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

Title: Grief and Picture Books

Picture books uniquely portray powerful messages through captivating illustrations and storytelling, making them precious tools in helping children navigate complex and often overwhelming emotions, especially when facing a bereavement which is likely a new experience for them, “The difficulty many of us face is that we know so little about grief until it is upon us” (Lake, 1984, p.2). Many emotions can be challenging for young minds to understand, but grief stands as a profound experience for anyone of all ages. Through the pages of picture books, children are given a safe, accessible space to explore the many faces of grief. This essay will research how picture books can help children understand their emotions and build resilience when they lose a loved one and also touch on how they can have the same impact and provide guidance for adults.

Firstly, it's beneficial to understand how grief can be an entirely different experience for younger children in comparison to adults and how picture books can help children understand difficult feelings like grief through storytelling and illustrations. Grief is an emotion that can touch children of all ages at various stages in their lives, whether it's the loss of a beloved family pet, a grandparent, or even a parent. The uncertainty

of when a loved one passes away can be a life-altering experience for children, but they may not necessarily understand the depth of it. Grief in children is different from grief in adults in several ways due to their stages of emotional development, as well as their ability to cope at such a young age. "The death of a loved one can be devastating at any age. Adults are more adept at handling loss than children due to life experiences and higher-order thinking." (Ferow, 2019). Reactions in children when grieving can vary per child due to age and culture as well as other factors. "How people respond will be individual and dependent on factors such as cognitive ability, age etc" (Brown, 1999, p. 13). However, there are recognisable changes to note when a child is bereaved including emotions (feeling sad, angry, confused), changes in behaviour (difficulty sleeping, appetite changes) and changes in thinking (thoughts of a loved one, intrusive thoughts) to name a few according to The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (2005).

Due to the factors mentioned above, guiding a child through grief is a crucial responsibility for parents and caregivers, as it plays an important role in their emotional development and well-being. "Not having a supportive and guiding hand to make it through this tolerable life stress, children can easily be set on a path toward negative health and life outcomes" (Elswick, 2018, p. 77). Children may not necessarily have the coping skills to deal with grief, however, parents can help them develop healthy coping mechanisms, such as talking about their emotions, engaging in different activities, or seeking advice when needed as well as providing a safe space to express themselves, "Where children feel secure they will generally endeavour to get the information which is important to them by asking questions" (Brown, 1999, p. 18), this emphasises the need of adults to be prepared for any questions the child may have. This is where picture books can become an effective

tool in addressing the complex emotional journey the child is going through but also helping maintain a good relationship between parent and child, both providing support to each other during a difficult time.

Encouraging the use of picture books in discussions about grief is an extremely beneficial way for parents to guide their children through this challenging experience. "Children's book illustration is a subtle and complex art form that can communicate on many levels and leave a deep imprint on a child's consciousness" (Salisbury, 2004, p. 6). Picture books will become an invaluable instrument in enlightening a child about topics like grief. They provide a gentle and effective way of introducing the concept of death to children, offering them vital support and are ideal sources of education. Parents need to select books suitable for the child's age and developmental stage, ensuring that the content aligns with their needs and individual grief.

"Sharing picture books with grieving children provides an opportunity for positive coping, the discovery of new information, and methods for making meaning from their experience." (Von Drasek, 2016). Picture books on grief can also offer precautionary guidance for those who have not yet encountered such loss.

"Every mark displayed in a picture is a potential carrier of meaning" (Doonan, 1993, p. 12). This insight from Doonan's book emphasises the significance of every mark in a drawing, particularly when considering illustrations in children's books, where images often take precedence over text. She discusses how pictures are made up of simple things such as colour, and shapes and how they can be effective in gaining attention from children and have the power to elicit emotional responses from readers, especially young ones. "Looking at pictures evokes emotional responses:

the feeling, and a rationalisation of how you feel" (Doonan, 1983, p. 51), this describes how children may feel more understood through picture books and helps them feel less alone in their feelings. Another thing to add would be that in children's picture books, there might be words that young readers do not comprehend fully and, in such cases, the illustrations will step in to provide context, aiding the reader's understanding of the story. As the Marie Curie website aptly points out, "Reading books about death can help a child understand what's happened better and realise they're not alone" (Marie Curie, 2023).

After researching the experience and impact of grief on children and the significant role that picture books play in helping them navigate this challenging journey, the next section of this essay will support the research by looking closely at a picture book. Exploring this will demonstrate how the book, with its own unique story, contributes to the understanding of grief and how picture books are tailored to the diverse needs of young readers facing loss.

