



The music of dolphins (Sep 1996)

Author: [Hesse, Karen](#)

Ages 9-12 Fiction 

Description: A girl raised by **dolphins** records her thoughts about her reintroduction to the human world.

Book Appeal Terms: [Definition of Appeal Terms](#)

Genre: Realistic fiction

Storyline: Character-driven

Tone: Moving

Writing Style: Attention-grabbing; Stylistically complex

Min/Max Grade level: 6 - 9

Accelerated Reader: [IL: MG, BL: 3.4, AR Pts: 3](#)

Booklist:

Books for Youth, Middle Readers: Gr. 4-7. It was no ordinary rescue for the Coast Guard: the girl preferred to stay unrescued, running away with movements more animal than human. The young teen, called Mila for miracle, and thought lost at sea years earlier, was raised by dolphins until her discovery. Now she begins her acculturation back into the world of humans, and the scene shifts to a special school-hospital in Boston, where doctors study and observe their fascinating find. Mila tells the story, speaking in simple, halting prose in the opening chapters as befits her own feelings of strangeness in a radically new environment. A quick study, she rapidly figures out human civilization and makes great strides in language and music. Being human disappoints her, however, and she feels longingly that "I have been coming back to the sea from the moment I left it." Return she does, though in a somewhat

unconvincing reunion with her sea family at the end. The book works largely because of Mila's sharp observations, the stranger-in-a-strange-and scenario, and the incredible notion of the dolphin family, all of which will interest elementary and middle-school readers. ((Reviewed October 15, 1996)) -- Anne O'Malley

School Library Journal:

Gr 6-9-After a plane crash off the coast of Cuba, a four-year-old survives, nurtured by dolphins . At adolescence, the girl is "rescued" by the Coast Guard and turned over to a scientist who has a government grant to study the part language acquisition plays in socialization. Mila, the otherworldly "dolphin girl," is enthusiastic to please, learning to speak words and write her thoughts on a computer, but gradually she understands that she is a prisoner "in the net of humans." She begins to lose ground, regressing physically, begging to be returned to the sea. Hesse's skill is in making readers believe in this wise, intuitive feral child. Mila's longing for the sea and her dolphin family is so achingly palpable that her return is equally believable. Her story is told in her own perfectly sustained voice: the clear and simple, but profound and poetic language of a "foreigner" with a keen mind and resonant spirit but limited vocabulary. Readers, engrossed, will follow the intriguing device of changing typeface that indicates Mila's evolution-flowing script, to chunky bold, to standard size, and back-reflecting changes within her character. Deceptively easy in format, this is a complex and demanding book. Evoking a Selkie myth, it is a reminder that the link between humankind and nature is mysterious and ignored at our peril. This powerful exploration of how we become human and how the soul endures is a song of beauty and sorrow, haunting and unforgettable.-Kate McClelland, Perrot Memorial Library, Greenwich, CT

Publishers Weekly:

As moving as a sonnet, as eloquently structured as a bell curve, this book poignantly explores the most profound of themes--what it means to be human. The narrator,

Mila, is discovered by the Coast Guard on a deserted island, where she has been living with dolphins . The so-called feral child becomes the subject of government study--pried at and poked, taught language and music . Her amazing progress contrasts with that of another "wild child," Shay, who is being studied by the same team of experts. While Shay remains locked in silence, Mila's hands can fly over the computer keyboard or the holes of a recorder, and she even tries to explain dolphin language to the eager doctors who become her family. But Mila feels the call of the wild growing stronger and doubts about the sparkling lures of civilization growing louder. Finally the longing for her island consumes her entirely. It's a difficult plot to pull off, but Hesse (*Letters from Rifka*; *Phoenix Rising*) succeeds. While she insists on simplicity in framing the story, she also employs a high-wire writing technique, having Mila tell the story first in halting, little words (in big type), then in more complex, fluid words (in small type), so that the language and themes become increasingly sophisticated. All together, a frequently dazzling novel. Ages 9-12. (Sept.)

Kirkus:

Her mind and spirit shaped by the dolphins who raised her, a feral child views herself and her human captors from a decidedly unusual angle in this poignant story from the author of *A Time of Angels* (1995). The rescuers who find her on a key off the coast of Cuba dub her Mila--Spanish for "miracle"--for although she weighs barely 100 pounds and bears sucker and barnacle scars, she is healthy and alert, human in form but with strange gestures, sounds, and behavior she learned from the dolphins with whom she has lived for at least 10 years. Taken to a research facility, Mila launches into her new life with enthusiasm, spurred by the hope that she will soon be returned to her marine family. She excels at her studies and displays a genius for music . As someone whose inner resilience has allowed her to develop a dual nature, Mila is utterly convincing; in a highly individual voice, she describes her old and new lives--e.g., "the sea is a big home where all the time is swimming and all the time is singing and all the time is touching in the big wet." Changes in type size and style

signal Mila's inner shifts as she turns toward humanity, then away, finding in the dolphins a wiser, more comfortable society. A probing look at what makes us human, with an unforgettable protagonist. (Kirkus Reviews, August 15, 1996)