

Death in the World of the Child

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Cookies for Luke, Sheila J. Bleeks. Illus. by Kelly Clark. Cherry Publishers, 1979. 17 pp. \$5.95 hardcover. ISBN 0-9690480-5-X.

Learning to Say Goodbye, Eda LeShan. Illus. by Richard Cuffari. Four Winds Press, 1978. 134 pp. \$6.95 hardcover. ISBN 0-590-07535-7.

What do children know of death? How can an adult deal with children's questions about death? These questions have remained largely unanswered since the pioneering work on children's theories concerning death carried out by Maria Nagy (1948) and Sylvia Anthony (1940). More recently, however, there has been a growing interest in providing parents, educators and even children with information related to the intrusion of death into childhood. In her book, *Learning to Say Goodbye*, the American author Eda LeShan presents an approach that is very badly needed. She combines sensitivity, an understanding of the child's and adult's world with a humanistic perspective. Her book has become a widely used and respected resource in the field of thanatology. In contrast, Sheila J. Bleek's *Cookies for Luke*, an attempt to treat a child's death in a work of fiction, is representative of a book which should have remained unpublished.

Bleek's book is the story of a child whose friend dies; the story fails largely because the author shows a good deal of unfamiliarity with the conceptions of death held by children, especially five-year-olds. Children at this age see death as life under changed circumstances, a living on somewhere else. Death for these children is more aptly described as a form of separation anxiety, particularly from loved ones. In defense of Sheila Bleek, she does recognize that young children are concerned about the food requirements of the dead, as well as common stories told to children by well meaning and often confused adults about where the dead go. Although I would like to give the author more support in this regard, I do not think that she fully understands the implications of 'the cookies' for Luke. I am also uncertain about just whom this book is for. If it is primarily for adults to read to children, it exhibits adults' favorite defensive ploys in dealing with questions about death: that is, tell a child a story. If it is intended for children to read alone, I don't believe either the story or the illustrations warrant respect or interest.

Furthermore, I found it remarkable that a book telling a child about the death of another child could be so devoid of emotion. *Cookies for Luke* portrays a false and potentially harmful picture of death in the world of a

young child. As well, it is very unlikely that a five-year-old today would be ushered into a room in which the body of his friend is laid to rest by the boy's uncle. Here the uncle and the child express no feeling of sadness, but instead they converse about the distinction between mind and body. This conversation would be unintelligible to a young child, for children this age frequently think that the dead have gone away to return again when they want to.

There is not much more to be said about *Cookies for Luke* except to hope it remains unread. I would suggest to its author that she read LeShan before she attempts another book in this area. Writing for children is a difficult assignment, and it becomes even more so when we, as adults, impose our causal-logical models onto the past where we once lived as children.

Eda LeShan's book deals with the death of a parent rather than of a peer as in *Cookies for Luke*; however, the concern here is how a death is perceived by a child and how a child reacts to death. In her introduction, LeShan demonstrates her understanding of children's needs to accept their own feelings. She covers feelings of numbness, anger, loneliness, loss, grief and relief. Throughout *Learning to Say Goodbye* there is the underlying theme, stated in the final few pages, that there are lessons for life in death for both children and adults. This is of great importance for the child whose parent has committed suicide or has died unexpectedly. Children must learn to cope with change and the feelings, 'good or bad', that go along with such change. There is no doubt that Eda LeShan has had experience with children and death, and can effectively communicate her feelings. I recommend *Learning to Say Goodbye* to anyone who is concerned about death in childhood.

REFERENCES

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