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Illustration

Research in context

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

Introduction

Children's picture books hold many purposes from opening a child's mind to imaginative out-of-this-world events to teaching life morals and valuable lessons. However, some picture books can tackle more difficult subjects, such as abuse, war, depression, separation, and even death. All these have been explored throughout picture books. (Salisbury and Styles, 2012).

Throughout this essay, we will be exploring difficult subjects within children's picture books, focusing on the difficult topic of death and bereavement. We will be exploring how children deal with the idea of death and what happens when they become bereaved of someone and looking into example picture books. "Themes of stress and anxiety have increasingly appeared in picture books published during the last few decades." (Schwarcz and Schwarcz, 1991) Additionally, we will be exploring the advantages and drawbacks of including such serious themes in children's literature.

“Perceptions of suitable or appropriate content for children’s picture books have changed greatly over the years.” (Salisbury and Styles, 2012) The world is constantly updating itself on how we best raise our children, if that does mean shielding them from the toughest of subjects. There are arguments that we should speak openly about tough subjects such as death, as unfortunately not every childhood is one that does not experience bereavement. According to statistics in the United Kingdom, 1 in 29 children and those under the age of 18 has lived with the death of a parent or sibling. To illustrate that figure it is about 1 child per class. (B Thomson, 2009)

How children deal with bereavement

The never-ending inquisitiveness of young children will continuously seek to learn more, particularly about topics that parents want to avoid. (Salisbury and Styles, 2012). It is in their nature to be curious about things that they do not understand. Picture books may be a useful tool for parents and loved ones explaining these difficult subjects.

All children are individual and deal with the idea of death and bereavement differently. (Child Bereavement UK, 2019). When a child experiences loss it turns their safe world upside down, and the best you can offer is “reassure them they are not to blame” (Child Bereavement UK, 2019) and give lots of “time to talk about what has happened, ask questions and build memories”. (Child Bereavement UK, 2019). As the concept of death becomes clear to children, they start to comprehend the inevitable and will understand that it will happen to them one day and it is permanent. (Child Bereavement UK, 2019)

Numerous factors could impact how a child copes with bereavement: this can be from the age of the child to the support system that is accessible to them. (B Thomson, 2009). A child's feeling of security is disturbed (Child Bereavement UK, 2019). "Primary ages children show 'magical thinking' where they think 'if I do this dad will come back'". (Child Bereavement UK, 2019).

It is important to enforce gently that this is not true and that when someone does pass, they will not return. It is also expected that when a child is bereaved, they may experience "Psychological symptoms: emotional distress, separation anxiety, fear that others will also die, death fantasies, guilt and learning difficulties." (Karl Sven Rosengren et al., 2014). It is important to be transparent and educate our children so they are not in denial, afraid of death or dying, and not feeling alone.

Duck death and the tulip.

The children's picture book *Duck Death and the Tulip* is about an unlikely friendship and their journey of discovery ultimately exploring the idea of life and death. The main characters of the book is Duck and Death. The character Duck is a warm character full of life and curiosity. They discover Death, an illustrated skull figure wearing a long-patterned dress. Duck is not afraid and displays them with kindness and respect. Death describes that no one has ever treated them that way before. "'Are you cold?' Duck asked. 'Shall I warm you a little?' Nobody had ever offered to do that for death." (Wolf Erlbruch and Chidgey, 2018)

Their characters continue to blossom a friendship and to learn about each other. However, everything does end when unfortunately at the end of summer, Duck passes away peacefully. Death with so much respect, takes care of the Duck so they are not alone passing. The story ends with the Duck's body being placed in the river, with a dark tulip placed on their stomach gifted from Death

and them travelling off the page. The ending reading “But that’s life, thought Death.” (Wolf Erlbruch and Chidgey, 2018)

This book is different to other children's picture books. “Death in its generalised sense often crops up in books for the young, but using the subject as a central theme of a picture book is a very different matter.” (Salisbury and Styles, 2012). Children are usually introduced to death through the passing of a beloved pet, or grandparent, this picture book illustrates Duck interacting intuitively with Death. You can connect Ducks’ curious behaviour of Death in this book to the curiosity of a young child’s mind. Children are naturally curious (Salisbury and Styles, 2012).

