



Grief in Picturebooks

An Evaluative Rubric

LISA VON DRASEK



From *Goodbye Mousie* by Robie H. Harris. Used with permission.

It's OK to cry when someone you like very much has died.

— Pat Brisson and Stéphane Jorisch,
I Remember Miss Perry

This is an examination of death and grief in ninety-two picturebooks for young children, pre-school/early elementary, considering the content with regards to child development producing a rubric for evaluation.

Every young child experiences loss. From the first time her mother leaves the room, a typically developing child has no framework to process what Piaget has labeled “object permanence.”¹ Mothers or fathers who have removed themselves physically from the sight of a baby have disappeared. Thus we witness the inconsolable sobbing child at daycare drop-off whose parent is “gone!”

As children develop cognitively, their concept of death evolves. The preschool child perceives death as temporary. They may ask when grandma will be visiting again even after being informed numerous times that she had died.²

Robert Delisle and Abigail McNamee examined a variety of developmental points of view for their article “Children’s

Perceptions of Death: A Look at the Appropriateness of Selected Picture Books.” They found a unity of theory in typically developing children, as reflected in figure 1.³

They observed that children ages zero to three had no comprehension of death. These children experienced grief for an inexpressible loss but could not articulate an understanding of the word dead and the implications of the experience of a person or pet dying. They reacted to the sorrow expressed by the adults around them but couldn’t name it.

At ages three and four, they may begin to understand that a death means a loss but have difficulty with the concept that death is permanent and an experience of every living thing. At age five, there is some comprehension of the facts of death. Grandpa is not going to be visiting anymore or Spot is not breathing or moving therefore is dead. There may be regression to the earlier stages of development, yet by age six, a child is developmentally capable of understanding what causes death—illness, accident, that death is irreversible, that body functions cease, and that death is unavoidable for all of life.⁴

Robie Harris, author of *Goodbye Mousie*, commented, “The experience of loss for young children is a continuous learning curve. This is a continuous issue from Pre-K drop-off to the

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TABLE 1 Age-typical Perceptions of Death

Age	Nagy (1948)	Anthony (1940, 1971)	Ilg and Ames (1955)	Koocher (1973)
3	Deny death as regular and final	Ignorant of meaning of word <i>dead</i> ; may be interested in word <i>dead</i> ; limited or erroneous concept of <i>dead</i>	Limited perception, little sorrow	Egocentric conceptualization; fantasy reasoning; magical thinking; symbolism closely ties to own experience
4	Death = departure or temporary change		Little sadness	
5	Death personified		Calmness evident; end for others, never for self; reversible; death = old age	
6	Death kept distant from	No evidence that children do not understand word <i>dead</i> ; preoccupied with death ritual; define <i>dead</i> by reference to humanity but include nonessential information	Becomes emotional	
7			Interest in details; seems morbid; suspects he/she will die	Specific, concrete conceptualization; specific means of inflicting death; specific weapons, poison, assaultive acts
8			Less morbid; less emotional	
9	Death for all is inevitable; a realistic view of death	Understand word <i>dead</i> and the event; define it by reference to biologic essentials	Faces death squarely; scientific	
10			Interested in death	Abstract, generalized conceptualization; death a natural phenomenon and a physical deterioration

Figure 1. Common elements of perception of grief.

moving on of a caregiver, the deployment of a parent, and to medical emergencies. In all of these instances young children are experiencing and adapting to loss.”⁵

Author/illustrator Todd Parr, whose plain spoken text and brightly colored stick-figure characters are embraced by teachers and their students, noted that he had been begged by parents and teachers for years to create a book for young children and their parents on death and grieving. He had worked for ten years on various iterations of *The Goodbye Book*.

It was only when he expanded his text so that the examples encompassed many forms of loss not just death that he felt he had completed the manuscript. In the process of revising the text and illustrations, he began to understand that children went through this grieving not only for death but in the absence of a loved one. As one example of this expanded notion of loss, Parr said that he hoped that children who had an incarcerated parent would find *The Goodbye Book* a comfort and a way to express their thoughts and feelings.⁶

Elementary-aged students begin to understand that death is irreversible, final, and inevitable and caused by factors they cannot control. It is at this time we are able to communicate the facts of death to them.⁷ It is essential that librarians and teachers impart accurate biological factual information when discussing death with elementary-aged children.

