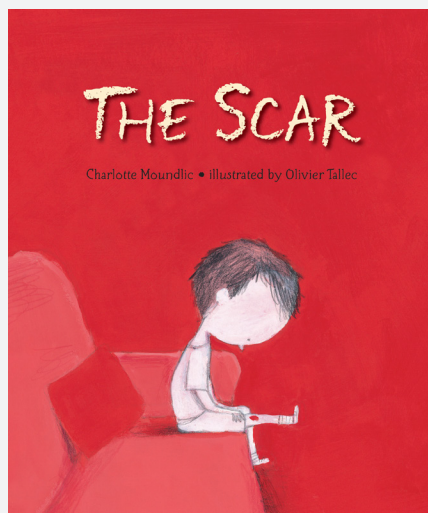


## Second Reaction: Teaching with a Trauma-Informed Text

Moundlic, Charlotte. *The Scar*. Illustrated by Olivier Tallec, Candlewick Press, 2011.

John McDermott



Charlotte Moundlic's *The Scar* is a deeply moving account of the traumatic experience of a young child. In the days following his mother's death, the main character, a young boy, acts out in ways that are completely rational from his perspective. From another's perspective, they could be interpreted as confusing. This aspect of the story becomes very relevant when thinking about trauma-informed teaching. In my admittedly short teaching career, I have encountered students with trauma and have been bewildered by some of the behavior I have observed. This text provides a valuable and genuine perspective for teachers whom may be confused by the behavior that students with trauma may exhibit. Some behavior might be viewed as malicious, such as the boy responding to the news of his mother's passing with "Good Riddance!" (Moundlic unpagged). Teachers may encounter behavior that seems nonsensical, such as the boy keeping all of the windows closed to keep his mother's smell in the house. Teachers may also see students coping in ways that seem macabre, such as the boy picking his scab so that he can hear his mother's voice.

This text lends itself to young readers by offering the perspective of a young child. In the mind of this little boy, no one knows what he is experiencing. This is a viewpoint that will ring true with many children, especially those who have experienced trauma themselves.

I engaged readers in this book by first introducing them to the text and its subject matter. I wanted the readers to be emotionally prepared for the gravity of the text. While this book does a surprisingly good job incorporating humor into its serious topic, my students were

used to reading more light-hearted texts. For many readers, I imagine that this was their first experience with such an emotional book, and certainly a picture book of this nature. As we read the text, the readers became more engaged. I stopped after almost every page and asked my students what the boy was doing and why. This allowed me to hear their interpretation of what the boy was experiencing. I was pleasantly surprised at their emotional insight while they shared their interpretations. When we finished the book, I talked with my students about what happened in the text and what they felt. For some of them, this was an emotional experience.

While I was working with the text, I found it to be more emotional than I had anticipated. I had heard of the book before working with it and I did not expect to feel strong emotions while reading it. This came to the forefront while reading it to my daughter for the first time. Originally, I thought the story would be more about the death of the boy's mother. However, it is much more valuable as a teaching tool because it is about the grieving process.

The initial feedback I received from readers was not positive. When I was reading this text to small groups, students were very upset by the notion of losing a parent. When we began our discussion, they were asking questions about the mom more than the boy. However, not long after the first reading, I had people requesting to read it again. Upon further reading, students really began to connect with the theme rather than having an emotional reaction to the death of the boy's mother. Future group discussions were more student-led than the first discussions, and they began to talk about the boy instead of the mother. I didn't have to bring new points of discussion to the group as they began to cover key parts of the story themselves. As a group, students talked about why the boy acted the way he did. Some students were initially dismissive of the boy's actions, saying that he was being "weird" or that he "didn't make sense." I was happy that other students disagreed and brought up the trauma that the boy was experiencing. These students helped the whole group to see the boy through a more empathetic lens. I pointed out to the groups that the boy was helped by his grandmother; I wanted my students to know that adults can help. We had discussions about how the boy was helped by the adults in the story and how the story might be different if he didn't have their help. I noted that this story is one example of helpful adults, who can be teachers at school or someone else students have a close relationship with. The more that young readers explore this text and talk about it with a teacher or an adult, the more they will gain from its message.

### **About the Author**

**John McDermott** is a graduate of the elementary education program at the University of Missouri–St. Louis. Having completed his second semester of student teaching in a St. Louis metropolitan area elementary school, he had an opportunity to share this text with his students as well as his four-and-a-half-year-old daughter.