

## Building Loving Fences: Death and Grief in Children's Literature

Nicholas E. Husbye

Nothing to that point in my 24 years of life had prepared me for the death of my mother and her complete disappearance from my day-to-day existence. My grief created a kind of gravity that was wholly unrecognizable to me then and still is shrouded in mystery despite the years between. We talk about grief, even among fellow adults, in the most ambiguous terms. It is the fiercest and perhaps trickiest of emotions, invasive like a low-lying fog and nearly impossible to fend off. There is no way to inoculate ourselves against it, no nook or cranny so remote as to escape it. In its presence, we often attempt to ignore it. Grief is uncomfortable, unpredictable, and, when in the throes of it, seemingly unending.

If grief is so confusing for adults, one can only imagine its complexity for children, whose lives are often sanitized, scrubbed clean of that which is unsavory. In this issue of *First Opinions, Second Reactions*, children's literature scholars and classroom educators explore loss and the subsequent grief echoing out as a result of that loss. This is a common theme in children's literature, whether it is the loss of Sirius Black to the Veil in *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, or Viorst's emotionally charged *Ten Good Things about Barney*.

When curating this collection, I wanted to bring together multiple perspectives on death and grief. In some of the books, death is a living, breathing character, as in Erlbruch's *Duck, Death and the Tulip* and Ringtved's *Cry, Heart, but Never Break*, while in others, characters live with its invisibility, as in Moundlic's *The Scar* and Rosen's *Michael Rosen's Sad Book*. Still others use metaphor, as in Jeffers's *The Heart and the Bottle*, to represent death and the emotional work that follows. Furthermore, drawing upon visits to children's bookstores while abroad, this collection represents a set of international perspectives on death and grief, with authors hailing from Danish (Ringtved), German (Erlbruch), French (Moundlic), British (Rosen), and American (Jeffers, who grew up in Northern Ireland but now resides in Brooklyn, New York) backgrounds.

I am extremely proud of the contributors in this issue, whose charge was not an easy one: to bring these issues to light in their classrooms and in their scholarship. The vulnerability of these contributors rings through as classroom educators write about their reluctance to share their selections with their students and colleagues, as children's literature scholars connect their titles to their own lives, their own grieving. "I have been complicit in pushing aside trauma, loss, and grief among my students," writes kindergarten teacher Clara Thiry. As Allyson Hensley reminds us, "Some adult reactions are not helpful for young children." These are but two of the ten powerful voices in this issue, whose stories using these titles are far from victory narratives but, rather, are complicated, sticky, and, ultimately, human.

As educators, we can no longer articulate boundaries that fail to allow mourning and grief into our classroom spaces; rather, we must recognize them, welcome them, live in ambiguous discomfort with them. When we welcome death and grief into our classrooms, we welcome the depth of human emotion and create opportunities to foster resilience, to provide comfort. Books such as those in this issue are meant to provide inroads to helping our students and ourselves make sense of the experience of grief, to give words to experiences and emotions that often feel insurmountable and unnamable. "Of course," Jerry Spinelli writes of character David's grief in *Eggs*, "all of their words for a thousand years could not fill the hole left by his mother, but they could raise a loving fence around it so he didn't keep falling in."

It is my hope that, guided by the work of the contributors in this issue, you will use these books to build loving fences in your classrooms and your lives.

### **Works Cited**

Rowling, J. K. *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*. Scholastic, 2003.

Spinelli, Jerry. *Eggs*. Little, Brown Books for Young Readers, 2007.

Viorst, Judith. *The Tenth Good Thing about Barney*. Illustrated by Erik Blegvad, Atheneum Books for Young Readers, 1987.

### **About the Guest Editor**

**Nicholas E. Husbye** is a teacher educator and literacy education researcher at the University of Missouri–St. Louis. He seeks to create classroom spaces that welcome joy and grief as well as preservice teachers who can respond competently to the challenges elementary students face in their everyday lives.