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TREASURES IN THE DUST

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About the Book

Annie May Weightman and Violet Cobble are best friends and neighbors. They live in Cimarron County, Oklahoma, during the Great Depression. This is their story, told in two voices. Annie is happiest on the ground, sifting through the dust for traces of the past. But Violet is a dreamer always playing make believe to escape, to fly away from the dusty land. In this beautifully crafted first novel, poet Tracey Porter joins together two unique voices to tell a larger story of America, its hopes and dreams, during a time when thousands fled their prairie homes in search of work, food, and shelter.

Annie and Violet's story is one of friendship and courage--treasures shining through in the face of hardship.

Source: *HarperCollins*

About the Author

Tracey Porter teaches English at a middle school in Santa Monica, California. A poet whose work has appeared in various magazines and anthologies, she is a graduate of Georgetown University and the University of London, England. Of her inspiration to write about Oklahoma during the Great Depression, Ms. Porter says, "I remember the very day, where I was sitting, what the weather was like outside of the classroom, when I first saw images from and learned about the Dust Bowl in my eighth-grade U.S. history class." Greatly influenced by Dorothea Lange's and Arthur Rothstein's photographs of Okies, and by John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*, Ms. Porter traveled to Cimarron County, Oklahoma, to complete her research for *Treasures in the Dust,* her first novel. She lives in Los Angeles with her husband, Sandy, daughter, Sarah, and son, Sam.

Source: *HarperTrophy*

An Interview with Tracey Porter

Q. What made you interested in the Dust Bowl? Why did you choose this time and place for your first novel?
A. I have a very vivid memory of when I learned about the dust bowl in my eighth grade history class. There was a filmstrip with Dorothea Lange photos, and I remember thinking it was like seeing a tidal wave. . .some huge massive destructive force of nature. Those images of people suffering and persevering through that were very powerful for me. Years later, when I was reading *The Grapes of Wrath*, I realized that I was more interested in the people who stayed than the people who left.

Q. How far had you gotten with the book before you traveled to Cimarron County? How did your ideas change once you were there?
A. I was probably about halfway done when I went there. I visited little old ladies with whom I had been corresponding. I heard the way they spoke and their language changed the way I heard my characters. Their stories made the language become richer. The high plains is really an amazing land—you have a huge bowl of sky above you and this vast 360 degrees horizon. Even in the best of times the land is inhospitable—it's dry, and there's always a harsh wind blowing. The land is sparsely populated, bleak and empty. These people are tough pioneer types. They were terrific.

Q. In your acknowledgements you thank "the three ladies who shared their brave stories of living through the Dust." In what ways did these women's memories figure in *Treasures in the Dust*?
A. I absolutely used some of their memories in my stories. The women I spoke to were young mothers during the dust storms, and they have all kinds of memories of what it was like to live through the Dust Bowl years. Nobody had sugar, so they had to use molasses, which came in half-gallon cans like paint cans. The kids used them to carry their lunches. Details like this create a web that added a lot of depth to my work. Once I heard about a dozen isolated things like this, I got an overall sense of how poverty affected peoples' daily lives. These women were amazingly positive. They talked about how it wasn't such a bad time, because the only way to survive was to pull together. People really did help each other out. The people who stayed helped each other stay. Times were tough, but many of those women actually said that it was better then than it is now because of that strong sense of community.

Q. How does teaching young people influence you in writing for and about them?
A. I think that I strive to be open to each of my students' individual characteristics, and that helps me avoid certain clichés when I create characters. I don't underestimate my students or my readers. They deserve the best language and imagery I can give them.

Q. How did the characters of Annie and Violet evolve?
A. When I first started writing, it was only Annie's book. I showed the manuscript to a friend, and she pointed out that Violet was an equally strong character that needed to speak. I rewrote it, adding all of Violet's chapters, and she became a much stronger character. This let Violet become her own self. Violet's hardship gives her food for fantasy, as opposed to Annie, whose hardship grounds her more in the earth. I realized Violet's gift for imagination gives her a different type of strength that is just as valid as Annie's.

