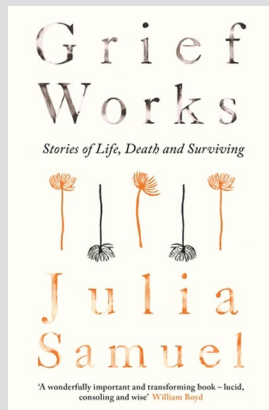


Book Reviews



Grief works: stories of life, death and surviving

Julia Samuel

London: Penguin Random House
2017
292pp
Hb £14.99
ISBN: 978 0 241 27074 5

This is an extraordinary book written by Julia Samuel, a Grief Psychotherapist with 25 years experience, who sometimes sees clients for several years until they resolve their grief. It is shared stories about her clients' journeys through their grief and her insightful reflections on what she has learned. The first section is 'when a partner dies' and moves on to explore the death of a parent, a sibling, a suicide, and a child. In a lively retelling of the stories she shares her analysis of each client's psychological state, as well as noticing the way she personally responds to the client. So when one client comes as an adult, mourning the death of his mother when he was only four, she notices that she herself is feeling motherly towards him and how this impacts on her relationship with him. It is useful to have these personal practice issues aired in the context of the client's material as it enables grief counsellors to become more aware of their own responses in practice, particularly if they are not aware of transference and counter transference.

Each section is concluded with a 'Reflections' in which Samuel draws together the key issues and learning points about people who have experienced that particular loss, and the overall implications for work with clients. This mixture of client story, therapist's personal response and the theoretical reflection makes for a sound basis for others working in the same field, and for those who want to understand more about the psychological and social components of how 'grief works'.

I was particularly struck by her saying 'Death ends a life, but it does not end a relationship and survivors often struggle to resolve what seems like an unresolvable contradiction'. The dilemma of trying to reframe a relationship after death can be an area of acute distress.

Samuel also addresses the needs of people who are facing their own death, an issue that many people find hard to work with. Disagreeing with the idea that patients should be made to face reality when they are in denial, instead she

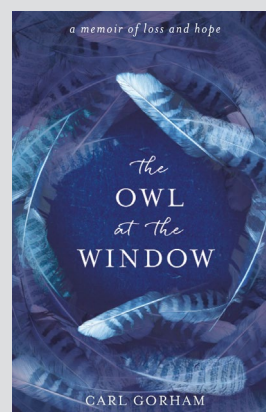
honours the client's way of expressing the delicate topic of their own death. Advocating the use of clients' own words rather than the therapist's, she suggests that, in order to cope with their own impending death, it is important to keep their own defence mechanisms in place. She encourages families to talk open and honestly and to make sure they don't have any regrets.

The final section of the book addresses what helps: the work we all need to do to help us grieve and survive successfully. Samuel introduces her model of the pillars of strength that support us and enable us to rebuild our lives. All of these need attention and time to develop, along with the other elements of society we can draw on - friends and family. Her guidance notes are drawn fully from her experience, fully referenced and relate back to the clients' stories that she has shared.

This is a remarkable book working on several levels, as educator and mentor to those supporting the bereaved, as well as offering a therapist's insight into the process of grieving that suits the client and those supporting them. It is a book that speaks of the humanity and diversity of grief and can be well recommended to both the bereaved and those supporting them. ■

Janet Dowling

Cruse Bereavement Care Volunteer



The Owl at the Window

Carl Gorham

London: Coronet
2017
260pp
£14.99 Paperback
ISBN: 978 1 473 64232 4

This is a memoir of loss and hope that is very different to previous memoirs I have read. Written by Carl Gorham, it tells the love story between himself and his wife, their journey through cancer, her ultimate death and the aftermath. But Carl is no ordinary writer; he has a string of credits for TV and radio comedy and

sit-coms. He treads the balance between comedy and tragedy with aplomb, where you find yourself both appalled at the insensitivity of others and venting outrageous laughter at moments of complete idiocy such as the conversation he has with a company who demand that they want to see a copy of his wife's death certificate, and complain because he has sent them only a copy of a copy of the original.

