

Question 2 : Analyse the work of illustrators and, particularly, author illustrators who tackle difficult, sensitive and sometimes shocking themes.

How Do Author Illustrators Kitty Crowther, Shaun Tan and Judith Kerr Deal With The Theme Of Death And Loss Through Children's Picture Books?

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Children's books are often assumed to be filled with fairy tales and fantasy, however sometimes authors and illustrators deal with some heavy themes when writing and illustrating children's books. In this essay, I will explore how these illustrators tackle the theme of death, examining their common techniques, such as the use of symbolism, narrative structure, and visual storytelling. I will also discuss the theoretical frameworks that underpin their work, drawing on key concepts from psychology and literary theory. By analyzing the contributions of Shaun Tan, Kitty Crowther, and Judith Kerr, I aim to highlight the vital role that children's literature can play in helping young readers understand and cope with death.

Illustration plays a key role on how death can be depicted in children's books. It provides the ability to convey emotion and concepts that may be difficult to do with words alone. Key theorist Bruno Bettelheim (1976) quoted in Alan Dundes *The Journal Of American Folklore* (1991, p.74-75) states that 'fairy tales offer figures onto which the child can externalise what goes on in his mind'. The importance of this outlet is stressed by Bettelheim "by denying access to stories which implicitly tell the child that others have the same fantasies, he is left to feel that he is the only one who imagines such things. This makes his fantasies really scary"(Dundes, 1991, p.75). Children need these portrayals so they may not feel so alone when dealing with these topics,

and makes themes like death less isolating to a child who may be thinking about or experiencing them.

Belgian author/illustrator Kitty Crowther takes the approach of personifying death in her book *The visit of little death* (2004), portraying death and a friend and promoting the acceptance of mortality.



Fig 1: Crowther, K. (2004), *The Visit Of Little Death*. Belgium: Pastel, illus.

Crowther's use of soft lines and simple warm colours, which can be seen in fig 1, gives death a friendly appearance. It appears as if Crowther wished to portray death as an approachable character, which subverts the traditional portrayal of death as being something fearful. Crowther acknowledges this in the book as little death is sad that no one wants to welcome him, as at the beginning of the book he is met with cold interactions. She gives him redemption by letting the protagonist, a little girl, greet him warmly "Finally, you are here!", she exclaims.

Theorist Kiefer, B (1995, p.123), on discussing a book titled *The Mountains of Tibet* by Gerstein, M, she speaks on how simple shapes are used to portray death, “when the woodcutter dies, the square changes to a circle, the universal symbol of eternity.”

Like Crowther, Gerstein invites children to engage with death in a safe and imaginative space, symbolising death in a friendly manner rather than the harsh fearful way death is typically portrayed in media.

Crowther has also presented death with less direct symbolism, in her book *Annie Du Lac* (2009), she uses imagery of a lake to represent the boundary between life and death. The water becomes a metaphor for mystery, evoking fear, which is a large contrast to her representation of death as a friendly approachable and lonely character in *The Visit Of Little Death*. Whilst this can be seen as a fearful interpretation of death, it can also encourage a feeling of mystery, almost conveying to readers that death is not an abrupt end but may be a journey into something else.



Fig 2: Crowther, K. (2009), *Annie Du Lac*. Belgium: Pastel, illus.

This can be seen in fig 2, where there is a quite brutal representation of someone passing on, a girl descending into the mysterious lake, a stone tied to her leg like a weight, pulling her to the depths. Normally this world is a brutal and scary representation of someone passing, however the character is surrounded by somewhat wonderful imagery. Crowther uses warm toned colours and soft lines to give the lake a comforting appearance, the fish with friendly faces also seeming welcoming. Crowther still does not shy away from the fear death can bring, including some darker imagery, especially with a small touch of darker colour, in which a fish with a somewhat scary face sits in waiting for the falling character. This shows that as much as Crowther shrouded death in whimsy and mystery, she still acknowledges that it can be a scary and complex theme, even for young readers.

Shaun Tan has a less direct approach to addressing the theme of death in his literature. Tan more so suggests said theme, like in his work *The Arrival*, which contains no words, only illustrations. The book contains a couple of scenes in which death is implied.

