



## Reviews



### **Representing Death in Children's Literature: Border Crossings** —Maria José Botelho and Marsha Jing-Ji Liaw

Dekko, Espen. *Paws and Edward*. Illustrated by Mari Kanstad Johnsen, Kids Can, 2019. 34 pp. \$18.99 hc. ISBN 9781525301353.

James, Matt. *The Funeral*. Groundwood Books, 2018. 40 pp. \$18.95 hc. ISBN 9781554989089.

Quan, Betty. *Grandmother's Visit*. Illustrated by Carmen Mok, Groundwood Books, 2018. 32 pp. \$17.95 hc. ISBN 9781554989546.

Young, Cheyanne. *The Last Wish of Sasha Cade*. Kids Can, 2018. 320 pp. \$12.99 pb. ISBN 9781525301407.

Borders are material and people made. Borders are constructed and negotiated as humans and environments interact. These four new texts evoke and challenge the border between life and death. The young and adolescent characters deal with the death of family members, a pet, and a friend. The books show how characters observe, experience, commemorate, and, in one case, defy crossing the border between life and death. These books also defy the representation of death in contemporary children's literature by recasting death and grieving as nuanced, complex, and diverse.

The representation of death in children's literature gained prominence in the 1970s because of its use in bibliotherapy: the practice of using books to heal children from emotional and psychological difficulties (Crago). Adults reached for noteworthy children's books like *The Dead Bird* (Brown), *The Tenth Good Thing about Barney* (Viorst), and *Nana Upstairs and Nana Downstairs* (dePaola) to support dialogues about death. These iconic texts showcase child characters' emotional responses and emerging ritual practice and afterlife beliefs. Devereaux A. Poling and Julie M. Hupp's 2008 study of death-themed books notes emotional responses, socio-cultural practices, and biological facts are recurring aspects in rendering death in children's literature (166). Biological facts about death include irreversibility, inevitability, and causality. Socio-cultural practices consist of rituals and afterlife beliefs. "Deathways" like funerals, memorial services, and beliefs about heaven commemorate dying and support grieving (Murphy 170). Characters' emotional responses such as sadness, anger, longing, guilt, denial, and acceptance, however, are the most represented aspect of death in children's literature (K. James 10; Poling and Hupp 170). Death is inseparable from life.

Death is socially constructed (K. James 10). Its biological facts, emotional responses, and socio-cultural practices are culturally shaped as characters engage in these plotlines. The materiality—how characters participate and use the networks and resources within contexts—and social practices connected to death offer insights into how cultures work. This review considers four new publications, three picture books and one young adult novel, that engage with these death-related aspects: addressing the illness and death of a pet, the loss of a grandmother, a family funeral, and secret adventures mapped out by a deceased character. We apply this social theoretical understanding of death as we consider the children's books in this review.

*Paws and Edward* (Dekko) brings the reader up close to the biological processes of and emotional response to an ailing pet's end of life. Paws, a large yellow dog who loves to chase rabbits, cats, cars, and airplanes, is centre stage in this text. The third-person perspective offers an expansive view of Paws's waning energy, while the short exchanges between Paws and Edward show their deep connection. Paws just wants to lie down, rest, sleep, and

observe his boy Edward while he loses interest in eating, drinking, and life. Edward notices these changes and gives him hugs as Paws slips into “sleep without dreams.”

Lightheartedness permeates the beginning of this magical realistic picture book. The cover, when opened, is a large poster of Paws with his owner sitting on his back. In the double-spreads of Paws and Edward’s life together, we see the last days of Paws’s life. The bold hues and simple line drawings exude a deep affection between these two characters. This story was first published in Swedish before it was translated into English. The Swedish book cover renders Paws and Edward in a plausible scale with Paws walking alongside Edward. The author is a puppeteer, an artform that might have informed the representation of this story. The puppeteer manipulates puppets to create the illusion they are alive. Staging Paws as the main character places him at the centre of the story arc. Paws’s perspective shapes the telling of this tale. The words and images imbue Paws with life and dying.

This book showcases the young boy’s relationship and memories of his dog to show the process of loss. The reminiscing is joyful, yet the second to last double spread appears in dark colour. *Paws and Edward* is one of the first children’s books to bring young readers up close to the passing of a pet and the biological process of dying, which becomes a resource for young readers to understand death. On the last page, a double spread, the young boy dreams of Paws. Dreaming becomes a metaphor for aging, illness, passing, and remembering as Paws’s daydreaming introduces the reader to his healthier days. Dreaming about Paws’s favourite activities helps Edward live through his loss.

