

## Summer's End and Sad Goodbyes: Children's Picturebooks About Death and Dying

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**Abstract** This article explores children's picturebooks about death and grieving by considering both psychological and literary aspects. Two questions frame this analysis: How can picturebooks, particularly written for young children, support children's grief when someone dies? How do the illustrations and text of picture books express and convey the aesthetic and emotional experience of loss? Using both psychological research on children's grief reactions and literary analysis of picturebooks, this paper reviews picturebooks that have been published on the topic of death from 2001 to 2011 and then closely analyzes three books that span a range of topics and approaches to death. Findings indicate that children's picturebooks convey important psychological and cultural issues through text and illustrations. Furthermore, understanding some of the psychological and literary features of children's picturebooks that address death and grieving can help educators to provide support and understanding for children when they experience loss.

**Keywords** Children's literature · Death and bereavement · Picturebooks · Illustrations

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The news came suddenly, and even worse, via Facebook. As I perused the status updates, I saw that a friend and colleague announced Larry Sipe's untimely death. The post, which left me grieving in the shadows of the morning, was surreal. I went to his Facebook page and already people were posting messages of sadness and farewell addressed to him. The last comment prior to his death had actually been from me; I had written a post after I taught a class in my reading methods course dedicated to illustrations in children's picturebooks. I had wanted him to know about the way his research on children's literary understanding and emphasis on picturebook illustrations impacted my own teaching. During that class, my students lingered over the beautiful illustrations from exemplar picturebooks, discussing their color, tone, endpages, and borders. When I posted my note to him, I could still imagine myself in his doctoral course creating collages in the style of Eric Carle—I got lost in the color, paper texture, and shape of the pictures. I hope he read my message to him and knew how his influence permeates my teaching and research.

Unfortunately, people of all ages experience death; however, it can be particularly difficult for young children. When I was a graduate student and researched kindergarteners' responses to children's literature alongside Larry in an urban public school, we found that the students in the classroom also experienced their own losses of pets, grandparents, parents, and friends. Reading picturebooks about topics relevant to children's lives can provide an opportunity for children to engage with ideas and experiences that are significant to them (Sipe, 2008). In his work, Larry recognized the complexity of children's responses to literature and acknowledged the significant interplay of textual and visual elements in children's picturebooks. As I thought about the legacy of his work, two questions came to my mind: How can picturebooks, particularly written for young children, support children's grief when someone dies? How do the illustrations and text of picture books express and convey the aesthetic and emotional experience of loss? This article explores the role that children's literature has in supporting children's experience with death and grieving by considering both psychological aspects as well as the visual and aesthetic components of picturebooks.

### **Children's Grief Reactions**

Children experience death in many ways—whether it is a loss of a family member, friend or pet. Death has a tremendous impact on children and often generates what is referred to as a grief reaction (Corr, 2010). Children's grief reactions, the way that they respond to their loss, are dependent on the child's sociocultural context and individual development. As a result, children demonstrate multidimensional ways of perceiving and reacting to the experience (Slaughter and Griffiths, 2007; Willis, 2002). When children encounter grief, they negotiate complex emotions and feelings related to their personal identities, cultural background, and relationship with the loved one. They may demonstrate feelings of sadness, anxiety, or even display physical symptoms of distress such as headaches.

The way that adults recognize and respond to children's complex reactions to death is an important aspect of how they grieve (Holland, 2008). For instance,

children may have inaccurate ideas about the cause of death or even think that death is temporary (Hawkins, 2002). Younger children are more likely to believe that people who have passed away may still be able to perform internal functions (like dreaming and knowing) and also assume that death could result from their own “bad” behavior (Speece, 1995). Furthermore, they often attribute death as something that happens only to those who are old and frail, so their emotions may be intense when they deal with the death of another child or parent (Webb, 2011).

