

Children's books that deal with the end of life

An annotated bibliography

Kathryn Meyer Reimer

Many picture and chapter books for children include the death of a parent, grandparent, sibling, or friend. For *Vision* readers looking for a few choice children's books on end-of-life issues I have selected ones that speak to a broad variety of situations, ones with which anyone who has experienced the terminal illness or death of a family member or friend might be able to identify. These books are easy to share, easy to read, and appropriate for children as well as for adults.

I have organized the list in three sections: books that speak to feelings about and images of death, books that deal with end-of-life illness, and books that address the subject of death by using the death of an animal. All are books that would be appropriate for a church library or the personal library of a pastor, lay minister, or pastoral care commission member. The list does not include novels or resource books.

Books dealing with feelings about and images of death

In narrowing my selection of books on the subject of death, I found myself returning to older books that continue to be classics. What follows is my short list of books that speak to all ages in a clear, eloquent way about the feelings of loss at the time of death. All are currently in print.

Nana Upstairs & Nana Downstairs, by Tomie dePaola (New York: Puffin Books, 1998). This book is a family story about a four-year-old boy who looks forward to his weekly visits with his great-grandmother, Nana Upstairs. (She lives in the home of his grandmother, Nana Downstairs.) He is especially close to his great-grandmother, and they spend many hours together. She dies, and when his family goes to visit, her bed is empty. "Won't she ever come back?" he asked. 'No, dear,' Mother said softly. 'Except

in your memory. She will come back in your memory whenever you think about her.” A few nights later he sees a falling star and decides that it is a kiss from his great-grandmother.

This book avoids sentimentality while approaching the relationships and concerns of a child in a gentle, sympathetic way. It speaks directly about one of the things we fear most: the empty bed. The 1998 edition is a full-color reissue of a 1973 three-color book.

Everett Anderson’s Goodbye, by Lucille Clifton (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1983). Everett Anderson has lost his father. With sparse text, this short book directly addresses five stages of grief—denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance—using a brief scene or interchange between Everett and his mother. Tenderly illustrated by Ann Grifalconi, this book can help children talk about all the different feelings they go through as they deal with the death of someone they love.

How It Feels When a Parent Dies, by Jill Krementz (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981). Jill Krementz is a photographer whose work has included taking portraits of children. She found that the children had so much to say as she was photographing them that she started to write down their words. *How It Feels When a Parent Dies* records the words of children ages seven to sixteen who have lost a parent to death. In two to four pages each child shares his or her own story about living with and through the death of a parent.

The book can be read bits at a time or as a whole. Each story is poignant in the honesty of children talking about their own lives and losses.

Lifetimes: The Beautiful Way to Explain Death to Children, by Bryan Mellonie and Robert Ingpen (New York: Bantam Books, 1983). With realistic, nature-oriented illustrations, this book centers on the idea that everything has a lifetime—animals, plants, and people: “There is a beginning and an ending for everything that is alive. In between is living.” “Nothing that is alive goes on living for ever. How long it lives depends upon what it is and what happens while it is living.” Some lifetimes are short, some are long, some are cut short by illness or accidents, but all

living things die. The text and illustrations are factual, descriptive, and clear as they talk about death that inevitably comes to all living things, including people.

What on Earth Do You Do When Someone Dies? by Trevor Romain (Minneapolis: Free Spirit Publishing Inc., 1999). This pocket-sized book answers children's questions about death, from "Why am I hurting so much?" and "What can I do if I'm angry?" to "What happens to a person's body?" and "What is a funeral or memorial service?" Several pages are devoted to each question. Brief, straightforward text is accompanied by black-and-white illustrations. The author lost his own father and has done extensive work with children who have cancer and are facing death. He writes with an authenticity, empathy, and clarity that is compelling.

Sad Isn't Bad: A Good Grief Guidebook for Kids Dealing with Loss, by Michaelene Mundy (St. Meinrad, Ind.: Abbey Press, 1998). Each page of this book deals with an emotion or response children might have after a significant loss. Responses range from worrying that the death might somehow be their fault to worrying that they shouldn't be having a good time when good things happen after someone has died.

