Weeping Bitterly

Death and Grief in the Baldwin Library's Collection

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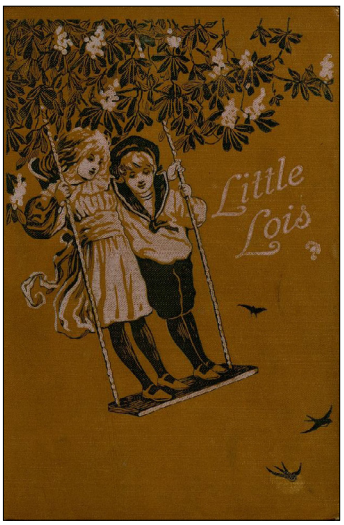

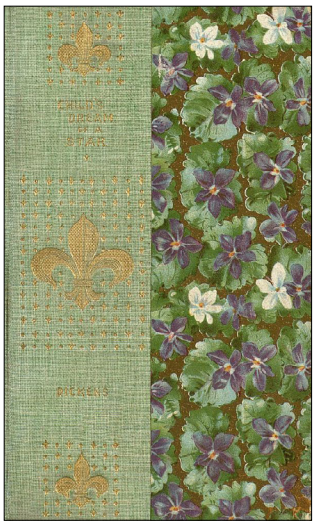

In autumn 2021, months after the vaccine had proven to be effective in combating the novel coronavirus outbreak and as the Delta variant was picking up speed, I found myself thinking about the catastrophic loss our nation had experienced and was continuing to endure. Mostly, though, my attention kept turning to the losses weathered by our nation's children. I thought of the grieving families and of the children who suddenly found themselves orphans.

The losses were indeed calamitous—an estimated two hundred thousand children in this country are now orphans *because of* the coronavirus. In fact, as of 2022, the pandemic alone was responsible for a little less than a tenth of all orphans under the age of 18.[1] As new variants emerge and as both resistance to and lack of access to vaccines continue to be societal barriers, that number will likely grow.

These concerns inspired me to apply for ALSC's Louise Seaman Bechtel Fellowship. I was interested in how both death and grief had historically been addressed in children's literature, specifically picture books. I wondered if there were parallels or diversions in structure, in vocabulary, and in presentations of death and grief.

This article will orient readers to my preparation for research during the Bechtel Fellowship, my experience at the Baldwin Library of Historical Children's Literature, and my thoughts on what I discovered. I am by no means an expert on death, dying, grief, and loss; my observations are exploratory and specific to the Baldwin Library. My interpretations are just that—how I processed the experience and what librarians can gain from seeking out historic materials about the topic.

How the Literature Review Guided My Process

Plenty of scholarly research has been conducted on the topic of death and dying in children's literature. While preparing my application, I was drawn to articles that explored how teachers and librarians navigate this difficult subject with the children they serve. How can teachers and librarians dismantle the taboo of speaking openly about death and grief? How can they invite children to be vulnerable by modeling their own vulnerability? I was drawn to the research conducted by Nick Husbye and his colleagues in their article "Death Didn't Come Up at Center Time." It provided enlightening insight into why many educators struggle with talking to children about death and grief.[2]

Several of the articles in the literature review provided me with a solid framework from which I could evaluate the titles I read. I developed a spreadsheet partially using the criteria created by Angel M. Wiseman in her article "Summer's End and Sad Goodbyes: Children's Picturebooks about Death and Dying," specifically the guiding questions in table 1.[3] Equally important in this framing was Lisa Von Drasek's "Grief in Picturebooks: An

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Evaluative Rubric," which allowed me to tighten my focus while taking notes.[4] Although both Wiseman's and Von Drasek's focus is on picture books, the parameters they use can be easily adapted to both chapter books and middle grade titles.

During my research, I concentrated on the following components:

1. **The age and race of the protagonist (or the person who grieved).** With regards to age, I was initially interested in a child's perspective, but several titles had fascinating portrayals of parental grief. As for race, it was disappointing, though not truly surprising, that 100 percent of the titles I read featured white (or white as default) characters.

