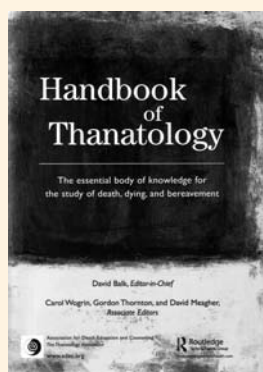


# Book reviews

## Handbook of thanatology



**Handbook of thanatology**  
The essential body of knowledge for the study of death, dying, and bereavement  
David Balk (ed)

London/New York:  
Routledge, 2007  
486pp  
£56.00 hb  
ISBN 978 0 415 98945 9

Browsing through the *Handbook of Thanatology*, two things struck me at first glance. First, the structure of the book as a whole: it comprises six sections that cover specific broad topics – dying; end-of-life decision making; grief; assessment and intervention; traumatic death, and death education. Each of the six sections neatly comprises six chapters that take a similar angle on each topic: culture; religion and spirituality; history; life span issues; the family, and ethical and legal issues. Two overarching additional chapters on professional issues and resources in thanatology complete the package.

This matrix structure fits neatly with how the American Association of Death Education and Counseling (ADEC) structures the field, which is no surprise, as the book was published under auspices of ADEC and most contributors are ADEC members. Which brings me to the second striking feature of the book – the list of authors. An impressive array of well-respected experts have contributed to this book's 38 chapters. To have such a line-up and so many of them is potentially very promising for a handbook, but they would seem likely to behave like frogs in a wheelbarrow in the writing and editing process – jumping in every direction. An editor would need every skill and ounce of energy to keep them within the structure. Miraculously, David Balk has succeeded in doing just this. The result is a bulky book (over 400 pages) that contains a wealth of information and expertise. Without any doubt we can call the *Handbook of Thanatology* a valuable contribution to the field.

There are some fantastic chapters. Without wanting to do any injustice to the other authors, I would like to mention Alicia Skinner Cook's chapter on family grieving. She addresses all the basic issues in no more than seven pages. And Paul Rosenblatt's chapter on culture and grief, which covers literally the world of grief – from Papua New Guinea to Turkey, from South Africa to Korea – in such an erudite way that it is a delight to read. Furthermore, I very much

appreciated David Meagher's chapter on ethical and legal issues in loss, grief and mourning, also because of the way he seriously addresses a niche topic like cryonics. [Indeed, I had hoped to read something on plastination too (see Walter, 2004), but that may be a bridge too far.] It is, of course, impossible to describe all 38 chapters here, but rest assured that the whole book contains a wealth of valuable information on death, dying and grief.

So, would I recommend it to the reader of *Bereavement Care*? Not without some cautionary remarks. First, the book is mainly valuable for people new to the field. It may also serve as an aid to keeping up with the literature. This suggests that I miss depth in the book, and in a way I do. Yet I feel reluctant to raise this as a criticism. What can one expect? The authors can obviously only scrape the surface of their topics within a chapter, and I think they do what is within their power. But detail, depth and nuances are difficult to achieve in such a short space. Some do succeed, but most chapters should be considered an introduction to the specific topic rather than reflecting the essence of the topic.

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### Detail, depth and nuances are difficult to achieve in such a short space

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Second, the book is too myopic for my taste, and its scope rather narrow. All the authors live and work in the USA and, although their scope is often slightly broader than just North America, I do miss input from and systematic attention to other continents. Some authors do explicitly address developments outside the USA: Ken Doka in his very readable chapter on 'Historical and contemporary perspectives on dying,' for example, when he addresses the pioneering work of Dame Cicely Saunders and the groundbreaking work at St Christopher's Hospice in the

UK. And Paul Rosenblatt's chapter on culture and grief, which I mentioned before. There are more, such as Dennis Klass's chapter on spirituality and grief, but most authors confine themselves to the situation in the USA, often implicitly, and that disturbs me. Are childhood deaths indeed in general relatively rare, as Robin Paletti claims, or is that true for the USA, and not necessarily for other continents? Surely the Social Security Act of 1935 is a USA law, not a global phenomenon? Is the Oregon Death with Dignity Act the only law on euthanasia and assisted suicide in the world? Isn't, for instance, the Netherlands famous or notorious (depending on who you talk to) because of its law on euthanasia, and isn't that worth addressing? And when talking about culture, socialisation and end-of-life decision-making (Andrea Walker), I had expected attention to more than five major North American cultures.