One main fact? Death cannot be undone. All life functions stop when a person dies. Death happens to every living thing, including people, animals, and plants. It is also important that the adults in children’s lives, whatever their religious or spiritual background, take care not to describe death as sleeping or use vague phrases such as “resting in peace” as children of this age are quite literal. Some may make a connection that sleeping equals death.⁸

Why Picturebooks?

We often are asked to recommend titles to help children cope with the big feelings surrounding life events like the first day at school, visiting the hospital, or dealing with traumatic events like death. Bibliotherapy, or the use of words and literature for therapeutic purposes, has been theorized and empirically suggested to aid in emotional expression, positive coping, meaning-making, and healing.⁹

Troy Pinkney-Ragsdale, director of Child Life Program at the Bank Street College of Education, trains teachers who work with children and their families. Child Life Specialists work in hospital or rehabilitation settings with residential children and their families.

Their work has demonstrated the value of

sharing picturebooks with children to help cope with the difficult concept of death and the associated feelings of grief.

Pinkney-Ragsdale emphasized, “Bibliotherapy is an engaging, nonthreatening, and accessible tool to support children and families experiencing loss and grief. The written word can be used by both professionals and families alike as a door into the child’s world.”¹⁰

Sharing picturebooks with grieving children provides an opportunity for positive coping, discovery of new information, and methods for making meaning from their experience.

Common topics that are found in picturebooks about death and grieving for children include death of a parent, grandparent, neighbor, or caregiver; death of a pet or animal; and/or death of a friend or sibling.

Methodology of Review

A search of Amazon.com in August 2015 using the keywords “death and dying” and “picturebook” brings up 277 titles. I examined ninety-two titles held by the Children’s Literature Research Collections of the University of Minnesota, Bank Street College of Education Library, University of Minnesota Libraries, St. Paul Public Library, and the Hennepin County Public Library. These titles were cross-referenced in WorldCat for frequency of holdings. There are four points to this literature review to ascertain the quality of the titles.

Literary Value

Content of picturebooks was evaluated using commonly held criteria of literary value as published by the Children’s Book Committee at Bank Street College of Education¹¹ and the

Grief in Picturebooks: An Evaluative Rubric Lisa Von Drasek, University of Minnesota Libraries, 2015

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I
1	Title	Literary value	Artistic Merit	Identification	Age relevant content	Memorialization	score	op	
2	Brisson, P., & Jorisch, S. (2006). <i>I Remember Miss Perry</i> . New York, NY: Dial Books for Young Readers.	5	5	5	5	5	25	op	
3	Brown, M., & Charlip, R. (1958). <i>The Dead Bird</i> . New York, NY: W.R. Scott.	5	5	5	5	5	25		
4	Burleigh, R., & Catalanotto, P. (2010). <i>Good-bye, Sheepie</i> . Tarrytown, NY: Marshall Cavendish Children.	5	5	5	5	5	25		
5	Burrowes, A. (2000). <i>Grandma's Purple Flowers</i> . New York, NY: Lee & Low Books.	5	5	5	5	5	25		
6	Carlstrom, N., & Schwartz, A. (1990). <i>Blow Me a Kiss, Miss Lilly</i> . New York, NY: Harper & Row.	5	5	5	5	5	25	op	
	Castellucci, C. & Denos, J. (2010). <i>Grandma's Gloves</i> . Somerville								

Figure 2. The author's rubric for evaluating books

American Library Association/Association for Library Service to Children's Newbery and Caldecott Award Criteria.¹²

My criteria for this rubric (figure 2) included literary quality and excellence of presentation as well as the potential emotional impact of the books on young readers. Other criteria include credibility of characterization and plot, authenticity of time and place, age suitability, positive treatment of ethnic and religious differences, and the absence of stereotypes. Nonfiction titles were further evaluated for accuracy and clarity.

In *Summer's End and Sad Goodbyes: Children's Picturebooks about Death and Dying*, Angela Wiseman's research supports the use of this format to support children's grief when someone dies. She asks that we examine the illustrations and text of picturebooks to evaluate if they satisfactorily express and convey the "aesthetic and emotional experience of loss."¹³

Given the considerations of the typically developing child, one must ask:

- Does the text present a coherent concept of grief and/or death?
- Is the content accurate and well organized?
- Are the characters well delineated? Is the setting accurate?
- Is the style of the text and art appropriate to the topic of death and/or grief?
- Does the story contribute to the child's intellectual, social, or emotional needs?

