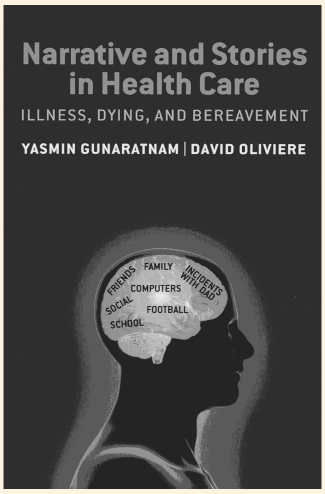
Book Reviews



Narrative and stories in health care

Illness, dying and bereavement

Yasmin Gunaratnam,
David Oliviere (eds)

Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2009
246pp
£29.95 (pb)
ISBN 978 0 19954 669 5

This scholarly, well organised, multi-disciplinary collection engages with the role and implications of narrative methods in mediating experiences of those facing and working with death and loss. It uses practical examples to demonstrate that attending to people's stories enables those providing care to respond to the complexities, diversities and idiosyncrasies of human experience. Indeed, as Frank underlines in chapter 10, such attention to the individual story is an act of care in itself. In this, the book pays tribute to Dame Cicely Saunders' vision of patient stories as key to enhancing patient care, with renewed resonance for the current emphasis on personalised care through user involvement and empowerment.

Narrative approaches in qualitative research are comprehensively covered in the literature (see, for example, Josselyn and Lieblich, 1995). The use of narrative and story in the experience of health and illness is similarly well represented, most notably through the work of Kleinman (1988) and Frank (1997). This book, with its focus on end-of-life issues, is a welcome contribution in an arena in which existing literature on narrative methods is fragmented.

The 14 chapters are organised into three inter-related sections covering 'Concepts and approaches', 'Services and care' and 'Working with patients and carers'. This ensures a thorough and comprehensive discussion of the use of stories as both research and practice tools that can inform each other.

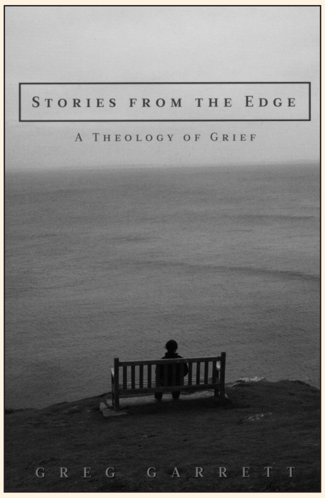
International contributors from across the social, human and medical sciences critically reflect on their experience, highlighting both potentials and limitations of narrative-based evidence, its role in developing service provision and clinical practice, and, most important, its capacity to empower patients and carers alike. With most contributors writing from the health and palliative care sector, Walter's chapter on Mediator Deathwork is an important reminder of the importance of the narrative work of pathologists, coroners, clergy and funeral celebrants in the care of bereaved people. ■

Christine Valentine

Josselson R, Lieblich A (eds) (1995). *Interpreting experience: the narrative study of lives* (vol 3). London: Sage.

Frank AW (1997). *The wounded storyteller: body, illness and ethics*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Kleinman A (1988). *The illness narratives*. New York: Basic Books.



Stories from the edge

A theology of grief

Greg Garrett

Louiseville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008
129pp
£9.99
ISBN 978 0 66423 204 7

Greg Garrett is a Professor of English at Baylor University (US), writer-in-residence at the Episcopal Theological Seminary of the Southwest, and a lay preacher in the Episcopal Church. This book arises from his personal experiences as a chaplain-intern at a regional trauma centre, to which he was assigned as part of his theology studies. The experiences and case material he shares, together with his theological and pastoral reflections, give the text a refreshing authenticity and honesty.

The central theme of the book is how we reconcile Christian beliefs in a just, merciful and omnipotent God with the fact of suffering and pain. To discuss these difficult issues, Garrett explores the way in which we use story to make sense of our life, especially when we experience suffering, loss and grief.

