

out the rich possibilities of relationships. He took the fruitful opportunity for inner fulfillment before stepping into an uncertain future.

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*The pain encountered in grieving is the very energy that heals.*

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I did not realize how important this achievement was until a month later, when I was standing at the pulpit giving a eulogy at Tim's funeral. Tim had

elected bypass surgery. The aneurysm on the heart proved much larger than anticipated, and Tim suffered post-surgically from persistent bleeding. In the end, sepsis overcame his body and Tim died.

I share this story because of my own need for grieving and healing. As a hospital chaplain, I am satisfied that my interventions helped Tim attain great peace during his last days. At the moment when the medical "cure" did not work, Tim readied himself for healing. I miss my friend, but I "stand in" my sadness and "reach into" the emotions of this narrative to share my story.

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## Love, Loss and Legacy: Death and Dying in Children's Literature

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by Eileen M. O'Connell

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*Readers unfamiliar with children's literature may be inclined to overlook its potential as a resource for discussions about dying and death. Everett Anderson's Goodbye, The Tenth Good Thing About Barney and Charlotte's Web are books written for children that explore these subjects and offer valuable insights to children and adults alike. A theme of love, loss and legacy operates in these and other children's books about death and dying. Exploring this dynamic offers one approach to coping with these issues.*

To many people, children's literature may seem an unlikely forum for examining issues of dying and death. However, those familiar with children's books, from the simplest picture books to the most timely young adult novels, realize that literature for children is as attuned to the needs of its audience as is literature for adults. Contemporary as well as classic children's fiction provides insightful lessons about friendship, loneliness, fear, courage, compassion, honesty, perseverance, trust, discrimination, play, change, family, growth, aging, illness and death. Furthermore, children's literature is accessible to people from almost any age group and reading level and therefore enables a wide audience to discuss these issues.

Of the 141 titles currently listed under the subject heading "Death—fiction" in the Albuquerque Public Library's catalog, 137 are classified as children's books. Many of these are picture books which focus

on the death of parents (Everett Anderson's *Goodbye* by Lucille Clifton; *Saying Goodbye to Daddy* by Judith Vigna), grandparents (*Christmas Moon* by Denys Cazet; *Nana Upstairs, Nana Downstairs* by Tomie de Paola), friends (*Badger's Parting Gifts* by Susan Varley; *I Had a Friend Named Peter* by Janice Cohn), and pets (*The Tenth Good Thing About Barney* by Judith Viorst; *That Dog* by Nannette Newman). Furthermore, the catalog listing does not include works like E.B. White's *Charlotte's Web*, in which death is one issue in a wide context of relationships. When works such as *Charlotte's Web* are also examined, children's literature provides a comprehensive springboard for considerations of dying and death.

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Children's books allow readers of all ages to explore their world imaginatively—to experience conflict, change, friendship and grief, and to think of possible responses without actual personal risk. Stories about death allow readers to internalize the love relationships between the one who dies and the ones who mourn. Readers can benefit by the deceased's legacy without actually losing and grieving for a loved one themselves. The best fiction provides a safe environment for readers not only to live the experience of its characters but also to reflect on that experience. Through reflection, readers compare the characters' reactions to their own probable reactions, weigh the values the story illuminates, and apply to their lives whatever they consider valuable, helpful or admirable. This is as true for children as for adults, as Sommer points out: "Children also develop responses from listening to and integrating the principles that are embodied in the stories they hear; thus it is important for children to hear and tell stories that express their feelings about suffering and death."<sup>1</sup> Children's literature about death and dying allows both juvenile and adult readers to think over these issues. For children especially, learning to cope with dying and death through fiction may enable them to cope more readily with actual losses in their own lives.

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*"Barney is in the ground and he's helping grow flowers. That's a pretty nice job for a cat."*

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Many stories about dying and death in literature for children reflect a three-fold dynamic which can be summarized as love, loss and legacy. All the works I have read, whether for young children or young adults, present a loving (if sometimes antagonistic) relationship between the one who dies and the one who mourns. The love portrayed in these works emphasizes the importance of the loss to the bereaved, who, with assistance by others, eventually comes to terms with his or her loss by identifying the deceased's legacy, a heritage of remembrance. The mourner rediscovers the deceased's uniqueness and reflects on what he or she has learned from the deceased. Once the mourner has claimed the legacy, he or she is able consciously to share it, taking his or her place in a cycle of love, learning and remembrance.

