Literature, A Window to Understanding: Using Children’s Books to Process Loss

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Using Children’s Books to Process Loss

By

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Abstract

This thesis explores how literature can smooth the process of grief. Specifically, it focuses on the loss of pets through the shape of a children’s book with a target audience of children ages two to six. The book is designed to be used with children as loss occurs in their life to provide them with a new lens to learn about what has happened. The book contains back matter for the adult to review to learn about loss and children, and it will also provide discussion starters to open conversations between the adult and the child. The goal of this book is that as the characters find understanding and hope, the children reading it—or having it read to them—will be able to experience the same sense of calm following what could be a traumatic experience. The second piece to this project is a written reflection following the composition of the children’s book which explores the writing process. There is also an expository section which discusses similar resources and research which guided the choices made in the production of this children’s book.
Expository Section

Literature Review and Influences

Literature can be used to give children an understanding of what is happening in their own lives as well as to provide them an understanding of experiences they have not had. An issue of *The Reading Teacher* published in 2013 contains an article that demonstrates this concept clearly through the responses of children with and without incarcerated parents who read a picture book about the criminal justice system. This article argues that literature for children should be a place where they can see themselves as well as relate to others and gain a sense of understanding, using the metaphor of “mirrors, windows, and doors” (Oslick, 1).

The phrase ‘mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors’ was first introduced by Rudine Sims Bishop in 1990 to discuss the importance of diversity of characters in literature for children. In her article, she references Nancy Larrick’s landmark article, “The All-White World of Children’s Books” which stated that “6,340,000 nonwhite children are learning to read and to understand the American way of life in books which either omit them entirely or scarcely mention them” (Larrick, 1965). While this pattern is being
improved on now, the progress is slow. There are still significantly more children’s books that contain all-white characters and when authors and illustrators choose to include characters who are people of color, the identity is sometimes used blatantly as simply a token. Sims Bishop follows this line up in her own article by explaining that “when children cannot find themselves reflected in the books they read, or the images they see are distorted, negative, or laughable they learn a powerful lesson” (Sims Bishop, 1990). This lesson is not a positive one but rather is devaluing. The mirror concept is children reading about themselves—or a character like them—in a book. This way the child sees they are not alone. The window gives students a glimpse into the experiences of others, and the sliding glass door concept is the idea of using books as a place to initiate action, questions, and discussion. This concept can be applied not only to the way a child looks but also their culture and the life events they are going through, such as getting through the death of a pet or other common issue of childhood. This is exactly the mission of “Memories of Milo.”

Talking about death with children is commonly considered taboo in American culture because as a society, we tend to hide realities from children as long as we can in an attempt to preserve their childlike purity. While this is nice to some extent, it also can result in harder awakenings as they grow up
and begin to experience the world without their parents and guardians as a filter. While the grieving of a pet may be considered to be less serious to most than the grieving of a loved one or, for example, a parent, it is often a child’s first experience with death, making it serious for them. The Child Development Institute published an article entitled “How to Talk to Kids About the Death of a Pet” in 2011 which highlights these issues. While parents may have good intentions when they attempt to explain the death of a pet using alternate wording, their choices could actually have damaging effects. The use of the word “sleep” can be one of the worst. The Child Development Institute suggests parents “try not to say that the pet will be ‘put to sleep.’ This can confuse young children and they may fear going “to sleep” at night themselves in case the same thing happens to them” (How to Talk to Kids, 2011). Instead, if the family is aware of the pet becoming old or ill, parents can prepare the children by starting conversations with them about the current situation and the cycle of life while encouraging them to continue to enjoy their furry family member.

Direct and open conversations between children and their trusted adults can actually enable children not only to learn about their own mourning process but also can help the healing process. Dr. Deborah Serani, in Psychology Today, suggests that parents explain the situation truthfully and
quickly to their children, adding that “the truth gives an explanation for [the parents’] tears and pain” and can teach the child how to work through losses like these better in the future. Serani also suggests that engaging in conversation about the pet is ideal for children as they can ask questions to clarify their understanding. On top of this, the conversation may lead to reminiscing over memories with the pet or loved one which is ideal because “research shows that the pain of reliving memories or sharing stories actually aids in healing and closure” (Serani, 2016). Remembering times spent together, while at first might be challenging, can eventually turn into a happy thing and restore laughter within the family.