The Harvard Child Bereavement Study (Worden and Silverman, 1996), a seminal longitudinal research study that documented children's responses to loss into adulthood, reported two significant findings related to children's responses to death. First, many children often immerse themselves in everyday activities as a response to their overwhelming feelings about grief. While it may be interpreted that children are recovering quickly from their loss because they resume their day-to-day routines, the reality is that they may need more emotional space to process their feelings and therefore mourn for longer periods of time (Koehler, 2010). Second, the study revealed that many children have delayed reactions to their loss that spans their lifetime. For some children, their sadness is intensified years after the death of a loved one because they think about the role that the person could have played at various times in their lives (Howarth, 2011). An example would be that a person might grieve for her mother during milestones such as high school graduation, even if the mother passed away years ago. These findings underscore the importance of addressing children's grief over an extended period of time and providing them with opportunities to reflect on their feelings and remember the person they lost.

### **Responding to Picturebooks**

Reading and responding to literature has been identified as a powerful method for dealing with traumatic events, such as losing a loved one (Bargiel et al., 1997; Dutro, 2008). Using children's literature to support a child who is experiencing grief can validate emotions and experiences (Copenhaver-Johnson et al., 2008; Corr, 2003–2004). Sipe and Bauer (2001) analyzed interactive read alouds in a kindergarten classroom and demonstrated that, when provided opportunities to respond dialogically, children's complex responses built on their own cultural background and personal understanding. Other studies have revealed how topics in picturebooks that focus on the most fundamental emotions and experiences of life provide opportunities for children to consider their own feelings and responses about a topic (Short, 2011). Responding to literature can support children's grief reactions, which is one reason that counselors use bibliotherapy. Bibliotherapy allows children to make personal connections with characters, relate to story elements, and in turn, cope with their own difficult emotions (Ianquinta and Hipsky, 2006; Prater and Dyches, 2006).

There is a paucity of research analyzing children's literature related to death and grief, yet there has been a significant increase in the number of children's books published on this topic in the past 20 years (Corr, 2003–2004). One of the few

studies analyzing how death is portrayed in children's literature was conducted by Poling and Hupp (2008); they used a framework that focused on biological facts (irreversibility, nonfunctionality, inevitability, and causality), sociocultural practices (ideas of heaven and funerals), and emotional responses (sadness, anger, longing, guilt, denial, shock, and confusion) to conduct a content analysis of death-themed children's literature. Their study found that picture books depicted a range of emotional reactions to death, including sadness, denial, longing, and shock, yet rarely focused on the biological factors. This contrasts with psychological research that demonstrates that the more children understand about biological factors, the less anxiety and fear they feel (Slaughter and Griffiths, 2007).

Children's picturebooks are a distinct form of literature because meaning is conveyed in both pictures *and* words. One of Larry Sipe's most significant contributions to the field of children's literature was to recognize the transactional and transforming relationship between pictures and text (Sipe, 1996, 1998; Sipe and Brightman, 2005, 2008; Sipe and McGuire, 2006). Sipe described the illustrations and text in picturebooks as having a "synergy" and being "incomplete without the other" (Sipe, 1998, p. 98); his work demonstrates how attending to the illustrations is an important aspect of the reading experience. Research has demonstrated that visual aspects of literacy learning can be a significant part of meaning making (Ranker, 2009; Siegel, 2006). Children place significant emphasis on the visual images (Wolfenbarger and Sipe, 2007) because they provide significant cues that affect the overall meaning (Kress, 2003; O'Neil, 2011; Sipe, 2008). Therefore, attending to the way that death is represented both in text and illustration is an important aspect of selecting and utilizing picturebooks to support children's grief reactions.

While Sipe did not focus specifically on how picturebooks would support children when they experienced death of a loved one, there are three important aspects of his work that provide a framework for understanding the potential of using children's literature with children who are experiencing loss. First of all, children's literary understanding is built from both the pictures and the text; many illustrations can actually provide an experience that goes beyond the text (Sipe, 1996, 1998; Sipe and Brightman, 2008). In his research, Sipe (1998, 2000, 2008; Sipe and Brightman, 2006) found that children attended to the visual features and could make complex connections between their own experiences and the illustrations. Second, Sipe documented how children recognize artistic elements in the illustrations to develop their own literary understanding. In numerous studies where he documented interactive readalouds in classrooms, Sipe revealed the complex understandings children display at an early age when given the opportunity to attend to artistic elements such as endpages, artistic medium, color, shape, line, and borders (Sipe, 2008, 2011; Sipe and McGuire, 2006). Finally, Sipe found that meaning conveyed in illustrations may be more significant to child readers in understanding the overall meaning of a picturebook than the words (Sipe, 2011; Wolfenbarger and Sipe, 2007). Recent research on visual literacy has continued to support the significance of sign systems and semiotic representations in the ways that children interpret and understand ideas (Kress, 2003; Sipe, 2008). Knowledge of and attention to picturebook illustrations can extend, expand, and build on children's literary understanding.

