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### Death in Children's Literature

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#### Recommended Citation

Kaufman, Joyce Ann, "Death in Children's Literature" (1976). *Honors Theses*. 278.  
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DEATH IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

JOYCE ANN KAUFMAN

I.D. 05819

SPRING 1976

## DEATH IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

----- A simple child,  
That lightly draws its breath  
And feels its life in every limb  
What should it know of death?

Wordsworth

Mr. Wordsworth posed an interesting question. What should a child know about death?

Often we try to protect children from death. Euphemisms are used regarding death. People and pets do not die, they "pass away," "go to sleep," or "go to live in heaven." When a death occurs in a family, the adults often say of a young child, "It doesn't seem to bother him. Maybe he doesn't realize what has happened." Other people may mention that "He has accepted it so well. Children adjust so easily."

Death is as much a part of living as birth. We experience death every day. Flowers and plants die in the classroom and at home. The bunny, so lively and frisky on Friday, is forgotten in school over the weekend and is very still on Monday morning. Overdoses of food, however lovingly intended, bring on the sad demise of turtles, goldfish, gerbils and lizards.<sup>1</sup>

In their studies of children, Gesell and Ily have discovered that the immature person goes through certain stages in the recognition of death. Until age five a child may consider death reversible and show no observable affect in its presence. By age six and seven some affect reveals itself; there is a marked preoccupation with death and burial rites, but he still does not understand death as a personal process. By the age of eight he begins to display an interest in

what happens after death. At nine he/she apparently begins to accept the concept of personal death.<sup>7</sup>

A few years ago discussions and literature on conception and birth were considered taboo for children. By a strange reversal, discussion of death has become obscured by all the evasiveness that used to surround discussion of birth. Dying has, to some degree, replaced reproduction as the taboo subject between adults and children; and, to a large extent, in modern literature for children.

Over the years death in literature has been presented in a variety of ways.

Greek writers presented death in a very mild way. Although death is a frequent occurrence in mythology, the Greeks rarely presented actual death but presented characters being metamorphosized into flowers, animals and other things of nature. Arachne was changed into a spider because of her vanity while a god who loved Hyacinthus turned him into a lovely flower when he died.

Later, death was presented in the form of "poetic justice." Aesop wrote a fable about a turtle being carried through the air while gripping a stick in his mouth. The turtle opened his mouth to jeer back when the children laughed at the ducks carrying the stick and fell to his death. To most readers of the fable it seems right and natural for the turtle to die.

Poetic justice also is important in the area of folklore. No one weeps as the wicked queen in "Snow White" gets her just rewards by dancing out her life in red hot shoes. In "Three Billy Goats Gruff" there is no sorrow when the wicked troll is killed by the larger Billy.

Religion entered into the topic of death in early children's literature. In the 1600's the New England Primer carried only one illustration which was

Mr. John Rogers being burned at the stake as a Christian martyr. Children were encouraged to note his bravery and devotion to God so that they would know how to die with honor.

In the seventeenth century children were often taken to hangings, or when seriously ill, they were taken to see their places in the family vault.

Sentimental deaths were familiar events in the novels of Charles Dickens or Louisa May Alcott. Writers of the nineteenth century reflected in their works the high rates of infant and young adult mortality. They indicate that children were not sheltered from death scenes and funerals as they are today. In Alcott's Little Women, Beth's sisters watch her slow demise, mourn for her and are intimately involved with the activities and emotions surrounding her death. The story dwells on the reactions of Beth's family and not on death itself. Dog of Flanders is created so as to make the reader not only sentimental but melancholy as well. A small boy is poor and badly treated by society and finally freezes to death inside the cathedral with his dog frozen to his chest. Kingsley's fantasy, The Water Babies, describes a small boy drowning. Instead of dying, the child is transformed into a water boy whose life parallels that of any normal boy.

Romanticizing a death often makes it emotional and beautiful. The ballad is an excellent tool for accomplishing this type of sentimentalism. The ballad "Barbara Allen" presents a young girl dying of grief upon the death of her sweetheart. Love is symbolized by the entwining of a rose and a briar rising from their graves.