Every child will travel through the grieving and recovery process differently depending on who they are as a person, their age, their relationship with the animal that passed, and also the way the pet died. Clinical psychologist, Abigail Marks, who specializes in childhood grief states that “when a pet dies suddenly, it highlights the unpredictability of the world. It tells children that the people and animals they love can die without warning” (Fraga, 2017). Children have been shown to recover quicker when they are aware that an animal has a shorter lifespan or the animal is nearing death as opposed to accidents that end in death. As mentioned previously, the child’s age can also affect the grieving process. With different ages comes
different developmental levels which will change how a child perceives the death of a pet. Jessica Harvey, a psychotherapist specializing in pet grief, shared that “kids under the age of 5 will have a hard time understanding that the pet is gone forever because it’s difficult for them to grasp the concept of death” (Fraga, 2017). Young children are not yet able to conceptualize concepts that are not tangible. Children might not show emotion immediately and that is okay and generally is just reflecting their developmental level, they most likely will still be affected by the situation.

There are many articles written by qualified people out there for the public to read on what to do and not to when it comes to helping a child through the grieving process, especially after the death of a pet. However, this information is not always something a parent would think to look up when they themselves are also preparing for or dealing with the loss of their pet.

Something that might be more accessible and quickly available could be a children’s book. Rudine Sims Bishop said that reading is “a means of self-affirmation, and readers often seek their mirrors in books” (Sims Bishop, 1990). As humans, people want to read about not only people who look like them but also people who live like them. People want to read about characters in their same situation. For example, a child who is entering kindergarten in the fall might spend the whole summer picking books at the
library with the common theme of school. The child is trying to learn about their experience through these texts.

This applies not only to children but to adults as well. Oftentimes it is easier to address difficult concepts for personal experiences through sharing literature rather than having the conversation out right. It could be helpful to read books about losing a pet to a child experiencing the loss of a pet. The hope with “Memories of Milo” is that it will fill this need. It can be a conversation starter, helping to ease the pain and awkward feelings that might form around the subject of death. However, its support does not stop there. The book also includes more prompts to keep that healthy conversation going. It is important to continue the conversation beyond the book. Something featured in every article I read regarding how children handle death, including the Psychology Today article, “The Do’s and Don’ts of Talking with a Child about Death,” is that one of the worst things we can do in a child’s life is brush off a death and hush all conversation about it. Instead, it is important to let children ask questions so they can process the feelings they are experiencing. A study conducted on the effects of discussion used as a treatment for bereavement worked with children who had suffered the death of an immediate family member through group meetings where they partook in discussions as well as activities to help encourage the healing (Morrison,
1996). The results of this study showed the “treatment facilitated children feeling less constricted, angry, and better able to cope with the emotions they will continue to experience” (Morrison, 1996). This is why giving children the chance to read about, and then discuss, the death of a character in a story is so vital to both the healing and understanding of the death of a pet. Other professionals would agree that conversation helps this process, such as Dr. Abigail Marks, a clinical psychologist specializing in childhood grief in San Francisco, who says if children “are asking about the details of the pet’s death, it’s a sign that they want to talk about it. They are looking for [the adult’s] comfort” (Fraga, 2017).

There are already several existing children’s books written about the death of family members, deaths of animals, and more specifically, the deaths of pets. *Cry, Heart, but Never Break* by Glenn Ringtved (2001) is a touching story about children who lose their grandmother. The concept was explained artfully and appropriately for the age level the book was written for, encouraging that death should not be feared. It even features a character called Death who looks like a softer version of the stereotypical grim reaper we have come to know. In the book, Death is a kind, calm character who the children sit at the kitchen table with all night as he sips his coffee. This choice Ringtved made painted death as something ordinary rather than scary. It does
a nice job, but it is about the loss of a grandmother and so does not quite hit home as directly as it could for a child who lost a pet if the book was about the death of a pet.

A second book, written for a younger audience, is *The Goodbye Book* by Todd Parr (2015). He wrote this book in the same style he has written his other books such as *The Peace Book* (2004), and *The Feelings Book* (2000). These books are short, sweet, written simply, and filled with bright colors. Each page features one sentence describing what might happen when someone is going through the death of a loved one. The main character in the book is a goldfish who lost a goldfish friend. It is very simple and covers the ground level of what should probably be addressed within a children’s book about working through death like the feelings a child might feel and what they might do as they work up to being their regular selves again. All of these are good to have, but the book is almost too simple and might not be enough for all children. Plus, it is more descriptive and structured rather than telling the story of someone losing a pet. This creates a gap in the current published literature for stories that artfully reveal the pain and recovery involved in the grieving process.

Taking a more descriptive, non-fiction approach is a common theme among some of the more well-known children’s books about death. Another
example is *When a Pet Dies* by Fred Rogers (1988), also known as Mr. Rogers from *Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood*. This book follows a similar structure as *The Goodbye Book* with the short, direct sentences on each page. There is no story involved, but the book describes what happens when someone or something dies and that it is okay to feel what we feel and have lingering questions.