**Table 1** Title of book, author

Characteristics	Attributes specific to the book
Who died? (animal, person)	
Deceased/dying character's age	
Deceased/dying character's gender	
Deceased/dying character's race/ethnicity	
Deceased/dying character's relationship with main character	
Age of main character	
Reaction to the death	
Coping strategies and how they worked	
Any other strategies or interesting information	

Overall, it is important to realize that children's grief reactions may be extended over time, involve misconceptions, and reflect varied personal or cultural reactions. Children's literature provides an opportunity to experience and represent images and text related to death. Understanding some of the psychological, visual, and literary elements of picturebooks is an important aspect of reading and responding to children's literature about death, grieving, and loss.

### Selection of Books

In July of 2011, I conducted a search using NoveLit Plus to identify picture books with the topic of death published between the years of 2001–2011.<sup>1</sup> To begin the search, I used the terms “death” and “dying,” years of publication were limited to 2001–2011, and “fiction literature” was specified. The search engine allowed for age-range specification of intended readers, so initially I searched among books designated for children ages 0–8, which resulted in 252 books. A second search using the same terms and publication years was conducted for books designated for ages 9–12, which resulted in 2,059 books. Once the search was limited to children's picturebooks, a final search resulted in 89 picturebooks about death that had been published in the past 10 years. The summaries of book were carefully examined and entered into Table 1.

The purpose of reviewing summaries of the books was twofold. First, I wanted to have an overview of how death was addressed in recently published children's

<sup>1</sup> NoveLit Plus is a database of fiction and non-fiction literature that allows searches using specific age ranges and years of publication. It was designed for librarians as a way to search by topic; it features articles, book reviews, and thematic book lists and was adopted by my university library to aid in researching children's books. There are some limitations to using a search engine such as this one; specifically, that searching by age range can be problematic, the books are limited to those published in the United States and managed by the administrators of the program, and the topic search is only as effective as the keywords or labels placed on the book. Nonetheless, NoveList Plus provided me with a starting point for analyzing a number of the books published in the past 10 years and was informative because the database gave a plot summary along with a picture of the front cover.

picturebooks. Second, I wanted to select three books to review based on specific criteria detailed below.

Analyzing the themes of the literature published in the past 10 years provided a window to the ways that death is represented in picturebooks for children. Of the 89 books, 52 dealt with the death of a person and 31 were stories about the death of an animal.<sup>2</sup> Not surprisingly, most books that addressed the death of a person focused on adults, with 17 focusing on the death of a parent, 31 addressing the death of a grandparent, two stories were about an uncle (no stories about losing an aunt), and two stories about an elderly person who was a friend rather than a relative. Three books focused on general topics related to dying, including ways of conceptualizing heaven or understanding loss. And, only three of the books that appeared in the search depicted children who died. Across all of the characters, more male characters were depicted than female regardless of whether they were human or animal.

The picturebooks reviewed depicted many ways of grieving after a loss; the representations showed various cultural approaches as well as individual ways of understanding death. For instance, in many books, children plant a garden or specific tree to memorialize their loss. In some stories, the main characters share their favorite memories or explain significant objects in order to help them remember their relationships with those who have passed away. The emotional representation of grief and loss varies widely, for instance, children might make a scrapbook of memories of a parent, hold a memorial for that parent or pet, or even fly a kite with a message for that person. Certain stories center on feelings of grief that happen surrounding a significant event such as a holiday or birth of a new baby. Images of the afterlife are also varied based on the authors' conceptions and the cultural influences. In some stories, the dead are portrayed as spirits or as people in dreams. Heaven is referred to in many books and is variously depicted as full of jazz music, in the clouds above, or in our hearts and memories.

