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Dicey's Song (The Tillerman Cycle)



Synopsis

>When Momma abandoned Dicey Tillerman and her three siblings in a mall parking lot and was later traced to an asylum where she lay unrecognized, unknowing, she left her four children no choice but to get on by themselves. They set off alone on foot over hundreds of miles until they finally found someone to take them in. Gram's rundown farm isn't perfect, but they can stay together as a family—which is all Dicey really wanted. But after watching over the others for so long, it's hard for Dicey to know what to do now. Her own identity has been so wrapped up in being the caretaker, navigator, penny counter, and decision maker that she's not sure how to let go of some responsibilities while still keeping a sense of herself. But when the past comes back with devastating force, Dicey sees just how necessary—and painful—letting go can be.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

> won the Newbery Medal for > and the Newbery Honor Award for >, both part of the beloved Tillerman Cycle. She is also the author of many other celebrated books for middle-grade and teen readers, including >and >. She was awarded the Margaret A. Edwards Award in 1995 for her work in literature, and the Katahdin Award in 2004. She lives in Maine.

Dicey's Song CHAPTER 1 AND THEY LIVED HAPPILY EVER AFTER. Not the Tillermans. Dicey thought. That wasn't the way things went for the Tillermans, ever. She wasn't about to let that get her down. She couldn't let it get her down • that was what had happened to Momma. Dicey lay on her back under the wide-branched paper mulberry tree. She opened her eyes and looked up. The paper mulberry had broad leaves that made a pool of shade in which she lay. Thick roots spread around her, making a kind of chair for her to lean on. She wore only shorts in the hot midday air. Her arms and chest were spattered and streaked with red paint, and the barn was completely painted, top to bottom, all four sides, patched and painted and looking good. The paint and sweat were drying on Dicey's body. She could hear the buzzing of insects and nothing else. For once she was alone, but she knew where everybody was. Gram had taken James downtown in the motorboat. Gram was going to get groceries and James was going to the library to find some books for Dicey, on repairing and maintaining wooden boats. Maybeth was up in her room, doing some of the many extra assignments her teacher gave her, so she could catch up with the rest of the third graders and not be kept back again. Sammy was out back, on the other side of the old farmhouse, spading up fallow land to increase the size of the vegetable garden. Gram had said, right off, that they would have to do more planting next spring than she'd done for years, with four more people to feed. Dicey suspected that Gram hadn't been sure how the children would feel about the work. Well, Gram would learn about them. And they would learn about Gram. There would be some surprises for everyone, Dicey guessed. She knew Gram had already been surprised: at Dicey's reaction when her sailboat • the one she had hoped over and dreamed over • sank into the shallow water by Gram's dock. Even James was surprised by how calm she stayed, maybe because he had seen Dicey's face as they hauled it down the quarter-mile path through the marsh, seen her strain and pull and check to be sure the wheels they'd removed from a wagon and fixed to the legs of the sawhorse cradle didn't fall off, seen how much it mattered to her. Dicey had watched the water pouring in through the leaks where the boards had shrunk apart with all those years of drying out. She had watched • they had all stood and watched, as the little boat filled up with water and settled quietly down onto the sandy bottom of the Chesapeake Bay. "I should have remembered," Gram had said. "I knew, if only I remembered." "You can't sail in that," Sammy declared. Dicey had stared down at the chipped paint on the gunwales of the boat, which still showed above the water. The boat was her lucky charm, her rabbit's foot, her horseshoe, her pot of gold, it was the