*Lifetimes: The Beautiful Way to Explain Death to Children* by Bryan Mellonie (1983) is a step closer to the more artistic side of children’s books about death. It features lyrical poetry as it explains the truth about the life cycle for animals, plants, insects, and people. It is good that these books address the truth about life and how it must have a beginning and an ending and that it is only natural to get emotional about death at times. However, they still create the same hole for a children’s book about death that tells a story which can tend to be easier to relate to, especially for young children.

One book that artfully presents the death of a dog is a book called *The Rough Patch* by Brian Lies (2018). The structure of this book is similar to the idea I had in mind for my own work. However, it has some elements that I have adjusted in order to truly fill in the gaps that the current selection of books on this subject are lacking. For example, the characters in this children’s book are all animals. While animals are easy for children to relate to, I have made mine human characters to fill this hole in currently available
children’s literature on this topic. What is admirable about this book is that it does not linger on the actual death of the pet, but instead shows the pain that the dog’s owner felt after the death of his dog. The two characters had grown a garden together and after the dog’s death, the fox lets the garden die and fill with dark weeds and prickly, thorny plants. This is important to show children that feelings they might be experiencing like sadness, anger, and isolation are common. In the garden, a pumpkin grows out of nowhere. The fox decides to keep it and at the end of the book, he enters it into the county fair. The owner’s pumpkin places in the top three and he has the chance to take home a puppy. At first he is not sure, but on second-thought he adopts a new dog to take home. It creates a great cyclical structure for the book, however there are a few problems with this ending. As with many other children’s books on the subject of death, healing is commonly portrayed as it was in The Rough Patch, through replacement. I want to try to avoid this in my own writing because I want to be able to show that recovery and happiness can come without getting another dog. Replacing a pet is not bad by any means, but children are not in control of whether or not their parents will choose to take that path as the family heals. I would prefer to show a different way of healing so the idea of bringing home a new pet can be a natural thought that comes to the entire family when they are ready.
It is nice that *The Rough Patch* tells the story of death, grieving, and healing through characters within a story. One common theme to be observed between books that do this same thing within a storytelling format is that many of them tell the story using animals as characters. This anthropomorphism can be found in many children's books and fables in order to convey a powerful message such as in *The Three Little Pigs* and *The Little Red Hen* which both teach messages about hard work paying off. Anthropomorphism, authors giving animals human traits, can also be found in the adult world. *Animal Farm* by George Orwell (1945) is an excellent example. In this novel, Orwell used a barnyard scene and farm animal characters to use his book to discuss the events of the Russian Revolution. More instances of this can be found in political cartoonists who turn political figures into animals and giving political issues human qualities. This technique can convey clear messages to adults and it is argued that it can also open up a window of possibility for children to engage in conversations with their parents about topics they might not have understood otherwise.

To further investigate this claim, Carolyn Burke and Joby Copenhaver from the National Council of Teachers of English Language Arts journal examined two texts that Joby identified as prominent in her childhood. Both of the children's books contained instances of anthropomorphism. One of
these books was *The Rabbits’ Revenge* by Kurt Weise (1940), which follows the rabbits’ plans to prevent a man from hunting and killing them to get their fur to make a coat. The book revealed two sides of the issue of hunting: the man who needed clothes, and the rabbits who wanted to live. The book allowed young Joby to see both sides of the situation, and “hearing this story about a hunter going out to kill innocent rabbits, read by a well-loved father who also hunted (for food), brought tears and conflict” (Burke, 2004). This conflict sparked conversation between preschooler, Joby, and her father about the issue of hunting and its fairness, settling on the idea that killing out of necessity is acceptable while taking away an animal’s life out of anger or for fun was not. The authors of this study reflect on this experience, declaring that “by giving the rabbits the capacity to act with human reasoning, it was possible for Joby to reflect on hunting from the perspective of the hunter as well as the hunted” (Burke, 2004). The rabbits were given human characteristics and voices which gave their lives and experiences more value in the story as well as to the young reader’s mind. Many analysts of children’s literature believe that using animals in stories pertaining to powerful human issues can provide a relatable context for children while still allowing emotional distance. Burke writes that “the intellectual and emotional distance that the animals’ role-playing allows children and their mentoring adults
grants space in which to become reflective and critical concerning life
problems and life choices” (Burke, 2004). From this point of view, addressing
important or controversial issues using human characters could make the
issue too personal and a defensive wall might build itself, holding the child
and their parents back from the ability to take time to reflect and discuss
together. This could explain the choice behind multiple books about the loss
of a pet using animal characters to portray the story such as in *The Rough
Patch* as well as in *Big Cat, Little Cat* by Elisha Cooper which follows the lives
of a young cat who learns from an older, bigger cat before the big cat dies and
is no longer around.