DOI: 10.1080/02682621.2010.484938

Chapter headings draw on first-person quotes to powerfully illustrate their themes: 'Why God, why?' (stories of God); 'I don't deserve this' (stories of grief and the modern American myth); 'I love the Psalms' (stories of grief from the Hebrew bible) and 'Jesus will come on time' (stories of grief from the Christian Testament).

In this there are echoes of Tony Walter's narrative approach to the grief process (1996). Garrett emphasises the importance of awareness and understanding of the stories in which we find ourselves playing a part. The second chapter addresses the American cultural narrative – one in which success, healing and emancipation dominate, leading inevitably to the association of suffering with failure. Garrett argues that belief in God is coupled with an over-riding faith in the ability of science and modern medicine to 'fix' anything. This 'medical narrative' cannot embrace the idea that wholeness might be achieved through illness, or that there might not always be a 'happy ending'.

Garrett wrestles with the 'problem of suffering' and draws on numerous case examples of people – young and old – who came into the trauma centre. These accounts felt raw and real and awoke memories of many such encounters in my own working life as a health care chaplain. The author also reveals his own earlier battles with depressive illness and how this, to some extent, enabled him to empathise with others who were struggling to make sense of what was happening to them or their family member.

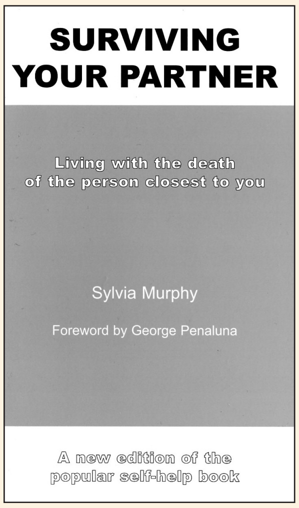
Garrett looks to some of the key theological writers, the biblical psalms and the New Testament for possible answers to these real life situations. He recognises that what people want is an interventionist God who will solve the problems and take away the pain. However this, he points out, would render us little more than hapless chess pieces on a board whose boundaries we cannot see. He believes that God is not so dispassionate and invites the reader to work alongside Him through the process of grief and suffering.

This book will be of interest to anyone concerned with Christian belief and experiences of suffering and grief. However, apart from a reference to CS Lewis's *A Grief Observed* (1961), there is no acknowledgment or use of the very considerable literature relating to trauma and grief, which would have enhanced its content. It is also, perhaps, surprising that the content does not reflect a more multi-disciplinary approach to the important issues the author seeks to address, especially given the focus of Clinical Pastoral Education in the US. ■

Peter Speck
Honorary senior lecturer (palliative care)
King's College, London

Lewis CS (1961). *A grief observed.* New York: Bantam Books.

Walter T (1996). A new model of grief: bereavement and biography. *Mortality* 1(1) 7–25.



SURVIVING YOUR PARTNER
Living with the death of the person closest to you
Sylvia Murphy
Foreword by George Penaluna
A new edition of the popular self-help book

Surviving your partner (2nd ed)

Sylvia Murphy

Exmouth, UK: SA Greenland, 2005
128pp
£5.99
ISBN 978 095505 120 7

What is a self-help book? On Amazon, the sole reviewer (a medical practitioner) of Worden's *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy* (1991) cautions that it 'is not a self-help manual'. Sylvia Murphy's book *is* styled a self-help book. Joan Didion, in *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2006), declared 'how-to' practical and inspirational guides 'useless', and turned instead to the 'professional literature'.

In my view, any book that helps a person understand the predicament in which bereavement and grief place him or her is a self-help book. Indeed, in that context, Worden's book has been invaluable to me. This variety of needs is doubtless understood by anyone seriously engaged in bereavement counselling.