When Duck is first introduced to Death, they are momentarily afraid of them but quickly relaxes. On the page where they first meet, there is plant life separating them a small bunch of flowers. These were purposely put here to demonstrate the separation between their two worlds, illustrating the fine line between life and death.



(Wolf Erlbruch and Chidgey, 2018)

Death doesn't portray themselves as a character that you should be afraid of, even though they have the appearance of a skull. Throughout most of the book, they are stood in a way that is quite relaxed holding a small dark tulip, that is never mentioned throughout any of the dialogue, but only the title. The tulip resembles the Duck's life. Throughout the book as the Duck is alive and healthy, so is the tulip. However, in the scene where Death finds that Duck has passed away, you can see that the dark tulip is placed just below Duck, copying the linear direction of where their lifeless body lies. When Duck is being carried to the river by Death, again the tulip is a metaphor for ducks passing as the limpness of the stem replicates the lifelessness of ducks draping neck as they are being carried.

Death stroked a few rumpled feathers back into place,
then he carried her to the great river.



He laid her gently on the water and nudged her on her way.



(Wolf Erlbruch and Chidgey, 2018)

The appearance of the book itself has muted toned-down colours. Most backgrounds are plain white. However, when Duck passes away, the background is filled with a deep blue colour, demonstrating the profound sense of sadness and loneliness that bereavement can bring to someone's emotions. Duck is placed in a river, and they float away. The river is the same dark blue and filters off the page in a winding way, demonstrating how over time death and bereavement become more manageable to cope with, and eventually, life does move on.

To follow at the end of the book you are greeted with a beautiful illustration of Death in the middle of a chase between a Fox and a Hare, showing the circle of life, the relationship of predator and prey. This gives a glimpse of death overseeing another ending of life, and their work to help life pass on is never finished.



(Wolf Erlbruch and Chidgey, 2018)

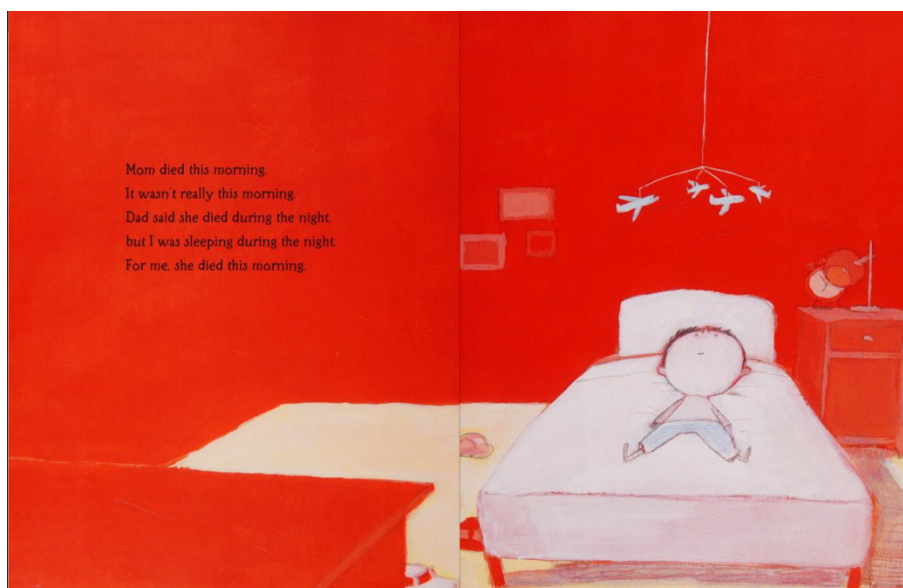
The main message of this book is not to be afraid of death. Though the character Death has introduced themselves into Ducks life, it still doesn't stop Ducks from doing things that they love, such as: going in the pond and climbing up tall trees. The book portrays honestly the sadness related to grief but also emphasises that in the meantime you should not fear death.