Others argue that anthropomorphism has a negative side, especially
with the rise of the Internet and all the videos it has to share of animals
“acting like humans.” Patricia Ganea, a Toronto University psychologist, used
three to five year olds in an experiment to see the effects of
anthropomorphism on children. She gave the children factual information
about animals first and then gave them information in “fantastical
anthropomorphized way,” such as comparing their actions to a similar action
humans might do (Milman, 2016). The results showed that the children had
trouble remembering the actual facts after being told the animals were
basically like humans but with fur. The concerns with these results, Ganea
said, is that while anthropomorphizing animals can help bring empathy
toward an animal that might have been mistreated, it can also “lead to an
inaccurate understanding of biological processes in the natural world” and
“inappropriate behaviors towards wild animals, such as trying to adopt a wild
animal as a ‘pet’ or misinterpreting the actions of a wild animal” (Milman,
2016). Ganea has concerns about children’s media increasing these
misconceptions. While many animals have been shown to exhibit human-like
behaviors at times, it would be wrong to say they exhibit these behaviors for
the same motivations as humans do.

Those who see anthropomorphism as a positive in children’s literature
and adult entertainment and media as well seem to outnumber those who
disagree and they seem to be arguing in multiple contexts. Those for
anthropomorphism appreciate it for creating a sense of relatability between a
child and an animal when discussing controversial issues. Those who are
against it tend to be focused on its possible negative effects in the future on
science and muddying explanations of animal’s behaviors. This group, while
they mention the effects of children’s media and some of today’s most popular
humanized ducks and mice, their main concern seems to be with its effects on
science. Seeing as this work is focused on a children’s book about the loss of a
pet which is not a controversial or political issue, and noting that there is a
lack of children’s books about death using humans as the main characters, I will write my book about a human family in order to fill that gap and hopefully bridge the distance that anthropomorphism can create. This distance is necessary at times, particularly with powerful, divisive, or painful topics. While the topic of death can be painful, the hope is that having the characters be humans can connect a child closer to them both through the difficult times as well as during the resolution and therefore can lead to a peaceful ending and a positive, reflective discussion between a child and their family.
Body

Personal Inspiration

More than other students, I grew up in elementary schools because both of my parents worked as elementary school teachers. After my school day finished, I would walk to their classrooms and help them with any tasks they needed to complete before we could head home for the night. Often this would mean organizing the classroom library, putting books back into their assigned spots and sometimes picking books to showcase on the shelves or at the front of the room. These tasks would often take me longer than they likely should have because I would get distracted and start reading through each of the stories. This experience fostered a love for children’s literature, which was resparked for me during my second year of college when I took the Honors Children’s Literature colloquium on campus.

This pre-education major class is a requirement for all future elementary level teachers at Western Oregon University. The course educates students about the various awards children’s literature can receive, the important role of illustrations, and the necessity of diversity in children’s literature. Through the work of this class, I was exposed to over 80 new
children’s books and novels that were each very intentional with the themes presented both in the text and the illustrations. This exposure opened a world of understanding for me. I realized the depth of thought and planning that went into children's literature. There are countless things to consider, ranging from genre to abstract concepts, and representation in the creation of characters. As an Elementary Education major, this course left me feeling motivated to construct a rich library for my future students filled with quality literature for children including a variety of topics, and characters.

Specifically, my interest in intentional literature, such as stories for children to read in partnership with an experience they are having, peaked this summer. For the past four summers, I have worked weekly for a family with two sons. The summer of 2018 was important for the oldest son who was anxious about the nearing start of his school career. Over the last month of summer, I noticed the majority of the books he checked out at the library were focused on subjects pertaining to school. He was using literature to collect information about what his school experience may be like and then would ask follow up questions after having the story read to him. When the family lost their dog of fourteen years at the end of August, the boys struggled to process that loss. I realized they had no literature to help them work
through the situation. This experience, paired with the older child’s interest in books about school drew me to this project.

As an Elementary Education major, building a diverse classroom library is something that is a top priority for me. Books help students in a variety of ways from actually giving them the skill of reading, all the way to learning about their world, whether it is how the world works, or social education. It is important that books available to classroom teachers contain a variety of subjects, as well as diverse characters representing all sorts of identities. This project will contribute to my goals to create a well-developed classroom library as I am creating a book that I, along with other teachers, could add to our libraries. This project will also serve as a resource outside of the school context, as a book that families could sit down and read together. To do this, the book has been paired with appropriate back matter to aid adults in opening discussions with children after experiencing the loss of a pet.

While the target audience for the creative project itself may be children between the ages of two and six years old who have recently experienced the death of a loved pet, the reasoning behind it should be applicable to almost anyone with a child in their life. Death is simply a part of the life cycle. Although the topic covered in my thesis project and children’s book is focused
on the loss of a pet, the feelings of grief can be directly compared to the loss of a family member, neighbor, or friend. For many people, discussing death can be an uncomfortable topic, particularly since everyone handles loss and grief in their own unique way. Talking about death with children can become even harder, especially since in our society we tend to underestimate what children can comprehend.

