

GOLD

From the Newbery Award–winning
author of *Out of the Dust*

WITNESS



A Novel by **KAREN HESSE**

 SCHOLASTIC

Distinctions and Praise for Karen Hesse's

WITNESS

Winner of the Christopher Medal

A *School Library Journal* Best Book of the Year

An ALA Notable Children's Book

A *Publishers Weekly* Best Book of the Year

★ “In this remarkable and powerful book, Hesse invites readers to bear witness to the Ku Klux Klan’s activities in a small Vermont town in the 1920s. Using free verse as she did in *Out of the Dust*, the narrative here is expanded to encompass the voices of eleven townspeople, young and old, of various races and creeds. . . . A thoughtful look at people and their capacity for love and hate.” — *School Library Journal*, starred review

★ “The author of *Out of the Dust* again turns language into music in her second quietly moving novel written entirely in verse. . . . Easily read in one sitting, this lyrical novel powerfully records waves of change and offers insightful glimpses into the hearts of victims, their friends and their enemies.” — *Publishers Weekly*, starred review

★ “In this stunning piece of little-known American history, Hesse paints small-town Vermont on the brink of self-destruction circa 1924. . . . What Copland created with music, and Hopper created with paint, Hesse deftly and unerringly creates with words: the iconography of Americana, carefully researched, beautifully written, and profoundly honest.”
— *Kirkus Reviews*, starred review

“Using real events, Hesse tells a story of the Ku Klux Klan in a small town in Vermont in 1924 in the same clear free verse as her Newbery winner, *Out of the Dust*. . . . Hesse’s spare writing leaves space for readers to imagine more about that time and about their own.” — *Booklist*

“This lyric work is another fine achievement from one of young adult literature’s best authors.” — *VOYA*

WITNESS

KAREN HESSE

SCHOLASTIC INC.

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To Jean Feiwel

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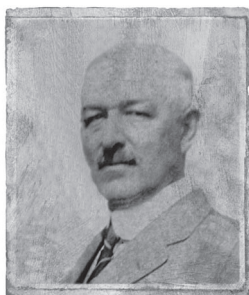
*And in this yard stenogs, bundle boys, scrubwomen,
sit on the tombstones, and walk on the grass of
graves, speaking of war and weather, of babies,
wages and love.*

*from "Trinity Peace"
by Carl Sandburg*

The Characters...



Leanora Sutter (aged 12)



Percelle Johnson,
town constable (aged 66)



Sara Chickering,
farmer (aged 42)



Fitzgerald Flitt,
doctor (aged 60)



Harvey Pettibone, shop owner,
husband of Viola (aged mid-50s)



Merlin Van Tornhout (aged 18)



Esther Hirsh (aged 6)



Johnny Reeves,
clergyman (aged 36)



Iris Weaver, restaurant owner
and rum runner (aged 30)



Viola Pettibone,
shop owner (aged mid-50s)



Reynard Alexander,
newspaper editor (aged 48)

Setting: Vermont

Time: 1924

ACT ONE

leanora sutter

i don't know how miss harvey
talked me into dancing in *the fountain of youth*.
i don't know how she knew i danced at all.
unless once, a long time ago, my mamma told her so.

but she did talk me into dancing.
i leaped and swept my way through *the fountain of youth*
separated on the stage from all those limb-tight white girls.

the ones who wouldn't dance with a negro,
they went home in a huff that first day,
but some came back.
they told miss harvey they'd dance,
but they wouldn't
touch any brown skin girl.

only the little girl from new york,
esther,
that funny talking kid,
only esther didn't mind about me being colored.

merlin van tornhout

i pushed the window up in school
to get the stink of leanora sutter out of the classroom
where miss harvey brought her to show off
a dance from last week's
recital.

mr. caldwell
chuffed his arms,
faked a shiver,
ramped the sash back down
saying the day was too cold to leave a window open.

leanora sutter
turned and stared through me
 that witchy girl
 with those fuming eyes
she meant to put a curse on me.
she meant to.

i left school right then.
no amount of air will get the smell of her
out of my nose,
the soot of her out of my eyes.