My goal was to select three picturebooks for an in-depth review that would reflect a range of important issues or topics related to the issue of death and grieving. After reviewing the subjects in the summaries from the database and considering research on children's grief reactions, I selected the following topics:

- loss of a sibling because it is an underrepresented topic in the literature
- loss of a pet because it is a complex and common experience for children
- loss portrayed from a specific cultural perspective because I felt it is important to consider diverse perspectives on death and dying.

Using the list of the 89 books published in the past 10 years, all of the available books in local public libraries were gathered ( $n = 35$ ) and the picturebooks were sorted into the three topics I wanted to review. I used two different frameworks to evaluate and select three quality children's picturebooks. First, I used information about the psychological research on death and grieving (for instance, Corr, 2010) to modify Kiefer's (2008) criteria for evaluating children's picturebooks that considers

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<sup>2</sup> Some books focused on death without a main character and one book had both a dog and owner die. Therefore, the numbers do not add up to exactly 89.

aspects such as plot, setting, theme, characterization, style, and point of view. Important considerations on children's grief reactions that would impact the plot of the picturebook included how characters express their feelings, in what ways the loss is represented or explained; and the ways in which the deceased is memorialized or remembered (Corr, 2010; Hawkins, 2002; Howarth, 2011; Worden and Silverman, 1996).

Second, in order to consider how illustrations contribute to the understanding of the story and how artistic elements are used to create meaning about death and grief for children, I used Sipe's research on picturebook illustrations (1998, 2008, 2011). He evaluated picturebook illustrations using three main components: literary, artistic, and semiotic elements. For the literary elements, I considered how pictures extended the meaning of the text by either supporting or differing from the textual content. Specifically, because authors and illustrators can use the contrast between the text and pictures to lead the reader to understandings beyond the printed words, I considered the "synergy" of text and illustrations (Sipe, 1998; Wolfenbarger and Sipe, 2007). Artistic elements are reflected in various aspects such as end pages, artistic medium, colors, shape, lines, and borders, and affect the interpretation of the illustrations. And finally, analysis of semiotic representations focuses on the way that visual images create meaning in the reader's mind (Sipe, 1998). Using these three components, I created a checklist for the illustrations and used it when evaluating the picturebooks.

### Textual Analysis of Three Picturebooks

After careful consideration and evaluation using the two frameworks listed above, three books were selected for further analysis: *That Summer* (written by Johnston, 2002 and illustrated by Barry Moser), *Ghost Wings* (written by Joesse, 2001 and illustrated by Giselle Potter) and *Harry and Hopper* (written by Wild, 2011 illustrated by Freya Blackwood). *That Summer* describes the final summer that two brothers share after Joey is diagnosed with cancer. The story is told from the perspective of the brother who is not dying, using flashbacks to reflect on some of their significant shared memories. It begins with description and images of both of the boys playing and ends with Joey laying "as still as a whisper" in his bed. In order to cope with his terminal illness, Joey sews a quilt which provides him an opportunity to reflect on special items and memories in his life. As he creates the quilt, he includes squares representing his favorite things such as his fishing pole and his baseball glove. The quilt also provides an opportunity to reflect on abstract ideas related to his illness and offers a creative outlet for dealing with grief. For example, when his grandmother tells him God will care for him after his death, Joey quilts his own conceptualization of God, which resembles his dog. When Joey dies, the quilt is almost complete and Joey's brother completes the project by adding the final square and sewing a border around the quilt with pieces of Joey's pyjamas.

This book was selected because it describes the loss of a sibling and reflects some of the emotions, such as guilt and sadness, common to siblings who deal with grief

(Stevens et al., 2010). The text is rich in metaphorical and descriptive language which evokes vivid images of the emotions and complex feelings of losing a brother and dealing with a family member who is terminally ill. For instance, when he describes the family's response to Joey's illness, the author states that, "All of us were dream walkers." During the illness, there is a point where it seems that Joey is getting better and it describes how, "hope fluttered inside us like a little green bird." However, the family begins to accept that Joey's death is imminent as the brother states, "Joey was leaving. It was clear as the rain that stung his window that summer."

