

# Bibliotherapy and Loss: Separation, Divorce, and Death in Jewish Children's Literature

At the Association of Jewish Libraries Convention held in Livingston, N.J., on June 23, 1987, Dr. Joanne E. Bernstein and Merrily F. Hart presented a program on "Bibliotherapy and Loss: Separation, Divorce, and Death." An abbreviated report of Dr. Bernstein's remarks is followed by Merrily Hart's paper and bibliography.

## Children and Loss

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Many changes in a small child's life involve loss. At an early age, children are fascinated with disappearance [loss], and return. Peek-a-boo is a game that infants love to play. The concept/phrase "all gone" fascinates and delights children as they experiment with making things disappear. They discover that some things don't reappear. Children's tears at mother's disappearance for an evening out, or for work, are heartfelt. The security that she will return as promised develops slowly. Going to bed, going to nursery school, and a haircut all involve loss. Death is, of course, the ultimate loss.

In a frequently quoted pioneering study, Maria Nagy (1959) explored the child's concept of death. Children aged three to five deny the finality of death. They regard it as a separation or departure and expect the return of the loved object or person. Sometime between the ages of five and nine, children begin to see death as a permanent event.

Children go through many of the same reactions to separation and death as adults do. Initially they feel shock; they may have severe somatic symptoms including sleep loss, lack of appetite, and shortness of breath. The child may initially deny the loss, as previously described, or feel anger, fear, embarrassment, and depression.

The child's curiosity about death must be satisfied. Children may want to touch a dead bird, or dig it up after burial to find out what happened to it. Behavior that at first might seem morbid or gruesome is natural childhood investigation. Finally, children experience and exhibit sadness, but their behavior is not like that of mature adults. The phrase "short-sadness span" has been used by Martha Wolfenstein (1965) to describe children's abbreviated mourning behavior, in which they dip in and out of grief.

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## Bibliotherapy and the Judaica Children's Librarian

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What is Bibliotherapy? As a librarian friend of mine asked, "Is that when someone has a problem and you give them a book about it?" In the broadest and simplest terms it is, but it is usually more inclusive. Bibliotherapy is "the use of books to influence total development, a process of interaction between the reader and literature which is used for personality assessment, adjustment, growth, clinical and mental health. It is a concept that ideas inherent in selected reading material can have a beneficial, even therapeutic effect upon the mental and physical ills of the reader" (Good, 1969, p. 58). In bibliotherapy, the counselor or librarian provides guidance in the solution of personal problems through directed reading.

Everyone can be helped through reading. Bibliotherapy includes the self-examination and insights that are gained from reading either fiction or non-fiction. Reading can be self-directed, selected by an adviser, or even accidental. It can be used to create a richer, healthier, more integrated life if:

1. The author communicates with the reader.
2. The reader understands and responds with conscious awareness.
3. Attitudinal and/or behavioral changes occur, either self-induced or with the help of outsiders.

In its most formal manifestation, a team consisting of a trained therapist, librarian, and possibly others provide therapy, books, and discussion. In a more informal situation, it may be something closer to the familiar concept of "reader's adviser."

Books offer the opportunity to cope with a problem in private. In reading fiction, the child can identify with the character in private. Books provide catharsis and help the child realize he isn't the only one who has this problem, he isn't alone, he isn't different from everyone else. Stories extend possible solutions, lend insight.

Adult self-help books are currently very popular. Books used in bibliotherapy provide a variety of types of self-help. The first step in coping with the fear and imagination surrounding an event is to understand the reality. The events surrounding death can be explained. The decay of the body and the ceremonies practiced can be described.

The facts are never as awful as the story the child's imagination supplies. The adult must also admit that he does not always know the answers.

The adult guide does have certain responsibilities. The librarian or guide must show a good sense of timing when providing the books and must be available for discussion when needed. The guide must have read the book. (I never put anything on the shelves in the children's room that I haven't read.)

Jewish children's librarians working in synagogues and schools can have special impact as book consultants for bibliotherapy. As a first step, they can build a book collection including titles that address life's problems. They can inform teachers, counselors, psychologists, and rabbis of particular books that deal sensitively and effectively with these problems. They can advocate the use of books as tools in the process of therapy. Finally, they can learn to lead discussion groups in concert with a trained therapist.

There is a growing awareness and interest in bibliotherapy. The Ohio Library Association publishes a newsletter prepared by the Task Force of the Outreach and Special Services Division. Doris Robinson in the Cuyahoga County Public Library system frequently prepares brochures on specific bibliotherapy topics.

