

story in *Griff gets a hand*, based on an Emmy award winning episode, is a poignant look at a young boy's grief and guilt at the sudden death of a friend. In "Martin hears the music" in *Karen keeps her word* the authors skillfully manage to interweave the story of two "different" children: Martin needs a hearing aid and Rachel is fat. The title story of *Casey draws the line* evokes an emotional response as Lisa and Casey, fighting over the same rabbit, ultimately are responsible for its unhappy end. What gives the story its punch is that the rabbit's point of view has not been forgotten.

The "Degrassi Junior High" novels are more loosely based on the TV episodes and are better for it. *Exit stage left* is an original story that successfully interweaves the problems of popular characters, LD, Lucy and Stephanie, as they prepare for the school play. *Spike* and *Stephanie Kaye* deal in depth with the concerns of one child which allows for greater character exploration. Both stories rely heavily on character self-reflection, a common element of problem novels. To achieve an impact and an immediacy similar to the TV episodes on the same subject, the story of Spike's pregnancy is told in the first person. A feature of the "Degrassi Junior High" TV series is the inconclusive endings of episodes which prompt reflection and personal conclusions. The authors wisely have chosen to keep this characteristic in the novels.

Lorimer seems to be targeting the "Junior High" novels to adolescent girls as only female protagonists are featured. Lorimer and the Degrassi team now need to recognize that the problems of male characters, like adopted Wheels and class clown Joey, also warrant attention.

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CHILDREN AND THE THOUGHT OF DEATH

Love you forever. Robert Munsch. Illus. Sheila McGraw. Firefly Books, 1986. 32 pp., \$12.95 \$4.95 cloth, paper. ISBN 0-920668-36-4, 0-920668-37-2; **Gynn.** Mary Jane Muir. North Winds Press, 1985. 28 pp., \$7.95 cloth. ISBN 0-590-71546-1; **Deep Thinker and the stars.** Patricia Murdoch. Illus. Kellie Jobson. Three Trees Press, 1987. Unpag., \$14.95, \$5.95 cloth, paper. ISBN 0-88823-127-X, 0-88823-125-3; **Goodbye Rune.** Marit Kaldhol and Wenche Oyen. Breakwater Books, 1987. Unpag., \$11.95 cloth. ISBN 0-920911-09-9 (Co-publication with Det Norske, Sanlaget, Norway); **Goodbye Mom, goodbye.** Philip E. Johnson. Illus. David Peacock. Burlington: Welch Publishing, 1987. Unpag., cloth. ISBN 1-55011-032-2.

Children under four years of age do not view death as final. The twentieth century philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein said in his famous *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, "Death is not an event in life, but the end of life". Unlike him, pre-schoolers view death as an event, a long trip, and wonder when the dead person will return.

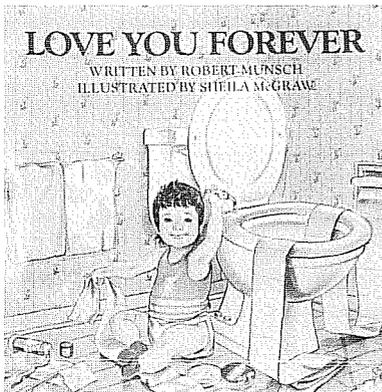
Good literature, whether for children or adults, usually works with the conceptions of the audience. Literature about death, for those adults who view death as final, and who are more concerned about how to go through and grow through the period of mourning, elaborates the issues of grief, guilt, and self-reconciliation. How can children's literature explore death?

A tentative classificatory scheme divides children's death literature into two groups: 1) pre-school, about the cycle of life, where death is viewed as one stage within that cycle; and 2) school-age, about death viewed as the end of a life.

For pre-schoolers, literature on the topic of death should be about the cycle of life. Death is a moment in a life-cycle where the baby grows up to be a big girl or boy, the girl or boy grows bigger and bigger and becomes a father or mother, and the father or mother grows to be old like the grandfather or grandmother. Eventually, the grandparents go away.

For school age children, literature about death might explore feelings of guilt. All children are very sensitive about their status in their adult-dominated world; they tend to feel to blame even for events outside their control. Children four and over, who recognize the finality of death, feel guilt concerning the death of a loved one.

We might further divide the literature horizontally across the two vertical divisions, into two other groups: 1) literally about people; and 2) figuratively about animated creatures, or about unrealistic situations. For instance, Shel Silverstein's *The giving tree* is about the life cycle, and contains the figurative aspect of a tree which communicates with its human companion who grows from childhood to old age. *Charlotte's web*, of course, is figurative, and uses the life-cycle as a structure for dealing with death, and grief.



I review five recent books in terms of my classificatory scheme.

Robert Munsch's *Love you forever* has a heart-tugging "song" as its main theme, repeated through the various stages of the life-cycles of the mother and child, with the mother holding the child and singing this lullaby with these words to him:

I'll love you forever,
I'll like you for always,

As long as I'm living
my baby you'll be.

However, in the penultimate stage of the life-cycle story told in this book, the child now grown up holds the aged and sick mother in his arms and sings the same lullaby only with the last line changed to:

my Mommy you'll be.

Returning home, he holds his baby daughter and sings the lullaby, completing the turn of the life-cycle.

The subtly intimated connections in this book among the concepts of lullaby, sleep, death as an eternal sleep, and the renewal of rituals with successive generations, are beyond the understanding of the pre-schooler. However, the pre-school child does have an understanding of the notions of growing bigger and older, and of dying as happening to the very old person.