2. **The emotional arc of the person who grieves, including their acknowledgment about the finality of death.** Although it has been criticized for being inaccurate and fairly unhelpful,[5] Elizabeth Kübler-Ross' five stages of grief is a familiar model of how American society has thought about grieving. I wondered if these stages were captured in early writing, perhaps granting an historic prelude to Kübler-Ross' theory.

3. **The age and race of the person who dies and their relationship to the griever.** Initially I was interested in the child's navigation of losing a parent or guardian, but as the research deepened, my focus changed, as described later.

4. **The cause of death and the acknowledgment of the cause.** In the United States, we often speak quite specifically about the cause of death (e.g., "Nana died of lung cancer. Brad died of a brain aneurysm"). I wondered if that was a recent phenomenon, especially given the relative lack of medical technology in the 1800s.

5. **Vocabulary.** Often, writers will refer to death as anything *but* death. Florid language and euphemisms are gentle substitutes. I wanted to see if death was named or if it was communicated in alternate language.

6. **Coping strategies and the impact of death.** Social-emotional learning posits that children can more deeply navigate their own feelings and develop empathy by accepting and understanding the emotions of others.[6] I wondered if emotional navigation would be present in historic children's books.

Research Process at the Baldwin

Prior to visiting the Baldwin Library, I developed a list of possible subject headings to use as search terms in the catalog. I wondered if there was a wealth of children's literature written after the 1918 pandemic, seeking some strong parallels there.

The Baldwin's holdings, however, did not yield a substantial body of work reflecting this topic, so I returned to looking at death and grief more holistically. Further, the first handful of titles I read were from the 1800s, and I found myself drawn to both the writing style and sheer volume of published titles on the subject of death and dying. To tighten my focus, I decided to read only books published in the mid-to-late 1800s with a few outliers from the earlier years of that century.

Armed with subject headings, I encountered a substantial barrier on my first day of research—the online catalog. In the Baldwin's digital galleries, the linked subject headings don't unite books about the same topic. For example, in the record for *Little Lois*,[7] one of the linked subjects is "Youth and Death Juvenile Fiction (lcsh)" [Library of Congress Subject Heading]. Unfortunately, when that hyperlink is clicked, there are no further results. Separating the subject from the audience ("youth and death," "juvenile fiction") proved similarly fruitless, so there was no way to combine all the titles from the digital galleries into a neat, packaged returned result. However, in the catalog record for the physical copy of *Little Lois*,[8] the linked subject headings *did* work, uniting all titles about the subject. I shifted from exploring the digital galleries to using only the physical collection.

Well into my first day, it became apparent that I would not be able to limit my selections to just picture books or even illustrated books. The Baldwin Library's collection is arranged by size rather than by topic, genre, or audience. The catalog's records don't indicate intended audience/age or genre. Since my time was limited to two weeks, I broadened the focus of my research to general children's literature, adhering to the ALSC's definition of serving ages zero to fourteen. I began to examine *any* book that featured death and grief. Though I hesitate to impose modern-day terms on the books I read at the Baldwin, most of the titles fell within in the spectrum of early chapter books to middle-grade books.

The physical card catalog, though, turned out to be my greatest asset. It opened a huge door and allowed me to make far more discoveries than those in the online catalog. For example, the book *The Baby's Death*, which I hadn't found online but *was* in the physical card catalog, became a Rosetta Stone. After discovering this title, I cross-referenced it in the online catalog and found different variations of previous subject headings I'd been using. Suddenly, I had hundreds of books at my fingertips. To help winnow down this overwhelming number, I focused only on books where a death (and the inevitable grief of the characters mourning the loss) was the inciting incident of the book's plot.

Observations

Early in my reading, I began to notice patterns—specifically that most of the deaths I encountered were those of *children*. This shouldn't have been surprising since life expectancies were lower, very few vaccines had been invented, and there was little understanding of how viruses and bacteria operated. Still, I was alarmed by the sheer volume of titles that featured the deaths of children and how indelicate the discussions surrounding the deaths were; that is, there was a bluntness to how death was written about that is quite shocking to modern sensibilities. I soon turned all my attention to these books, largely ignoring any book where an adult passes away.