The main focus of Murphy's revised edition is on the practicalities of life after loss of a partner. Chapter headings include 'Becoming a Single Parent', 'Living Alone', 'Suffering Sexual Loss' and 'Forming New Relationships'. The book is perhaps at its best when dealing with financial matters: particularly valuable is the advice on benefits, practical budgeting and financial questions in relation to 'Making a New Commitment'. However, having stated that 'most of the rows that married couples have are about money' (co-habiting couples too, one silently adds), Murphy does not explore at all, let alone with rigour, possible answers to her own pertinent questions.

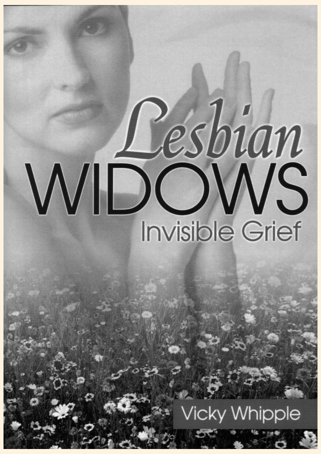
On emotional issues, Murphy can sound patronising at times – for instance, when opining that 'children and friends will tell you that you are making a fool of yourself' if you go 'mooning about' with a potential partner. Will they? Or might they? And if they do, might they not, in some circumstances, be the truest guides?

It is to her credit that Murphy dares venture into such difficult territory; it is a pity that she only skims the surface. ■

Ray Snape

Didion J (2006). *The year of magical thinking*. London: Harper Perennial.

Worden JW (1991). *Grief counseling and grief therapy* (2nd ed). New York: Springer.



Lesbian widows

Invisible grief

Vicky Whipple

Binghampton, NY: Harrington Park
Press, 2006
216pp
£9.99
ISBN 978 1 56023 331 2

Vicky Whipple's tender, moving account of lesbian bereavement is a long overdue contribution both to the bereavement care field and to knowledge and understanding about lesbian lives. As she learns from her interviews with the women who contributed their experiences, there is no written material on this subject and many of them would have found this book helpful and supportive.

The vital points she draws out are the potentially damaging and debilitating effects of homophobia and heterosexism on the grieving process, the importance of community support, and the usefulness – but lack of – group support for grieving lesbians. For those who encountered prejudice and lack of support from lesbian, gay, bi-sexual and transgender (LGBT) communities, the effect on mental health could be severe.

She interviews a wide range of bereaved women. Some had been in long-term relationships, some short; some had lost their partners suddenly, some from terminal illness. First person accounts are reported throughout, and may have benefited from a little more analysis, but make very compelling reading.

One of the key problems all the women faced was the lack of legal recognition of their relationship and how that was dealt with by the deceased's 'real' family. In the UK recent changes to the law and the introduction of civil partnership will make a huge difference. Whipple's research is all in the US where, depending on which state you live in, the situation may be getting considerably worse.

I do have some gripes. All the participants reportedly had the most wonderful relationships – a surely unrealistic picture that means the book does not deal with the sad truth that difficult relationships can be much harder to grieve. There was a frustrating lack of analysis of the findings. Also the quotes from the author's own journals and the intimate details about her interviewees felt superfluous.

Nevertheless, I would highly recommend this book to anyone who works with the bereaved. You may not have met any bereaved lesbians yet, but you need the insights this book offers for when you do. ■

Helen Jones
Mindout, Brighton

Death of a parent

Transition to a new adult identity

Debra Umberson

Cambridge: Cambridge University
Press, 2003
249pp
£27.00 (pb)
ISBN 978 0 52181 338 9

This book addresses the problematic issues associated with the common phenomena of post-bereavement guilt and self-blame among adults following the death of a parent. The author draws on national US quantitative data, personal qualitative research and in-depth individual interviews to present findings and conclusions that are sometimes rather vague and perhaps not as groundbreaking as promised on the cover.

