First Opinion: Loving through Loss


Penny Silvers

*The Scar* tells the story of a mother’s death from the perspective of her young son. Through the little boy’s lived experiences, we learn about the impact of her death on the boy and his father. Wise beyond his years, the boy expresses his feelings about death and grieving as he narrates the story. Although the father tries to soften the mother’s death by telling him that “she’s gone forever” (Moundlic unpaged), the little boy doesn’t mince words and names it, stating “I knew that she wasn’t gone—she was dead” (Moundlic unpaged). Throughout the story, he experiences many emotions, from anger to great loss to acceptance. He tries many coping strategies to remember his mother, like shutting all the windows to keep her smell in the house. But then Grandma arrives and tells him that his mother will be in his heart forever. Every time he feels his heart beating he is reassured, knowing it is a sign that his mother is with him. When the little boy falls down and scrapes his knee, the scar that forms when the scab falls off becomes a metaphor for the healing process. The boy finds peace and takes solace in knowing that as his knee is healing, his heart is also finding comfort and acceptance.

As a reader, I found this story to be a moving reminder of how children and families cope with loss. The author uses the boy as the narrator and main voice in the story, evoking a feeling of care and empathy for the child and, ultimately, for the father. Given the boy’s knowledge and understanding about death and dying, it seems that he has been prepared for the death of his mother. However, the father appears to be emotionally unavailable to comfort the boy and unable to emerge from his own grieving process to console his son or acknowledge their
shared feelings of loss. The boy is portrayed as the caregiver and the one who has the power and will to continue living. For example, he makes comments about his dad, like, “I’m sure that Mom didn’t teach him . . . and now it’s too late. He won’t be able to manage without her. Luckily, I’m still here and I can explain everything to Dad” (Moundlic unpaged).

Although I felt an emotional connection to the boy and his father, I was disturbed by the portrayal of the father as incapable of parenting, nurturing, and consoling his son as they shared the loss of the mother. I feel that the author missed an opportunity to move away from gender stereotypes of men as unemotional workers and women as emotional, empathetic homemakers. It is evident from the boy’s perspective that women are the competent ones at home. Even the grandma was brought in to reconnect the boy and father and help them cope. However, it is also interesting that the boy perceives himself to have a combination of both male and female characteristics—able to take charge, to comfort and care for the father, and to show emotions as he cries and goes through the grieving process on his own.

The illustrations use only red and white colors and portray the actions and emotions of the three characters in the story primarily through their body language, with minimal background images. This provides a visual cue for the reader but does not distract from the text, allowing the reader to focus on the boy’s expressed feelings and coping skills.

Taken as a whole, this book provides a story that shows a father and son experiencing loss and despair, yet ultimately finding ways to keep on living. It seems that the boy and his father are closer to each other after the mother’s death, and that there will be more honesty and openness in their relationship moving forward. This book could help readers discover and discuss ways to address the various stages of grieving and coping after experiencing the loss of a loved one. It is a gentle, lovely story that frames the child as the main character who is learning to cope with death. The emotions and actions are authentic and realistic, and the minimalist illustrations and simple story line invite the reader to relate to their own life stories and experiences. It would be a good book for a read-aloud in school, or for a parent to read with a child, to generate discussion that can lead to personal reflection and deeper understanding of loss and living in the cycle of life.

About the Author

Penny Silvers is a professor of literacy and learning in the School of Education at Dominican University in River Forest, Illinois. She is a former reading specialist and elementary teacher and an avid reader who believes in the importance of sharing a love of reading with others as part of being a culturally and critically responsive educator.