The Scar

The children's picture book *The Scar*, is about a little boy who has recently lost his mother to an illness. You meet the character the morning after his mother passes when he awakens and faces the reality of having lost someone whilst trying to be there as much as possible for his father, who is also struggling with the loss. You follow the little boy through his journey and healing process. At the end of the book, nothing is what it was before his mother got ill, but the boy and the father find a way to live as happily as they can. This book is aimed to help children who may have experienced loss first hand, whereas *Duck Death and the Tulip* is about introducing death to a child, and the lesson not being afraid of it.

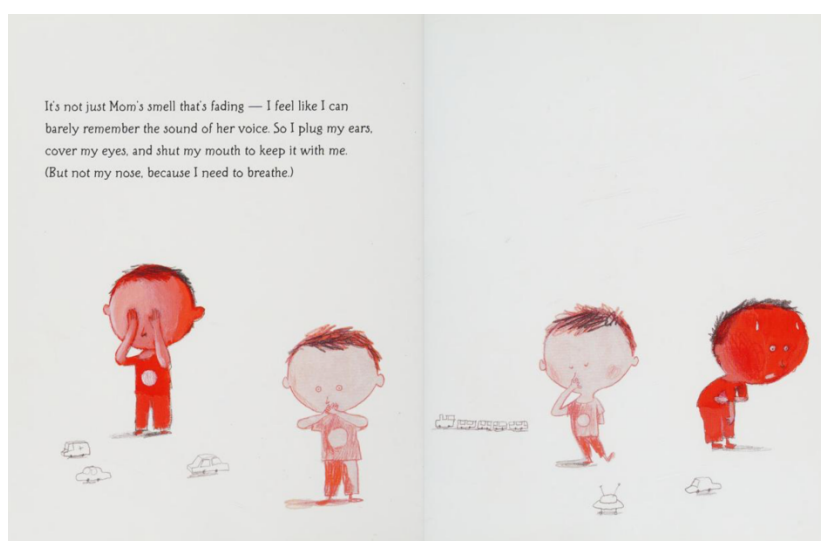
The Scar is quite an intense picture book. A lot of the dialogue describes very distressing sad moments and thoughts the child is going through. The book describes emotional trauma and denial very easily for a child to understand and relate to. "I told her that she could come back when was rested, that I would wait for her." (Moundlic and Olivier Tallec, 2011). This dialogue addresses children's "magical thinking", that if they are particularly well behaved, or will it be enough, their bereaved person will come back. (Child Bereavement UK, 2019)

The book's appearance displays these strong emotions through colour, by the illustrations inside being shaded with a deep blood red. The areas where the red is indicated are where the characters are under the most stress and anxiety. On the first spread of pages, when the little boy is initially waking up, you see that his bed and space where he plays with his toys and the plane mobile are lighter shades of blues and yellows, when the rest of the room is a deep concentrated red. This could illustrate that the child's bed and toys are his safe place and escape from the horrible reality he is waking up to that morning, that these distractions are a reminder of happier and simpler times they are holding on to before they get up and face reality. "Children first respond with shock and denial but that these emotions then evolve into sadness and anger". (Karl Sven Rosengren et al., 2014)



(Moundlic and Olivier Tallec, 2011)

Continuing, you witness a lot of the strong emotions through pages of spot illustrations presenting us the range of emotion. Children find it difficult to express emotions verbally, and sometimes show their struggle with grief throughout bursts of behaviour. (Child Bereavement UK, 2019). Again, the illustrator uses red to indicate when the child may be more upset and distressed. These images can not only educate the child that these strong feelings are completely normal but also reassure the parent what the child is going through is part of their likely behaviour to dealing with grief.