esther hirsh

i did first meet sara chickering
when i had comings here last year
to be a fresh air girl in vermont.

vermont is a nice place.
they have wiggle fish.
that is what i did tell daddy in new york
when i had comings back to him.
i did ask daddy
to have our livings in vermont with sara chickering

for keeps.

but daddy did say no.

so i made a long walk all by myself.
i did follow the train tracks and
pretty quick daddy did have comings after me.

sara chickering made two rooms to be for us
in her big farmhouse
with her dog jerry.
we have sitting every night at the round table, next to the hot stove.
and i do catch the wiggle fish through
a hole sara chickering does make in the ice.

daddy gives helps when
sara chickering has needs for extra big hands.
but daddy is a shoe man. he has shoe knowings.
my friend sara chickering, she has knowings of all things else.

leanora sutter

in school willie pettibone handed me an article
torn from the town paper.
it said:

*any person to whom an evening of hearty laughter is poison
had better keep away from the community club minstrel show
friday evening at the town hall. all others will be admitted
for a night of fun brought to you by 22 genuine
black-faced "coons."*

felt like skidding on ice as i read,
felt like twisting steel.

why can't folks just leave me alone?

daddy says:

how alone you want to be, leanora?
you're already nothing but a wild brown island.

percelle johnson

roads were bad.
don't blame me.
it's not my fault.
these roads are nothing but hog wallow during a thaw.
folks ought to know that.

wright sutter should have thought
before bringing his wife and child along to town with him.
that wasn't my fault,
his horse and wagon miring down,
stuck in the mud.
i wasn't even on duty.
not my fault he couldn't get help.
no one too energetic about helping a colored man hereabouts,
even if he is a neighbor.
sutter, making deliveries, left his womenfolk in the wagon too long.
wife took a chill,
waiting. she put her wrap around the little girl,
leanora.
sick all year, sutter's wife was. doc flitt said
she ought to go away to a sanatorium to get her health back.
wright sutter didn't have money for that.
even if there was a sanatorium for colored folk.
the sutter woman died this past spring.

don't blame me.
the roads were bad.

esther hirsh

the preacher man
johnny reeves
did have sittings on the riverbank
where i do make the leaves and
twigs float by in the ice green water.
even with my hat down over my ears i did hear him cry,
neighbor,
oh neighbor.
so i made my way to see what he did want.

johnny reeves did stand when he had seeings of me
and a girl did stand up in the brown tangle bank beside him and run away
and johnny reeves did yell
and make fist shakings at me
and i did yell
and make fist shakings back
and we did have a good game of yellings and shakings

until sara chickering did call me
and i had runnings back to the house
to gather the warm chicken eggs
from the steamy straw nests.

leanora sutter

they made me mad.
willie pettibone and some of the other boys, they said things
about me and daddy.

i shouldn't let them get to me but
i'm flint quick these days.

willie said:

at the klan meeting last night
the dragons talked about lighting you
and your daddy up
to get them some warmth on a cold day.
you'd be cheap fuel, they said.
they liked the smell of barbecue, they said.

i turned my back on willie pettibone and walked out of school.
i didn't know where i was going.
i just walked out
without my coat,
without my hat or rubbers.
i didn't feel the cold,
i was that scorched.

sara chickering

the day was cold,
bitter, below-zero.
made-you-wish-you'd-been-born-inside-a-fur-coat
cold.

heavy sky, early dark, lamps already lit.
esther playing in the kitchen with her clothespin dolls,
and mr. hirsh still at the shoe store. that's
when leanora sutter, half frozen,
showed up on my porch.

she wore no coat, her head was bare, no rubbers on her feet,
nothing but worn-thin school clothes standing between her
and the teeth of winter.

i brought her in.
sat her on a chair by the stove.
put a mug
the chipped one
of warm broth in her hands.

esther dragged my best quilt into the kitchen and
worked it up over leanora's shoulders.
only esther would go lugging out the company best
for a colored girl.