*Everett Anderson's Goodbye* and *The Tenth Good Thing About Barney* are excellent examples of picture

books that concentrate specifically on coping with death. In *Everett Anderson's Goodbye*, Lucille Clifton takes readers with Everett through the five stages of his grief at his father's death. The first four sections ("Denial," "Anger," "Bargaining" and "Depression") show the depth of Everett's love for his father and of his loss, interspersed with memories of his living father. In the final section, "Acceptance," Everett has come to terms with his bereavement and is able to weave love and memory into healing:

Everett Anderson says, "I knew my daddy loved me through and through, and whatever happens when people die, love doesn't stop, and neither will I."<sup>2</sup>

Clifton validates Everett's grief and healing and thus shows readers how love and memory can combine to help a mourner manage his or her loss.

Judith Viorst's *The Tenth Good Thing About Barney* tells the story of a small boy whose parents help him deal with his cat Barney's death. The boy's mother suggests that he "think of ten good things about Barney so [he] could tell them at the funeral."<sup>3</sup> The boy is able to think of nine things, and afterward his father suggests a tenth that helps the boy reconcile himself to the cat's death. That night the boy tells his mother, "Barney is in the ground and he's helping grow flowers. You know . . . that's a pretty nice job for a cat."<sup>4</sup> The parents in the story play a key role in the boy's coming to terms with Barney's death, and Viorst signals the importance for the healing process of recalling why the boy loved Barney. Viorst also shows that the deceased's legacy may include more than memories: since Barney can "help grow flowers," the cat continues to contribute to the family's life.

The dynamic of love, loss and legacy is beautifully illustrated in *Charlotte's Web*, which tells how Charlotte, a spider, saves the life of Wilbur, a pig, by writing apparently miraculous messages in her webs. From the moment Charlotte introduces herself to the lonely Wilbur, E.B. White unfolds the story of a delightful friendship. Wilbur responds enthusiastically to Charlotte's "Salutations!" and eventually comes to terms with her insectivorous habits. Charlotte's commitment to save Wilbur from an untimely death strengthens the bond between the pig and the spider, and when Charlotte's ingenuity rescues Wilbur once and for all from the threat of butchering, Wilbur wonders why Charlotte has done so much for him. She answers, "You have been my friend. . . . That in itself is a tremendous thing."<sup>5</sup> Wilbur shows himself Charlotte's equal in devotion when he declares, "I would gladly give

my life for you—I really would.”<sup>6</sup> Wilbur has learned a great deal from his love for his friend, and it is through her lessons that he is able to cope with her death.

Wilbur’s reaction to the news that he will be killed at the end of autumn, and Charlotte’s to her own imminent death, are vastly different. Wilbur interrupts the old sheep’s description of butchering time, screaming, “Stop! . . . I don’t want to die! Save me, somebody! Save me!”<sup>7</sup> Charlotte makes tremendous efforts to save Wilbur, but is resigned to the prospect of her own death: “After all, what’s a life anyway? We’re born, we live a little while, we die.”<sup>8</sup> When she tells Wilbur at the fair that she will not return to the barn with him because she is dying, she is quite calm. Wilbur, however, responds with the same hysteria he exhibited when he first learned that he might be killed: “Wilbur threw himself down in an agony of pain and sorrow. Great sobs racked his body. He heaved and grunted with desolation. ‘Charlotte,’ he moaned. ‘Charlotte! My true friend!’”<sup>9</sup> Wilbur is forced to return to the barn without her, and Charlotte dies at the fairgrounds alone.

