

Book Reviews



Grief is the thing with feathers

Max Porter

London: Faber & Faber

2016

128pp

£5.59

ISBN: 978 0 571 327232

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

explored such as: after lengthy illness; unexpected death due to accident or illness, murder, manslaughter, suicide, and military, which may complicate grief processes.

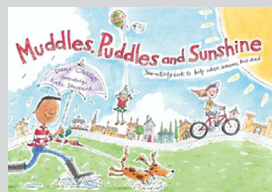
There is a 'framework,' on how to support grieving teenagers, which highlights the importance of adults not shying away from honest, open, and educative communication about grief and loss, and of goodbye rituals and the sharing and the keeping alive memories of the deceased. There are also suggestions about how physical activities, writing, music and art can help with difficult and confusing emotions in a non-threatening way. Three sub-sections are specifically for parents, schools, and teenagers themselves. The latter is through a comic-style approach which quotes teenagers wanting to share their experiences as to what they found helpful during their own grief process and how friends can help. This 5-page section can be downloaded for free from www.winstonswish.org.uk as a pdf file.

The generous peppering of direct quotations from teenagers and adults can be a relief in that it shows one is not alone and that others have similar thoughts and difficulties. The section on 'Talking with teenagers' not only illustrates empathic suggestions for responding to a young person's grief but also gives examples of insensitive responses as experienced by teenagers. There is also signposting under 'Important Issues' for when teenagers may need more specialist support.

At the back of the booklet there are not only useful reading recommendations for adults, but also fiction and non-fiction books specifically for teenagers. There's also an extensive list of organisations that can give information and support about bereavement across all ages and different types of death. ■

Nina Ruff

Volunteer with the charity Grief Encounter – Therapeutic Play Counsellor



Muddles, puddles and sunshine: your activity book to help when someone dies

Diana Crossley

Stroud, Glos: Hawthorne Press
2000
32pp
£10.95
ISBN: 978 1 903458 96 9

It is well known among child therapists that the natural language of young children is through doing and playing rather than the spoken word, particularly when they

have not cognitively developed the vocabulary to describe difficult emotional feelings. The death of a family member or someone close is a traumatic event for anyone, but for young children it can be immensely confusing. Young lives can be devastatingly turned upside down, with financial and environmental implications, particularly if a parent dies.

This book can be seen as a little ray of sunshine in a young child's shattered world. It is designed to be shared with an adult the child trusts. This does not have to be a parent or professional, but the book recommends, if possible, parental discussion at some point. At the back, there are suggested guidelines as to how to use this activity book with a bereaved child. Although aimed at primary school age children, it could be used with older children depending upon maturity.

The reasons I recommend this book are:

- Crossley's text is very engaging and easy to follow but this belies a seriousness behind the activities. It enables children to find meaning in their loss, get in touch with and express emotions, and facilitate continuing bonds with the deceased through various memory activities;
- The illustrations are delightfully engaging, full of colour and vitality, adopting a comic-book style. The characters Bee and Bear guide the child through various activities involving writing, drawing and making and, in doing so, sharing about their loss and ensuing worries;
- The strong emphasis is on children having fun while doing inexpensive activities. Crossley thoughtfully uses metaphorical activities as leverage to deeper processing. Some examples of this are making scary spiders, biscuit feeling faces, a feeling volcano, a friendship bracelet, a jar of memories, a salt dough bear, a first aid kit, a fantastic photo frame, planting seeds and ending with a memory box in which to also place this activity book.

The underlying message is that although the bereaved child will have difficult feelings, it is fine to have good times too.

Another activity book to help children with a family bereavement is the *Grief Encounter Workbook* (2014) (recommended ages 8-15 but not excluding older children) written by Shelley Gilbert MBE, founder of the charity, Grief Encounter, who was made an orphan by the time she was 9 years old. ■

Nina Ruff

Volunteer with the charity Grief Encounter – Therapeutic Play Counsellor

Gilbert S (2014). *Grief Encounter Workbook* (4th ed) London: Grief Encounter Publications.