prize she'd set for herself for leading them from nowhere to somewhere. OK, she said to herself, thinking about what needed to be done. They'd have to bail it before they could get it out of the water. Then they'd have to take it back to the barn. She told James to find something to bail with. They'd have to slide the cradle back into the water, it would probably take all four children to do that. "You don't rest a minute, do you," Gram had said. Dicey shook her head; she had already gotten used to her grandmother's way of asking questions without question marks. "But you'd do better to let it sit out here a day or so," Gram had advised. "Let the wood soak up water, to swell up again. I knew that once, but I forgot. I'm sorry, girl," she said. Dicey hadn't answered, just looked at Gram where she stood on the dock with the wind blowing her curly gray hair around her face. "Dicey doesn't mind, as long as she knows what to do about things," Maybeth told Gram. "Is that right," Gram asked Dicey. "I guess so," Dicey said. "What do you do when there's nothing you can do," Gram said. "I dunno, I do something else," Dicey said. "That doesn't make sense," James pointed out. "That's illogical," Gram looked around at all of them. "Which one of your sons built this boat?" Dicey asked, but Gram had turned away to go back to the house and didn't answer. Remembering that scene, Dicey reminded herself that they all had a lot of learning to do. The boat was back in the barn and she had to begin scraping off the old layers of paint. But not quite yet. Gram and James would be back soon, and they'd have lunch, and then Dicey wanted to go downtown to see about a job. She'd been thinking about what kind of job she could get, all those long first three days of school. There wasn't much else to think about in school. As far as she was concerned, about all school was good for was using up your days. Dicey hadn't talked to anyone, except to answer teachers' questions. That was OK with her, because she had important things to think about. Getting a job, to bring in some money was one. Tillermans always needed more money, because there were so many of them to feed. Dicey knew Gram worried about that. For that matter, Dicey worried about that too, and had worried all her life, because at thirteen, she was the oldest. That worry about food had been her single biggest worry all summer long, when they had traveled down here, after Momma disappeared. The other worries • about what James was thinking, because what James thought in his head told him what to do; about whether or not Maybeth was retarded as people claimed, or only shy, slow, and frightened, which was what Dicey thought; about why Sammy was so angry he hit out and didn't mind how much the person he fought with hurt him; • those worries, and

worries about how much Dicey should give up for her brothers and sisters in order to have any kind of home together – or if she was driving them too hard; about how many miles they had covered and where they were ever going – all the other worries had come and gone. The worry about food had haunted her all summer long, and maybe it always would. There were still things to worry about here, but nothing crucial. James said everything was all right now, now they could live with Gram. James was smart, but he wanted everything to be all right so badly that he couldn't see – Couldn't see what? Dicey asked herself. She hunkered up, resting her back against the tree. Couldn't see how big troubles had little beginnings, just like little troubles. Dicey heard voices approaching the house from behind. Nobody ever came up the front driveway. Gram didn't have a car and couldn't drive. She always went downtown in the motorboat. So except for the children's bicycles, the overgrown tracks that led off from the front of the house, through a stand of pines and between two long barren fields to the road, were unmarked. The voices came clearer. Lazily, Dicey stood up and went around to help carry in bags of groceries. When she got around back, Sammy had taken the extra bag in his grubby arms. His face appeared at the top, streaked with dirt. Dicey looked at him and grinned, and made a mental note to tell Gram that he was having his seventh birthday next week. James trailed up through the garden, carrying another bag. "You two are a mess," Gram announced, before she even went up the back steps. She looked at Dicey and hesitated, as if deciding whether or not to say what she was thinking. "You're too old to go around half-naked," she announced. "What do you mean?" Dicey demanded. "I am not." Gram was already in the kitchen. "Am I, James?" Dicey asked. "You know, Dicey," he said. His eyes shifted away from hers. At ten he was old enough to be embarrassed. He hurried after Gram. Well, she guessed she did know. She guessed she had noticed when she had stripped off her T-shirt that her breasts seemed to be pointing out – maybe. But she had convinced herself that wasn't true. Dicey shrugged. There wasn't much she could do about getting a bosom, but she didn't have to like it. Gram made a plate of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for lunch, and she had put out a bowl of apples. Dicey had washed off most of the paint with turpentine. Then she and Sammy rinsed off with a quick swim, and she had put her shirt on. Sammy's yellow hair was slicked down. James was on his third sandwich and Maybeth was still nibbling at her first. "How did it go?" Gram asked. "How many pages did you get read?" "Four," Maybeth answered softly, without looking up. "That's not enough," she added. Gram looked at Dicey, and Dicey sighed.

“Is the book too hard?” Dicey asked her sister, her bent head.

Maybeth’s hair was as bright as sunlight, and she’d tied it back with a red ribbon.

“Where’d you find the ribbon?” Dicey asked. “Gram got it for me,” Maybeth said. She looked up at Dicey then, with a little smile. Dicey liked the way Maybeth looked, like an angel, a Christmas angel. It was partly her wide, hazel eyes and her soft hair that curled gently at the ends; but more, it was the quiet ways she had. “I think it’s pretty,” she said.

“It is,” Dicey assured her. She, herself, like James, had their father’s straight brown hair. Which was about all they had of their father, that and the narrow face; Maybeth and Sammy looked like Momma – round and fair. But Dicey and James were mixes: Yet all the Tillermans had hazel eyes. She couldn’t remember the color of their father’s eyes, or exactly what he looked like; just his voice. Not surprising since she was seven the last time she saw him.