Something discussed in many classes I have taken on the development of children, as well as in the Psychology Today article, “The Do's and Don'ts of Talking with a Child about Death,” is that one of the worst things we can do in a child’s life is brush off a death and hush all conversation about it. Instead, it is important to let children ask questions so they can process the feelings they are experiencing. Multiple studies have been conducted on the effects of discussion used as a treatment for bereavement. One showed that children who had suffered the death of an immediate family member were treated through group meetings where they partook in discussions as well as activities to help encourage the healing. The results of this study showed the “treatment facilitated children feeling less constricted, angry, and better able to cope with the emotions they will continue to experience” (Morrison, 17).

This is why giving children the chance to read about, and then discuss, the
death of a character in a story is so vital to both the healing and understanding of the death of a pet.

Literature can also be used to teach children understanding of experiences they have not gone through, such as in the previously mentioned example of the responses of children with and without incarcerated parents after reading a picture book about the criminal justice system, documented in the March, 2013 issue of *The Reading Teacher*. This article makes reference to the Rudine Sims Bishop metaphor of literature for children being “mirrors, windows, and doors,” to explain how children in the study gained understanding of an experience they had not had through reading a children’s book, as well as how children in situations reflected in the book were able to make associations with the characters in the story (Oslick, 1).

Children’s books about death may be less common currently, but there are several already published and well-known. One of these is *Cry, Heart, But Never Break*, by Glenn Ringtved (2001). This book serves as an inspiration for this project in that they both address difficult experiences. In *Cry, Heart, But Never Break*, the grim reaper comes to a house to collect the grandmother on her final night. Instead of it being something scary, the grim reaper is shown as a calm, kind character. While this is not a character that will be introduced
in this children’s book, the concept of death being soft instead of scary will be an important concept to include.

Throughout my time working on this project, I have also been a student teaching in a dual-immersion kindergarten class in which 70% of the school day is in the context of Spanish. Working in this context and attempting to find resources to share with my students in Spanish has been a whole new level of challenging. There are definitely resources out there, but they are not always going to be the first link available to click on. I cannot simply adapt the strategies and ideas provided to me in my university courses. Oftentimes the best resources are ones that have been shared or recommended to me by my mentor teacher and other staff at this school, or resources that I have come up with on my own. This situation has opened my eyes to a new realm of literature which is bilingual and Spanish language children’s books. In the school and classroom libraries, I enjoy taking time to review the selection of books available and to see how many books we have available in Spanish versus English. Questions that run through my mind are, *Are the books written in Spanish simply translations of popular English children’s books? Do we have books written in Spanish for native Spanish speakers? Are the books culturally authentic?* The school I spend my time at has a mix of authors whose native language is Spanish as well as popular English-speaking authors who have
had their most famous works translated into Spanish to reach more children. While this mix is a positive thing to have, writing my own children’s book about the death of a pet got my mind thinking once more; Are there books written in Spanish for children about death and pet loss?

It turns out there are several stories written in Spanish about loss available for children, even for varying age levels. Two of these books which relate directly to the loss of a pet are Yo siempre te querré, by Hans Wilhem (1985) and Para siempre, by Camino García (2016). The first tells a story similar to the one I have been inspired to tell about a child and their close relationship with their dog, Elfi, who grew up much faster than the child and passed away. The second story brings attention to the many metaphors and explanations adults provide to children after loss occurs rather than explaining death as it is to the child, through the story of a young girl and the deaths of her pets that she has experienced. These are excellent resources which I have recommended to families in the back matter of my book. However, what troubles me is how difficult it was to find these books even through all the research I had done on books relating to pet loss. While I am not a native Spanish speaker, I am bilingual and have written my book in both English and Spanish so that it can serve as a bilingual resource and hopefully support double the families in that way. As mentioned, I have also provided
resources in the back matter for families and have done my research on available literature in an attempt to primarily suggest titles not only in Spanish, but also books that authentically represent Latinx culture and families. Popularizing multilingual literature and books written by authors of color is an important next step in the development of children's literature and is something I feel very passionate about supporting, especially given all of the research about children needing to see themselves in literature.
Planning

Characters

Finn

- Main character
- Age: 5
- Hair: extremely curly hair, short-medium length on head, light brown with orange tints
- Eyes: hazel

Milo

- Dying dog/another main character
- Breed: German Short-haired Pointer
- Age: 14
  - Will start as a younger, more active dog
  - This could mean adding white around Milo’s face region to show aging throughout the friendship montage pages

Finn’s dad

- Job: tries to ease the loss of Milo, also downplays the reality of the situation for Finn
- Age: 37
• Hair: short brown hair, could be curly if it were longer
• Eyes: hazel

Finn’s mom
• Job: delivers solid emotional help at the end of the story to Finn
  ○ This is also emotional help for the reader as well
• Age: 37
• Hair: just-beyond-shoulder-length, curly/wavy, brown/auburn
• Eyes: blue/green

Outline

1. Introduce Finn and Milo as best friends.

2. Happy montage of what the two do together.
   a. Possible illustration notes:
      i. In this montage, we start to see hints of Milo aging from adulthood into old age, but we would see Finn changing the most since he is growing from toddler into child whereas Milo was already an adult when Finn was born.
      ii. This could also be a montage from recent times so Finn would be about five years old in every illustration, and Milo would be an adult.
3. Milo becomes distant.

