

Book Reviews



Grief is the thing with feathers

Max Porter

London: Faber & Faber

2016

128pp

£5.59

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This is an extraordinary short book that is part diary, part poetry, part fantasy. It explores the lows and highs of grief, relationships and depression. It takes the point of view of the bereaved father, his two sons, and the Crow Trickster (the metaphor for managing grief) that comes to stay with them after the death of their wife and mother. The father is a Ted Hughes scholar, and the *Life and Songs of the Crow* is one of Hughes' major works, but it is not essential to know this to appreciate the novel. Hughes explored the relationship between God and 'his' Trickster companion Crow, as an exploration of Christianity and Humanism. Porter develops this to use the Crow's Trickster role as a non-secular container and challenger of grief. God does not appear here, but Trickster balances both acceptance of grief and a refusal to accept hopelessness.

At one point the Dad says 'I missed her so much that I wanted to build a hundred-foot memorial to her with my bare hands The whole city is missing her.' The crow responds 'Eugh ... you sound like a fridge magnet' thus pricking the illusion of the pedestal that many place their lost ones on. When the Dad has a tentative sexual encounter, he is aware that he is using the 'sofa that my wife bought, drinking from glasses my wife was given, beneath the painting my wife painted, in the flat where my wife died.' His dilemmas about the experience are swiftly countered by 'Crow on the sofa impersonating me pumping and groaning.'

Crow remains with the family as they struggle to make sense of their world, reflecting on their achievements and losses. While the loss of their wife and mother remains, their grief and their memories become less painful and finally Crow can leave them. In a dialogue between man and bird, bird says 'You'll remember with some of my earlier work with you, that what appeared to be primal

corvid vulgarly was in fact a highly articulated care programme, designed to respond to the nuances of your recovery.' The man responds 'I would be done grieving?' and bird answers 'No, not at all. You were done being hopeless. Grieving is something you're still doing, and something you don't need a crow for.' Crow Trickster teased out and challenged the sense of hopelessness from the healing power of grief. This is the key message that bereavement workers can take from this.

The writing can feel disjointed in parts, and lyrical in others, allowing the reader to fill in the gaps with their own responses, and works surprisingly well. As a bereavement counsellor I would offer passages of this to my clients and allow them to explore the novel in their own time. ■

Janet Dowling

Cruse Bereavement Care Volunteer



You just don't understand: supporting bereaved teenagers

Dr Helen Mackinnon

Sheerness, Kent: Portfolio Publishing
(endorsed by Winston's Wish)

2013

44pp

£6.95

978 0 9559 539

This booklet is an excellent resource for anyone who may come into contact with bereaved teenagers. Its approach is very down-to-earth so that it is not only easily accessible to adults, be they teachers, youth workers, carers, parents or other relatives, but also for bereaved teenagers themselves and their friends. The latter is an important consideration when, developmentally, teenagers are pulling away from family and adults, and peers become more influential.

The starting point of the booklet is an outline of what is typical teenage development, and also, specifically, what is typical teenage grief including consideration of the differences between the grief behaviours of boys and girls. Different types of deaths a teenager may experience are