Debra Umberson holds the position of professor and chair of sociology at the University of Texas. She has published several articles on family relationships and health, and this book was supported by the US National Institute on Aging. However, I have long learned to be cautious of testimonials and biographical data, and prefer to assess the merits of a book on its written style and readability, the plausibility of its content, the reliability of its data, and its appropriateness within the field.

The content comprises personal reflective accounts of emotions, cognitions and behaviours drawn from the interview data to illustrate and give insights into the many different responses of individuals to the death of a parent. These anecdotal passages are the meat of this book, and would be helpful for others also grieving the loss of a father or mother.

However the links between the author's own qualitative data and those drawn from the large-scale quantitative national survey are somewhat tenuous.

The academic affiliation of the author and the resources acknowledged at the start of the book indicate a leaning towards a sociological approach. The mere 11 pages accorded to psychological references bear this out. I suspect this text might be less relevant to those working in the fields of therapy and psychological support.

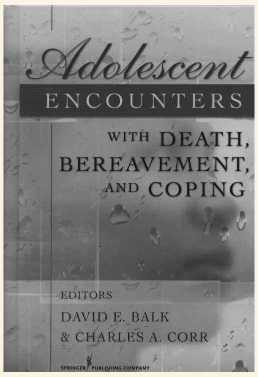
A major flaw is the lack of acknowledgement of previous research and complete absence of references from the body of the text. Instead, references are listed by chapter at the end of the book. I find this a much less accessible format than citing them in the text and at the end of chapters.

In summary, the book contains many reassuring snippets of advice for 'adult orphans', and the reflections of the interview participants will surely be of interest to others in similar circumstances, allowing them to compare and normalise their own responses. However, there are several other, much more accessible books on the market that also meet this need. I personally favour the excellently written, sensitive and inspirational explorations of adult grief in Alexander Levy's *The Orphaned Adult* and Virginia Ironside's *You'll Get Over It*. ■

Trish Staples

Cruse bereavement supporter and trainer

Ironside V (1997). *You'll get over it.* London: Penguin.
Levy A (2000). *The orphaned adult.* New York: Perseus Books.



Adolescent encounters with death, bereavement and coping

David E Balk, Charles A Corr (eds)

New York: Springer, 2009
390pp
$65.00 (hb)
ISBN 978 082611073 2

This is Balk and Corr's second edited publication that focuses on adolescence as a phase with distinctive qualities where death and bereavement present particular challenges that are worthy of special consideration. The editors have brought together 31 academic and practice-based authors drawn from a wide range of disciplines in the US, UK and Australia to create a volume of 20 chapters arranged around four themes, although these are not mutually exclusive. 'Background' provides the developmental, cultural, and methodological context; 'Death' discusses the primary causes of death among adolescents and adolescents' ways of coping; 'Bereavement' focuses on different loss relationships and traumatic death, and 'Interventions' deals with educational and therapeutic interventions for adolescents, as well as for caregivers suffering from burnout or compassion fatigue.

Some of the chapters may feel familiar to those who have read Balk and Corr's first publication. However there are some outstanding new contributions, both within the chapters and also in the particular topics that are addressed. They include Jane Ribbens McCarthy on meaning making, Julie Stokes and colleagues on parental death, and Carla Sofka's excellent exploration and discussion of 'thanotechnology'– bereaved adolescents' use of online bereavement communities such as personal memorial sites and shrines, online guest books, message boards, chatrooms and blogs.

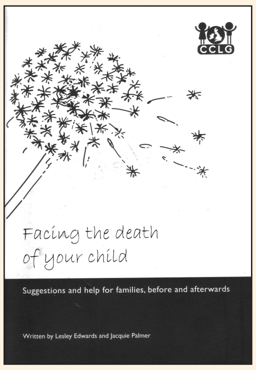
However, I do have a number of reservations. First, this is predominantly a US text. Given the different cultural and policy contexts, this can make the relevance of some chapters questionable for a European audience. The US dominance is also manifested in the psychological/medical tone in many accounts and the language of 'disorder' (for example, 'alcohol use disorder'; 'oppositional-deficient disorder'). With a few notable exceptions, culture is treated as an 'add-on'. Second, I was surprised to see no reference to the work of Louise Rowling who, with John Holland, has made such an important contribution to our understanding of grief in schools. While the role of school is noted in Heather Servaty-Seib's chapter on the death of a friend during adolescence, the absence of a chapter that discusses school as a dominant institution in the life of adolescents is a significant omission.