Until recently, twentieth century children's literature has treated death as something which happens but should not be dwelt upon. Instead death is treated vaguely.

Death presented as merely an event is exemplified in Esther Weir's The Loner. A migrant girl is caught in a potato picking machine which mutilates her. The gory details are not emphasized but do bring about an immediate reaction from the major character; these unpleasant details are never mentioned again in the story.

This vagueness is found in few of the new books being published today. Currently a few excellent books are being published that deal exclusively with the subject of death.

Following is an annotated list of books that deal with death in a positive manner:

Abbott, Sarah. The Old Dog. New York: Coward, 1972.

Ben awakes one morning and finds that his lifelong companion the old dog does not wake up and move. Father gently explains that the dog is dead. Ben feels sad, but reminisces about the many hours he has spent with his beloved companion.

Brown, Margaret Wise. The Dead Bird. Reading Mass.: Wesley Publishing Co., 1965. Ages 5-8.

This book serves as an excellent introduction to death. Some children find a dead bird. They express regret that the little bird will never fly again and decide to bury it. A burial ritual is carried out, with ceremony, tears and singing. The children resolve to visit the grave every day and remember the bird. And they did ---"until they forgot."

Buck, Pearl S. The Big Wave. New York: The John Day Co., 1947. Ages 8-12.

This book tells the story of Jiva, a Japanese boy who learns that life is stronger than death. Death comes

to a small fishing village in the form of a tidal wave, leaving Jiva orphaned. Jiva tries to be brave but when death takes his parents he is grief stricken. The family that befriends him understands the need for his grief, and allows him to mourn at will, silently offering him encouragement and the support of their love.

Burch, Robert. Simon and the Game of Chance. New York: Viking, 1970. Ages 10-12.

Simon's family is happy when the mother gives birth to a baby girl. When the baby dies, Mother is hospitalized. Tragedy strikes again when Simon's sister's fiance Whit is killed on their wedding day. Simon feels guilty because he had wished that "something" would happen so that his sister wouldn't get married. Finally, after several months he admits his guilt to his sister and she assures him that neither he nor anyone else was responsible for Whit's death.

De Paola, Tomie. Nana Upstairs and Nana Downstairs. New York: Putnam, 1973. Ages 4-8.

Nana Upstairs is the ninety-four-year-old great grandmother who is usually confined to her bed upstairs. Nana Downstairs is the grandmother, always making cookies for the four-year-old protagonist. Nana Upstairs dies. After explaining that "Dead means that Nana Upstairs won't be here anymore," the child's mother encourages him to speak of his Nana Upstairs, because "She will come back in your memory whenever you think of her."

Fassler, Joan. My Grampa Died Today. New York: Behavioral Publications, Inc., 1971. Ages 4-7.

Grampa, who has always been a pal to David, tells him that he is growing old and cannot live forever. He assures the child that he is not afraid to die "because I know that you are not afraid to live." David does

not understand but agrees anyway. When Grampa dies, the boy feels scared and does not like the grown-up grief. As David returns to his everyday activities he realizes what Grampa had meant about not being afraid to die; he sees that Grampa knew that he, the child, would keep busy.

Furita, Miyuki. Why, Mother, Why? Translated by Harold Wright. Tokyo: Kodansha, 1965. Ages 9-12

Why, Mother, Why?, is a beautiful collection of poems in free verse written by a fifth grade Japanese girl whose mother had died suddenly and unexpectedly.

Lee, Virginia. The Magic Moth. New York: Seabury, Ages 10-12.

This is a story of a family facing the death of nine-year-old Maryanne. The family is aware that Maryanne will not live, and have explained this to the other children. Mark-O, Maryanne's six-year-old brother does not understand how the family will replace Maryanne as they did his guinea pig when it died. When Maryanne dies quietly in her sleep, the family observes a white moth emerging from its cocoon in her room.

Little, Jean. Home From Far. Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1965. Ages 10-12.