Most of the books featuring the deaths of children were of a religious nature. Organizations such as the American Sunday-School Union seemed to regularly publish collected biographies of children who had died. These stories, often relayed through anonymous witnesses or priests years after the death had occurred, rarely came across as authentic recountings, but rather lurid cautionary tales. Therefore, the purpose of these books is straightforward—impress upon young people the importance of being a good Christian, doing right by your parents, and putting God before all else in life. When the time comes—and it will come—salvation is paramount. The children in these collected biographies die gruesome deaths, often rendered in excruciating detail. Throughout the ordeal, however, they are pious, eager to die and meet their Maker. To that end, the books seem to encourage martyrdom.

A curious lack of characterization is prevalent throughout many of the titles. The protagonists lack an interior landscape, and often come across as empty vessels. This makes sense, especially in the religious tracts; the child character is meant to be *all* children so that the child reader could see themselves as the main character—ailing, suffering, and dying, and being a good example of piety for those they left behind. This is in stark contrast to the modern biography, which tends to highlight the lives of people who have had a significant impact historically, culturally, or politically.

Modern children aren't necessarily expected to see themselves as the *subject* of the biography. Perhaps they may be expected to relate to the person, but not to *be* them. Overlaying a modern understanding of biographies on these "death biographies" (for their really is no better term that I can think of for them) is an exercise in futility. They are curious and fascinating relics of a bygone era.

There was often a refreshing lack of euphemisms for death employed in the books. Perhaps this was because the death of children was so commonplace, almost expected, that there really was no need to sugarcoat the finality of death. The language was often stripped of emotion; this lack of tone is in stark contrast to how modern literature might deal with the topic:

> There came no breath from the baby's lungs. . . . Herbert had never looked upon death before; and, as he stood there in the darkened room with his mother and the dead baby, he asked some questions that made his mother's tears flow fast and fall down upon the pillow of the little bed in the coffin.—*Little Ernest, or, The Land Beyond the River*[9]

Some books, however, did use flowery language—characters "expire," "[fall] asleep in Jesus," and have spirits that "[take their] flight into the eternal world."

Grief is similarly stark in its portrayal. Although many characters are cartoonishly reduced to "weeping bitterly" (a description I read so often it became mordantly humorous), there's a startling humanity imbued in most of the characters reeling from the deaths of their loved one. This is made even more interesting because the lack of character development tended to remove this reader from the mourners' emotions.

Authors (and when authors were not explicated, I assumed publishers) seemed to draw upon their own experiences with grief to render the gut-wrenching tides of emotion. The choice of words was so exacting that they pointed to an acute understanding of death's aftermath. *Little Lois* acknowledges the dizzying disassociation that accompanies an unexpected death:

> She had gone about with a strange, stunned feeling, as though part of her brain were numb, and only half of it really awake.[10]

The Baby's Death shows a striking spectrum of grief.[11] Some of the children cry at the loss of the infant, but others remark about the costumes of the girls in the funeral procession. In an emotional sequence, the brother of the deceased baby cries out to stop the coffin from being lowered into the ground. He is consumed with both fear and anguish and has to be reminded that the child's soul is no longer on Earth. After the funeral, an exchange between the parents is marked with sadness, but points to an unyielding acceptance of the finality. They admit there is little they could have done for the sick baby and resign themselves to the loss. It's an alarmingly stark moment.

Five Titles of Note

[*The Life and Happy Death of Anna Emery*], George Goodwin & Sons, 1821[12]

This title started me on my journey of finding supposed biographies of dying children. The first nine pages outline, in intense detail, the titular character's suffering before the jaws of death ensnare her. The level of detail isn't all that different from the clinical gruesomeness found in books like Gail Jarrow's contemporary nonfiction Medical Fiascos series. The difference here, of course, is that the character is a child.

The Sad Mistake [American Sunday-School Union], 1854[13]

This was the first title I encountered from the American Sunday-School Union, but unlike their collected biographies, this book is most certainly a work of fiction. Of particular note is the curiosity of the child protagonist, Allie, whose peer, Jennie, has died. Interestingly, Allie's parents speak quite frankly of Jennie's death, reminding Allie of her pet kitten that had died. It's an equivalence that helps Allie understand the finality of Jennie's death. Because Allie's parents have not impressed upon Allie the importance of religious devotion, this title takes a decidedly dark turn at the halfway point.