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## BERNSTEIN

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Adults can help children through the stages of mourning, allowing them to express their grief. In the first phase, youngsters must experience the pain as they test and accept the reality of their loss. In the second stage, they decathectize [rid themselves of emotional attachments to] memories related to loss. They may discuss past experiences or look at pictures of the friend or relative who has moved or died, and remember the bad times along with the good. In the third phase, the child begins to build substitute relationships for the absent friend or relative. Young children look toward the adults in their lives for support and guidance, and with that support, they can cope with their crisis and go on with life.

(Summarized by Merrily F. Hart.)

### References

Nagy, Maria. "Child's View of Death" in *Meaning of Death*, edited by Herman Feifel. New York: McGraw Hill, 1959, pp. 79-98.

Wolfenstein, Martha; Kliman, Gilbert, eds. *Children and the Death of a President*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965.

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## HART

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Two excellent sources of titles for use in bibliotherapy are:

Bernstein, Joanne. *Books to Help Children Cope With Separation and Loss*. 2nd ed. New York: Bowker, 1983.

An annotated book-length bibliography with an excellent introduction.

Dreyer, S.S. *The Bookfinder: When Kids Need Books*. Circle Pines, Minn., 1985.

Contains a useful index with very specific subject headings such as: loneliness; separation anxiety; limb—missing; marriage—inter-religious; grandparent—living in home of, etc. Over 1000 books (90% fiction) are indexed.

Both these books are currently being updated.

The following bibliography of Jewish titles relating to loss includes the themes of aging and death, family disintegration, family conflict and divorce, moving and relocation, alienation, and loss through illness. Some titles, although informative, will only be useful in a few cases. The many stories of immigration convey the sense of dislocation and the alienation that is also felt in shorter relocations. Books on the Holocaust that deal with loss and separation have been omitted, because the Holocaust is such an overwhelming topic that it smothers other themes in a novel (Meir, 1987). Many good bibliographies of Holocaust books for young readers are available.

### References

Good, Carter, ed. *Dictionary of Education*. New York: McGraw Hill, 1969, p. 58.

Meir, Rachel, "Introducing Holocaust Literature to Children," *Judaica Librarianship* Vol. 3 No. 1-2 (1986-1987), p. 65-67.

## Bibliography on Loss in Jewish Children's Literature

\*=Particularly useful for bibliotherapy.

### I. Aging—Senility—Death

\*Benjamin, Carol Lea. *Nobody's Baby Now*. New York: Macmillan, 1984.

When Grandma Minnie moves in with Olivia's family, Olivia is displaced and distressed, but she soon comes to adore and appreciate her grandma in this story about first love and growing up. After strong resistance, Olivia accepts her grandma's physical deterioration and the necessity of her move to a nursing home. For age 10-14.

\*Blue, Rose. *Grandma Didn't Wave Back*. Illustrated by Ted Lewin. New York: Dell, 1978.

Debbie's beloved grandma becomes forgetful and a bit senile. Debbie finds it difficult to accept the fact that grandma must move to a nursing home. For age 8-12.

\*Caseley, Judith. *When Grandpa Came To Stay*. Greenwillow, 1986.

Excellent picture book for preschool and early elementary grades with a story about Grandpa coming to live with the family after Grandma has died. Minimal Jewish content, but well integrated into the story.

Chaikin, Miriam. *I Should Worry, I Should Care*. Illustrated by Richard Egielski. New York: Harper & Row, 1979.

Molly and her immigrant family have just moved to a nice new apartment in Brooklyn, but Molly misses her old friends and has to adjust to her new life. The death and funeral of a retarded adult neighbor whom Molly has befriended, form a chapter in the book. For age 7-12.

Clifford, Eth. *The Remembering Box*. New York: Holiday House, 1985.

A lovely story with lots of Jewish content and a warm and realistic relationship between a young boy and his grandma. Her death provides a good point for beginning a discussion about death. For age 8-12.

Derman, Martha. *The Friendstone*. New York: Dial Press, 1981.

Sally's summer in the Catskills in the 1920s, her friendship with Jewish Evie, and her special relationship with her tolerant great-grandmother help her to outgrow the prejudices of her parents. Despite some stereotyping of Jews, the treatment of Sally's great-grandmother's death and Evie's helpful discussion of Jewish mourning practices rescue this book. For age 8-12.

Geller, Norman. *I Don't Want To Visit Grandma Anymore*. Illustrated by Albert Tomlinson. Auburn, ME: Norman Geller, 1984.

A didactic and wordy story about visiting a recuperating grandma in a nursing home. The black and white pictures are useful, but not wonderful. For age 8-12.