Michael, Jenny's eleven-year-old twin, is killed in an automobile accident. Jenny is disturbed because no one in the family speaks of her dead twin or seems to miss him as much as she does. Eventually she learns that her mother misses Michael very much but has tried not to overdo her grief. Mother realizes that she should have talked more about Michael. When Jenny confesses that she sometimes feels guilty because she gets happy and busy and forgets to miss him, Mother assures her that it is perfectly natural to want to



return to a happy life.

Miles, Miska. Annie and the Old One. Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1971. Ages 6-9.

This is an outstanding story of Annie, a six-year-old Navajo girl who cannot accept the approaching death of her grandmother. Grandmother tells Annie that she is old and will return to Mother Earth by the time the rug, now in the loom, is complete. Annie lets the sheep wander off so that her mother won't be able to weave that day, and later begins to unravel the day's weaving each night. Grandmother, discovering what she has done, explains that man cannot hold back time, but that death and life will continue according to the cycle of time. Thus Annie is able to prepare for her grandmother's death.

Smith, Doris Buchanan. A Taste of Blackberries. New York: Crowell, 1973. Ages 10-12.

A Taste of Blackberries is the story of a ten-year-old child whose friend Jamie has died of a bee-sting. Told in first person, the story describes the boy's reaction to his friend's death in a masterful way, and the recollections of the many happy times the boys have spent together reveal a keen insight into the workings of a young boy's mind.

Viorst, Judith. The Tenth Good Thing About Barney. New York: Atheneum, 1971. Ages 5-9.

Barney the cat has died and the boy is melancholy. A funeral is planned for the next day and mother suggests that the boy think of ten good things to say about Barney at the funeral. The boy easily thinks of nine good things, but the tenth eludes him. Father explains that soon Barney will change in the ground like the plants do and help the flowers and grass to grow. The boy

decides that's a pretty nice thing for a cat and declares that's the tenth good thing about Barney.

Wagner, Jane. J. T. New York: Dell, 1969. Ages 7-10.

J. T. is an eight-year-old black boy living in the ghetto of a large city. He befriends a stray cat, a bond develops between them, and when the cat is killed by a car, J. T. is heart broken. His mother and grandmother attempt to share his grief, expressing their own lack of understanding about death, but stressing the need to accept its reality. J. T. learns to accept the death of his pet and to love another when a neighbor brings a new kitten to him.

Warbol, Sandol. Growing Time. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1969. Ages 7-10.

Jamie, a preschooler, and King his dog have grown up together. One day King, now old, dies quietly in his sleep. The book deals with Jamie's reaction to the death, and his family's attempts to respond to his questions and help him cope with the tragedy.

White, E. B. Charlotte's Web. New York: Harper and Row, 1952. Ages 10-12.

After Charlotte has cleverly saved the life of Wilbur, a prize pig, by spinning exotic webs over his stall, she comes to her inevitable death. Wilbur carefully protects Charlotte's eggs, the future generations. Even while Wilbur is mourning for Charlotte, and waiting for her eggs to hatch, White writes, "Life is always a rich and steady time when you are waiting for something to happen or hatch." Readjustment to life without the loved one is also shown. Wilbur grows to love the spider's children and grandchildren but no one ever

quite replaces Charlotte in his heart.

Zolotow, Charlotte. My Grandson Lew. New York: Harper and Row, 1974. Ages 4-7.

Lewis, about age four, waking and calling for his mother, asks about Grampa, whom he has missed. Mother tells him that she did not think Lew remembered him. Mother says that they can share memories of Grampa and not be lonely.

Recently several excellent factual books have been published dealing with the subject of death. Following are three examples:

Grollman, Earl A. Talking About Death: A Dialogue Between Parent and Child. Boston: Beacon Press, 1970. Ages 3-8.

The book is designed to be read to the child by the parent, with the aim of producing a discussion about death. It presents facts and attitudes toward death, and gives a brief description of biological death. The book emphasizes that the dead can live in our memory. A parents guide is included in the book.

Stein, Sarah Bonnett. About Dying. New York: Walker, 1974. Ages 3-8.