“Was the book too hard?” she asked again. Maybeth shook her head. “I have to keep working,” Mrs. Jackson said, she told Dicey. “Only I can’t remember what the words are, so I have to go back and memorize the lists again. If I work, Mrs. Jackson says, everything will be all right.” Dicey wanted to cooperate with this Mrs. Jackson. “We’ll do fractions after dinner,” she promised Maybeth, who nodded with no more enthusiasm than Dicey felt.

“Is it OK if I go downtown this afternoon?” she asked her grandmother. “The barn is finished,” she added, to distract her grandmother from any question about what Dicey wanted to do in town. Gram looked as if she knew Dicey wanted to distract her. But she didn’t know why. She decided not to ask. “I’m pleased it’s done,” she said. “You don’t sound pleased,” Sammy pointed out. “Appearances,” Gram declared, “can be deceiving.” Sammy thought about that. “Why?” he asked. Gram snorted. “Because you can’t judge a book by its cover.”

“Why not?” Sammy wondered. DICEY HAD DECIDED to ask Millie Tydings, who owned the little grocery store down by the water at the foot of the one main street, if she had a job open. The store wasn’t ever busy, at least not ever when Dicey was in there. She wondered if anybody besides Gram shopped there, and she couldn’t blame them. Millie didn’t keep the windows or floors particularly clean. Dust gathered on the cans and boxes on unwashed shelves. The meat and fish counter, behind which Millie worked most of the time, got wiped down every day, Dicey guessed from the way the white enamel gleamed. Millie might be lazy, she might just be too tired (and Dicey guessed if she had to tote that body around every day, all day long, she’d get tired too), or

she might just not care. Whatever the reason, Dicey figured there was a lot of work she could do in Millie's store. Dicey leaned her bike up against the grimy plate glass window and entered the dim little store. Millie was at the back, leaning against the top of the meat counter. "What can I do for you today?" she asked. "Your grandmother forget something?" Her little blue eyes rested lazily on Dicey. She had gray hair that she braided into circles around her head. "No," Dicey answered. "I came to ask you if you might give me a job." "A job? Why? Why should I do that? I don't make enough to keep myself in comfortable shoes," Millie told her. "But if I kept the place cleaner, more people would want to come and shop," Dicey argued. "If I washed the windows and the floors and dusted off the shelves and the cans and the boxes." "My Herbie used to do that," Millie said, "before he died. Business isn't good," she told Dicey. Dicey made herself be patient. She'd just been talking about that, and how to make it better. "But it should be," she argued. She'd thought about this all the long bike ride into town. "I mean, you have the only grocery store right downtown, the only store that people can walk to. The supermarkets are way out on the edge of town, and people have to drive there. It would be more convenient for people to come to you. If your store looked nicer they would want to." Millie seemed to be thinking about this. "Business used to be better," she finally said. Dicey stared at the woman, at the heavy mottled flesh of her face. She thought maybe Millie wasn't very smart at all. She'd never thought of that before. If that was the case, how would she go about convincing Millie to give her a job? "I think business could be better, if the store looked better," she said. Millie's eyes moved slowly around, studying the narrow aisles. "It's dirty," she said. "But not back here," she added. "I've always passed the health department inspection." "You're a good butcher," Dicey said, trying a little flattery. "Gram says so." "Really?" Millie smiled at this. "Did she really?" Dicey nodded, it was the truth. "Ab always was smart and quick. You know, we all - all of us in school - hankered after John Tillerman. He was so handsome and dignified, you know?" Dicey nodded, even though she didn't know. "But it was Ab he courted. There were some tears shed over that, I can tell you." Millie nodded her big head wisely. Dicey didn't know how to get the conversation back on the track she wanted. "Gram says your husband taught you how to be a butcher." "When we got married, that's right. I wasn't so fat then," she said. "We never did have any children." She relapsed into