Mary Jane Muir's *Gynn* is a life-cycle tale about a child's fondness for and eventual disenchantment with a guinea pig. Robbie and his mom eventually grow tired of Gynn the guinea pig and give it to a more appreciative family. Gynn grows fat, old, and dies. The family holds a funeral and remembers Gynn at the anniversary of his death. This is a life-cycle story with no hook for drawing the reader into the tale. The reader is given no opportunity for identifying with the characterless creature, and characterless

humans. The illustrations are as plain as the story.

Patricia Murdoch's *Deep Thinker and the stars* is a life-cycle Native style story. Though it is about the birth of a baby brother for the young girl, Sharon, whose special name is "Deep Thinker", the story relates the girl's memories of her dead grandfather. The cycle of life concerns the re-birth of the grandfather in the baby brother. After her mother leaves for the hospital to give birth, Sharon sees her dead grandfather's face in a dream and notices his eyes "that had diamonds in them". Later, looking at her new baby brother, "Sharon felt a tingling in her stomach. She had seen those eyes before! The baby had the eyes of her grandfather!" When the baby boy is about to be given his special name in the customary ceremony, Sharon prepares a gift of "stars", made with great effort and care from sparkling glass beads. The children's grandmother, seeing the gift, gives the boy a name that symbolizes that resemblance: "Boy with the stars in his eyes". This story deals with one way of remembering the dead: naming the newborn in the hope that the special qualities of the remem-

bered person will be inherited by the baby. Thus, this story elaborates the preschooler's concept of death: the dead person is re-born in a new baby.

Marit Kaldhol and Wenche Oyen's *Goodbye Rune* is a realistic story of the accidental death of a playmate. The story is illustrated as if with hazy images from a painfully sad memory. Sara, befuddled by the death of her friend Rune, does not seem to grasp the finality of his disappearance. "Are you sure Rune is never coming back?", Sara asks on the way to church.

Though her mother answers, "Yes, quite sure", she tells Sara that she can keep Rune in her mind. The story details the funeral service in church and the burial ceremony at the graveyard, punctuated with Sara's questions, and her parents' straightforward answers:

"What if Rune wakes up and wants to get out?

What if he can't get the lid off the coffin?"

"Rune won't wake up," said her father. "He won't wake up again."

After the winter ends, Sara visits Rune's grave, and though she cries at the thought that he won't ever return, she reconciles herself by placing flowers on Rune's grave, and by thinking of him. The child struggles with the finality of the death of her friend. Her questions and her parents' simple and honest answers help her come to terms with the irretrievable loss of her friend.

Philip E. Johnson's *Goodbye Mom, goodbye* literally recounts the death of the mother of two children. The story tells of their holiday plans interrupted by the illness of their mother, of receiving the news, of the funeral plans, visit to the funeral home, service, and burial ceremony. The story gains some life in the all-too-brief dialogue between the father and children after returning home. The children ask "Why?", and bemoan the unfairness of death. Their father replies: "Sometimes life isn't fair and sometimes bad things happen to good people."

The children, we are told and shown, are included in the sad events surrounding the death of their mother, and, in particular, the making of the funeral arrangements. They are not sheltered, not isolated from their father's grief, nor from the social customs concerning death. The story goes on to tell of their year of mourning. About a year later, at the grave, they can say "Goodbye Mom...Goodbye".

The moral of the story is that by including children in the events surrounding the death of a loved one, and in frankly answering their questions, we allow children to complete the grief-cycle. However, because the story is told mainly from the third-person, with very little actual dialogue between father and children, I cannot see how a child would feel any involvement in reading or listening to the story.

Furthermore, the story evades the actual emotions and confusions felt by elementary school age children. Apart from feelings of unfairness, and feelings of insecurity aroused by the loss, which the story indicates, there are deep

and painful feelings of disbelief, anger, and guilt which the story avoids. These are not easy emotions to express in third-person realistic narrative. Because the story seems to come with an implicit tag declaring, "I have a moral", it raises high expectations of thoroughness and honesty in dealing with the issues it tacitly declares as its subject: however, the book fails to meet these expectations.

In general, the first three of the five stories reviewed here fit into the life-cycle category of my scheme. The last two fit into the school-age category. All the stories are strictly realistic, except *Love you for ever* which goes just a step beyond customary reality.

Is realism the most adequate genre for presenting the emotions the child feels about death? Children, especially pre-schoolers, have trouble recognizing the finality of death. With that recognition children often feel guilt or blame, and we all feel grief. Though none of the stories deal with guilt feelings they do deal with the feelings associated with grief. *Goodbye Rune* does convey the child's struggle to admit the finality of the death of her friend. Except for *Love you forever* and *Deep Thinker* and the stars, the books have funeral and burial scenes: which seems to indicate that these stories have a sub-text saying that loved ones die, we bury them, say goodbye, and remember them.

All the books are quite explicit about remembering and expressing love for the dead person, particularly *Deep Thinker*, where the memory is reinforced by naming a newborn after the dead grandfather.

In *Love you forever*, the old mother sneaking into her son's house, and holding the grownup son in her arms while he is asleep stretches the apparent realism of the book. This creates a frame for the very real situation of the son holding the frail mother in his hands, and singing the lullaby to her, and heightens the tenderness the adult child feels for the parent as she approaches death. The sadness of the final letting go of the dead parent, while keeping her in memory, is felt through the story when the son pauses in silence at the top of his stairs. Feelings of return and rebirth are displayed in the grownup son repeating his mother's ritual with his own new baby girl. These are the feelings the other stories talk about rather than reveal in their realistic approach. Strict realism may be good at describing and talking about the feelings children have, including adult children, on the death of loved ones, but not very good at involving us in those feelings.

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