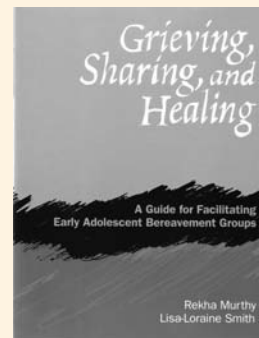
It does not take much to broaden one's perspective a little bit. Take Stephen Connor for instance, in his chapter on 'The family, larger systems and dying,' and James Werth and Christine Harte in their chapter on 'The history of end-of-life decision-making.' These authors focus on the USA too, but add an international element, and that makes it so much more attractive and relevant for non-Americans.

All in all, the book has a lot to offer, but to give it the subtitle 'The essential body of knowledge for the study of death, dying and bereavement' is rather an overstatement. In my view, a handbook of thanatology needs to take more account of the world beyond the shores of the USA. ■

### Henk Schut

Associate professor of clinical and health psychology, Utrecht University, The Netherlands

Walter T (2004). Plastination for display: a new way to dispose of the dead. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 10 603–627.



### Grieving, sharing and healing A guide for facilitating early adolescent bereavement groups

Rekha Murthy,  
Lisa-Lorraine Smith

Champaign, Ill, USA: Research Press, 2005  
228pp  
\$29.95 pb  
ISBN 978 0 87822 501 3

*Grieving, Sharing and Healing* is a useful handbook for anyone setting up a group for adolescents who have experienced bereavement. It goes through the process of planning and designing group sessions in great detail. For some, this level of detail will be reassuring and extremely helpful; for others, it may detract slightly from the excellent theoretical and conceptual information provided. But all should find the activities interesting and helpful.

As a 'how to' manual, it falls into the common trap of trying to cover too much. It seeks to combine essential information on running a generic group with the particular requirements of working with a specific age group that, in addition, has an identified focus. This leads to a certain amount of repetition and, while this is perfectly manageable, it is somewhat tedious. However, the reader can be selective, and the book's structure makes this easy.

The book compares well with other bereavement groupwork handbooks: for example, *Kid's Grief: A Handbook for Group Leaders* (McKissock, 2004), by the Australian Dianne McKissock, offers a similar but more rigid approach. Murthy and Smith stress that they do not intend to be prescriptive and that the book must be read with this in mind. Rather, this book

is a useful stimulus for thinking about, planning and then delivering a group programme. ■

### Kate Gardner

Senior practitioner, Winston's Wish, UK

McKissock D (2004). *Kid's grief: a handbook for group leaders*. Epping, NSW: National Centre for Childhood Grief.



### The Saying Goodbye Game

Weaverville, CA: Boulden Publishing

[www.bouldenpublishing.com/www.incentiveplus.co.uk](http://www.bouldenpublishing.com/www.incentiveplus.co.uk)

Board game

\$52.00/£47.50

*The Saying Goodbye Game* is a board game developed in the USA but distributed internationally to help children and young people explore their experiences of loss and bereavement. The game is aimed at children aged 6–14 years (in the UK; 4–12 in the USA). The game is designed to be facilitated by an adult, and there is an accompanying manual that explains the rationale and the playing rules. The adult need not be a bereavement or counselling professional, but the manual recommends that the adult should feel comfortable dealing with the emotions the games may provoke, whether in the children playing or in themselves.