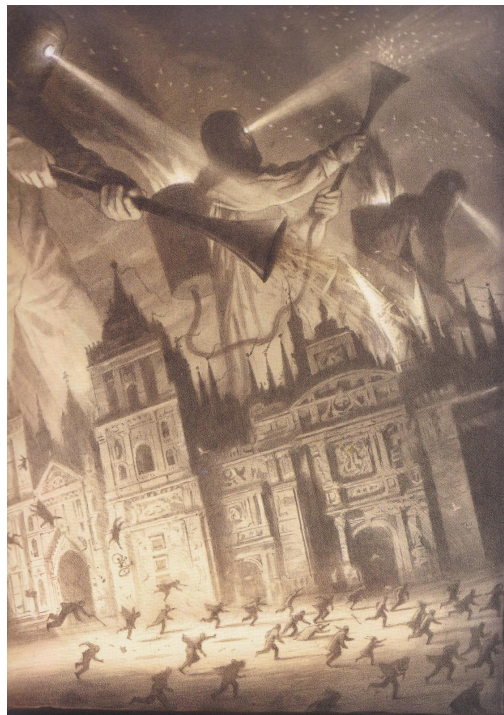


Fig 3: Tan, S. (2006), *The Arrival*. Melbourne: Lothian Books, illus.

One of these is where a fruit seller relays to the protagonist why they left their homeland, and shows giant masked figures vacuuming people up from the streets, which can be seen in fig 3. This, whilst not being an explicit mention of death, still heavily and quite violently suggests it. Tan uses scale and colour in a threatening way in his work, the masked giants looming over the crowds. The lack of colour and the play with light also emphasizes their size, their eyes glowing making them even more threatening. Tan, in a stark contrast to Crowther, represents the action of death in a very fearful manner, death is not a friend to Tan like it is to Crowther.

“Gerstein artfully creates a metaphor for life and death that could never be expressed as powerfully with words alone“ Kiefer, B (1995, p.123) Tans use of only images is akin to Gerstein, his work conveying deep emotions that are difficult to convey with solely text. His lack of words also allows readers to interpret the images in their own way, giving them an indirect interaction with the theme of death, which can be less overwhelming as it doesn't have to be directly confronted, and fosters reflection and empathy.

Tan also touches on the theme of death, focusing on the feeling of loss, in his book *The Red Tree*. The red tree follows a young girl as she explores a series of surreal scenes. These scenes seem to convey different emotions, alienation, despair and confusion, all of which can be linked to the emotional stages when dealing with loss and death. Whilst death is never explicitly mentioned in *The Red Tree*, Tan uses powerful symbolism to evoke a sense of depression and loss which are comparable to the response to death. Tan's approach to loss aligns with key theoretical frameworks that emphasize the importance of dealing with difficult emotions through picture books and storytelling. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, introduced the five stages of grief in her book *On Death And Dying*, denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Using acceptance and the key example here, Tan's final illustration in the book strongly represents this, in fig 4, the red tree growing in the protagonist's room symbolizes hope for the protagonist, and the ability to carry on, which can convey to young readers that even though days can be hard, there will always be a light at the end of the tunnel.



Fig 4: Tan, S. (2001), *The Red Tree*. Melbourne: Lothian Books, illus.

Judith Kerr portrays the stages of grief through the family's reactions in *Goodbye Mog* (2002). The book opens with Mogs passing, she feels "dead tired" and that she is ready to sleep forever. This is a direct confrontation with death, and a very personal one too, as it is based on Kerr's life experiences, which gives the narrative authenticity.

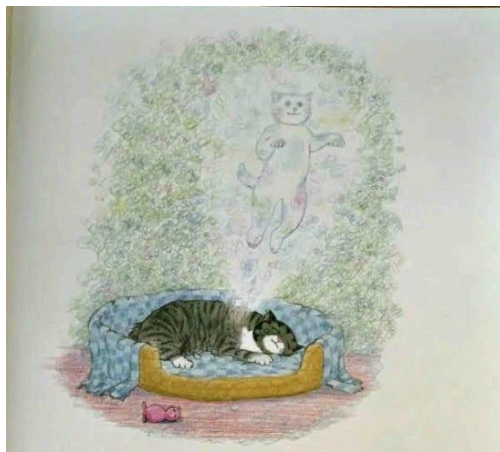


Fig 4: Kerr, J. (2002). *Goodbye Mog*. Glasgow: HarperCollins Children's Books, illus.

Kerr's illustrations, characterised by their simplicity, subtle colour scheme and gentle mark making, which can be seen in fig 5, convey a sense of calm whilst the subject remains quite dark. This has the effect of portraying death as something that is not as fearful as may have once been though, much like Crowther.

Goodbye Mog (2002) then continues with a focus on the family's grief, and their eventual acceptance of her death. This very direct approach to portraying the emotional results that loss can have provides a template for understanding the after affects of death for younger children, and can help with the loss of a pet or family member. Kerr portrays death as a part of life, which is vital in a child's development, and doing this with the loss of a beloved long standing character can hit quite close to home for a young reader.