(Moundlic and Olivier Tallec, 2011)

There is a particular spread throughout the book of spot illustrations exposing anger and stress. Illustrated around them are their toys scattered, being abandoned and not played with. This can be connotated to “When a child, of whatever age, loses a loved one, childhood comes abruptly to an end.” (Karl Sven Rosengren et al., 2014). Their ignorance toward the toys around them, visual representations of being a child demonstrates this statement.

The main message behind this book is that when a child goes through a traumatic event like this, everything will be different and will not be the same. However, this book teaches that situations will improve over time people learn to adapt and carry on, still remembering who they have lost. The healing of the mind is metaphorically illustrated through the child accidentally cutting themselves playing. At the end they discover their cut has healed by turned into a scar. This validates no matter what you are going through, with support, and taking care of yourself, it will get better eventually. People learn, adapt and heal.

Benefits and drawbacks including death as a theme in children’s picture book literature.

Children are constantly learning and seeking the answers of everything throughout life. Their curious nature will make them want to make sense of the idea of death, they do so with the resources that they may have accessible to them. (Karl Sven Rosengren et al., 2014) The potential benefit of including death as a main theme in a children’s book is that we are open and talking about subjects that occur throughout life and what they may see on TV and the media. “Increasingly graphic and abundant images of death and disaster that are available to children through television and new

media” (Karl Sven Rosengren et al., 2014). Having access to the media children have an idea of death, from the devastation they may see on the news, or things circulating social media. However, a children’s picture book is a time for a parent and child to sit down together and explore these tough subjects openly in a safe environment to ask questions.

For children who have experienced bereavement firsthand, it is proven that “books can help children experiencing loss make some sense of confusing and sad emotions”. (Marie Curie, 2020). They can help children feel less isolated (Marie Curie, 2020). “Young children’s vulnerability and lack of language skills, make it difficult for them to express their emotions through language” (Karl Sven Rosengren et al., 2014). Reading a book about a situation a child may be or previously had gone through will help them relate to a character or situation in the narrative and feel less alone. It may also be a coping mechanism to confirm that what they are going through is hard it’s not meant to be easy but will learn to live with what’s happened and things get better. “Many authors and illustrators treat themes of stress and anxiety and present children with imaginative ways of working out their own problems.” (Schwarcz and Schwarcz, 1991). These themes in children’s literature also teaches a child the values of self-care and validating their feelings. It gives them a sense of independently learning about these tough topics, that they may or may not be able to relate to personally. “75% adult respondents to CBN survey said they wished their school had taught them about coping with bereavement.” (B Thomson, 2009)

Opinions has changed about what is suitable or not in children's picture books over time. (Salisbury and Styles, 2012) However, some believe different.

“While difficult subjects, such as death, illness, abuse and racism have been tackled in children’s literature over the last 50 years, many commentators- particularly in the West- have increasingly come to believe that young children must be protected from all things unpleasant and dangerous, in both life and literature.”

(Salisbury and Styles, 2012)

Many adults believe that children lack the emotional and intellectual capabilities to deal with the concept of loss and, as a result, they should be protected from it. (Karl Sven Rosengren et al., 2014)

Childhood is an innocent time and parents want to keep their worlds care-free and away from stress inducing topics like death (Karl Sven Rosengren et al., 2014)

Conclusion

To conclude the topic of death as a challenging theme in children's picture books, it does provide both benefits and controversies. Picture books can be used as a valuable tool for parents and guardians to educate children about death and provide a safe space to process the mixed responses and feelings related to loss. Examples such as *Duck Death and the Tulip*, and *The Scar* provide relatable characters and situations that children learn from. The benefits of these helping them feel less alone when experiencing grief. However, some may disagree and believe children should be shielded from such serious themes, that they can wait till adulthood. Ultimately, the decision to include death as a theme in children's picture book is the parent to decide to balance sensitivity and age-appropriateness with the potential benefits and drawbacks of tackling such complex subject matter. With proper care and consideration, I believe that death as a theme in children's picture books will benefit them socially and emotionally, helping them understand their feelings and feel ultimately less alone.

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