silence. "If I worked here," Dicey said finally, "there's lots I could do." "Aren't you supposed to be in school?" "I mean, maybe after school for an hour, maybe Saturdays in the mornings." "That wouldn't be very long. So it wouldn't cost me very much. I'd like the company," Millie said. "How much were you thinking of me paying?" "A dollar an hour," Dicey said. She was under age, so she couldn't charge much. Millie thought about this, her fat sausage-shaped fingers working on the countertop. "I thought, if I worked four days a week after school, and then three hours on Saturday," Dicey said. The fingers moved. "That would be seven dollars a week," Millie announced. Dicey nodded. She figured, with seven dollars, she could give each of the little kids an allowance of a dollar a week and the rest to Gram. Except now she changed that plan • she'd give herself an allowance too. They'd never had allowances. Momma never had any extra money at all to be able to count on to give them. So when they wanted paper or pencils for school, or shoelaces, they had to ask her, and her face got all worried until she figured out where to find the extra money. "I don't know," Millie said. "We could try it," Dicey offered. "I could work for three weeks on trial. Then, if your business wasn't getting better, you could fire me." "I never fired anybody, I don't know how," Millie objected. "You see," Dicey spoke urgently, "my theory is that your business will get better, and so instead of costing you money, I'd be making you money." "Do you think so?" Millie asked. Dicey bit her lip and nodded. This was like talking to a bowl of Jello. Everything you said slipped in and jiggled the Jello, but it didn't make any dents. "So you think it might work out that way?" Dicey nodded. Like a bowl of strawberry Jello, her least favorite kind. "Then maybe I should." "I'll start on Monday," Dicey said quickly. "I'll come in after school on Monday, so that'll be about three fifteen I'll be here." "All right," Millie said. Dicey left before the woman could change her mind. Maybe it would work, maybe it wouldn't; her guess was that it would. In any case, she had the next three weeks taken care of. She was satisfied, she thought, riding seven miles back over flat, curving roads to her grandmother's house. To our house, she corrected herself. But when she said our house she couldn't help thinking about the cabin in Provincetown, up against the windy dunes; even though she knew that wasn't their house any more. At dinner, she told everyone about her job. She looked mostly at Gram while she was telling, and thought the woman approved. "But aren't you under age?"

Gram asked her. "Yes, but Millie didn't seem to mind. She didn't even ask," Dacey said. "That's because she never had a thought in her head that somebody else didn't put there for her," Gram said. "You mean she's stupid?" Sammy asked. He shoveled spaghetti into his mouth in long strands, because he was too hungry to practice winding it on a fork. He had spaghetti sauce all over his face. "You might say that," Gram agreed. "What about school?" she asked Dacey. "School's easy," Dacey told her. "I won't have any trouble in school. At least, she wouldn't have any trouble passing, unless it got so bad in the stupid home ec course they made her sign up for that she started cutting classes. "I thought she looked at James's admiring face, and Sammy's spaghetti decorated one, and Maybeth's quiet one. "we should have allowances. A dollar a week," she announced, pleased with herself. "Even me?" Sammy demanded. "Even you," Dacey agreed. "Good-o," Sammy said. "Even Gram?" Dacey met her grandmother's eyes. She couldn't tell, from the expressionless face, whether Gram was amused, or angry, or insulted. "Gram too, but Gram gets more. It's only seven dollars a week, all together," she apologized. "That would be only three dollars a week. And if her business doesn't get better, after three weeks I'll have to find something else." "You could get some shoes," Sammy told his grandmother. "You need to wear shoes when the weather gets cold." Gram's expression resolved itself into amusement. "Well, you do," Sammy pressed on. Gram always wore bare feet, unless she was going into town, bare feet and a long skirt, with a blouse loose over it. She wore her clothes for comfort, she told the children. "I have shoes I wear in cold weather," she told Sammy. "How do you think I lived so long? Not by going barefoot in cold weather." "I didn't know that," Sammy complained. "How could I know? I thought it was a good idea." "It was," Dacey assured him. "So it's all right?" she asked her grandmother. "If you've made the arrangements, it'll have to be," Gram said. "But I always thought, if you were a family, you talked over your plans first. And got permission," James reminded Dacey. "Not permission," Gram said, "just to check in." Dacey bit back anger. She thought, she said to herself, she was doing something pretty smart and to help out too. Nobody said thank you, or anything. "I'm proud of Dacey," Maybeth said softly. "Oh, so