i left leanora there with esther,
ran the half mile to iris weaver's restaurant
with the coffee flowing and the politics raging around me
phoned doc flitt and constable johnson,
let them know i had leanora and she wasn't in any too good shape,
and they'd better hurry along.

constable johnson said he'd go after the girl's father.
make sure wright sutter got his child home safe and sound
to that little place they rent from lizzie stockwell
out the west end of town.
constable said he didn't want happening to leanora,
what happened to the mother.

when i got back to the house,
esther sat at leanora's feet,
little round esther leaning against
that slender brown girl, with her long head and longer limbs.
gave me some turn
seeing those two motherless children
 in my kitchen
 before the stove,
esther's hair draped across leanora's lap,
leanora's dark hand stroking esther's silk face.

after wright sutter drove away with leanora,
i looked at the empty chair by the stove,
the quilt still slung over it, spilling onto the floor.

i never had a colored girl in my kitchen before.

leanora sutter

i told daddy i wasn't going back to school.

daddy said:

of course you are.

no low-down white boy's gonna stop leanora sutter
from getting an education.

johnny reeves

some preacher down south
has himself a following
of coloreds
and whites,
together.
they trail after him from town to town,
forgetting their duties to home.

they even tried him, neighbor, they tried him
before a jury of white men
for inciting trouble,
for leading the lord's sheep to stray,
and still, neighbor, it grieves me to tell you that
still,
they let the devil go free.

it's a sorry state, neighbor,
it's a pitiful state of affairs when a colored preacher
can lure good white folk from their hearths.

leanora sutter

my daddy says
down in texas
a reverend by the name of
revealed jesus
is preaching so powerful,
people are leaving their jobs and their houses and
following him from meeting to meeting.

my daddy says
revealed jesus better get his brave behind up north pretty quick because
what he's doing down there in texas
is sure to get him lynched.

johnny reeves

oh, neighbor.
down in that den of the devil,
down in that center of sin,
down in new york's harlem,
negroes kill other negroes
 over gambling debts,
 over women,
 over gin.

hear me, neighbor.
if we are patient,
if we are patient, my good neighbor,
we can stay here at home,
we can take care of our problems at home
and down there in harlem, the
negro problem will
 settle
 itself.

esther hirsh

in new york
i did see someone whose poor head
did have a bullet inside it
and he did
have blood everywhere in the street
where he did sleep so still.

daddy and sara chickering did talk at the table.
a man with the name of senator greene did get a bullet in his head, too.
i did make a whisper sound
to hear this talk.

like birds falling.

daddy did say
don't cry esther. senator greene is getting better again.
daddy says bullets are a very bad thing.
but daddy says
sometimes you can even get a shooting in the head
and still be okay.
sara chickering did say yes that is true.
so it has to be.

percelle johnson

the ku klux klan

is looking to rent the town hall for their meetings.

why shouldn't they?

iris weaver

some girls i know have gone out in the world.
but most have married,
settled down to
children
and housework.
i'm different.
i have this restaurant.
i have a secret life, too.
a life the law is forever dogging me over.

i run booze.

i know every foot of ground
between boston and montreal.
i could walk the distance blindfolded.
i know the names of the customs officers,
american and canadian,
where they're stationed,
what shift they're on,
the tough ones,
and the ones who can't resist a pretty leg
or a slice of apple pie.

the officers in vermont are the toughest.
i've brought loads through highgate and alburg,
but mostly i go through new york:

rouses point and plattsburg.
i drive a good secondhand packard.
it has plenty of pep,
plenty of room to carry a load.

and it's got damn good springs.

johnny reeves

have you seen the way the girls dance?
sinful, neighbor, sinful.
these girls
doing the unspeakable gyrations of satan.
with each step they unravel the
moral fiber of our country.

they must be stopped.
not by law, neighbor,
not by legislation. this is no business of the government.
it is up to us, neighbor.
it is up to us to lock our daughters in
until they learn to behave,
until we destroy in them
the wanton will of satan.

fitzgerald flitt

the flapper
is not the least bit alarming,
nor a sign of the declining social standard.
though she drinks cocktails and shows an inordinate fondness
for lipstick and the rouge pot,
we have nothing to fear.

