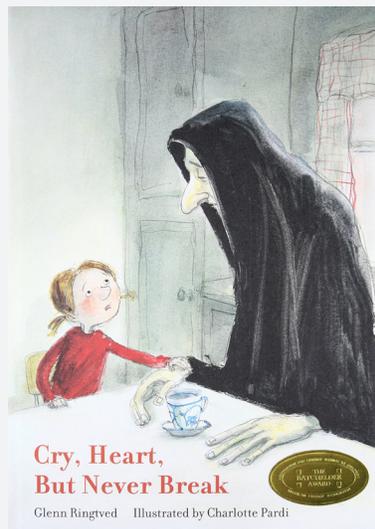


**First Opinion: A Response to Glenn Ringtved's
*Cry, Heart, but Never Break***

Ringtved, Glenn. *Cry, Heart, but Never Break*. Illustrated by
Charlotte Pardi, Enchanted Lion Books, 2016.

Sarah Vander Zanden



Adults may wish to protect and maintain children's gleeful sensibilities rather than discuss taboo topics like death and dying, but perhaps a more respectful tact to take is to follow author Kate DiCamillo's advice. DiCamillo encourages writers to consider how they can tell the truth and make that truth bearable for children (unpaged). Glenn Ringtved does just this in the 2016 publication of *Cry, Heart, but Never Break*. This book of parallels is a bittersweet treat for the eyes and the soul. The watercolor illustrations immediately draw readers into the book. The contrast between light and dark and sunshine and gloom is vividly splashed across each page. The lightness of the imagery is counterbalanced with the main event: Grandmother's passing.

The story of a dying grandmother visited by an unknown cloaked figure, who readers quickly learn is Death, holds our unwavering attention. The main characters, four young siblings seated around a kitchen table throughout much of the story, will evoke familiar contexts for many young readers, while perhaps generating nostalgia for older readers. As the siblings work to stop the inevitable passage of Death to their grandmother on the second floor, their attempts, such as offering a frequently refilled cup of coffee, generate pangs of empathy. Ringtved writes, "So every time Death emptied his cup, Nels would ask more coffee, Sir?" and

Death would nod, Death loved his coffee strong and black like the night and he was happy to sit and rest for awhile" (8).

Death, it turns out, is a compassionate storyteller, one who helps the children begin to understand and recognize the intense emotions well-meaning adults so often thwart in their artificial protection of youth. For example, before conducting his final ascent up to Grandmother's room, Death shares the story of sisters (Joy and Delight) and brothers (Grief and Sorrow)—two pairs who were united in love and who could not live without the other. It is here that Ringtved offers the youthful reader comfort and reassurance that life and death are much the same as joy/grief and delight/sorrow. We need one to experience the other.

Introducing somber topics while reading with children requires intentional investment in real emotional growth—reserving these topics for older children or ignoring them all together more than likely protects adults. Ringtved invites readers to the table to hold hard conversations and offers them a tour of emotion. The book provides a backdrop to explore the complexity of grief with young readers, along with the joy, sorrow, and delight it brings in waves. The story culminates with a hopeful message. We learn that Death's heart is not dead nor black as coal, rather "Beneath his inky cloak, Death's heart is as red as the most beautiful sunset and beats with a great love of life" (9). We have evidence of this loving heart through his stories, demonstrated patience, and the lasting sentiment that in the future, with each breeze from the window, the grandchildren will feel a hug from their grandmother.

Death reassures readers that pain of loss is right and real by gently reminding the children, reflecting the title in the final pages, to "Cry, Heart, but never break. Let your tears of grief and sadness help begin a new life" (24). Readers will see themselves throughout the book, whether it's through the grandchildren's innocent efforts to stop the inevitable, time spent sharing stories about loved ones, or bravely embracing the possibility that in death we can celebrate life.

Work Cited

DiCamillo, Kate. "Why Children's Books Should Be a Little Sad." *Time*, 12 Jan. 2018, <http://www.time.com/5099463/kate-dicamillo-kids-books-sad>. Accessed 12 Jan. 2018.

About the Author

Sarah Vander Zanden is an associate literacy professor and teacher educator at the University of Northern Iowa, as well as a mother. Her six-year-old son notes, "it's sad but really, Death seems sort of friendly."