am I," Gram said. "I think Dicey knows that. You get things done, girl, 'cve got to give you that." "So do I," Sammy said. "It's what Tillermans do," Dicey said, feeling better. "And I had something to talk over too," Gram told them. "I've got an appointment down town next week, about getting welfare money," she said, as if the words tasted bitter. Then she added, "I thought I might as well talk to a lawyer and get advice and ask about adoption. If that's what you want." "But what about Momma?" Sammy asked. "Momma's sick, you know that," Dicey said quickly. "She can't take care of us. She might get better, and she might not." "The doctors think she won't," James added. Sammy had stopped eating. "Because she's crazy sick?" he asked. Dicey nodded. "But how does she eat?" he demanded. "If she doesn't eat she'll die." Dicey looked helplessly at her grandmother. "They have ways of feeding people, with tubes and special liquids," Gram said. You could see Sammy thinking about this. "But if you adopted us and Momma came back," he said to Gram. "Then we would put you and James into one bedroom, and your Momma would sleep where you're sleeping," Gram answered quickly, "because that was her room when she lived at home." Dicey could have gotten up and hugged her grandmother, except that they never did that kind of thing, the Tillermans, hugging and kissing. "Or," Gram said, "we might turn the dining room into a bedroom. We never use it and she would have more privacy." Gram waited a minute for more questions, then nodded briskly. "That's all taken care of then," she said. "If you wanted to adopt us," Dicey said, "I'd like that." "And me," Maybeth said. The boys, too, agreed. "It would be safer for us," James explained. "We'd have legal status, and rights. But what about you?" he asked his grandmother. "Might be safer for me, too," Gram said sharply. James looked at her, with sudden intensity, as if he wondered what she was thinking and suspected that it might be very interesting. But he didn't say anything. Dicey and Maybeth washed up the dishes. Dicey hurried through them, but Maybeth lingered, humming. It was Momma's song, about giving her love a cherry without any stone, and Dicey joined in. She was drying the forks and putting them away while Maybeth scrubbed down the wooden table. "How can there be a baby with no cry-ing," they sang. All of a sudden, Dicey remembered how the words to the last verse answered that question, and the other impossible questions the song asked.

“That’s funny,” she said. “What is?” “The song. You just look at things another way and it all makes sense. When a chicken doesn’t have bones. Isn’t that funny?” “I think it’s sad,” Maybeth said. “Anyway, the music is. Momma sang it sad.” Dicey didn’t know what to say, so she started the last verse. They worked at fractions.

Maybeth’s class had done them last year, in second grade. Mrs. Jackson had told Maybeth she should understand fractions from one half to one eighth. Dicey figured that would be pretty simple. She took an apple and a knife and cut the apple in half. Then she cut it into quarters, then halved the quarters. Maybeth watched with big eyes. When Dicey wrote down the fractions and showed Maybeth the numbers one fourth and one eighth and asked her which was bigger, Maybeth pointed to one eighth. Dicey tried to explain. “That one up there doesn’t mean anything. I mean, it’s called the numerator and it tells you how many of the eight parts are there.” “I know,” Maybeth said, studying the numbers seriously.

“Since the one is the same, the fraction with eight is bigger.” Dicey showed her on the apple pieces, but since she had to combine two of the eighths to make a quarter, Maybeth said the two was bigger than the one now. Dicey tried another approach. “In fractions, the bigger the number in the denominator – that’s at the bottom – the smaller the fraction is.” “But how can that be?” Maybeth wondered. “Because you’re talking about parts, not the whole number. It’s different from the whole numbers.” Dicey felt frustrated. It was so clear in her own mind, and Maybeth just sat and looked at her, or at the apple pieces, or at the paper. Her eyes got bigger. “I don’t understand,” she whispered. Dicey didn’t know what to do. “That’s OK,” she said. “They aren’t important.” “I’m supposed to know them,” Maybeth said. “We’ll try again,” Dicey said. “Some other time. I am going to eat an eighth,” she announced, popping the crisp apple slice into her mouth. She had done it wrong and she didn’t know how to do it right. She tried not to look as discouraged as she felt. Maybeth smiled at her. “And I’m eating a half,” she said, eating another eighth, one that had been set beside its equal to make a quarter. The rest of the family was in the living room. They had opened the windows to catch any suggestion of a breeze. Outside, the sun was setting and splashing the sky with colors. Maybeth went right to the battered upright piano and picked out the tune she had been singing in the kitchen. She searched for notes that harmonized with the melody lines. Dicey watched her for a while, trying to figure out how to explain about fractions. Maybeth’s back was straight. Her

face was serious as she watched her fingers on the piano keys. After a while, she tried to add more harmony with notes played by her left hand. Gram and Sammy sat playing checkers, both of them barefooted, both concentrating on the board. They sneaked looks at one another's faces, as if trying to see what the opponent was thinking of for his next move. When Sammy was doing something tricky, it showed on his face. His eyes danced while he waited for his grandmother to fall into his trap, as if he could barely keep his cleverness inside. Gram gave herself away by her mouth, Dicey decided, because it would get all stiff and straight. That way, you could tell she was hiding something, and all you had to do was look at the board to figure out what her scheme was. Dicey thought she'd like to play a game of checkers with Gram. She thought she could probably beat her.

"King me," Sammy ordered. Gram pointed out that he was still one move from the end of the board.

"Momma used to," Sammy argued. He was losing the game. His voice quivered.

"If you're going to play with me, you're going to play by the rules," Gram said.