I was most struck by the way he *names* small incidents that helped them, for example, of the 'power of holding hands' as he and his wife have exhausted the words to console each other. 'We sit for hours at home just holding hands when inspiration has dried up, when quiet is preferable to anything else....It says so much'. It is this ability to name and reflect on these small things that gives added value to the narrative and the support it may offer to our clients who often struggle to put into words how they feel. For someone in the throes of their own bereavement it is the *naming* of these moments that makes a difference. Someone else experiences this. Someone else has noticed this. There is a shared witness to bereavement.

After the death of his wife he is aware of the people around him and their responses to him. This ranges from the man who cannot even voice his condolences but feels he must try, stammering and unable to complete his sentences, to the friends who also struggle when 'there are only so many original things you can say to a bereaved person, only so many ways that you can commiserate without drowning in a sea of clichés'. His friends move on, but he is stuck in this 'alien, weird parallel world, with its own rhythms and strange patterns. It moves slowly. It suffocates. It is relentless'.

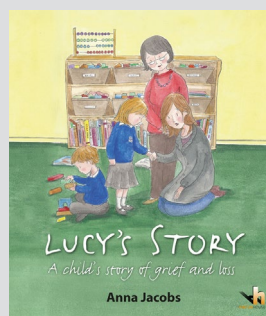
This is most powerfully demonstrated in the incident of the cardboard mummy. This part of his story has been circulating on Facebook for some months. His young daughter Romy was witness to the last hospital episodes, and was involved in the funeral process, even choosing the final clothes for her mother. Having spoken little of her loss, one day she asks that they make a cardboard mummy. Having been advised to 'keep talking, stay receptive' and 'to do everything they [children] ask in expressing their grief however weird or unexpected', despite his misgivings he goes along with it. As a private thing he is able to see how it benefits his daughter, but struggles when she wants cardboard mummy to be more public – going to the shops and displayed to her friends. As an adult he is embarrassed and fearful of other people's reactions and the judgements they make on him. But it's when she takes the cardboard mummy to school for 'show and tell' that he realises the value that it has for her, and how in her own way she has found the thing she needs to support her.

Finally, he describes how, after a year, he feels the need to find companionship. He explores the need to reach out to someone else and the fears that he is betraying his deceased wife. The dilemmas, fears, and hopes of the bereaved are

very well described and made accessible. I read this in an evening, sitting up to 2am to finish it. I don't do that very often. This is one memoir that I would recommend to my clients without hesitation. ■

Janet Dowling

Cruse Bereavement Care Volunteer



Lucy's story: a child's story of loss and grief

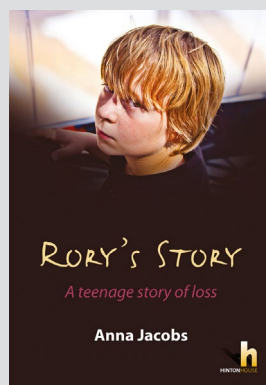
Rory's story: a teenage story of loss

Anna Jacobs

Buckingham: Hinton House
2014

Lucy's story 36pp and
ISBN: 978 1 906531607

Rory's story 51pp and
ISBN: 978 1 906531423
£12.95 Paperback



These two story books are written by Anna Jacobs who is a play therapist who works with bereaved children and teenagers. They are also linked to the workbooks *Supporting children through grief and loss: practical ideas and creative activities for schools and carers* and *Supporting teenagers through grief and loss: practical ideas and creative activities for schools and carers*¹ which were reviewed for *Bereavement Care's* Winter 2015 edition. Both story books have a similar format of story and questions that can be used as discussion points but these books approach them differently.

Lucy's story is targeted at primary school children and tells the story of Lucy whose father has died, and whose mother is struggling to cope. The school notices that there is a problem and encourages the mother to seek help. Along the way it shows good models of teachers' involvement, but also examples of how children can be confused by adults' explanations, for example, 'Mummy - where is heaven and when is Daddy coming back?' as well as young children trying to take on the role of carer to their parent. There

1 They were both published in 2015 by Hinton House in Buckingham and both are by Anna Jacobs.