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Afterlife: Exploring and Accepting Ideas Through Children's Literature

Kiley Vandavelde
vandeka@bgsu.edu

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Afterlife:

Exploring and Accepting Ideas Through Children's Literature

Kiley Van De Velde

Honors Project

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Amanda McGuire Rzciznek, English Department, advisor

Barbara Bergstrom, Art Department, advisor

Elizabeth Loo Zemanski, English Department, advisor

Kiley Van De Velde

Amanda McGuire Rzciznek

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INTRODUCTION

This project was inspired by a personal, near-death experience. Upon reflection I understood that had I died, my children would not have had adequate tools to process their grief. Discussions of death and the grieving process are not a topic of everyday discussion. Death is an unescapable reality of the human condition and avoiding this conversation or delaying it until an event occurs could be detrimental to a child's emotional health. With this project, I endeavored to create a tool which would provide a child with the understanding that belief in the afterlife can assuage grief, but these beliefs are up to interpretation and there are many ideas surrounding this concept. Children's books are valuable resources for children because they explore ideas in a visually engaging way, and reading with a loved one provides a comforting, shared experience. Research required several guiding questions. How does grief education benefit children? How does the idea of an afterlife affect children who are grieving? How is the afterlife presented in children's literature currently?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The first line of research for this project was studying published children's books about death and the afterlife. There is a plethora of books on these subjects which follow many

formats. Some books, such as *Getting Over the Blues: A Kid's Guide to Understanding and Coping with Unpleasant Feelings and Depression*, focus on the importance of mental health and provide activities to maintain positivity and coping methods (Frank et al). Others focus on the biological aspects of death, such as *Lifetimes*, explaining that all living things die, and this is a natural and normal process (Mellonie & Ingpen). Some books, like *The Dark* (Snicket), represent death metaphorically while others, like *Dancing at the Pity Party*, are memoirs based on personal experience (Feder). Very few of the books which I read focused on the afterlife. Books that did, such as *The Next Place* outlined an author directed representation of what the afterlife looked like, and the feelings experienced from the perspective of the deceased (Hanson).

A study from the Omega Journal of Death and Dying published a qualitative study of over 100 children's books. The study concluded that about 50% of the books mention an afterlife. Common descriptions of the afterlife in the books included ascension, bright light, perfect paradise, angels, clouds, and reunions of the deceased (Malcolm). This shows that depictions in current literature are somewhat one-sided, providing a decidedly western view of the afterlife. Yet society is diverse, why are other ideas underrepresented? Publishing companies often consider consumers first and readers second. This means that majority groups have higher purchasing power and will heavily influence the books that are lucrative to sell. But this has negative effects on both white and BIPOC children. White children reading books heavily centered around white children receive a misaligned representation of the cultural diversity in their surroundings and can lead to feelings of superiority. BIPOC children that do not see their culture represented in books may turn away from reading or have negative feelings about their own cultures or ideas (Short). Multicultural representation in children's literature attempts to transform the existing social order and ensures greater voice and authority to marginalized

cultures. Cultural validation is important to building confidence and a desire for academic achievement in BIPOC children (Gopalakrishnan).

METHODS

Text in children's books is limited. It is difficult to convey a complex message in few words. Before writing it is important to outline the goals of the book. What should the reader take away? It was important that after reading this book a child would understand that belief in an afterlife is beneficial because it allows for continued connection between the deceased and the child. They would understand what happens after death is a mystery that cannot be known, and there are many different ideas surrounding the afterlife. Finally, the reader understands that what they believe is a choice. The text features effective elements in children's books such as active imagery (seeing a baby spitting out blueberries or seeing a ray of light through a dark and cloudy sky). The text also uses repetition to keep the narrative focused on important take-aways and allows a child to follow a story from a predictable language pattern. Asking direct questions throughout the story gives a child the opportunity to analyze unfamiliar concepts and explore new ideas.

After the text was written considerations were made for illustrations. Illustrations do not merely convey the words on a page but add additional context clues which promote critical reading skills. Figure 1 shows an example of this; These pages show that the person the main character lost is an immediate family member as opposed to a friend or pet, someone which they would share mealtimes with and read stories with at night. Additionally, color is used to convey emotions or feelings, such as blue to convey sadness in Figure 1, or the warm, red color in the mother's shirt (Figure 2) to convey love and comfort. Though the protagonist is white, diverse cultural imagery is included such as Day of the Dead in Figure 3. Showing people who dress and

look different from one another reinforces the idea that belief systems are inherently different (Figure 4).

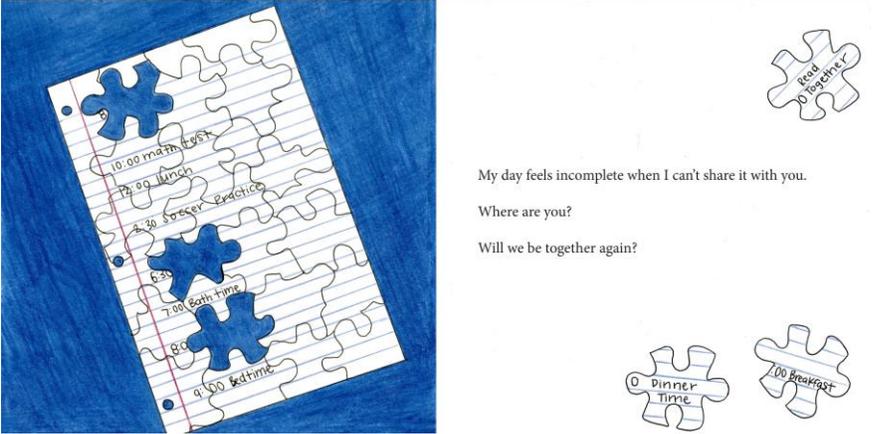


Figure 1. Context clues



Figure 2 Warmth and Contentment



Figure 3 Day of the Dead



Figure 4 Diversity

RESULTS AND IMPLICATIONS

The end product reflects the goals I set from the start. The book can be used as a tool in the home, or in the classroom. It can be used for actively grieving children, or to introduce a potentially difficult subject in a safe and traditional way. It can be used in classrooms to promote conversations between students about different ideas, and help students think critically about what they believe and why. School usage is limited to general classroom discussion, however. School counselors would most likely not be able to use this book to counsel grieving students, because considerations must be made to family views or religion.

This book fills a gap in current literature by focusing on ideas other than western, Christian portrayals of the afterlife. It is free from religious implication and considers only ideas, which leaves a child free to believe in an afterlife without first having to meet the requirements of a particular discipline. The book is objective and does not push my ideas on the reader but allows the reader to explore their own thoughts and come to their own conclusions. This book focuses on only two main ideas of the afterlife (reincarnation and the afterlife as another place), though there are many concepts of the afterlife. Future research could include an in depth look at belief systems around the world or throughout history, which would give the book more cultural specificity. Adding length to the book would provide more opportunity to involve other cultural points of views (other than Mexican, Buddhist, or Christian). Back matter could be included that describes afterlife beliefs of the individual cultures represented on the multicultural spread (Figure 4). A series could be developed which focuses on individual components of managing grief, such as focusing on happy memories with loved ones, recognizing sudden and unexpected emotions, or how to seek additional support.

Coming to terms with death of loved ones is a reality that children will eventually face. Tools such as illustrated books provide children with insight on how to manage grief, and these can be delivered proactively. This project encompasses different ideas in an attempt to address the benefit that belief in the afterlife confers to the process of healing.

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