"You're big enough, aren't you, to play by the real rules," Sammy didn't want to say yes and he didn't want to say no. When he saw the way Gram looked across at him, he didn't say anything. Dicey went to stand behind James, who sat at the big wooden desk reading a thick book. He looked up over his shoulder at her and marked his place on the small print with a finger.

"How long do you think it'll take to get the boat fixed up?" Dicey asked him.

"Not now, Dicey, I'm reading."

"What're you reading?"

"The Bible."

"Why?"

James sighed.

"Mr. Thomas said every educated man should. He said it's one of the underpinnings of western civilization."

His face lit up.

"Isn't that an idea? Underpinnings of civilization? As if civilization were a big building, you know? Besides, there are some good stories in the Bible."

"And besides," Gram added in, "it was the fattest book on the shelves and James always likes to read the fattest ones."

"That's not true," James said.

"Isn't it?"

Gram answered.

"And besides," James said, "if you have a big idea, you have to write it down in a big book, otherwise you won't be able to explain all the complicated parts."

"Didn't say there was anything wrong with what you were doing," Gram remarked. The piano behind them played on, softly, through all this, as if Maybeth knew that everything was all right in the room.

"And look at this, Dicey," James said quietly. He turned the heavy pages back to the beginning. There was a long list of names and dates, in different handwritings. Some of the ink was so old it had turned brown. The list

went all the way down one page and partway down the next. James's finger pointed to an entry on the second page. John Tillerman md. Abigail, 1936, she read. Then there were three names, in a row, in the same handwriting, with dates of birth beside them: John Tillerman, Elizabeth Tillerman, Samuel Tillerman. By Samuel there were two dates, and the last date had been put in later, by a different hand. The same hand that put in a date of death for the first John Tillerman. Dicey touched Momma's name there in the ink and pointed at Samuel's name. "That's our uncle. He was only nineteen," James pointed out. They were talking almost in a whisper. "It was a war," Dicey explained. "Even so," James said, "that's still young. He was only six years older than you. Only nine older than me." "We should be written down too," Dicey thought. But maybe Gram didn't want that. "I can hear what you're thinking, girl," her grandmother said. Dicey looked up, alarmed. "And you're right," Gram said. She got up, took James's place at the desk, and pulled an old fountain pen out of the drawer. Slowly, she wrote down their names: Dicey Tillerman. James Tillerman. Maybeth Tillerman. Samuel Tillerman. They all looked at the names there. At last, Gram said, "That's settled too." She gave James back his seat. None of the children said anything. Dicey guessed that, like her, they couldn't think of how to say all the things they were thinking. Finally, Sammy found words. "Good-o," he declared. Gram smiled to herself and agreed to play another game of checkers with him. James went back to his reading, Maybeth back to the piano. For a while, Dicey watched them all. Then she wandered out of the room. She had nothing to do. Her homework she had finished quickly after school on Friday, just some math, and memorizing for science. There weren't any chores she could think of. She decided to go outside. Outside was better than inside, Dicey always thought that. In Provincetown, where they had lived with their momma, they were always outside, on the dunes and down by the rushing water. Summertime they would go out early in the morning and stay all day. The rooms in their little cabin were awfully small, especially with four children and one of them Sammy, so they had spent all the time they could outside. But even here, in Gram's house, with its big, boxy rooms, Dicey preferred outside. She liked the water. She liked the stretch of water leading before her and she liked the stretch of sky overhead. Dicey crossed the lawn at the back, went through the garden, and then headed down the narrow path through the tall marsh grasses. Overhead, the growing darkness turned the sky to the color of blueberries, and long clouds floated gray. The only movement Dicey could see in the Bay, when she sat dangling her feet over the end of the dock, was the turgid, slow sweeping of tide. She wiped sweat off her forehead. She looked