Artistic Merit

- Excellence of execution in the artistic technique employed.

- Excellence of pictorial interpretation of story, theme, or concept.
- Appropriateness of style of illustration to the story, theme, or concept.
- The delineation of plot, theme, characters, setting, mood, or information through the pictures.

I observed three additional evaluative points in examining the content for the purposes of selection of a picturebook on the theme of death and/or grief, beyond the literary, artistic, and child development considerations to meet the criteria for excellence:

1. The characters had to be identifiable to the child listener or reader. The characters needed to be authentic and real to early childhood or early elementary age group as evidenced by their words and actions.
2. The text provided language for the intended age group so they may use those words to express their own thoughts and feelings about death, loss, and/or grieving.
3. At some point in the text or pictures, there was a suggestion for commemoration or memorialization of the life that was being grieved.

Rating the Books

In examining the ninety-two picturebooks, I rated each attribute on a scale from one to five. If the illustrations were technically superior, superb in conveying the story, and contained the elements of excellence, the rating would be five. Points would be taken off for poor continuity, a dissonance between the art and the subject matter, and if the illustrations did not further the story or connect with a child reader. I have placed these on

a spreadsheet so that readers can compare to their own evaluations of the titles.

Exemplars

These five titles were stand-outs on the list, for meeting the standard of excellence in language and illustration. Their content is developmentally relevant to the intended audience.

Harris, Robie. H. *Goodbye Mousie*. Illus. by Jan Ormerod.

Simon & Schuster, 2001. 32p.

dePaola, Tomie. *Nana Upstairs and Nana Downstairs*. Illus. by the author. Putnam, 1998. 32p.

Napoli, Donna Jo. *Flamingo Dream*. Illus. by Cathie Felstead. Greenwillow, 2002. 32p.

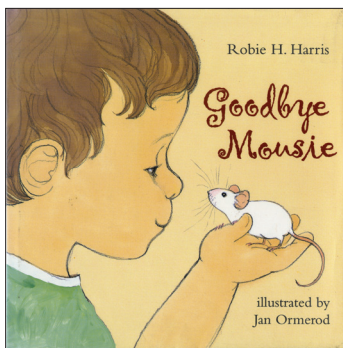
Woodson, Jacqueline. *Sweet, Sweet Memory*. Illus. by Floyd Cooper. Hyperion, 2001. 32p.

Durant, Alan. *Always and Forever*. Illus. by Debi Gliori. Harcourt, 2004. 32p.

They are all exemplars of the additional criteria for selection of a picturebook:

- Characters with whom the child could identify their own grieving experience.
- Text is in language that will facilitate readers' own communication or expression of thoughts and feelings.
- There is a modeling of memorialization.

Robie Harris, an award-winning children's picture-book and nonfiction author, uses her writing to answer big questions about human existence with stories that ring true and resonate with children. In *Goodbye Mousie*, a preschool child wakes one morning to discover that the family's pet mouse has died. The father states facts. The child narrates.



“Dead,” said Daddy, “is very different from sleeping. Dead is—,”

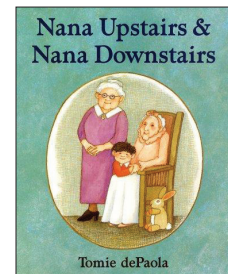
“—NOT alive!” I shouted. And I started to cry.¹⁴

In the text, Harris presents in dialog the many big feelings of the child, confusion, anger, and sadness. In our phone conversation, she said, “I wrote about the progression of the universal feelings around death that even young children have—first denial, then sadness, then anger, then even some humor and then, yes, some acceptance.

Jan Ormerod's drawings really bring this book to life. Jan showed the relationship between this young child and his parents, and to the mouse as well, as loving, warm, and understanding. In the words and the pictures, a child who has experienced a loss can find the language to express their hurt and pain.