The illustrations in this picture book include both monochromatic black and white photographs of the brothers' past experiences along with vivid watercolors that represent the present time of Joey's illness and death. The black and white images resemble old photographs and are not presented sequentially; they represent a collection of past memories of the brothers rather than a chronological tale. In contrast, the four watercolor images are sequential and depict the present time with Joey's illness; they start with a picture of the boys running in a field with their dog and end with an image of the brother, without Joey, sitting alone with his arm around their dog. The pictures and text are not synchronous; for instance, in one case he talks about his brother being "as still as a whisper" yet the corresponding picture shows a memory of a black and white image of the two of them where they are camping in a homemade tent they constructed together held up by string. The pairing of the text and images about the illness and shared memories reflects how Joey's brother is reminiscing about past memories while living with the more difficult present moments of Joey's terminal illness. Utilizing flashback also offers a way to show that past memories are important as one adjusts to terminal illness and/or loss of a sibling.

The last image is a borderless watercolor image, known as a "full bleed" with Joey's brother staring directly into the camera, posed with his dog in a large field of grass. Looking into his eyes, one almost feels his sadness, yet there is a strength conveyed by his direct outward gaze. The horizon is completely black at the top of the page and the frameless picture suggests a "life going beyond the confines of the page" (Sipe, 2008, p. 17). The grass is a strong visual feature on this page, depicting bright green blades made from short brushstrokes that show vitality and energy. The image of the brother conveys feelings of hope and strength, even though it is obvious that he is mourning. The text and illustrations of this story depict a realistic portrayal of a family, particularly a brother, dealing with terminal illness and shows how a child could begin to heal by honoring and remembering his sibling.

My next example, *Ghost Wings* is the story of a young Mexican girl, her relationship with her grandmother, and her celebration of her grandmother's life at Los Dias de los Muertes (Days of the Dead). The second page of text begins the remembrance of the grandmother with:

I remember the day the butterflies left.

They were the color of the sun setting on the mountains. They filled the trees with gold, so many they made the boughs bend. When they flew away their wings rustled like skirts. That was the day my grandmother died.



From this point, the granddaughter reflects on her unique and special relationship with her grandmother. Her grandmother was her best friend and they shared many special events together; the grandmother chased the young girl's nightmares away with a broom (rather than telling her to be brave like her parents do), they sat side by side making tortillas with a metate,<sup>3</sup> and they visited the Magic Circle together, a yearly event which happens in Mexico where Monarch butterflies return in their patterns of migration.

Butterflies are a motif in this story representing life cycles and spiritual afterlife. The book shows how the Monarch butterflies return to roost in the forests of Mexico in order to gain strength for the migration north, where they lay hundreds of eggs and die (a helpful explanation in the back of the book gives the scientific background). When they land in the oyamel fir forests in Mexico, they are described in the text as "filling the sky with gold." When the grandmother becomes sick, she is described as "thin as smoke" and very weak. The grandmother leans on her granddaughter for strength and invites her to "Come with me to the magic circle and we'll say goodbye." As they are together in the magic circle, the granddaughter closes her eyes and she notices that even when a butterfly leaves after perching on her arm, she can still feel its presence. This symbolism of feeling someone's presence even after they have left is further expanded when Grandmother explains that the butterflies, "carry the souls of the old ones, and the old ones never really leave." When the butterflies leave the oyamel fir trees, the grandmother passes away.

After experiencing a range of emotions from the grandmother's death, the family participates in the Days of the Dead celebration. The purpose of visiting the cemetery during the Days of the Dead is to pray and sing to encourage visits by souls of those who have left (Davies, 2010). As part of the festival, they create an ofrenda<sup>4</sup> and then visit their grandmother's grave. There are many people at the cemetery; the tone is upbeat and celebratory rather than dark and sad. The custom of singing and remembering at the Days of the Dead provides a way for the granddaughter to memorialize her grandmother; it is in remembering her grandmother's life alongside others who have also experienced loss that she feels her presence. The rituals surrounding the festival help the family commemorate the grandmother's life.

The artwork in this book is rendered through ink, watercolors, and colored pencils. Each picture features the reverence the granddaughter has for her grandmother due to the way the characters' body language and interactions are depicted through perspective, balance, and positioning. Three double page spreads that visually depict the events that were significant in their relationship through include grandmother protecting her granddaughter at night, and taking her to the visiting the magic circle and teaching her to make tortillas. The granddaughter is always by her grandmother's side looking up to her, such as the page where the grandmother is making tortillas and the granddaughter is gazing up to her

<sup>3</sup> A Metate is a ground stone tool used for processing grain and seeds. It is also referred to as a mortar.