4. Finn grows concerned.
   a. Has a conversation with parents about Milo being “sick.”

5. Finn gives Milo time and space but notices no improvement.
   a. Dad shares that Milo is just getting old.

6. Milo dies.

7. Finn goes through several different emotions.
   a. These are explained.

8. Finn has a chat with his mother about giving animals the best life we can while they are with us and how their memories live forever.
   a. This gives a sense of peace to the story and the reader.
   b. Goes through a montage of the happy times and memories Finn had with Milo.

Timeline

Here, I outline the setting of the story in regards to time. Grief takes time and is processed differently for each and every individual dealing with it. Because of this, the timeline for the healing portion of the plot will remain unclear to the reader.
• The book starts when Finn is a toddler, rather than when Milo is a puppy because Milo existed in the household before Finn did.

• The main plot will be centered around the time of Milo’s death such as when Milo gets tired and distant leading up to the death, the death, and the time afterward
  ○ This is where the amount of time passing will be the most ambiguous in order to account for the fact that everyone processes death at their own rate and to allow the reader to use their own timeline in their head as they read through and relate to the story)
  ○ This is communicated through an illustration montage in which it shows Finn growing up with Milo by his side
  ○ Milo will only have slight changes throughout since he was an “adult” dog for the duration of Finn’s life
  ○ The reader will know Milo is aging through slight coloring changes in his face, particularly in the last element of the first montage, more during the second montage where Milo no longer does everything with Finn, and especially in the illustration that is paired with the line “Milo’s body was getting tired.”
Back Matter

Back matter is an important part of children's books. This section can include information about the author, an author’s note, acknowledgements, reading comprehension questions, more information (or places to find more information), activities for readers that relate to the book, or even a promotional page. Not all of this information is necessary or applicable to every children’s book. Because “Memories of Milo” is to be a conversation starter, and because I predict that families will feel uncomfortable discussing death and the loss of their pet at the start, I have created back matter that is a mix between additional information, resources, and reading comprehension questions. Instead of looking for comprehension, the questions are devised in kid-friendly language for an adult to ask their child in order to allow them a place to talk and get conversation started. There is also information about what to do and not to do during these difficult times and tough conversations. I have found additional resources to incorporate as well, including articles I read to do my own research before writing the book and other books pertaining to similar topics in both Spanish and English. All of this information will be taken from the sources I have used and will be put into language that is fitting for families and children.
Milo and Finn were best friends.

Milo y Finn eran mejores amigos.

When Finn came home after a long day, Milo was always excited to see him.

Cuando Finn regresó a su casa al fin de un día largo, Milo siempre estaba emocionado de verlo.

When Finn practiced T-ball, Milo fetched the balls for him.

Cuando Finn practicaba béisbol, Milo trajo todas las pelotas para él.

When Finn became Super Finn, Milo flew right beside him.

Cuando Finn vistió como Finn el Superhéroe, Milo estaría volando a su lado también.

Milo and Finn grew up together.

Milo y Finn se crecieron juntos.
Together, they were cowboys and astronauts, pirates and artists.

Juntos, eran vaqueros y astronautas, piratas y artistas.

Eventually, when Finn got home from school, Milo wasn’t always waiting at the door to greet him anymore.

Eventualmente cuando Finn llegó a su casa de la escuela, Milo no estaba esperando en la puerta para saludarlo.

When Finn went outside to practice his swing, Milo stayed inside.

Cuando Finn salió para practicar béisbol, Milo se quedó adentro.

Finn’s parents told him Milo had gotten sick.

Los padres de Finn le dijeron que Milo estaba enfermo.

Finn decided to give him time to rest and get better.

Finn decidió a dar tiempo a Milo para descansar y mejorar.

But Milo only got slower and sleepier.

Pero Milo solamente se hizo más lento y más cansado.
“Milo is getting old” Finn’s dad told him, “He’s lived in this house even longer than you.”

—Milo se está haciendo viejo. — dijo el papá de Finn —Él ha vivido en esta casa más tiempo que tú.

Milo’s body was getting tired.