Kerr also explores the longstanding aftermath of death in her book *My Henry* (2011). Kerr addresses the death in this book through the lens of loving memory. One of the strongest themes in *My Henry* (2011) is the power of memory and imagination. It symbolises memory as a coping mechanism, where imagination can be a useful tool for dealing with loss. Kerr envisioning Henry in these fantastical adventures allows for her to celebrate and reminisce about their time together. Jean Piaget, a swiss psychologist, speaks about the importance of imagination and play as a healthy way for children to process their emotions in his theories of cognitive development. Kerr uses this technique very poignantly in her books about mortality, reflecting the important role her illustrations and writing could play for a child processing grief.

Exploring death, loss and grief through the medium of children's literature is a very delicate venture. It requires a lot of sensitivity and balance of honesty. The three illustrators analysed in this essay have all approached death with different narratives and techniques, but have all achieved a constructive method of translating the topic for the minds of children, making it more accessible for young readers.

All three illustrative authors use similar and different methods when depicting death in their books. They all use symbolic imagery to address death indirectly, allowing readers to address death in a non threatening way; Crowther using illustrative techniques to show the boundaries between life and death, whilst death is portrayed literally, they are represented as a dark character, whereas the protagonist and her surroundings are represented with a pale colour palette. Tan uses surreal landscapes to portray the stages of grief, the darker and more looming illustrations, where Tan particularly uses scale, representing feelings of hopelessness and fear, and his brighter and more playful illustration representing hope and relief. Kerr, whilst also directly approaching death like Crowther, uses fantastical settings to represent feelings one may have towards those who have passed on.

Another important theme that these authors reflect is the balance of sadness and hope.

Crowther, by personifying death, shows to the reader that death doesn't have to be something that is feared. Whilst it is sad for a person to pass on, it shouldn't have to be something that is scary. Tan's balance is far more geared towards sadness, especially in *The Red Tree* where the majority of scenes invoke a sense of dread, the conclusion of the book still reflects hope. This is still a healthy approach, Tans method is useful for consolidating the feelings that children may experience when dealing with death, and doesn't diminish the fact that these feelings may be terrifying to deal with. Kerr has a theme of longing in her books about loss. In *Goodbye Mog*, Mogs family mourn and long for her presence that was lost, and in *My Henry* the protagonist's sadness about her late husband is evident, but these sad emotions are balanced out by hope. In *Goodbye Mog*, the book concludes with the arrival of a new kitten, symbolising a moving on to a hopeful future, and in *My Henry*, the whimsical adventures the protagonist and her late husband take convey a sense of joy.

All three illustrators use techniques such as colour, and light composition to convey the emotions in their stories. Tan uses a muted colour palette in the majority of *The Red Tree*, symbolising the dark emotions that come with processing death, however working towards hope

and acceptance is evident through each page and the bright colour of the red tree's leaves can be found on each page, before the bright tree itself is shown on the final page, symbolising hope as a 'bright' emotion. Kerr, contrastingly, uses a muted colour palette in *Goodbye Mog* to portray a sense of calm, unlike Tan's use of a muted colour palette to convey dread. Her soft and warm colours convey the family's love and affection towards the late mog, portraying death as a gentle thing. Crowther uses a combination of both Tan and Kerr's techniques, using lighter and softer colours to represent hope, often the characters associated with life being portrayed in these colours, and darker deeper colours to convey the unknown. This contrast can be seen in the depiction of Death and the protagonist in *The Visit Of Little Death*.

Tan does not personify death like Crowther and Kerr, instead choosing to invoke the feelings associated with death and loss, and portrays a more abstract approach. Crowther on the other hand had a very literal interpretation of death, personifying mortality. This challenges the traditional interpretations of death that Tan seems to portray, presenting it more as a fact of life. Kerr in a similar fashion to Crowther, also personifies death, however not directly. In *My Henry* the concept of the afterlife is made literal, presenting it as a place of adventure and fun, making it less mortifying. Her adventures with her late husband portray death almost as a continuation of life rather than the end of it.

Kitty Crowther, Shain Tan and Judith Kerr demonstrate that children's literature doesn't have to just be about fairy tales and light hearted stories. It can also convey and address even the most difficult themes, and these can be presented with sensitivity and depth. Their work reminds us of the power that storytelling holds for the growth of a child's mind. Their contribution not only as a source of entertainment for children, but also as an educational tool is incredibly important, by contributing to a broader cultural understanding of death and grief, reducing fear and stigma surrounding the topic. Furthermore, the illustration in these books plays a crucial role in conveying the depth of these topics to young readers, coupling with text allowing for a

multi-layered narrative, and allowing readers to foster empathy by interpreting their own narratives.

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