i doctor these women
and i have seen over the last years a transformation in them.
and what i see,
 the opening of roses kept bud-tight so many years,
it warms this aging soul.

sara chickering

they say maple sugar
is becoming as old-fashioned
as the paisley shawl,
but to see esther hirsh suck on a lump,
her face star-blissed with
sweet delight,
i think that old-time maple,
it's still all right.

harvey and viola pettibone

harvey says:

the ku klux are here, vi.

there's not a thing to stop them. we might as well join them.

why not?

they're not low-down, like some folks say.

they're good men,

100 percent american men.

and they might bring us some business.

viola says:

in texas, harvey,

those "good" men thought a certain fella was
keeping company with a married lady.

they had no proof of hanky-panky, harv.

they beat him, anyway,

held a pistol to his head,

said they'd kill him if he didn't clear out.

harv, you don't want to join a group like that.

but harvey says:

that's just rumor.

they have parades, vi,

and picnics,

and speakers from all over.

wouldn't you like that?

picnics and speakers?

viola washes up the dinner dishes,

her hands gloved in soapy water.

they do good, vi. they take care of their women.
and liquor can't ever tear up a family with them around.

harvey examines a spot on one of the glasses.
shouldn't we join, vi?

viola shakes her head slowly back and forth.
no, harv, viola says. i don't think we should.

reynard alexander

this paper is neutral.

this editor is neutral.

i have attempted to remain neutral

in the face of the klan question

and i intend to continue neutral

until i have reason

to do otherwise.

leanora sutter

teacher says lewis won't be coming back to school.
he got himself killed yesterday
playing in the sandbank. it
buried him.
he was alone.
lewis was always alone,
down in that sandbank,
making big sand cities
that he limped away from when his ma
called him home for dinner,
big sand cities willie pettibone and those boys
came in and wrecked
so lewis'd have to start again.
this time the sand slid right down on top of lewis
and buried him
in the very city he was building.

i am being buried, too,
in all this whiteness.

iris weaver

well how do you like that.
down in texas,
mrs. miriam ferguson,
the wife of the impeached governor,
defeated the klan candidate
by 80,000 votes
to win the democratic nomination for her state.

if she wins,
she'll be the first woman
governor in
this whole damn country.

imagine.

harvey and viola pettibone

if we join the klan, harvey says,
we can wipe out bronson's grocery by next year, vi.
all the klan members will shop here,
even if they live closer to bronson.
bronson's made his feelings against the klan clear.
if we join up with them, how long could bronson last? six months, nine?

viola says:
and what about all our regulars, harv?
we make this store "klan only"
we lose a lot of business.
where do you think they'll all go?

harvey says:
it doesn't matter. that little bit of business,
it won't be enough to keep bronson flush, vi. you'll see.

i don't think so, viola says.

sara chickering

folks ask why i never married.
i watched my
father swallow his breakfast whole and rush away,
leaving mother with us children to be readied for school,
lunch to be prepared for noon,
washing to be done,
and the fitting out of a big evening meal.

father would come home late,
tired out,
falling asleep in the best chair after supper,
while mother put the house to rights,
got me, my brothers, my sister
and, finally, father off to bed.

from morning until night,
every day of the week,
that was mother's life.
father got a holiday from time to time.
mother never did.

that's why i moved out and came to work on the farm.
soon as i could i bought it for my own.
all these years i've managed fine without a man.
i may work as hard as my mother,
but i'm drudge to no one.

johnny reeves

we shall reign in the kingdom,
neighbor.

we shall form a great fist,
and we shall still those who oppose us.

we shall strike them out,
wipe them out,
blot them out.

together we cast a long shadow, neighbor,
and with our shadow

we cast our foes in darkness.

we cast those who are not like us into the arms of satan.

every one of the lord's lambs wants the light shining on him,
neighbor,

every lamb can see the right way when he is
standing in the light of the lord.

every lamb, once he has known the light,
cannot endure the darkness.

come stand with me in the light, neighbor.