About Dying is in picture book format, with a story to be read to the child, and, on the same page, a brief explanatory portion to be studied by the adult. The children's story deals first with the death of a pet bird and later introduces a story about Grampa, who becomes ill and dies.

Zim, Herbert S. and Bleeker, Sonia. Life and Death. New York: Morrow, 1970. Ages 8-12.

This book presents the scientific view of death.

It describes the physical facts of death in considerable detail, with explanations of the aging process, clinical death, autopsy and other aspects of biological death. This book is accurate, clinical and emotion free yet sensitive.

Children begin asking questions about death very early in life. Books giving either factual or fictional accounts of death may be used to explain the ending of life.

Unfortunately many adults continue to shy away from the subject of death. Apart from attempting to shield children from a painful subject, parents and teachers are prevented from open discussions with children about death by their own fears, misconceptions, and innate wish to deny life's inevitable end. Some adults are reluctant to admit to children that they have no answers and can offer only ambiguity and uncertainty.

Whatever the reasons, the entire evasion of death can only be termed dishonest and damaging to the emotional and intellectual development of the child. Literature, apart from entertaining and instructing, can aid people in coping with real life situations. Many children will have to face the death of a close relative. If they are somehow spared from a personal tragedy, they will probably know classmates who will need support in time of grief.

Many child psychologists emphasize the folly of adult attempts to shield children from the fact of death or to deceive them as to its nature. As in so many areas of life, careful, honest answers give a child greater reassurance and security than the obviously devious replies he or she so often receives from parents. Yet a general reluctance to deal with

the topic of death persists.

That all living things are born and die is a universal truth which should be presented to children. Books are an excellent medium through which death may be properly explained. Children must accept death as a fact and literature may be able to cushion that hard fact.

Pretending that death isn't there won't make it go away. No human can evade it either as it occurs to someone near to him, or as it eventually will end his life on earth. Man, as one writer has said, can never escape "the brutal fact of his mortality." <sup>12</sup>

CHILDREN'S BOOKS DEALING WITH DEATH

- Abbott, Sarah. The Old Dog. New York: Coward, 1972.
- Brown, Margaret Wise. The Dead Bird. Reading, Mass.: Wesley Publishing Co., 1965. Ages 5-8.
- Buck, Pearl S. The Big Wave. New York: The John Day Co., 1947. Ages 8-12.
- Burch, Robert. Simon and the Game of Chance. New York: Viking, 1970. Ages 10-12.
- De Paola, Tomie. Nana Upstairs and Nana Downstairs. New York: Putnam, 1973. Ages 4-8.
- Fassler, Joan. My Grampa Died Today. New York: Behavioral Publications, 1971. Ages 4-7.
- Furita, Miyuki. Why, Mother, Why? Translated by Harold Wright. Tokyo: Kodansha, 1965. Ages 9-12.
- Grollman, Earl A. Talking About Death: A Dialogue Between Parent and Child. Boston: The Beacon Press, 1970. Ages 3-8.
- Lee, Virginia. The Magic Moth. New York: Seabury, 1972. Ages 10-12.
- Little, Jean. Home From Far. Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1965. Ages 10-12.
- Miles, Miska. Annie and the Old One. Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1971. Ages 6-9.
- Smith, Doris Buchanan. A Taste of Blackberries. New York: Crowell, 1973. Ages 10-12.
- Stein, Sarah Bonnett. About Dying. New York: Walker, 1974. Ages 3-8.
- Viorst, Judith. The Tenth Good Thing About Barney. New York: Atheneum, 1971. Ages 5-9.
- Wagner, Jane. J. T. New York: Dell, 1969. Ages 7-10.
- Warburg, Sandol. Growing Time. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1969. Ages 7-10.

White, E. B. Charlotte's Web. New York: Harper and Row, 1952. Ages 10-12.

Zim, Herbert S. and Bleeker, Sonia. Life and Death. New York: Morrow, 1970. Ages 8-12.

Zolowtow, Charlotte. My Grandson Lew. New York: Harper and Row, 1974. Ages 4-7.

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