The writing is fairly directive in tone and touches on issues that many other books do not address. The book frequently suggests that the child talk with trusted adults. While I appreciate the book's discussion of issues surrounding loss, I regret the editor's choice to illustrate it with elves rather than children (the book is part of a series called Elf-help Books); somehow the illustrations seem to make light of an otherwise thoughtful text.

Books that deal with end-of-life illnesses

The books listed below deal ably with illnesses that precede death. All are written from a child's perspective and are appropriate for use with all ages. Two are out of print but readily available from libraries and used book sources.

Always Gramma, by Vaunda Micheaux Nelson; illustrations by Kimanne Uhler (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1988). A young girl and her grandma have warm interactions around all sorts of

activities, from taking walks to baking, and then Gramma begins to say and do strange things. First she starts to forget things, and then she gets lost when she is going places they have gone many times before. She behaves in uncharacteristic ways—yelling at her husband (when he changes the locks on the house so she won't walk away and get lost), and throwing things. Finally her condition deteriorates so much that the family decides they can't take care of her at home. She moves to a nursing home where her husband, daughter, and granddaughter visit her and feed her every day. Although Gramma is unable to communicate verbally, the young girl pushes her wheelchair out into the sunshine and talks with her. Gramma can still squeeze her granddaughter's hand.

"Some people wonder why we visit her so often. They say Gramma doesn't know we are there and that she doesn't remember us anymore. But I remember everything. I remember our swims in the creek. . . . And I remember every song she ever taught me. I believe that somewhere deep inside Gramma remembers, too." An honest and compassionate handling of the painful process of dealing with dementia.

Now One Foot, Now the Other, by Tomie dePaola (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1981). Bobby and his grandfather, Bob, love to do all sorts of activities together, from playing blocks to going to fireworks. Bob is the one who teaches Bobby to walk, "first one foot, then the other."

When Bobby is five years old, Bob has a stroke, and after his hospitalization he returns home, unable to talk. When Bob grunts, Bobby is initially fearful but soon learns that his grandpa still has ways to respond to him and interact with him. Slowly Bob learns to talk again. The story ends with Bob leaning on Bobby's shoulders, moving "first one foot, then the other," as he learns to walk again. This warm story addresses both the physical and the emotional realities of living with a stroke victim.

My Book for Kids with Cansur: A Child's Autobiography of Hope, by Jason Gaes (Aberdeen, S.Dak.: Melius & Peterson Publishing, Inc., 1987). As an eight year old, Jason Gaes wrote this book about having cancer since he was six. He documents what it feels like to have surgery, radiation, and chemotherapy.

He also writes about the side effects: “Sometimes keymotharupy makes you sick and you throw up. Sometimes you looz your hair from it but you can wear hats if it bothers you. Mostly kids don’t care when your bald.” Jason is surrounded by family and helpful medical staff; when he grows up he wants to become a doctor who helps children with cancer. At the end of the book his cancer is in remission. This book authentically follows the interests and thought patterns of a child, yet resonates with adults. It is dedicated to Sister Margaret “‘cause we’re both waiting to see if our cansur comes back.”

Books that deal with death by describing the death of an animal

These two books offer unique insights about the rituals surrounding death. For some younger people, a pet’s death may be their most direct encounter with grief, sorrow, death, and dying.

The Dead Bird, by Margaret Wise Brown (New York: William Morrow, 2004). A group of children find a dead bird and decide to bury it. They follow the rituals of a funeral—burying, singing, and placing a marker to remember the bird. This quiet and tender book provides a good way to start to talk with young children about the rituals following a death and the feelings we have when someone dies. It is a reissue of a book published more than twenty years ago.

The Tenth Good Thing about Barney, by Judith Viorst; illustrated by Erik Blegvad (New York: Atheneum, 1971). When his pet cat, Barney, dies, a child lists ten good things about him. This book offers a way to talk about how, even though we are sad, we remember those who have died through memories and stories, and by thinking about the things we liked about them. Simply told with three-color illustrations.

About the reviewer

Kathryn Meyer Reimer is professor of education at Goshen College, Goshen, Indiana, where she teaches children’s literature and literacy. She is also involved with children’s education in her congregation, Assembly Mennonite Church.