<sup>4</sup> An ofrenda is an altar.

grandmother to learn. In each picture, the artistic elements emphasize the importance of the grandmother to the child.

The illustrations in this book also help the reader understand the significance of celebrating the Days of the Dead. On five consecutive pages, the family is shown participating in typical activities which occur on the Days of the Dead celebration; we see the family at the market, setting up an ofrenda for the grandmother, and cleaning up the graves and eulogizing loved ones at the cemetery. The altar has a black and white photograph of the grandmother on a table with rose petals, cornmeal, fruit and edible skeleton dolls they selected at the market. The next day, they are depicted going to the cemetery and paying tribute to the “old ones.” The scene is celebratory; we see guitars, rose petals, and many people who have returned to pay tribute to people who have passed away.

This book describes the range of emotions one experiences through loss, and demonstrates how cultural or religious rituals can support healing and remembrance. Furthermore, this book illustrates how cultural rituals or events can support children in their grief. The author includes information at the back of the book for adults to use when reading to children; there are descriptions of Days of the Dead, Monarch Butterflies, and a guide at the back of this book for discussing feelings and memories about losing a loved one. The questions and discussion topics were designed specifically to support conversations with children about death.

The final book I chose to include as an example is *Harry and Hopper*, which tells the story of a young boy named Harry, his close relationship with his dog Hopper, and Harry's mourning of his dog's death. Nearly a third of the books published on death and grief between 2001 and 2011 depict the death of a pet ( $n = 31$ ), an experience that is very significant to children because pets represent unconditional love for children and enhance the social, emotional, and cognitive experiences. For children, the loss of a pet can equate to losing a family member (Corr, 2010; Toray, 2010).

In the story, Harry comes home from school with “...no Hopper waiting by the gate. No glad yelping. No loving lick of the tongue.” His father tells him “an accident happened” and Hopper is dead. Harry will not sleep in his bed because it reminds him of how they used to sleep on his bed together, so his father agrees to let him sleep on the couch. Harry initially exhibits feelings of anger, refuses to help his dad bury his dog, and even decides to go to school rather than stay home. Such feelings of denial can occur for children who are grieving (Corr, 2010).

In a progression of dreams, Harry slowly comes to terms with his loss and imagines how he can say goodbye to his four-legged friend. The dream sequence in the story represents how Harry extends his time with Hopper in order to accept his death; Hopper remains in Harry's dreams as he deals with the loss of his dog. At night, Hopper appears to him as a healthy dog and they go outside to do the things they loved, such as “running, wrestling, shouting, barking.” His dreams begin to portray Hopper as gradually fading away – for instance, the second day he appears he “wasn't quite as solid or quite as warm” until in one dream, Harry finds Hopper weak and “almost gone.” Harry comes to terms with Hopper's death when he lies close to him and tells him goodbye during his last dream.

Through a series of double page spreads, pictorial sequences, and framed images the illustrations depict the relationship between boy and dog along with Harry's gradual acceptance of his dog's death. The illustrations of this story are made of watercolor, gouache, and charcoal; the charcoal pencil creates the image of motion using lines that indicate movement surrounding all the characters and images. The second page is an illustration sequence with six frames that depicts Harry and Hopper's day to day activities such as throwing the ball, running in the backyard, doing homework, and giving Hopper a bath. Each scene demonstrates how Hopper is very important to this young boy's life.

The illustrator uses point of view, color, and tone to depict the emotions that Harry feels about losing his dog. The last page uses an illustration without text to show that Harry has accepted Hopper's death; the picture is an aerial view with a perspective of his house along with the homes on either side of him. In the bottom right hand part of the page is a view of Harry at Hopper's grave, hand outstretched on the earth where he has been buried. The point of view along with Harry's gesture gives the impression that "life goes on"; the father is mowing the yard, the neighbors have their laundry out, and Harry has come to terms with his dog's passing.