Q. Have you taught this book in your own classes? What strategies would you recommend to teachers who wanted to use this book in the classroom?
A. I haven't ever taught the book myself. I think that the Dorothea Lange photographs help. In those photos, the land looks like the Sahara Desert. Dunes of sand, dust burying tractors, fences and houses—the photos are very powerful. When I was writing my book, I carried them around in my wallet or purse or briefcase with me. When I visited, I found and old jar, and I filled it with the dirt there. I put it by my desk near the photos. I meditated on all that to help me feel and smell and hear the dust. To hear how it sounds on the windowpane. The dust storms are so foreign that the kids need some concrete visual imagery so that when they read the book, they can begin to feel what it was like.

Q. What advice do you give to students who want to be writers?
A. I tell them to read a lot. Cultivate your own aesthetic standards. If you think something's well written, figure out why you think so. Don't be afraid to judge books against your own personal standards for writing; it helps you develop your own voice. Kids can definitely do that at an early age. I encourage my students to start defining the kind of reader they are. I really want kids to value their own memories, because I think the things that stay with you can be artistically explored. As my reaction to the filmstrip in eighth grade shows, memories can be very potentially fruitful material for writing.

Source: HarperCollins*Publishers*

Critical Praise

Eleven-year-olds Annie and Violet are best friends growing up in Cimmaron County, Oklahoma, during the Great Depression. The day Annie learned to walk the first dust storm hit. Hardship is the only thing the girls have known in their short lives, but like children everywhere they adapt, play, and go to school together. Their families help each other out during the hard times. Annie loves her home and digging through the dust for arrowheads, and dreams of becoming an anthropologist. Violet loves to pretend and act out stories; she dreams of getting away from the dust and moving to California. When things take a turn for the worse in Violet's family, Violet is forced to stay home from school to help out. Finally, in order to save their land from the bank, Violet's family boards up their home and heads to California like so many before them. Annie mourns the loss of her friend and the two vow to keep in touch. Their contrasting letters chronicle the return of the rain (and hope) in Oklahoma and the despair of life in the California migrant worker camps. In the end, Violet and Annie discover that the "treasures in the dust" are truly found in each other and their families. Narrated by each girl in alternating chapters, this stunningly-written book brings to life the hardships and triumphs of the people so devastated by the Depression and the drought. One can almost taste the dust as the author describes how the sand dunes "curve around the barn and change a fence clogged with tumble weeds into a dinosaur spine."

***VOYA* - Carrie Eldridge**

Further Reading

Other works by Tracey Porter:

A Dance of Sisters

If you liked *Treasures in the Dust*, you might like:

Out of the Dust by Karen Hesse

Blue Willow by Doris Gates

Cat Running by Zilpha Keatley Snyder

Esperanza Rising by Pam Munoz Ryan

Macaroni Boy by Katherine Ayres

A Place to Belong by Emily Crofford

The Happy Yellow Car by Polly Horvath

Discussion Questions

1. After Annie complains that they "don't have any of the same interests anymore," Violet counters, "Well, whatever made you think best friends have to be just the same?. . .Why would I want to be with someone exactly like me?" (page 26). Do you think it makes sense that these particular girls are such close friends? Why or why not? What do you think is important in a friendship?

2. "But the and don't tell the truth about it here. There are all kinds of ugly things hidden in the fields, and once you know them, the San Joaquin never looks pretty again" (page 100). Explain what Violet means by this. What do you think happens to her spirit in California?

3. "They make fun of us because we're ragged and poor. They call us Okies, which is the same as calling us pigs or good-for-nothings" (pages 110-11). Reread what Violet says about her experience in California. Why do you think people facing economic hardship are often looked down upon by others? What are other possible responses people could have to facing hard times?

4. Explain why Annie and Violet can't mail their letters to each other. Why do you think they write to each other anyway?

5. Annie looks at Violet's boarded-up house as if she were an archaeologist and thinks about what it says about the people who lived there. But she concludes, "There really aren't enough clues to finish the story. Only Violet can do that. Only she can say what she lost and found by leaving and coming back" (page 145). What do you think Violet would say? How do you think Violet's and Annie's stories will continue?

6. Why do you think the author called the book *Treasures in the Dust*? What do you think the "treasures" are?

Source: *HarperCollinsPublishers*