In many ways, this text is in dialogue with three picture books that centre protagonists’ emotional response to their pets’ passing: the classic *The Tenth Good Thing about Barney* (Viorst) and the more recent *Missing Jack* (Elliott) and *The Rough Patch* (Lies). *The Tenth Good Thing about Barney* depicts the child’s mourning of his beloved cat Barney to make sense of the biological, emotional, and socio-cultural aspects of dying. The memories of the ten good things about Barney help the young protagonist make sense of death and endure the days without Barney. This is one of the earlier texts that touches on the permanence of death. *Missing Jack* and *The Rough Patch* feature the emotional impact of losing pets. Nevertheless, *Paws and Edward* centres the pet’s experience.

*Grandmother's Visit* (Quan) depicts Chinese socio-cultural elements linked to a family member's passing. Grandmother lives with Grace's family and picks up her granddaughter from school every day. Grandmother and Grace spend time together preparing dinner, eating red lotus bean soup as dessert, and sharing food preparation practices from China. One day, Grace finds Grandmother's room empty and she is no longer there. A few days later, Grace and her parents visit Grandmother's grave.

The cover suggests an urban centre in the background. The double spreads immerse the reader in the context of the story: kitchen, backyard, park, and suburban neighbourhood. In the middle of the book, single spreads move the characters across place and the quiet storyline. There is a bird's eye view of Grandmother's own bedroom, where she keeps her belongings tidy. The colour palette creates a sombre mood throughout the text. It has many cultural markers: rice dish, pickled plums snack, tea, intergenerational household, the use of light to set the spirit free, rice cooker, and wall art. It is an immigrant story where family members practice their cultural ways at home. The child and grandmother have brief conversations throughout the activities. These engagements promote communication between these two characters and the sharing of stories from China. Even though Grace is kept from the details of her grandmother's ailing health and dying, her parents show her where Grandmother is buried and encourage her to leave the house well lit so her grandmother can bid farewell and transition to the afterlife. The story ends with the child visiting Grandmother's room and finds evidence that she was there.

This book foregrounds the socio-cultural aspects of death and the ways that a family culturally makes sense of dying with their deathways, that is, their particular cultural practices and beliefs to respond to and commemorate the passing of Grandmother. For example, the child protagonist's emotional response is shaped socio-culturally. Her parents do not tell her about Grandmother's dying. Although the empty room symbolizes grandmother's passing, such belongings as her coat, house keys, and a photograph help the child protagonist to remember her.

Intergenerational relationships and the death of grandmothers are featured in other picture books, such as *Grandma Lives in a Perfume Village* (Suzhen; first published in China)

and *Nana Upstairs and Nana Downstairs*. In *Grandma Lives in a Perfume Village*, the story is contextualized through ample details about the place and people. *Grandmother's Visit* only showcases one family, whereas *Grandma Lives in a Perfume Village* depicts a neighbourhood. The main child character in this latter text tries, in conversation with heaven, to understand where heaven exists and what his grandmother is doing. The child's imaginative play allows him to have a relationship with his grandmother after death as well as make sense of death. Unlike *Grandmother's Visit*, the worldview and language of the young child is centred in this story. The parallel and permeable storylines about death and life exist side by side. The child's perspective is plausible cross-culturally when children are permitted or invited to play with cultural beliefs about life, death, and heaven. *Nana Upstairs and Nana Downstairs*, a popular publication that adults have used to discuss the topic of death with children, shows the intergenerational relationships between a young boy and his grandmother and great-grandmother. His extended Irish American and Italian American family's lives are integrated and impacted when the great-grandmother and grandmother pass. The storylines remain stable across these three realistic fiction picture books. They disseminate traditional portrayals of death because they depend on the tropes of emptiness and heaven to represent death. Heaven becomes another character in the latter two stories, as does the open sky where it exists. Empty rooms signify the death of the elders in all three stories. The metaphor for death is leaving one place for another. The books about Chinese families do not use the words "die" or "death," as in Chinese culture these words bring misfortune to the person who utters them.

*The Funeral* (M. James), the third picture book, is much like *Paws and Edward* in how it offers readers proximate views of the processes and practices that are usually eluded in death-themed storylines. It foregrounds young Norma's experience during a family funeral. The book showcases this ritual from the child's perspective as she makes sense of the socio-cultural practices associated with the passing of Uncle Frank. The text invites inquiry into death and ritual.