The board game format is a fun and non-threatening way of encouraging children to talk about their thoughts and feelings. Playing in a

group allows them to hear from other young people who have been bereaved, which in turn may normalise their own thoughts and feelings.

In *The Saying Goodbye Game* children pick up cards that ask them to draw, sculpt or answer a question as they move their playing pieces along the board. The activities and questions relate to feelings, memories and thoughts about the death of someone important, as well as highlighting strengths, coping strategies and positives in the players' lives. I asked a team of practitioners experienced in working with bereaved children and two 14-year-old young people who have been bereaved to review the game. I also evaluated the game's clinical use by playing it in a therapeutic setting with groups of bereaved children aged from 6 to 11 years.

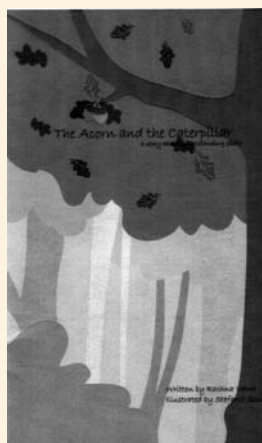
The young people felt that the game was well presented and interesting because of the different activities involved. They said it was easy to understand and play and they liked the option of having blank cards that you could fill out yourself. Some of the questions were felt to be quite difficult for younger children, and the young people questioned the value of including some non-bereavement focused activities (eg. make a sculpture of a hand). But overall they felt the game would be very helpful for young people who had been bereaved.

From a clinical perspective, the game could be a useful therapeutic tool, if a little repetitive and more suited for children at the lower end of its intended age range. It also takes quite long to play. However it looks appealing and is easy and straightforward to explain and play. The manual is clearly written. The option to talk, draw or sculpt enables children to express themselves in a variety of ways, which is particularly important for a game aimed at young children, whose main method of communicating is often play, rather than speech. The content of the cards may be helpful for facilitating communication about feelings and memories, and the cards also include items that foster self-esteem and resilience by

highlighting children's strengths and hopes. The inclusion of blank playing cards also allows flexibility to introduce topics that are of particular relevance to the children playing: eg. questions relating to death through suicide or murder. ■

### Catriona Reid

Chartered clinical psychologist/Senior practitioner,  
Winston's Wish, UK



### The acorn and the caterpillar A story about understanding death

Rachna Vohra

Montreal: Rachna Vohra,  
2006  
[www.rachnavohra.com](http://www.rachnavohra.com)  
21pp  
\$15.00  
ISBN 978 0 97373 541 3

This attractively produced and illustrated booklet is written in the form of a dialogue between a little acorn called Shalin, whose acorn friend Naren has recently fallen from the branch, and Father Oak, the tree on which they both grew. Through the dialogue Father Oak explains to Shalin the process of life and death as he sees it.

First, it has to be made clear that this is not a book for children: we are told explicitly that this is the first story in 'a spiritual series for adults.' Nevertheless, it is unclear to me who the readership of such a story would be.

Unlike, for example, *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* (Carle, 2002) – a fully-realised children's story, the simplicity and directness of which can be appreciated on many levels – this is neither a children's story nor a cogent exposition of a particular understanding of death. It is didactic in tone and paternalistic in its approach, given that Shalin is instructed by Father

Oak. It propounds a particular philosophical understanding of death and uses language that may or may not be acceptable or meaningful to the reader and which, at times, I felt was inappropriate. For example, Father Oak says of Naren: 'His form on earth was simply a mass of energy and a collection of atoms, congregated in a certain way.' This to me devalues the unique embodied and beloved identity of the person who has died.

Ultimately, this book falls between two stools, being neither a fully-realised story nor a coherent explanation for adults of one philosophy of death and dying. ■

### Victoria Slater

Hospice chaplain

Carle E (2002). *The very hungry caterpillar* (2nd ed).  
London: Puffin.