El cuerpo de Milo se estaba cansando.

One day, Milo’s body decided it was time to give up.

Un día, el cuerpo de Milo decidió que era hora de rendirse.

First, Finn was sad.

Al principio, Finn estaba triste.

Everywhere he went, a raincloud followed.

Dondequiera que iba, le seguía un nube de lluvia.

Then, he was mad.

Luego, él estaba enojado.
His rainstorm turned into a roaring ocean.

Su aguacero se convirtió en un océano rugiente.

Then, he didn't know what he should think or feel. Finn just felt confused.

Después, él no sabía cómo pensar ni sentir. Finn solo se sintió confundido.

Finn’s mom sat down with him. She had been sad, mad, and confused at one point too.

La mamá de Finn hablo con él. Ella había estado triste, enojada, y confundida al principio también.

“Our pets can’t live forever,” Finn’s mom said, “But we can give them the best life we can while they’re here. That is exactly what you did!”

—Las mascotas no pueden vivir para siempre —dijo la mamá de Finn, —Pero podemos darles la mejor vida posible cuando están aquí con nosotros. ¡ Esto es lo que hiciste!

“You hugged Milo,”

—Lo abrazaste a Milo,
“And you played with Milo,”
—Jugaste con Milo,

“And you loved Milo.”
—Y te encantó a Milo.

“So when we think about Milo we can remember just how happy he was and also how many smiles he brought us. Remembering our dog can keep our memories of him alive.”
—Entonces cuando pensamos en Milo, podemos recordar que feliz estaba y cuantas sonrisas nos dío. Recordando a nuestro perro puede ayudar a mantener vivos nuestros recuerdos de él.

Finn thought about how much fun he and Milo had together from dressing up and getting loud to just lying around.
Finn pensé en cuánto se divirtieron él y Milo juntos desde disfrazando y corriendo hasta simplemente relajando.

Finally, Finn didn’t feel sad, or mad, or even confused.
Por fin, Finn no se sintió triste, o enojado, o incluso confundido.
Now, Finn felt at peace.

Ahora, Finn se sintió contento.

Back Matter:

**When talking about the death of a pet with a child...**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Do</th>
<th>Don’t</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Use direct language like “Milo died.”</td>
<td>Use metaphors such as “Milo went to sleep forever.” Children are still developing their ability to distinguish between abstract and logical thoughts and metaphors like these can confuse them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explain truthfully what happened to the pet if the death is unexpected (extensive details are not necessary, but the child will need to know what happened in order to be able to fully process).</td>
<td>Tell the child that the pet has run away or something similar, this provides false hope for the pet to return. The child needs to know there is no way the pet is coming back in order to work towards closure and healing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explain feeling all sorts of emotions is natural following the loss of a pet or loved one.</td>
<td>Hide your emotions. It is good for children to see that you have been affected as well.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continue to talk about the animal with love, remembering positive memories with the pet. The child may also want to explore the concept of loss through play, it can be helpful to engage in this with them.</td>
<td>Shut down conversation about the pet or the concept of death for fear of bringing up negative emotions. Discussing the memories is a great way to encourage healing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allow the child to help plan a burial or special ceremony for the animal.</td>
<td>Bring another animal into the family as a replacement. However, when your family is ready, explain to the child that you might be getting another animal to love, care for, and add to the family.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Discuss what is happening to the pet before the death if the death is predictable (such as in the situation of an ill or old pet).</td>
<td>Let children go unaware that the pet is struggling. If the children can be warned, it can be better for them as sudden deaths draw negative attention to how unpredictable life can be.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rely honestly on your own viewpoints and beliefs if the child asks you what will happen to the pet after death.</td>
<td>Worry about saying something wrong. Being honest and showing your emotions in the conversations with the child is more important than having all of the right words.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Durante una conversación sobre la muerte de una mascota...**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Debes</strong></th>
<th><strong>No debes</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Usar lenguaje directo como “Milo se murió.”</td>
<td>Usar metáforas como “Milo se fue a dormir para siempre.” Niños todavía están desarrollando su habilidad de distinguir entre pensamientos abstractos y lógicos y metáforas pueden ser confusas.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explicar honestamente lo que pasó a la mascota si la muerte era inesperada. No es necesario incluir muchos detalles, pero el niño debe saber lo que pasó para procesar todo por completo.</td>
<td>Decir al niño que la mascota se ha escapado o algo similar. Esto provee esperanza falsa que la mascota va a regresar. El niño necesita saber que la mascota no volverá para progresar con su sanación.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explicar que el sentimiento de muchas emociones es normal después del muerte de una mascota,</td>
<td>Esconder sus emociones. Es bueno que los niños vean que adultos son afectados también.</td>
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</table>
o un ser querido.