out across the flat water. Just a band of burning orange was left from the sunset, but the water caught that and transformed it, lying before Dicey like a field of gold. Like cloth of gold. Dicey was feeling edgy and not really like herself. Probably, she told herself, it was all these changes that were permanent. The new home and the new school and Gram. But Dicey didn't mind changes, she'd gotten used to them over the summer. For a minute, she unrolled the adventures of the summer out, like ribbons. The ribbons unrolled back until Dicey saw her momma's face. But it wasn't her momma's own face she saw, it was the photograph the police in Bridgeport had shown her for identification, that faraway face lying back against a white pillow, with the golden hair cut short all around it. The sadness of Momma lost to them, maybe forever, was something Dicey carried around deep inside her all the time, and maybe that explained her edginess. Dicey wasn't used to carrying sadness around. She was used to seeing trouble and doing something about it. She just didn't know anything to do about Momma. What Dicey was used to, she realized, was things being simple, like a song. You sang the words and the melody straight through. That was the way she had brought her family down here to Crisfield, singing straight through. Gram probably knew something about carrying sorrow around. However she acted, Dicey knew Gram had cared about her three children who all left her and never came back. She wondered how Gram carried her sorrows. Maybe someday, when they had all got used to one another, she would ask. The first pale stars were coming out. It was the dark of the moon, so the stars burned brighter, especially the evening star, hanging just over the horizon. Dicey knew she should get back inside and send Maybeth and Sammy up to bed. But she didn't want to and maybe she wouldn't. She lay on her back along the dock and looked up at the stars. The sky was turning black and the stars burned out there, unchanging. All those stars, and those dark millions of light years . . . Dicey wondered if the space between was to push the stars apart or hold them together. She jumped up impatiently. That was James's kind of idea, and when she started having ideas like that it was time to get back inside. When she returned to the house, only James was still in the living room. "Where are the little kids?" Dicey asked. "They went to bed, half an hour ago. They're asleep; Gram tucked them in and went up to check later." "You should have called me." "Gram said maybe you wanted to be off on your own. She said you put in a long, hard summer with all of us, and we should remember that you might want to get away once in a while." Dicey didn't know what to answer. She was surprised to hear that Gram understood that, but still she almost wished Sammy and Maybeth hadn't wanted to go to bed without saying good night to her. James had his face back in the book. "Am I bothering

you? "Dicey asked. He shook his head, but his eyes were asking her questions. "Is something wrong?" He put his eyes back on the page. "I'm just wondering how things are going to go for us this year. And for me. I mean, it's not as if we were her real children and at school too. What if it doesn't work out?" "She's going to adopt us, you heard her. She wants to, she likes us," Dicey said. "She put us down in the Bible." "I know," James said. "But Dicey? You never understand, because it's always so easy for you, you just go ahead and do what you want. And Sammy, too, and everybody likes Maybeth. And I think Sammy must remind her of our Uncle Bullet." "What are you talking about?" Dicey demanded. "But I never fit in, not at Provincetown, or coming down here if you think about it. I think about it." "But you did, we did it together," Dicey pointed out. The trouble with James was he thought too much about things. "Some people, they're always outsiders, wherever they are." "So am I," Dicey told him, finally understanding what he was worrying about. "Yeah, but you don't care," James said. Dicey couldn't argue with him about that. "I wouldn't worry, about it, James," she advised. "Why not?" he asked. "Because it won't do any good," Dicey snapped. He didn't believe her, she could tell. She didn't let that bother her. She just picked up one of the books on boat building and went up to read in bed. During the next week, Dicey settled herself into a routine. She rode her bike to school (the little kids took the bus, which stopped for them right by Gram's mailbox), sat through classes, and spent an hour exactly in Millie's store. Except for the windows, the difference Dicey's work made didn't show much the first week. But after she'd spent three hours on Saturday morning washing down the floors, the store really did look cleaner, more like a place where you would like to buy food. Dicey had planned out her work at the store, what to do first, second, third, during the long, slow school days, going from science to math to social studies to gym to English to home ec. The only class she couldn't think in was home ec, because there you had to do things. Stupid things, Dicey reported to James. They were starting with sewing, buttons first. It wasn't interesting, but you had to watch what you were doing or you attracted Miss Eversleigh's attention and she would come stand behind you at the long table, explaining over again all the boring things you had already listened to, how to thread a needle and tie the knot, how to position the button and lock it in place, boring-boring-boring. Dicey had more important things to think about. Miss Eversleigh might care about that stuff, that was her business, and Dicey

