First Opinion: Simple Friendship and Death, Repositioned

Wolf Erlbruch is a German illustrator and children’s author whose books often address challenging topics like death, dying, and the meaning of life. He is the recipient of many awards, including the Hans Christian Andersen Award in 2006 and the Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award in 2017.

His picture book, *Duck, Death and the Tulip*, is a quiet story of Death—illustrated as a pencil-drawn skeleton in long dress—and Duck. The two develop a curious friendship narrated by frank, simple wording. From its opening lines, Death and Duck banter about their roles in the world, what they fear, and what comes after:

For a while now, Duck had had a feeling.

“Who are you? What are you up to, creeping along behind me?”

“Good,” said Death, “you finally noticed me. I am Death.” (Erlbruch unpaged)

Death holds a tulip behind his back for most of the story, waiting for the right moment to present it to Duck. They chat about what Death does—how he's been close all her life, “just in case.” Death isn’t to be feared, however. He doesn’t make anything bad happen—“Life takes care of that: the coughs and colds and all the other things that happen to you ducks. Fox, for example” (Erlbruch unpaged). Humorously, Death’s friendly smile persuades Duck to invite him
on a trip to the pond, where Death reveals his own fears: getting wet. After the swim, Death is damp and a little cold, so Duck offers to warm him up. This is something nobody has ever offered to do for Death.

The next day, Duck is delighted to wake up still alive, and Death is glad for her, too. Duck asks the questions we all have: what comes after I die and what it will be like once I’m gone? She imagines the pond, alone without her. She thinks about how she won’t have to mourn the loss of the pond, being dead. They chat about stories Duck has heard that explain what comes after life:

“Some ducks say you become an angel and sit on a cloud . . . that deep in the earth there’s a place where you’ll be roasted if you haven’t been good.”

“You ducks come up with some amazing stories, but who knows?”

“So you don’t know, either,” Duck snapped.

Death just looked at her (Erlbruch unpaged).

As they chat, they climb a tree to look over the pond and sit in the grass. Summer begins to come to a close, and as a cooler wind ruffles her feathers, “Duck felt its chill for the first time” (Erlbruch unpaged). She asks Death now to warm her up.

_Something had happened. Death looked at the duck._

_She’d stopped breathing. She lay quite still._ (Erlbruch unpaged)

This is the quiet moment in which Death does his job. He carefully strokes her feathers and carries her to a great river. He places the tulip on her belly and gently nudges her floating away, peacefully.

_For a long time he watched her._

_When she was lost to sight, he was almost a little moved._

_But that’s life, thought Death._ (Erlbruch unpaged)

This book creates opportunities for young children to ask simple questions: What is death? Is it scary? What happens after we die? It’s touching and just a little bit funny, perhaps odd enough for children to connect. The story addresses death in a simple, no-big-deal way.

I read this book with my children, ages six and four. They leaned in, interested, knowing it was a book about something that matters: life and death. The first gripping discussion we had was about what Death looked like. They asked, “Why is he a skeleton? Is he bad? Why is he in a dress?” They laughed when Death and Duck cared about one another, “warming each other up” (Erlbruch unpaged). They were quiet as I read about Duck floating away at the end. My six-year-old brought up the only close experience she’s had with death: visiting my dying grandmother in the hospital. While she didn’t experience grief herself in this real event, she
knew it meant something important to me. This book’s simple language repositioned grief not as a difficult emotion, something the grown-ups in children’s lives often feel strongly and cloud explanations of “what happened to grandma”; instead, this book’s words and pictures illustrate some of the simple ways life, and death, might happen.

I recommend this book for children as young as five, knowing they will likely interpret the story literally, yet have a chance to share their own thinking about what death means in a safe and simple story.

**About the Author**

**Christy Wessel Powell** is an assistant professor at Purdue University, where she teaches (and loves) working with preservice teachers learning elementary literacy methods, mostly hands-on in schools.