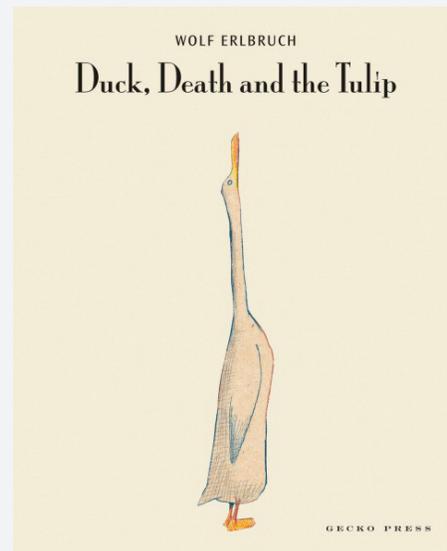


**Second Reaction: Stretching Beyond the Comfort Zone:  
Using Children’s Books as Critical Invitations to Explore  
Death, Grief, and Healing in the Classroom**

Erlbruch, Wolf. *Duck, Death and the Tulip*. Gecko Press, 2008.

*Meredith Labadie*



When I first picked up *Duck, Death and the Tulip*, I was curious. Children’s books addressing death are relatively rare. While I pride myself on the diverse children’s literature I expose my kindergarten students to, I was hard-pressed to find another book in my classroom quite like this one. I had read books about difficult topics before, but I realized death was a topic I had unconsciously stayed away from, and I wondered why. Perhaps because I worried how my students, who are from a diverse range of cultural and religious backgrounds, would discuss it? Perhaps because it felt sad, and early childhood classrooms are so often thought of as happy, joy-filled spaces?

As I flipped through *Duck, Death and the Tulip* for the first time, I was immediately struck by Wolf Erlbruch’s illustrations—quite sparse by children’s book standards. Most feature just the main characters: Duck and Death, which is represented by a skeleton. Very little background is included. Death wears a long dress and is often smiling—it was hard to reconcile this with grimmer or stereotypical representations of death. I appreciated that Death didn’t seem scary, but rather kind. I also appreciated that the book didn’t give many concrete answers about death and what happens after death, but rather leaves death open to the interpretation of

the reader. Yet, I still had reservations about the book. Was it appropriate for kindergartners? I found myself tucking the book away, not quite ready to share it.

Weeks passed, and one day in early November, we found ourselves engaged in a study of the holiday, *Día de los Muertos*. As we learned how Mexican families remember their loved ones who have passed away on this holiday, my students shared stories of their family members who had passed away and who were dearly missed. As we shared, there was sadness, but there was also happiness as we remembered better times with loved ones. I found that once the topic of death had been broached naturally in the classroom, it seemed a little safer to venture into that territory through a read aloud. The next morning, I gathered my students together to read *Duck, Death and the Tulip*.

As I read, I noticed students trying to make sense of the story. Although the illustrations were minimal, the students focused on them intently. They noticed that even though Death was smiling, Duck worried about her presence. As Duck pondered what happened after death, considering versions of heaven and hell, students laughed at the idea of those concepts applied to a duck. The page where Duck died elicited the most discussion. The illustration shows Duck lying on the ground as it snows, while Death looks at her. There was a sense of disbelief and students wondered if Duck was really dead. One student proposed that Duck must be sleeping, like Snow White in a fairy tale. This is not the kind of scene students were used to seeing. Where was the happy ending common in children's books? As we came to the end of the book, I was eager to put it away, not completely comfortable lingering on the discussion of death.

However, weeks later, as we encountered death in another book, students again brought up *Duck, Death and the Tulip*. To my surprise, students remembered it positively, saying things like "Oh yeah, I liked that book." It was clear the book had left a strong impression on them, such that they were able to remember and connect to it weeks later. Students encouraged me to read it again. Although the book seemed sparse and straightforward during our initial reading, as we reread it I came to appreciate some of the more subtle nuances. I also realized that the sparseness of the text was part of what made it so engaging—students had to grapple with the text and collaboratively make inferences about what was happening and what Death was implying on each page. I noticed I felt more comfortable with the book, and I was glad my students had encouraged us to revisit it.

As a teacher, it may be tempting to avoid discomfort in the classroom, but this is not realistic, nor does it honor students' lives. Many of my young students had already experienced death, grief, and trauma. By acknowledging this and offering a safe space for them to share, the classroom became more inclusive and supportive. Rather than communicating that we only talk about happy things, I want students to feel they can come to me and their classmates for support if they are dealing with something difficult. Reading books on a topic validates that topic for the classroom and is a powerful way for a teacher to create discussion around difficult topics. While *Duck, Death and the Tulip* is a thought-provoking text for classroom literary analysis, it is also a critical invitation for students to reflect on their own lives and beliefs.

### **About the Author**

**Meredith Labadie** is currently a kindergarten teacher in St. Louis, Missouri. In addition to her work as a classroom teacher, she teaches literacy courses at the University of Missouri–St. Louis. Her work focuses on early childhood literacy and critical literacy, and much of her research is conducted in her kindergarten classroom, where she enjoys learning from an amazing group of five- and six-year-olds.