Above all, Norma is looking forward to seeing her cousin Ray. She tries to make sense of how adults respond to a family member's passing. At the religious service, Norma observes what the adults do and gains views of the casket. She questions why the priest only talks about

“God and souls,” not Uncle Frank. Norma asks: “Is Uncle Frank still a person?” The adults mingle while Norma and Ray go outside and play. When they return to the reception hall, Norma and Ray notice Uncle Frank’s photos. She assumes that Uncle Frank liked his funeral because one photo shows him with a big smile. The text ends with the families going home, while Norma contemplates where Uncle Frank might be in the galaxy. Norma theorizes death throughout this funeral experience.

The images convey permanence of an impermanent topic. The media is acrylic and ink on masonite with dimensional elements constructed from cut paper, masking tape, rolled-up twine, cardboard, and scroll-sawn masonite, all painted with acrylic. Some elements were touched up digitally. The multiple media rendering creates the vivid and vibrant place and people. The characters are enlivened. The illustrations are realistic and frank, providing the child reader with a range of emotions and multiple views of the funeral event. For example, there are up-close images of the main character’s initial feelings about the passing of Uncle Frank and the joy that she and her cousin Ray feel during the family gathering as they play inside and outside the church.

*The Funeral* is told from a third-person perspective, offering a panoramic view of Norma’s experience at this gathering. This text features a range of emotions: deep sadness and deep gladness as the family gathers to celebrate Uncle Frank’s life. The illustrations show the characters experiencing these profound emotions alone and together. Norma reads the flags on the cars and is determined to emphasize the “fun” that appears in the word “funeral.” The children create a joyful funeral as they play through the event.

While the funeral initiates the storyline, the lived experience of the people attending the funeral is front and centre in this text. The child’s perspective of a funeral is a departure from other death-themed texts because the storyline is playful and joyful: it is a celebration of life. Death is backgrounded, as Norma takes notice of Uncle Frank only five times—twice during the memorial service and three times in the reception hall—but it is the entry point into the story. This text shows children gravitating toward lightness while the adults enact the socio-cultural ways of dealing with dying and grieving. It is important to note that this playful response to death does not hold true across cultural communities. Children are often

expected to emulate the solemn deathways of the adults. The story provides commentary on the joy experienced at extended family gatherings, of which funerals are one.

Many death-themed children's books represent funeral-like rituals as the socio-cultural ways that characters cope with mourning (Brown; Elliot; Viorst). Unlike *The Funeral*, the illustrations of *The Dead Bird*, *The Tenth Good Thing About Barney*, and *Missing Jack* portray somber ritual practices and processes of death. The first edition of *The Dead Bird* (Brown), illustrated by Remy Charlip, creates a solemn event that is rendered through a limited palette of green, blue, and yellow. The more recent illustration of Christian Robinson, published in 2016, recasts the story in a multicoloured urban park setting. The bird is found by a racially diverse group of children. The reader witnesses the emotional toll through a double spread close-up of the children crying. After completing the burial, however, in both editions of *The Dead Bird*, the children return to lightness, much like Norma and Ray in *The Funeral*, by resuming their play in the meadow and park, respectively.

*The Last Wish of Sasha Cade* (Young), a realistic young adult novel, defies the boundary between life and death. The protagonist, Sasha, a high school student, is adopted by a middle-class family. Her long-time best friend, Raquel, supports and accompanies Sasha through her failing health from cancer. After Sasha's death, Raquel misses her greatly but is not overcome by grief. Surprisingly, Sasha plans a series of secret adventures for Raquel to experience with Sasha's biological brother Elijah, someone Sasha never meets in person. Through adventures that come described in timed letters, emails, and packages, Raquel comes to know more about herself, Sasha, and her social world.

The secret adventures bring Raquel and Elijah together. Elijah moves from many foster homes, and Sasha wants her brother to be adopted by her parents so he can have a better life. A romantic relationship between Raquel and Elijah unfolds. While Sasha remains in the plotline as Raquel and Elijah engage with the communications she has left behind, Elijah moves in with Sasha's adoptive family and, in many ways, takes Sasha's place and realizes her wish. The story ends neatly. The romantic relationship between Raquel and Elijah is unrealistic because it happens quickly and predictably. The relationship between Elijah and Sasha's adoptive parents also happens quickly. While her parents cannot adopt Elijah due to his age, they rescue

him from a lawsuit and sponsor him through college. This text is realistic fiction with many unrealistic plot elements.

