

bereaved as a result of violence, although in the general population of São Paulo this is only the second most common cause of death. Statistics gathered in June 2000 from 18 people who were receiving treatment showed that the age of those in psychotherapy at the centre ranged from four to 54 years old. Of these, four had lost a son, three a mother, three a brother or sister, two a father, two a husband and one a brother-in-law. The causes of death were murder (nine), car accidents (four) and heart attack (four).

Prospective clients are first seen at the psychology clinic of the university. After an assessment interview, those who would benefit from psychotherapy or family therapy are referred on to our services, offered at the same clinic. Those who can afford to do so pay for their treatment according to their means, but we have sufficient funding from the university to be able to offer treatment to all, and no one is excluded on religious grounds.

When we cannot accept people because of lack of available resources, rather than keeping them on a long waiting list, we refer them on to psychologists trained in our laboratory but now working in other places. We have an agreement that they will see the people we refer to them under the same conditions as in the university clinic, offering an equivalent service from a technical perspective, with the same level of funding. In this way, we maintain a widespread net of support in the community and keep our ex-members of staff in constant contact with the activities of our laboratory.

RESEARCH

From the outset, the laboratory has based its activities on research, at various levels. A number of papers have been published or presented at scientific events. Of the completed research projects, those relating to bereavement by death are:

- Reasons for adoption after the death of a child
- Psychosomatic reactions to grief
- Anticipatory grief in a family when one of its members has cancer
- Epitaphs as words on stone: what do they mean for the bereaved family?
- Risk factors for complicated grief in a Brazilian population
- Untimely death as a risk factor for complicated grief
- Fantasies of a bereaved child.

During the next two coming years, we expect to complete a number of projects, including:

- Palliative care and anticipatory grief

Fantasies of children who have lost a parent

Widows and children of AIDS: what is left for us?

Widows in psychotherapy for grief.

As new Master and PhD students enrol

each year, we expect different themes to come up based on their interests. And so we are prompted to do new research and base our clinical work on the results obtained in this way: the wheel never stops turning. **BC**

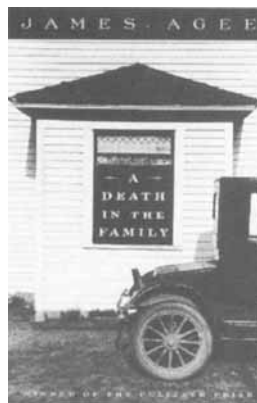
BEREAVEMENT IN LITERATURE

The work of grieving can lead to creativity and has given rise to many literary masterpieces, as well as lesser works, from which we have much to learn. The editors hope that this article will be the first of a series which we have called 'Bereavement in Literature'. You are invited to make your own contributions about other books, poems or plays which have inspired you or made a significant contribution to your understanding of bereavement.

A DEATH IN THE FAMILY

James Agee

First published in 1938. 1998 edition, New York: Vintage Press, 320pp, \$13.00 pb. ISBN 0375 70123 0



Agee was brought up in rural Tennessee and lost his father in 1915, when he was seven years of age. He wrote his semi-autobiographical novel, *A Death in the Family*, 23 years later and it remains a powerful evocation of the impact on a family of an unexpected and untimely death.

Like Shakespeare's tragedies, *A Death in the Family* can be interpreted in many ways. A historian would find a detailed and compelling account of family life in 1915, a sociologist would be fascinated by the powerful social factors which determine how each member of the family reacts to a death and a psychoanalyst would find copious evidence for the repression of unacceptable feelings of ambivalence in a family in which politeness and 'Christian' values dictate correct behaviour. (It is, perhaps, no coincidence that Freud's *Mourning and Melancholia* was published in 1917.)

Some of the most telling parts are those which remind us that the roots of grief are to be found in the primitive need to remain close to protective parents in childhood. This is brought home by juxtaposing the reactions of adults and children. In chapter seven the author describes the night terrors of young Rufus: 'And darkness,

smiling, leaned ever more intimately inward upon him, laid open the huge ragged mouth – Ahhhh... He cried out again, more fiercely, for his father.'

A similar fear of the abyss is later expressed by the boy's mother whose rigid control breaks down when, adjusting her veil and leaving her bedroom for her husband's funeral, she suddenly realises what has happened, '...and with such force, such monstrous piercing weight, in all her heart and soul and mind and body but above all in the womb, where it arrived and dwelt like a cold and prodigious spreading stone, that she groaned almost inaudibly, almost a mere silent breath, an Ohhhhh, and doubled deeply over, hands to her belly and her knee joints melted.'

A few pages later, separation fears are expressed by a child. So absorbed are the adults in their own affairs that little, Catherine, aged three and a half, cries out in great distress and '...her mother came towards her stooping with arms stretched out and Catherine ran to her as fast as she could run, and plunged her head into her, and cried as if she were made of tears; and it was only when her mother said, just as kindly, "Just look at your panties, why they're sopping wet", that she realised that indeed they were'.

However moving these individual reactions may be it is the interactions between the two families of the father and mother that make this book unique. I counted 27 family members who are mentioned by name, an impossible number for any novelist. But Agee marshals his forces with such precision that we are never lost. Rather we join with them in their search for meaning, their need for faith, their courage, their fear and their mutual involvement.

By presenting us with a story that is, in essence, true at both a cognitive and an emotional level, James Agee's master work transcends time and psychological theories. It will surely remain one of the great novels of the twentieth century. **BC**

Colin Murray Parkes

Consultant Psychiatrist