

"Out of nowhere Ralph's song—it *wouldn't be make-believe if you believed in me*—filled my mind. Foolish old man. Foolish to count on someone being there for you. And yet . . .



My heart ached to believe, and that hope felt like coming out of a cave into dazzling sunlight.”

Bea and the New Deal Horse

Host a
Depression Era
Meal with Music

The Depression's music is rich with humor, hope, and empathy—stunning considering how dire the times. I like to punctuate my historical narratives with songs of the day—they're such potent "reveals" of an era and the characters who choose to sing them.

Take Ralph, the old stable hand and country philosopher. His presence in the novel is relatively small. But his natural kindness and easy affection—for horses, for "Miss Milly," for children—blooms large as he enters and leaves scenes, singing.

Just as music immerses us, so does lingo of the day. It provides authentic dialogue, character reveals, and often something eye-opening or poignant. Like "farm out."

I'd always thought of the term as giving a task to someone who knows how to do it better than I. But it comes from the Depression. Parents, desperate to feed their children—would "farm them out," sending them to relatives or friends who had farms—and therefore food. They did it out of love—but what a wrenching, hard choice. That term inspired the set-up and opening scene for my story.

Bea's father lost his job, their home. They take to the road, bedding down for the night in a Middleburg farm. He slips away, leaving Bea and her little sister asleep in the hayloft. Bea wakes to find a note saying he thinks the farm's owner, a long-ago acquaintance named Mrs. Scott, will take the girls in.

It's clear, however, that Mrs. Scott's farm has fallen on hard times as well. There's also a palpable mystery about why her stable is only half full and why her high-level horses aren't being ridden.

The immediate crisis of the novel: How can Bea convince this formidable horse woman to take in two stray children? Bea decides to keep them hidden in the barn, to observe Mrs. Scott to learn more about her before approaching her. And her first chore is figuring out how to feed her little sister.

Fortunately, Mrs. Scott's lawn is neglected and overgrown with dandelions—something that became a staple for Depression era families.

Open a unit on the Depression and BEA by hosting a lunch with music and a reading of the first chapter plus pages 39 through 47. It immerses students in a visceral way (and amusing—the authentic recordings are delightful and quirky). The event also allows educators to initiate discussion about the ingenuity, resilience, and hope that helped people survive. (If there's time, keep going through page 55, which can prompt conversation about siblings.)

For music selections: [Discussion Guide \(pg. 5\)](#) & [my Spotify playlist](#). Have students research recipes for what became popular, cost-saving, use-what-you-have dishes:

Dandelion Salad
Chipped Beef on Toast
Pasta and Peas
Potato Soup (NO cream or fancy ingredients!)
"Hoover Stew"
Roasted Onions stuffed with Peanut Butter
Cabbage Soup
Pickle and PB sandwiches
Milkorno

Desserts: Prune Pudding; Oatmeal cookies; Hot Water Pie