Death is the thread that stitches lives together in this story. Sasha's death creates new beginnings and friendships through her afterlife communication with Raquel. These adventures create several situations that call up memories of Sasha for Raquel. Meanwhile, Raquel's friendship with Sasha's parents links them to their daughter. This book offers tools for adolescent readers to make sense of death as they are brought up close to Sasha's ailing condition, cancer treatment, and death, and Raquel's grieving and living. The story takes up the socio-culturally-shaped practices of cancer treatment and hospice care, which foreground the biological facts of Sasha's dying process. Through Raquel's grieving, the text foregrounds her emotional response to the passing of her friend and captures Sasha's emotional response to her own dying, which is not a common literary device. Sasha's planning of her funeral offers insights into how she wants her family and friends to commemorate her passing. Digital technologies are the tools that support the plotline and amplify the characters' experiences with death and grieving. These planned events disrupt the boundary between life and death and foreground the entanglement among biological facts, emotional response, and socio-cultural practices, offering young adult readers multiple experiences to investigate these three aspects of death.

Defying death requires relationships with those who stay behind. Sasha's afterlife communication challenges the border between life and death and brings different characters together: Raquel and Sasha's parents, and Raquel and Elijah. On the adventures, Raquel and Elijah abide by Sasha's ground rules. While these occurrences are unrealistic, they foreground the love among these characters. Sasha's communication helps those who are left behind to grieve. Through mourning, new relationships and experiences unfold. The memory work is important as the characters relive their experiences with Sasha. Revisiting of the past creates new spaces to continue living.

Other young adult novels consider the biological, emotional, and socio-cultural dimensions of cancer, or defy death with the socio-cultural practice of communicating via digital technology. Similar to *The Last Wish of Sasha Cade*, *The Fault in Our Stars* (Green) also deals

with themes of love, friendship, cancer, and death, although it is unique in that the two protagonists, Hazel and Augustus, are both terminally ill with cancer. Augustus dies. While coping with loss, Hazel discovers a letter written by Augustus, which is a eulogy that declares his love for her. Unlike Sasha's ongoing tech-delivered communications, Augustus's letter is found at the end of story, changing Hazel's perspective of death and life. *No One Here is Lonely* (Everett) also addresses the themes of love, death, friendship and family. Eden loses her long-time crush Will before her high school graduation. As she copes with the loss of Will, Will's mother hands Eden a personal account and software preplanned by Will. The anyone-can-call-for-a-companion technology recreates a mock Will with his true voice and personality, deepening Eden's relationship with Will. The negotiating between reality and virtuality in *No One Here is Lonely* and *The Last Wish of Sasha Cade* allows readers to consider the socio-cultural implications of defying death with digital technologies.

Death-themed books play a socializing function in guiding children to particular processes, practices, and beliefs associated with death and the afterlife. Roberta S. Trites, however, argues that there exists a great difference between representing death in literature for children and young adults (118). Books for children tend to represent death as part of a cycle, "an ongoing process of life," whereas mortality has a different purpose in young adult literature. Adolescent characters come to learn that death is more than a *Bildungsroman*, more than stage in growing up; it is permanent (Trites 118). These four children's books represent narrative investigations into understanding death and accepting loss.

The books in this review amplify and complicate death through multiple perspectives, across cultures, and different social practices. The artistic choices in the telling and illustrating of these stories show how socio-cultural factors have a hold on characters' understanding of and response to death. For example, the colour schemes of two texts communicate different messages: the muted hues of *Grandmother's Visit* render a solemn time, whereas the life-giving colours of *The Funeral* remind the reader that life exists alongside death. Character development of the two other texts, *Paws and Edward* and *The Last Wish of Sasha Cade*, offers insights about death: centring the diminishing life force of the main character and the deceased character in the storyline. These books reject concepts of death as a universal,

irreversible, and solely somber occurrences. These storylines are nuanced, complex, and diverse and provide different positions to view and experience death.

Death-themed children's literature should not be for "curing" and "healing" young readers, but it is "a way of affirming and extending" their feeling life and experiences with personally significant texts (Crago 188). These texts can be resources alongside the understandings that readers bring to the sense making of dying. These books have the potential to organize experience into a coherent pattern which gives death-related events specific meanings (K. James 9). These four new children's books may contribute to children's and young adults' new lines of inquiry about and understanding of the complexities and diversity of this life experience.

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