Finally, I wonder about the role of the editors. Here it is simply to collate and introduce each section and let each chapter speak for itself. More – and more critical – editorial commentary could have valuably drawn more attention to the connections across chapters (for example, between Aids [chapter 6] and community trauma [chapter 14]). More importantly, it could also have drawn attention to some differences between chapters in their understandings of particular theories.

For practitioners as well as academics, a more discursive, analytic and critical editorial presence would have increased our understanding not only of the content but also of the relationship and contingency of the information being presented. ■

Liz Rolls

Senior research associate, Lancaster University



Facing the death of your child

Lesley Edwards, Jacquie Palmer

London: Children's Cancer and Leukaemia Group, 2007
61pp
Free at www.cclg.org.uk/families/
ISBN 978 0 94901 557 1

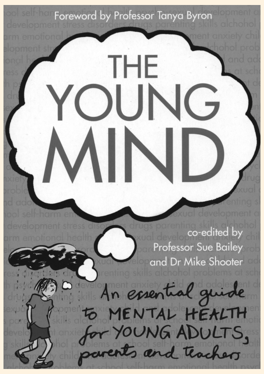
This is a really helpful booklet offering practical and sensitive information to parents about how to deal with the approaching death of a child. The authors, a clinical psychologist and a bereaved parent, tackle all the issues clearly and simply. There are sections on preparing the sick child and any other children for the death, the last few days of the child's life, the funeral, grief, and how others can help.

I was particularly pleased to see a section on 'Two to three years on and the future,' which acknowledges the fact that, to quote the authors, 'the death of a child remains with you forever'.

Each of the sections is broken down into sub-headings that are often in question-and-answer form, such as 'What happens immediately after the death?' and 'How long will we grieve?'. This makes the booklet easy to navigate and to absorb.

Only the first section is directed at parents of a dying child. All the other sections would be of use to all parents who have experienced the sudden death of a child, and I would recommend it to any bereaved parent, and to professionals and volunteers who are supporting parents and families where a child is dying or has died. ■

Frances Krauss
Candle project leader, St Christopher's Hospice, London



The young mind

Sue Bailey, Mike Shooter (eds)

London: Bantam Press, 2009
388pp
£14.99
ISBN 978 0 59306 138 1

This is an excellent book to which a number of eminent professionals have contributed. It is extremely readable and makes mental health issues in children and young people comprehensible to parents, teachers and young adults alike.

Bereavement is covered in chapter 13, 'Dealing with Loss'. This chapter explains loss not only caused by bereavement but also arising from divorce and separation of parents, and from chronic illness.

Bereavement and the issues that might arise as a result of this are dealt with thoroughly and sensitively. The opening case vignette of a 15-year-old girl whose mother dies after a period of illness portrays some of these issues very well. The vignette serves to highlight the loss that not only occurs after the death of a parent but also when a parent has a long-term, disabling illness and cannot parent the child or manage ordinary activities of daily life.

The important fact that loss may be expressed in anger and resentment as well as through tears and sadness is discussed and put in context. In this first chapter there is also a succinct outline of the stages of grief at different developmental stages, which provides a useful frame of reference for what constitutes 'normal' grief reaction at different ages. Signs of deviation from the normal grief reaction are also briefly mentioned, as are possible explanations for this.

This book will appeal to a wide readership. The chapter on dealing with loss will be of particular benefit to those who have contact with young people who have experienced bereavement. ■

Dola Okusi
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