### Healing activities for children in grief

Activities suitable for support groups with grieving children, preteens and teens



Gay McWhorter

Texas, USA: Gay McWhorter,  
2003

Available in the UK from  
[www.incentiveplus.co.uk](http://www.incentiveplus.co.uk)  
72pp  
\$24.95/£19.95 pb  
ISBN 978 0 97630 350 3

This book offers a 'menu' of ideas for group interventions drawn from the author's personal experience as a grief counsellor working at the WARM Place, a group support centre for grieving children in Fort Worth, Texas. The book mirrors their group programme, with sections for children of 5–8 years, 9–12 years and teenagers.

The author and her colleagues have been very creative in coming up with activities – possibly out of necessity: participation at the WARM Place is open-ended. Altogether there must be more than 250 activities listed in the book. The ‘menu’ is categorised by age group, and by introductory and main activities. There is also a ‘combined’ category where particular combinations of activities are suggested to make up a group session.

There are a number of interesting ideas in this book, particularly for the older age groups. A Rock to Survive (we might say ‘stone’) encourages teenagers to use a permanent marker to write on a stone things that they think help people survive the death of someone close. The Jenga Game involves writing questions (listed at the back of the book) on half the bricks in a Jenga tower block. If the person removes a brick with a question on it, they answer it. Some activities are presented as homework tasks: for example, asking a child to find someone to tell them a story they did not know about the deceased person. Many of these activities could be used individually or with a family group.

There are a number of drawbacks to this book. In brief, it is very American, and some of its content will not be directly relevant (eg. the section on Thanksgiving) to other audiences. Likewise, reference is often made to books or other resources that are likely to be more relevant to an American audience and difficult to obtain elsewhere. There are also some activities that I personally would not feel comfortable using with children and young people.

I would also say that this is definitely not a stand-alone aid for someone starting up a group. There is no detailed guidance about providing group interventions and all the associated issues, such as membership, ground rules, facilitation skills, and balance of group sessions. However, overall it would be a useful addition to the library of someone working in this field – first, because it is likely to add to their range of

interventions, second because it may stimulate critical thought and debate about group programmes generally. ■

### Sacha Richardson

Counsellor and director of therapeutic services, The Laura Centre, Leicester, UK



### Life without Mum

DVD (20 mins)  
Cheltenham: Winston's Wish, 2007  
Available free from Winston's Wish  
Tel 01242 515 157  
[info@winstonswish.org.uk](mailto:info@winstonswish.org.uk)

This is a short film about 12-year-old Hattie, whose mother died approximately five years previously. It was made as part of a Channel 5 television series called *A Different Life*, and originally broadcast in November 2006.

This is clearly Hattie's very personal story. It explores some common themes – increased responsibility, continuing loss, changing relationships and heightened fears for her father. It includes some of Hattie's Winston's Wish camp experience, which may help to convey the message that children are not alone in loss and can do something positive about their feelings. The footage of the candle-lighting ceremony shows that remembering is important and can be moving and powerful.

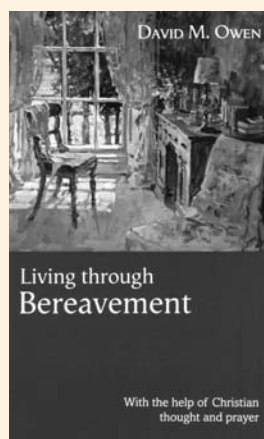
The film's main limitation is that it is one particular story about one child's loss of her mother, who died some time ago. Some children may not identify with Hattie; others may feel her story and experiences are irrelevant to a more recent loss. Some of the filming, especially in the home, also feels quite staged. However, our



experience at The Laura Centre with children in groups is that they are very accepting of individual differences, and the common experience of loss brings them together. If the film were shown in an environment that encouraged children to explore and compare its content with their own experience, it could be a valuable resource. ■

