INTRODUCTION TO DEATH-RELATED LITERATURE FOR CHILDREN: A SPECIAL ISSUE FOR OMEGA, JOURNAL OF DEATH AND DYING

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INTRODUCTION

More than 25 years ago, I became involved in preparations for, and then actually teaching, our inaugural classes in what I believe was the first college-level, credit-bearing, full-term course on Children and Death. At that time, I came across a few examples of death-related literature for children. Not many books on death-related subjects were available then, but they were fascinating.

Who could fail to be intrigued and charmed by a story (Brown, The Dead Bird) in which children encounter a dead bird, bury it, put a marker over its grave, and sing a song of lamentation? Or what about the implications of a story (Smith, A Taste of Blackberries) that describes the aftermath of a situation in which a boy’s friend dies after disturbing a beehive and being stung by a swarm of bees? Or a third story (Buck, The Big Wave) about how a young Japanese boy faces life after he is orphaned by a tidal wave that kills all of the other members of his family? Even most contemporary college students, whom many critics think are most notorious for what they have NOT read, have actually read E. B. White’s Charlotte’s Web, a tale of a little girl, a pet pig, and an amazing spider.

Much has changed since those early years. We now have available to us a very large body of death-related literature that has been written and published to be read by or with children. All of us who undertook to prepare this special issue sought to draw attention to the richness of this body of literature, to reflect on its development, and to point to some of the many ways in which it can be
used constructively to help children cope with death and loss—especially those children who have already experienced a significant loss in their lives. In the eight articles that make up this special issue, we pursue these aims in the following ways:

• Joy Johnson reviews the history and comments on the current status of death-related literature for children
• Karen L. Carney describes selected examples of activity books for children and remarks on their uses
• Carol F. Berns discusses bibliotherapy, ways of using books to help children, with an emphasis on the therapeutic uses of death-related storybooks to help children who are coping with death-related losses
• Charles A. Corr surveys selected examples of death-related literature for children in order to identify and describe what they have to offer in four important topical areas: bereavement, grief, and mourning; spirituality; loss of grandparents; and pet loss. If we set aside instances in which a book is mentioned or examined in more than one of these articles, taken together they explore a total of 162 death-related books for children.

To complement the emphasis in these articles on death-related literature for children, we also invited Donna L. Schuurman to select and describe what she judged to be the best books designed to guide adults as they work to help bereaved children.

Three brief comments can complete this Introduction and send you on to the articles that follow. First, we all recognize that the lists of examples of literature for both children and adults that we offer in this special issue could never hope to be comprehensive. There are simply too many titles currently available and more being published every day, as well as too many ways to make use of them. You will likely know or think of additional titles and ways to use them. Please share such information and suggestions with us (send e-mails to charlescorr@mindspring.com).

Second, most of the literature that is described in this special issue can be read or used by many, if not most, children on their own. However, there may be some children for whom that is not the most appropriate way to proceed. For them and for many others, the best alternative may be for a caring adult to read, explore, and discuss a book together with the individual child or group of children.

Third, some of the titles mentioned in these articles may be out of print when you read this special issue. Don’t let that stop you. Quite often, even when books are no longer commercially available from their original publishers and retailers, copies can still be found in local public, school, or academic libraries, through interlibrary loan services, or via used book services (e.g., Amazon.com).