Thoughts on the Death of Little Children, Samuel Irenæus Prime, 1865[14]

Samuel Irenæus Prime wrote the most shockingly frank book I read at the Baldwin (*The Little Burnt Girl*), but this title is more analogous to the modern self-help book. Prime walks bereaved parents through the avalanche of emotions that accompany the loss of a child. Using his own experiences as an anchor, Prime's book is notable for acknowledging both emotional vulnerability and the capsizing feelings of loss—the days, months, and even years of grief on the horizon. His observations often feel quite ahead of their time:

> To shut ourselves up in the dark to brood over our sorrows, is the worst of all remedies for grief.[15]

Agnes and the Little Key, Nehemiah Adams, 1870[16]

This title came incredibly close to hewing to the arc of the Kübler-Ross model. It follows two parents who have lost their baby, Agnes, and are unmoored by their grief. More so than any other title I read, the loss is written about viscerally, centering the narrative on the peaks and valleys so common in the healing process.

> There will be a time when this will cease to be an affliction.[17]

A Child's Dream of a Star, Charles Dickens, 1871[18]

Dickens' brief story most closely resembled the modern-day picture book, in that text and images are married in a recognizable way. Following the joyful early days of two siblings who delight in philosophical musings, the sister, in true Dickensian fashion, begins to "droop" and soon dies, leaving her brother to cope with the loss. Readers follow the boy into adulthood; his life is riddled with tragedy, but he endures each day, knowing that he will eventually be reunited with his sister.

Closing Thoughts

When I was a middle school librarian, I never felt particularly equipped to talk to children about death, about the grieving process, or even to open myself up to talking about my own grief. In fact, those topics seemed taboo, even though I knew that being open and even vulnerable about these topics would make me a *better* educator, not a weaker one. I would have benefitted from *more* books that addressed death candidly, that avoid euphemism, that explore the emotional landscapes of grief.

Librarians have a lot to gain from exploring how death and grief were tackled in historic literature. Most of us are familiar with death in the classic chapter books and middle-grade books and how characters process the grief. Anne sacrifices her future while revisiting her fond memories after Matthew's gut-wrenching death in *Anne of Green Gables*; Cassie grapples with the racism and systemic inequity when she learns of T. J.'s unsettling, implied fate in *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*. There are plenty of contemporary titles with children grieving the deaths of other children: *Lolo's Light* by Liz Garton Scanlon; *The Shape of Thunder* by Jasmine Warga; *Ghost Boys* by Jewell Parker Rhodes.

Exploring older books, like those from the nineteenth century, adds another layer of meaning, particularly in how we talk to children about death. The general lack of euphemisms in literature from this time, though quite unsettling for modern readers, offers a refreshing perspective and an unflinching guide to navigating the topic with children. After all, according to an article in *The Journal of Palliative Medicine,* authors Marina N. H. Arruda-Colli, Meaghann S. Weaver, and Lori Wiener cite that by "age seven years, most children understand death as irreversible, inevitable, and universal."[19]

I believe, then, that we owe it to children to speak openly and candidly about death, grief, and loss. Having looked at historic books that address grief and loss, I believe there is a space between two extremes in which contemporary children's literature can communicate these ideas in a nuanced way. Though the lurid accounts of yore have aged poorly, they are quite remarkable in their honest, mostly euphemism-free approach to death. Furthermore, the bone-shaking grief rendered in the writing, while often melodramatic, is admirable in its fearlessness. Grief is life-changing. Loss is forever. We can talk about these things with children in meaningful ways.

The experience of researching at the Baldwin Library has sharpened my sensitivity toward death and dying in children's literature. Children benefit from honest depictions of death and unfaltering affirmations of grief. Parents, guardians, teachers, and librarians should consider sharing contemporary literature that attends to a child's curiosity or need to understand these difficult topics. &

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