### Sacha Richardson

Counsellor and director of therapeutic services, The Laura Centre, Leicester, UK



### Living through bereavement With the help of Christian thought and prayer

David M Owen

London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2008  
140pp  
£9.99 pb  
ISBN 978 0 28105 934 8

David Owen writes from the perspective of his own personal bereavement and many years as a Christian minister, hospital chaplain and religious broadcaster, as well as author and teacher. The 14 chapters of his book each contain an introduction to a different aspect of bereavement, followed by a wide diversity of quotations from inspirational writers, including Leslie Weatherhead, CS Lewis, Joyce Grenfell and Kahlil Gibran. This selection provides a useful resource for personal reading or meditation, together with a selection of prayers for personal use.

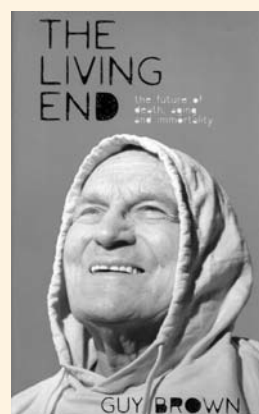
The opening chapters discuss the nature of death, the idea of 'soul,' and the fears and anxieties that may accompany the thought of one's mortality, with reference to ideas from the Bible and from contemporary Christian writers. Later in the first section the author deals with

topics such as untimely death, suicide and deaths that result from disasters or war. The second section discusses the nature of grief, belief in an afterlife and personal survival after death. The extent of his training or understanding of the literature on death and bereavement is not clear, but Owen quotes from Colin Murray Parkes and the wide range of sources on which he draws would certainly be of support to bereaved people.

Whatever a person's faith commitment, *Living through Bereavement* contains extracts that would be most helpful for anyone confronted by death. I would recommend it not only to those who are bereaved but also to anyone in a supportive capacity, such as a care worker, bereavement support worker or counsellor, or religious minister concerned with pastoral care of the bereaved and the responsibility for the conduct of funeral services. ■

### Peter Hammersley

Honorary lecturer, Department of Theology and Religion, University of Birmingham



### The living end The future of death, aging and immortality

Guy Brown

London: Macmillan, 2007  
278pp  
£16.99 (hb)  
ISBN 978 0 23051 757 8

Bereaved people often talk at length about the death, and the time that led up to it, but the professional listener often knows little about the physical decline, decay and treatment that underlie these stories. Guy Brown, a research scientist at the University of Cambridge, has done

us a considerable service. He uses cell biology, demography, gerontology, sociology, and our literary heritage to paint a disturbing picture of how we die today.

Few of us die suddenly of the big heart attack; more likely now is the slow advance of heart disease that impairs other organs, whose failure may be the final precipitator of death. This is the recent historical trend of all major killers – from quick death to lingering multiple organ failure. Life expectancy is increasing, but the number of years of prior poor health are increasing even more – especially for women and (which Brown omits to mention) low-income groups. Cancer apart, the family often have little sense that the person is actually dying, so may make inappropriate life choices. The bereaved's own emotional, physical and financial resources may well be depleted by the time death arrives.

Alternatively, the death may allow the bereaved a new lease of life.

Brown's reading of a wide range of research challenges the individualistic, atomised notion of self that pervades western culture, including much bereavement theory and practice. He sees the self as less like an atom, more like a wave – fluid, changeable, shared with others (something both Buddhists and Africans may easily understand). The dying of this wave can be a years-long process, starting long before the heart stops, and continuing long after. The implications for bereavement and bereavement care have yet to be explored. ■

**Tony Walter**

Director of studies, MSc Death & Society, University of Bath

Did you know that Cruse Bereavement Care has a bookstore specialising in publications about death, grief and bereavement?

We have a collection of books, many by leading authors  
for grieving people  
for bereaved adults  
for bereaved children and young people  
for trainers and for training  
for professionals

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Email direct to [shop@cruse.org.uk](mailto:shop@cruse.org.uk)