The book this section will be investigating is *Mum's Jumper* by Jayde Perkin. This story focuses on loss and captures the emotional journey of a child who has lost a loved one beautifully. The story follows a young girl who copes with the loss of her mother by wearing her mother's favourite jumper, finding comfort in its familiar scent and the memories it gives her. The jumper provides the young girl with a connection to her mother, although she is not alive anymore. The illustrations in the book are gentle, which enhances the narrative with visuals that convey the depth of the girl's emotions.

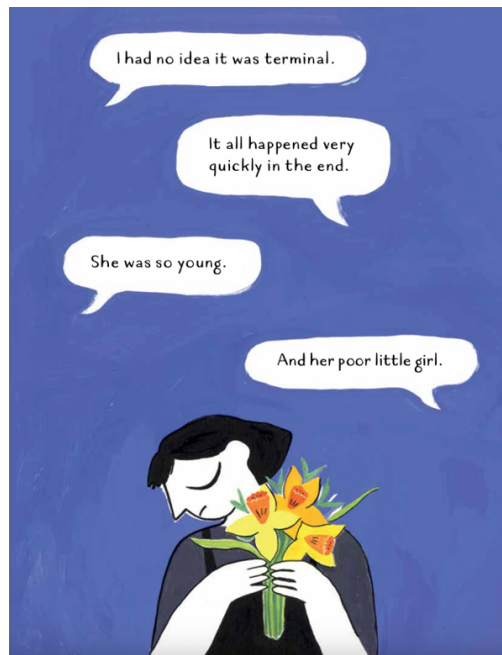


Figure 1: *Mum's Jumper* (Perkin, 2019, p. 8)



Figure 2: *Mum's Jumper* (Perkin, 2019, p. 9)

As the book begins, the illustrations are full of colour when the girl visits her mum in the hospital, but as you turn the pages of the book, once the mum has passed away, the colours become a lot more cool-toned which represents the loneliness and

sadness that the girl begins to feel when the grief sets in. The book uses colour as an effective tool in describing grief as the colours are bright to begin, but as soon as the mother dies, the colours do not instantly turn grey, they stay as they are until the funeral which emphasises that that is when the grief becomes more apparent to her. As seen in Figure 1, it shows the girl on the day of the funeral surrounded by discussions as well as the overwhelming space in the background. The use of negative space makes the girl seem small in comparison to the vast amounts of blue surrounding her which conveys the idea that she feels alone. The following page, which is shown in Figure 2, is still set at the funeral but shows the young girl surrounded by people consoling each other. "Emotional connotations are communicated more strongly by tone and saturation than by hue", which demonstrates how Figure 2 is a provoking image with the dark-toned, very saturated blue surrounding the young girl to evoke an emotional response" (Doonan, 1983, p 31). This again emphasises the feeling of loneliness but also conveys a message to adults to look out for young children, as although they seem too young to understand, they most likely do and will need that reassurance from people around them.



Figure 3: *Mum's Jumper* (Perkin, 2019, p. 19)

After the funeral, the book discusses many of the things researched in the previous section about the changes in children when they are grieving. It mentions how the girl can't concentrate in school, feels lonely when surrounded by her friends, and how she and her dad feel like they're "swimming" for days. The girl eventually finds her mum's jumper and puts it on, and it's much bigger than her. Figure 3 provides a metaphor for grief, it gives the impression that grief is the same as the jumper and she will eventually grow into it. Using metaphors like this one may not seem that useful but putting these large emotions into a simple saying that children can remember is vital so that they do not feel overwhelmed and know that the feeling will not last forever.

The idea of the jumper being a memory of her mother is another thing surrounding grief that children should explore, the idea of memorials to help them cope. *The Memory Tree* by Britta Teckentrup is another beautifully illustrated picture book that

focuses on memory. The story follows a group of animal friends led by the Fox, the fox falls asleep “forever”, and now the animal friends gather where he passed and tell stories about the Fox. A tree grows in the place where the fox lies, and this tree grows bigger with the more memories it hears. This book is a touching way of giving a child the idea to create a memory in remembrance of someone they loved, “When children plan and take part in memorial activities, they can exercise some control over how they choose to remember and honour the person who died” (Coalition to Support Grieving Students, 2022). This is why books like *Mum’s Jumper* and *The Memory Tree* are ideal for children, to help them understand the concept of memory and how they can use it as a coping mechanism.