Charlotte taught Wilbur ingenuity and patience, and through these lessons he is better able to cope with her death. Charlotte has told him she is sad that she will not see her children, whose eggs she has laid at the fair. Despite his pain at her revelation that she is going to die and his recognition that he cannot be with her when she does, Wilbur realizes that he can assuage Charlotte’s one expressed regret before he leaves her. “If Charlotte herself was unable to go home to the barn, at least he must take her children along.”<sup>10</sup> Although Wilbur misses Charlotte, his grief is eased because he has a job to do: “All winter Wilbur watched over Charlotte’s egg sac as though he were guarding his own children. . . . For Wilbur, nothing in life was so important as this small round object—nothing else mattered.”<sup>11</sup> In spring, the eggs hatch and Wilbur’s patience is rewarded when three of Charlotte’s children choose to make their home in the barn. One of these declares her resemblance to her mother when she offers Wilbur her “Salutations!” Wilbur is able to tell his new friends about Charlotte, and is comforted by a legacy of friendship composed not only of the presence of Charlotte’s children and grandchildren but also of what he has learned from Charlotte about love and living. But Wilbur’s primary comfort is his memory:

Wilbur never forgot Charlotte. Although he loved her children and grandchildren dearly, none of the new spiders ever quite took her place in his heart. She was in a class by herself. It is not often that someone comes along

who is a true friend and a good writer. Charlotte was both.<sup>12</sup>

*Charlotte’s Web* relies for its effectiveness on E.B. White’s realistic treatment of the foibles, strengths and feelings of his characters. The love between Charlotte and Wilbur, Wilbur’s terror when faced with his own death and his grief for Charlotte’s, bring the story to life, and the reader is able to accept the affective truth of the ending: Charlotte’s death makes her no less valuable to Wilbur. Wilbur continues to love her and remember her for her friendship, loyalty and intelligence; for the family she has left him; and for all that she has taught him. Although at the end of the book Charlotte’s presence is no longer physical, it is still real and still important.

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### *The dynamic of love, loss and legacy provides an approach to discussing mortal issues with children.*

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The dynamic of love, loss and legacy in *Everett Anderson’s Goodbye, The Tenth Good Thing About Barney* and *Charlotte’s Web* and the other children’s titles mentioned in this article provides an approach to discussing mortal issues with children. Whether children face their own deaths or the death of a loved one, they can learn something about what to expect through stories like these. Furthermore, the idea of legacy may provide comfort to children who face loss, especially because, as Sommer points out, “Children need to know that they will be remembered. Part of their fear of separation is that their parents will forget them and never find them again.”<sup>13</sup> Children’s fiction which deals with dying and death varies widely in content and approach; nevertheless, it consistently lifts up the idea that love and remembrance persist beyond death. This truth is as vital for adults as for children.

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## One Day It Will Make You Sing

by Stewart Lawler

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I needed to get up from my Sunday morning coffee and crossword and start on the review about a new magazine, *Art & Understanding: The International Magazine of Literature and Art About AIDS*, when a program on National Public Radio caught my attention. What really caught my attention out of the murmur was a voice and a story. Stories always get my attention. This story came from an oral history project in an old folks' home in Rochester, New York. As I listened to the voices and stories of the elderly women sharing their lives, the voice that especially caught my attention was that of an African-American woman who came of age in Mississippi during the civil rights era of the 1960s. She began by proudly telling the other women in the group about her "Certificate in Negro History." The collector of the stories didn't expect to see or find much in this "certificate." He was wrong. This woman, Sarah McClellan, told about her life in Mississippi. She told of the hunger and poverty in the rural South that she had always known and that the young civil rights workers discovered as they poured in from college campuses all over the United States. Of all the "kids" who came down, one "nice girl from Chicago" taught them the "Negro history" they "should already have been

taught." Sarah went on to tell about other events and people. In one local farmer's back field, two freedom fighters' bodies were found rotting under an old wagon. The farmer swore, Sarah said, "he thought it was an old rotted horse." Even though her story was related by the man who collected the histories, I could hear Sarah's voice as clearly as a chickadee's song. I especially remember that and two other things she said. The day Sarah hugged and kissed her friend, "the nice girl from Chicago," good-bye, she told her, "A person's a person, and out of one blood God created all nations." Later, the white postmaster's wife, who from the beginning looked at those "kids" with a distrust bordering on hatred, asked Sarah in her usual snide voice, "Sarah, where is that girl from Chicago?" Sarah couldn't answer. Sarah earned her "Certificate in Negro History" the hard way. She told the group in the Rochester old folks' home, "Sometimes you hear things that make you silent, but one day it will make you sing." Sarah McClellan, formerly from

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