In the pictures and guidance of the parents, the creators model the opportunity for memorialization. The child decorates a shoebox casket. During this activity, the child talks about the things that Mousie loved, like toast and carrots. This memorialization of the death echoes the ancient Egyptians' burial practice of using a sarcophagus. It is not a separation but a continuation of the important relationship with a loved one.¹⁵ Harris and Ormerod present a safe, loving home that is developmentally relevant to a young child's grieving experiences.

dePaola's *Nana Upstairs & Nana Downstairs* is the classic go-to recommendation for a grandparent's death for more than forty years. The clear concise language has spoken to generations of children. “When Tommy was a little boy, he had a grandmother and a great-grandmother. He loved them very much.”¹⁶ dePaola created authentic relatable characters by using the third-person narrative and naming of the protagonist, Tommy. Children can identify with the Sunday visits to the bustling kitchen activities of Nana Downstairs and the calm infirmity of Nana Upstairs.



They also are able to share with Tommy his grief when he learns that Nana Upstairs has died. The image of Nana Upstairs' empty bed is especially poignant as the text reads, “Tommy began to cry. ‘Won't she ever come back?’ he asked. ‘No, dear,’ Mother said softly ‘except in your memory. She will come back in your memory when ever you think of her.’”¹⁷ In the original manuscript, dePaola wrote that Mother said that Nana Upstairs had “gone up to where the stars are.”¹⁸ dePaola said that he took that out because he understood that children would have taken those words literally.¹⁹

dePaola said he was grateful that this book was one that had remained in print as he recognized that his experience of loss was one that continues to speak to children. This memorialization was the telling of his story and gave children the opportunity to share their own. dePaola commemorated the special relationship he had as a child with his grandmother and 94-year-old great-grandmother in telling this story. When he redid all of the illustrations for a full color edition in 1998, he recalled that he broke down into tears while re-creating Nana Upstairs' empty bed. “This was indeed written from the heart. As I created the art, four-year-old Tomie was right next to me.”²⁰

Jacqueline Woodson is a National Book Award winner, Newbery Honor book winner, and the Young People's Poet Laureate. She has a way with words that speak from the heart. *Sweet, Sweet*

Memory describes the loss of a grandfather and that loss's profound impact on a young girl's life. We enter her sorrow with

Out on the porch,
I comb my own hair
for the first time because
Grandma is busy and Grandpa is gone.²¹

