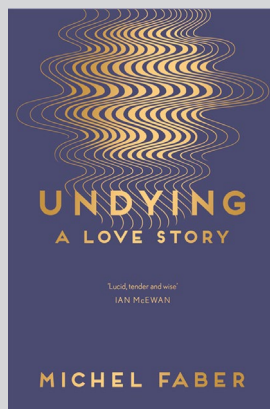


# Book Reviews



## Undying: A love story

Michel Faber

Edinburgh: Canongate

2016

144pp

£12.99

ISBN: 978 1 78211 854

Michel Faber is the author of several novels, notably *The crimson petal and the white* (2002). He does not perceive himself as a poet, but in the last days of his wife's life he started writing poetry, and after her death he wrote more as he tried to make sense of his grief and distress. The first part of this book is a collection he wrote mainly after she died, about post diagnosis and leading up to her death. The second part is about the experience of everyday living taking on new significances in the light of her death. Sometimes it is hard-hitting about body functions like diarrhoea and tumours, with which some people may feel uncomfortable, but it is a raw, honest sharing of grief, anger and frustration, with a sense of containment. The reader is not left holding the author's misery but sharing in his personal journey. Sometimes the poems are very light humoured and sometimes, obviously, refer to something very personally disturbing. *Nipples* describes the tumours that appear on his wife's body, that even now I find disquieting, but at the same time I understand the need to reframe each experience so that it is manageable for him.

Three poems stand out for me. These are: 'Remission', where luncheon choices are made to complement and boost the deficiencies in the body's levels. 'You choose the crispy fish because your lymphocytes are 1.6'; 'Account holder', with the frustrations of Faber trying to change the names on accounts after death; and 'Tamarind', with the clearing of cupboards and a final use of a jar of tamarind bought with promise and intention that did not come to fruition. He gives voice to the numerous small incidents in the life of the bereaved, which can be overlooked by the mainstream, but without overwhelming the reader. It offers the bereaved an opportunity to recognise their own life experience and know that they are not alone in their frustrations and

bewilderment about how the minutiae of life become great challenges.

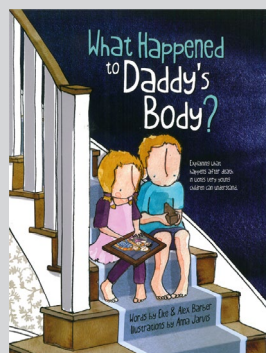
It is a useful companion to *Things to say to a deadman: poems at the end of a marriage and after* (2011) by Jane Yolen which I have previously reviewed. Each author has produced a collection of poems addressed to their loved one – husband and wife. Some of the poems in each are gender and role specific, and some are more general. This allows a bereavement counsellor to move between the two books to offer poems to clients which may reflect on their personal relationship, or more general issues. I rarely loan a whole book to a client but share copies of poems that I feel may be relevant. I then leave it to the client as to whether they wish to acquire the book and explore further. This one will be well used. ■

## Janet Dowling

Cruse Bereavement Care Volunteer

Faber M (2002). *The crimson petal and the white*. Edinburgh: Canongate.

Yolen J (2011). *Things to say to a deadman*. Duluth, Minnesota: Holy Cow!



## What happened to Daddy's body?: explaining what happens after death in words very young children can understand

Elke and Alex Barber

London and Philadelphia: Jessica

Kingsley

2016

40pp

£10.99

ISBN: 978 1 78592 107 0

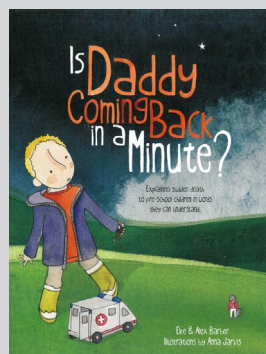
This book, first published in 2014, comes from the same authors as the earlier *'Is Daddy Coming back in a Minute?'* and will both look and feel familiar to readers of the earlier book.

The protagonist, Alex, is now four years old and has some more questions about what has happened to his Daddy's body. This takes the reader straight into a scenario that is very typical with small, bereaved children, the need to both answer again and amplify earlier questions, and to use straightforward language. Alex wonders what happened to Daddy's arms and legs if his body was in the coffin - a logical question for a four year old. His Mum explains what the 'wooden box' is called and pre-empted the explanation of a cremation by reminding Alex that a dead body cannot feel, move or breathe. This is important information for a child whose ability to understand what happens after death is still limited. The word 'burned' is not avoided and nor are 'ashes'. The explanation of a burial and what happens to the body afterwards is similarly sensitive yet direct and honest. It reminds us that often the difficulties with such explanations lie with the adults rather than the children and there is no need to be squeamish. Alex thinks it is 'really cool' that a dead body is reabsorbed back into the earth. When the time comes to spread the ashes, his mother explains carefully what they are doing and how this does not mean their Daddy will be forgotten. Keeping some of the ashes for the children in a bottle allows them to feel a real connection with their Dad.

This is such a good book for so many reasons. Whilst there are several books which help explain death, there are very few which deal so comprehensively with the fine detail of what needs to be told to children. The use of clear, respectful, honest and age-appropriate language is modelled by Alex's Mum, as is the way she shows her feelings. The oscillations of grief when Alex has his birthday party, the sharing and showing sadness together as a family, and the importance of maintaining a 'continuing bond' with Dad are all found in the research on childhood bereavement. The book ends with the same message as the previous one: *'It's okay to be sad but it's okay to be happy too.'* Anyone who works with small children or who knows a small bereaved child should read this. ■

### Judy Debenham

Candle Child Bereavement Service, St. Christopher's Hospice



### Is Daddy coming back in a minute?: explaining (sudden) death in words very young children can understand

Elke and Alex Barber

London and Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley  
2016  
40pp  
£10.99  
ISBN: 978 1 78592 106 3

This book is written for very young children (3+) and uses the real story of 3 year old Alex whose Daddy dies from a heart attack while he and Alex are having a 'boys' weekend' away together. It would be perfect to read aloud with a small child. The book was nominated for the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals' Kate Greenaway Medal in 2014 and this is the third edition.

It is a lovely book - from the 'pin up notes' from the writers and funders at the beginning, in which they remember people who have died in their families, to the 'update' notes and photos of Alex with his Dad at the end. It reminds us that death is not just a story in a book but happens to 'real' people too.

The language used is the language of small children and the font, with its use of upper case, 'handwritten' style and different sizes, is very natural and easy to read. The illustrations by Anna Jarvis are clear, with the kind of detail that small children love to spot. I wish the illustrations of the people reflected a greater ethnic diversity; the fact they are presumably true to life need not have precluded that in my opinion.

The special bond between Alex and his Dad is evoked at the start and the story unfolds in the chronological way that is often part of the recounting of a death. En route, Alex's questions and worries are addressed.

These are very typical of a small child. There is the frequent need for: further clarification, 'But where is he?'; indignation, 'But I don't want Daddy to be a star!'; the need for clear explanations of a heart attack and why his body could not be fixed; reassurance that there was nothing Alex could have done to change the outcome; who would look after him if his Mum could not; and how sadness resurfaces at birthdays and special times. The inevitability of death for everyone is not avoided but is given with lots of reassurance. I was glad that the 'd' word was mentioned and the funeral was also covered (although the words 'funeral' and 'coffin' are not mentioned which I think is a slight