While picture books are primarily designed for children, they can serve as valuable resources for educating and supporting adults on grief also, “Some countries have clearly less rigid ideas than others about which age groups are allowed to consume pictures in their books. In Norway, picture books are regarded as suitable for all ages” (Salisbury, 2007, p. 9). These books offer unique perspectives and insights into the grief experiences of children and provide tools for adults to improve their communication, empathy, and support for grieving children and families as well as guidance for themselves.

The book this section will discuss is *The Boy, The Mole, The Fox and The Horse* by Charlie Macksey, which is an insightful picture book that rises above age boundaries. The story follows four unusual friends and their conversations along their journey about love, friendship, courage and acceptance. This book encourages a positive outlook on life and will teach young children valuable life lessons

associated with the topics above but also provides a timeless reminder to adults about these lessons. The illustrations in this book flow effortlessly with the text being the same expressive and distinctive style. “Words are best at describing relationships of details, pictures are best at giving a sense of the whole. But each can eventually do both, and they can certainly help each other to do both” (Nodelman, 1988, p. 202), and in this book, the text and the illustrations work in harmony to provide a connection between the character and reader. “Dialogue is generally regarded as a non-narrated form, and indeed, pictures cannot convey direct speech” (Nikolajeva and Scott, 2006, p.119), although this quote is true and pictures can’t convey speech, Macksey’s book does a great job of using a conversational tone throughout the book and uses concise phrases like the ones below in Figure 4 & 5 to have more of an impact on the reader and adds a sense of intimacy to the narrative.



Figure 4: *The Boy, The Mole, The Fox and The Horse* (Macksey, 2019)



Figure 5: *The Boy, The Mole, The Fox and The Horse* (Macksey, 2019)

In Figures 4 and 5, the sketches are loose and minimalistic, and doing this enhances the emotional quality he is trying to achieve. The significance of these illustrations is what contributes to the accessibility of the book, so it is engaging for a variety of ages. The quotes from this book can resonate with children and adults. For example, in Figure 5, the Horse says the bravest thing he has ever said was asking for help, which relates to children who are unsure of how to speak to adults about their problems, but also adults who are surrounded by the stigma of not being able to speak about your problems, "One of the main tasks facing the grieving person is to be realistic about asking for and accepting help" (Lake, 1984, p.87).

Each of the characters represents different parts of a person, the boy represents vulnerability, the mole represents curiosity, the fox represents courage, and the horse represents strength. With all the characters having their individual personalities, it allows readers to relate to the different aspects that they see in

themselves. It also demonstrates the dynamic between these emotions and how they can help each other, shown in Figure 4 where the boy tells the horse they are “less scared together”, which again emphasises the need to surround yourself with people, especially when going through a bereavement. “Getting through grief means building a support system, and often it may not be with those you’d expect” (Grief In Common, 2022), this relates to how each of the characters can rely on each other for vital support, and encourages readers to seek out a conversation about how they are feeling.



Figure 6: *The Boy, The Mole, The Fox and The Horse* (Macksey, 2019)

One of the stand-out pages within the book is Figure 6. The text describes how life isn't always perfect and coincidentally, the author spilt something on the page and the ink has smudged, which is the ideal metaphor for the text on the page.

Throughout the whole book, the narrative is very simplistic, which makes it easier for young children to understand, however, the chosen words he writes have a greater

impact on the reader. The use of negative space around the examples shown is very effective as these blank spaces enable the reader to reflect on the deeper meaning of the content and allow the quotes to be memorable. For example, for someone grieving and struggling, the idea of asking for help is portrayed as brave and may provoke them to ask for help without any stigma. The simplicity, expressiveness and harmonious way that this story is illustrated alongside the narrative contributes to a universal appeal to everyone of all ages and backgrounds. This book provides a tool for intergenerational communication, which children and adults can learn from, but also provides adults with a bridge to discuss important life lessons with children and the complexities of life experiences, such as bereavement.

In conclusion, picture books play a crucial role in shaping a child's comprehension of grief, offering gentle guidance during emotionally overwhelming times. Researching *Mum's Jumper* demonstrates how the narrative navigates a child's grief journey, emphasising the use of mementoes as healthy coping mechanisms. On the contrary, *The Boy, The Mole, The Fox and The Horse*, does not directly discuss bereavement but provides us with universal life lessons on love, friendship, and courage. This book serves as a valuable resource for both children and adults, facilitating difficult conversations with young readers. It is clear to see that both authors tackle difficult subjects, through their storytelling and gentle narrative, contributing to the essential conversation surrounding grief, thus offering young readers a safe space to confront and process their emotions. These books pave the way for children to have open conversations about grief and provide a foundation for healing and growth that extends beyond the pages of the book.

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