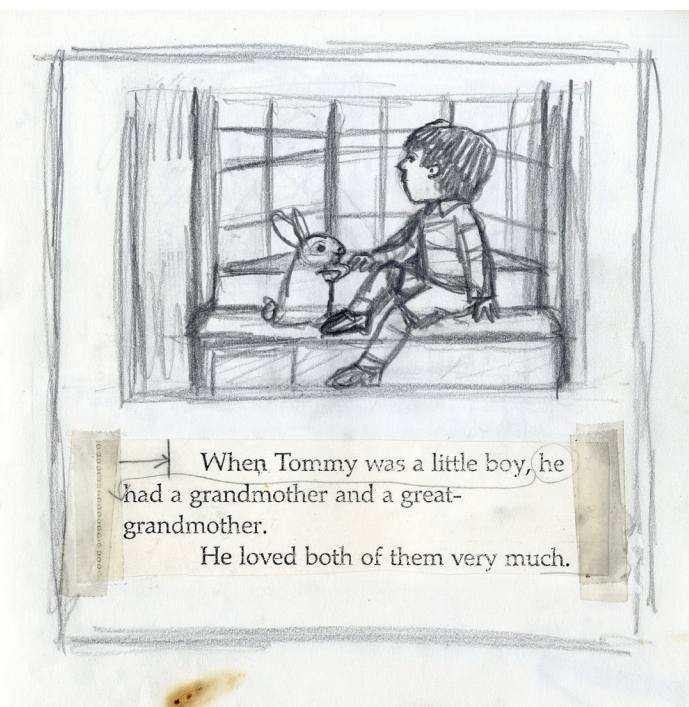
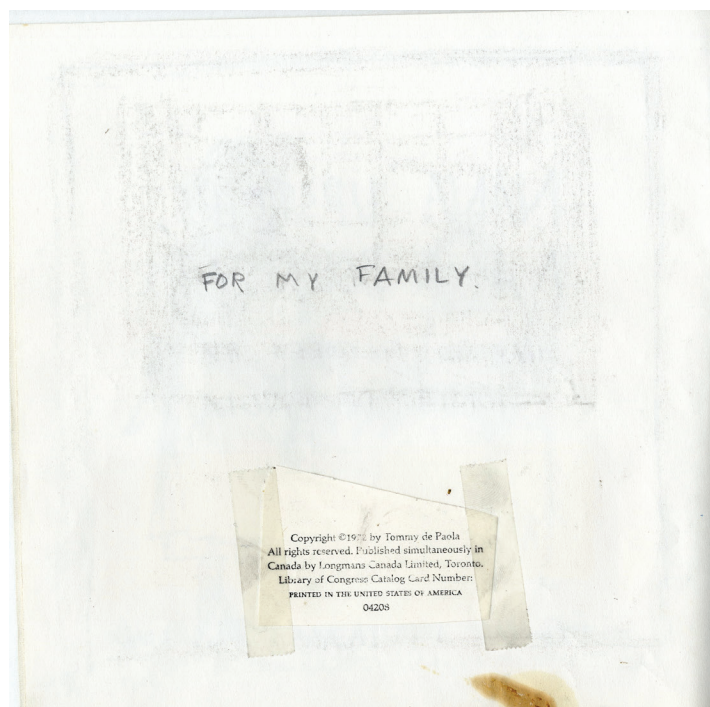
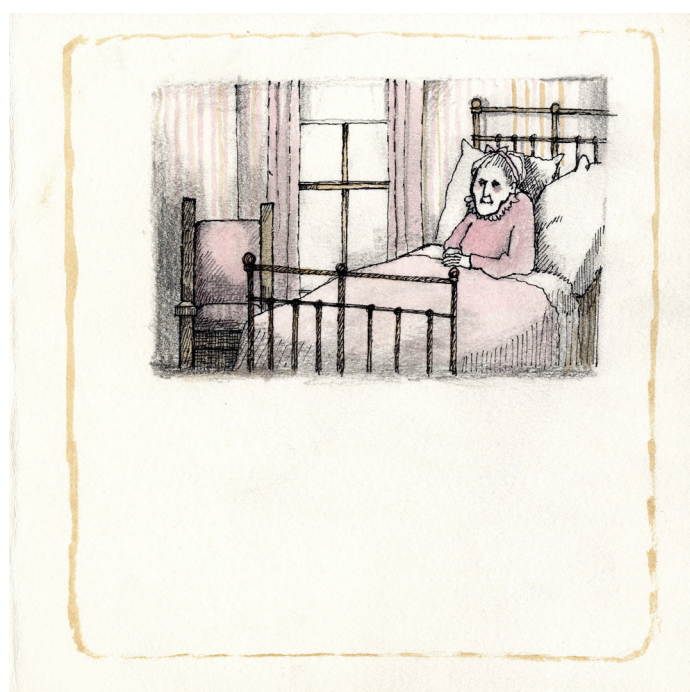
We begin to know Grandpa as the family gathers and tells stories. The narrator is silent in the crowd for a very long time. I asked Woodson about this book and why she wrote it. She replied, "I wrote this book in memory of my grandfather, Ganaar, who was a gardener. Whenever I see beautiful gardens filled with vegetables or flowers, I think of him."²²

In *Sweet, Sweet Memory*, Woodson shares her own sorrow and memorializes her grandfather in remembering his gardens. She reminds us that we can be sad and still laugh as we share our memories of loved ones who are gone. Woodson explained in an email that, "In *Sweet, Sweet Memory* there's also the refrain, 'Everything and everyone goes on and on'—reminding the child that each person leaves something behind that continues. The garden—and grandpa's words in this case. I think the refrain—like repeating songs that kids memorize—is important as it speaks to continuity, infinity etc."²³

Donna Jo Napoli is most well known for her novels that are retellings of familiar folktales like *Magic Circle* or *Zel* or her reimagining of Greek, Egyptian, and Norse mythology as in *Treasury of Greek Mythology, Classic Stories of Gods, Goddesses, Heroes & Monsters*. Napoli's *Flamingo Dream* is perhaps the best example of memorialization/commemoration in a picturebook about grief.

Written in first person, the story is an account of a girl whose father is dying. He takes her on a trip to Florida to his childhood home for the specific purpose of making memories. The pictures are a scrapbook collage of childlike drawings and souvenirs of their experiences. We see the boarding passes from the plane flight, pressed hibiscus flowers from Aunt Catherine's yard, and pink flamingo feathers.