guessed the tall, bony, white-haired woman didn't have anything better to do. But Dicey had much better things to do. She had her own routine. When she rode home from her job, Dicey would work for an hour on the boat, scraping off the old layers of paint, before going inside to help Gram with supper or some other housework. After supper, she would listen to Maybeth read for a while and help her review the lists of words. Then she would dash off the busy work her teachers gave as homework and spend an hour studying the boat books. On Sunday, Gram asked Dicey to give her some advice about the papers and pamphlets she had been given at the Welfare Office and by the lawyer. "I can't figure these forms out," Gram said, irritated. She had them all spread in front of her, covering half the long kitchen table. "So you're going to have to put your nose into them and help me, girl." If Gram needed her help, that was fine with Dicey. And if she couldn't figure things out, she could always enlist James's aid. "Between us," she promised Gram, "we can do anything." "Humph," Gram said. "I hope you're not counting on that." Dicey met her grandmother's eyes, across the table. "You do it too, don't you?" she asked. "Worrying," she explained. "Doesn't hurt to be prepared," Gram said. "I haven't ever taken charity, never wanted to. I don't expect to enjoy the experience, don't expect it to be easy. I like to be prepared for the worst. It saves trouble." Dicey remembered that the next Wednesday, when Maybeth came home from school with a note. As Dicey walked over from putting her bike away in the barn, she saw Gram shucking the last ears of corn from the garden. Gram sat on the back steps with her toes dug into the sun-warmed dirt. "Something on the table you should look at," Gram told her. Dicey knew what it was before she picked it up. A note from Maybeth's teacher. Maybeth was always coming home with notes from her teacher, saying could they please have a conference, not saying what they wanted to confer about. In Dicey's experience, what they wanted to talk about was what to do about Maybeth being so slow, about how they wanted to put her back a grade, which wasn't doing anything as far as Dicey could tell. Only the nun at the day camp in Bridgeport that summer had talked about really doing something. But what she wanted to do was send Maybeth to a special school for retarded people. Dicey didn't believe Maybeth was retarded, not the way she could learn music, the melodies and the words. But Dicey couldn't be sure; how could she be sure? She made herself pick up the piece of paper from the table. She took the folded paper outside to sit beside Gram while she read it. It was from Maybeth's music teacher, asking Gram to come in for a meeting, the next day, at three fifteen, as soon as school let out. "But Maybeth can

sing, Dicey protested. "She never had a note from her music teacher before," Dicey told Gram. "I don't know," Gram said. Her fingers pulled the long protective leaves from the ears of corn. This late in the season, half of the ears in her pile were too wormy to eat. Those she tossed into a mound on a brown paper bag. "I don't know what this young man is in such a hurry for," Dicey said. "I'll go in and see him before work," Gram told her quickly. "I was planning to. I'm the one who should, anyway, I'm the name that's on their thousands of forms." Dicey was so relieved she didn't know what to say. Instead, she picked up an ear and started pulling off the leaves. "I'm sorry," she said again. "You don't look it," Gram observed. Dicey looked up at her grandmother's face. Gram rewarded her with a sudden smile and spoke briskly. "You're not the only one responsible, girl. You've been responsible a long time and done a good job. Take a rest now." Dicey nodded her head and that was that. She finished the corn and dropped the husks into the garbage can on her way out to work on the sailboat. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

I'm a grandmother of 5 and a former teacher, and this is one of my favorite books. Dicey is an admirable character. It is so annoying to keep running into the same precocious, smart-mouthed, self-involved characters in children's books and on TV. In contrast, Dicey is responsible, determined and a great role model for kids. I suggest you start your reader with Homecoming, because this is the sequel. Homecoming can get a little slow, so you might want to read aloud some of it or just read it too to keep them interested, because it's a bit long and slow in parts. But most kids (even some boys) fly through Dicey's song. My oldest granddaughter is really enjoying it and almost finished. I gave it to her for Christmas. She's ten and it's hard to keep her in books. Most kids would read this at around 12. You can get a lot of information about the watermen of the Eastern Shore to help bring it alive. Google skipjacks and Tilghman's Island for local color. For Homecoming, you could have your child trace on a map their progress. Terrific book, and there are more in the series.

This book series should be required reading for all jr high schools. She is an excellent author and I feel like every character came alive as I read the book.

This is a beautiful and powerful book. The writing is very fine, but the depth of what is going on is

beyond that. The last portion of the book deals with characters dealing with death, but with no schmaltz whatsoever. It resonates at a very high level. The first book in the series has an adventure thing running through it. This does not. It is a psychological novel for young people, powerful, but without melodrama. If your kids are readers at all, they deserve to have a chance to experience this.

Read these books in junior high and reading again as a 40 something mom of three. How different was the world then? When kids could enter a store alone or ride their bikes minus helicopter parents: without someone questioning whether or not Child Protective Services should be notified. I grew up in New England and am now living at the top of the Chesapeake Bay in Maryland and am amazed how well this author embraces the differences between the two and the gifts to be found in both places. Timeless story of coming of age.

The Tillerman's continue their journey along life's tenuous and winding path, where the wiry threads of love hold everything and everyone together.

Great story!

The Homecoming and Dicey's Song were the most interesting and I would recommend them to any young adult reader - I read the entire series long ago and re-reading the first two again was just as interesting

Very nice book with a great ending. The characters were all very developed throughout the duration of the book. Fantastic!

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