This story depicts how a child experiences a full range of emotions and then begins to heal; however, I have two critiques of this book. First, an important aspect of understanding death for young children is to learn about biological factors; this understanding can help children in their grief and understanding of loss (Slaughter and Griffiths, 2007; Toray, 2010). In this book, we do not find out how Hopper dies, it merely states that there has been "an accident." Second, Harry does not want Hopper buried in the backyard and yet his father does so despite his child's feelings. Toray (2010) suggests that allowing children some input on how end-of-life arrangements are handled with the loss of an animal can support their grieving process. Examples of how children might have input on such arrangements might include allowing a child to help decide how to honor his dog and/or select or create a burial place.

Overall, *Harry and Hopper* portrays how important a dog is in a child's life and how a child might need to extend his grieving process over time. However, it does neglect some important facts about the death of a pet, including omission of how the dog died. This would be a good book to use in conjunction with other literature that focuses on the biological factors so that children could begin to understand what happens when their family pet passes away. Shielding children from details about death can result in further misunderstandings, fear, or sadness.

## Conclusion

It is unfortunate that children will experience grief in their lifetime. However, honest, concrete, and supportive conversations are very important for children's grief reactions. Children's picturebooks can provide a way to address and support children as they experience trauma and begin to understand the emotions surrounding their grief. The three books reviewed here span a variety of cultures,

contexts, and characters, offering several options for children to relate to the experiences in the story. It is important to understand the psychological process of grieving in order to help children make sense of death from an emotional standpoint. Since children experience the death of siblings but there is not an abundance of literature for young readers about this topic, *That Summer* plays an important role in exploring the loss of a brother with a terminal illness. *Ghost Wings* portrays the death of a grandmother by showing life cycles along with the annual migration of the Monarch butterflies along with describing rituals from the Mexican culture. *Harry and Hopper* demonstrates that children need to grieve in their own time and that it might take a while before they are ready to actually address feelings about their loss, even when it comes to losing a pet. These books make important contributions to death-themed literature because they address important psychological, emotional, and cultural issues through their text and illustrations.

Research on grief and loss demonstrates that children need time and guidance on how to deal with their feelings (Corr, 2010) and that literature can be an important part of this process (Short, 2011). However, it is clear that further research is needed to understand the potential of picturebooks as a way to support children's grief reactions. Much of our knowledge has to do with the psychological aspects of children's grief reactions, but we need a better understanding of the role of literature in helping children through these processes. As Dutro (2008) contends, "...the deeply personal response, the response that is embedded in pain, seems beyond the purview of much of our prevalent reader response vocabulary" (p. 426).

Further research on how children respond to literature about grief and loss requires a multidisciplinary approach that combines such approaches as psychology, literary and cultural theories, and reader response. Certainly, research on children's literary understanding would expand our knowledge of how picturebooks can support children in their grief reactions. It would also be informative to document how children respond to texts that have been carefully selected to address grief and loss. For instance, research that builds on Sipe's categories of reader response, which include analytical, intertextual, personal, transparent, and performative (Sipe, 2000, 2008) could be an important way to consider how children respond to literature about death and grief. Furthermore, Sipe's grounded theory of literary understanding which highlights the way that children respond by expressing 1) the desire to know/the hermeneutic impulse; 2) the need to connect stories to personal experience/personal impulse; and 3) the way readers use the story as a "lived through" experience/aesthetic impulse (Benton, 1992) could shed light on how the reader responds to and conceptualizes ideas about difficult and traumatic events (Sipe, 2000; Wolfenbarger and Sipe, 2007).

While the support provided by caregivers affects how children perceive their loss, it may also be important to look at how cultural and religious rituals affect grief reactions. Exploring different cultural practices through multicultural children's literature has the potential to support a range of responses about death and grief. For example, the book *Ghost Wings* is about traditions and celebrations found in the Mexico, however this topic would possibly be familiar to children from many different backgrounds. Across the United States and the globe, there are communities that celebrate the Days of the Dead and there are many similar

celebrations in Asian and African cultures (Davies, 2010). Certainly, further understanding of death from a multicultural perspective would provide even more insight on how culturally specific rituals and celebrations can support bereavement and remembrance.

When adults develop an awareness and understanding of children's varied reactions, they can provide support as children cope with their loss (Hawkins, 2002). Reading children's picturebooks has the potential to support children through the emotional loss of losing someone they love. Understanding some of the psychological and literary features of literature that address death and grieving is the first step in providing support and understanding for children during such a difficult time.

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