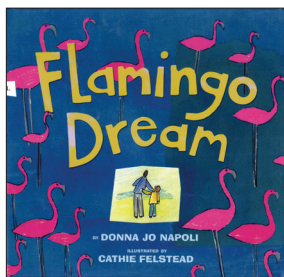
Napoli said this story began when her great-nephew's (who was eight at the time) father died and his mother was distraught and pregnant. The boy came to live with her for a while as



Nana Upstairs—original art Tomi dePaola, Kerlan Collection, University of Minnesota Libraries.

she was like a grandmother to the family. She found no books that reflected his grieving experience. She wrote, “Here was a confused and grieving child, and I wanted very much to help him. But I couldn’t find anything in the library that helped me. Everything was metaphorical (one beautiful book was about leaves changing color—*The Fall of Freddie the Leaf* by Leo Buscaglia) or more abstract than I wanted (another was about a father’s chair being empty; it made me cry, but it left Nick looking around vaguely). But there were concrete, head-on books about grandparents dying. So I decided to write Nick a story for us to share together when we read each night. And I didn’t even remember that I began it with a grandfather. But I know that the more concrete I got, the more Nick asked me to read it again, and the more he became able to talk about his father. Somewhere along the way, I must have changed it to the dad . . . to meet his need for something that spoke to his situation.”²⁴

I also selected this title from among the list of ninety-two as it validated the confusion some children experience when hearing common expressions around death as well as a direct response from the parent: “I told Mamma, ‘Daddy’s sleeping peacefully. When he wakes up, he won’t even remember he died.’ Mamma held me close. ‘Daddy will never wake up. That’s what it means to be dead.’”²⁵



Napoli’s *Flamingo Dream* text provides language for a grieving child as Cathie Felstead’s art offers a demonstration of how one can commemorate a loved one’s life.

If I were to choose only one title from the ninety-two that I had evaluated to share with a grieving

child, it would be *Always and Forever* by Alan Durant. Otter, Fox, Mole, and Hare lived together in a fantastical home in a tree in the woods. Fox grew ill, and as time passed, he died. In one of the most realistic portrayals of grief in children’s books, we witness his friends unable to experience any joy due to their overwhelming sorrow: “A wintery sadness settled on the house in the woods. Fox’s family missed him so much. They felt lost without him . . . remembering the things they loved about Fox made his family miss him all the more. Even talking about him made their hearts ache. They fell into silence.”²⁶

The seasons change and time passes. Their friend Squirrel stops by for a visit and the family begins to remember the laughter that was in the house before Fox fell ill. They recall what a terrible carpenter he was, a gardener who pulled carrots instead of weeds, and a baker who burned pies. They take actions to commemorate Fox’s memory. Mole builds a bench, Hare plants a garden, and Otter bakes a pie (but doesn’t burn it). The family sits on the bench, in the garden, eating pie “recalling happy times. As they laughed, they felt they could hear Fox laughing, too, as if he were still there with them.”²⁷

On Reflection

I reviewed the rubric criteria and the exemplar titles with Dr. Pauline Boss, professor emeritus Family Social Science at University of Minnesota. Boss is an educator widely recognized for her groundbreaking research on what is now known as the theory of ambiguous loss. This phrase describes and identifies grief in situations where there is no closure, a plane crash, a natural disaster, or when the family loses someone to dementia.²⁸

As we discussed the use of bibliotherapy as a way to help grieving children and their families, we reviewed the evaluative criteria. Boss agreed that titles like *Always and Forever* help children discover factual information as well as language to express their emotions as they grieve. As we read and reread these books, we come to know that death is forever, that we may never completely recover, that grieving takes time, that we will have big feelings, and that sometimes we won’t want to eat or talk. Boss stated in regards to the evaluative point of commemoration that, “Memorialization is the best predictor of who is coping well in the grieving process.”²⁹

When evaluating a picturebook about death and grieving, a selector must look beyond artistic and literary excellence. When recommending titles to families, we must examine relevance to child development in addition to its story’s ability to model a healthy grieving process. This rubric is a tool for the children’s materials selector whether buying for one elementary library or for a system of sixty branches to evaluate new and forthcoming titles for inclusion in their collections.

To view the author’s rubric on which this article is based, visit www.lib.umn.edu/sites/default/files/Grief%20in%20Picturebooks_Von%20Drasek.pdf.

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