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<tr>
<th>Continuar de hablar sobre el animal con cariño, recordando memorias positivas de la mascota. El niño puede querer explorar el concepto de la pérdida a través del juego.</th>
<th>Parar conversaciones sobre la mascota porque no quieres sacar emociones negativas. Hablando de las memorias de la mascota es una buena manera de ayudar sanación.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Permitir que el niño ayuda en hacer un plan para un entierro o ceremonia especial para el animal.</td>
<td>Traer otro mascota a la casa como una sustitución. Pero cuando su familia está lista para otra mascota, explica al niño que van a añadir un nuevo animal a la familia para cuidar.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hablar de lo que está pasando a la mascota antes de la muerte si la muerte es previsible (como con una mascota vieja o muy enferma).</td>
<td>Esconder la realidad del situación de los niños. Si los niños pueden recibir una advertencia que su mascota se puede morir, puede ser más fácil recuperar después de la muerte de la mascota porque las muertes impredecibles pueden poner atención negativo en cómo la vida puede ser tan impredecible.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rely honestly on your own viewpoints and beliefs if the child asks you what will happen to the pet after death.</td>
<td>Worry about saying something wrong. Being honest and showing your emotions in the conversations with the child is more important than having all of the right words.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Questions to open up discussion:**

1. Finn talked to his mom in the story about Milo because sometimes talking about hard things can help us. Would you like to talk to me about [your pet’s name here]?
2. How are you feeling today? Do you feel mad, sad, confused, happy, or another emotion? (Turn through the book to look at the illustrations of the emotions together.)

3. What are your favorite memories of [your pet’s name here]?

**Preguntas para iniciar la conversación:**

1. En el cuento, Finn habló con su mama sobre Milo porque hablando de cosas difíciles nos puede ayudar. ¿Quieres hablar conmigo sobre [el nombre de su mascota]?

2. ¿Cómo te sientes hoy? te sientes enojado, triste, confundido, feliz, o algún otro emocion? (Mira las ilustraciones de los emociones en el libro juntos.)

3. ¿Cuales son sus memorias favoritas de [el nombre de su mascota]?

**Looking for more information?/¿Buscando más información?**

All of the information provided on these pages was gathered from the following online articles/Toda la información en estas páginas era recogida de los siguientes artículos en linea:

- “When a Pet Dies (for Parents)” by Steven Dowshen, MD, June 2018 on kidshealth.org
- “How To Talk To Kids About The Death Of A Pet,” September 5, 2011 on childdevelopmentinfo.com

**Other Books On Similar Topics/otros libros sobre temas similares:**
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English/inglés</th>
<th>Spanish/español</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>The Rough Patch</em>, Brian Lies</td>
<td><em>Yo siempre te querré</em>, Hans Wilhelm (traducido por Pilar Garriga i Anguera)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Big Cat, Little Cat</em>. Elisha Cooper</td>
<td><em>Para siempre</em>, Camino García</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Goodbye Book</em>, Todd Parr</td>
<td><em>No te olvido</em>, Jennifer Moore-Mallinos</td>
</tr>
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</table>
Reflective Essay

While I attempted to do as much research as possible before beginning the actual writing process for the children’s book, much of my learning took place throughout the creative process of writing and producing the book. I researched far and wide about concepts related to the book such as death and grievance in children as well as read a myriad of articles about what it is like to write children’s books, how to write an effective one, and what elements it should include. Even still, the actual process of creating the book taught me much more than five plus pages of bibliographic content at the end of this thesis could ever tell you.

The first lesson I learned is that illustrations are not optional. This may seem like common knowledge, as every children’s book one picks up will have at least some sort of illustration in it whether it is full of artwork, sketches, cartoons, or even just shapes. However, it did not occur to me the true importance of these illustrations in this particular context until I was writing the text for the story. As I began this project, I wanted to be able to fully complete the children’s book I intended to write, however I knew that would also mean illustrating it. Throughout the time building up to when I sat down to write the first draft, I had tossed around the idea of just writing the
text to the story since that was what seemed truly important for the work that I was doing in giving students a story to help heal their hearts. While I personally may not have the talent I would like to illustrate the book, I threw out the idea of only having words as soon as I started writing the first sentence of the book. This is because every time I would write a sentence I would begin imagining it on paper, in a hard-back book, held up in front of a child. I would see images dance around the words and bring them to life. As I came to the end of the text, I saw a whole hidden story told through just illustrations which expanded on my words and made the book that much better. I knew I had to include the words in partnership with their illustrations.

Illustrations are not optional when it comes to children’s books, but rather they are an essential element that works hand-in-hand with the words to convey the meaning of the story. Emma Middleton, an award-winning author and illustrator, described illustrations in an article she wrote as a tool for young readers to use as well as an element that provides an opportunity for children to begin decoding stories before they are able to decode all of the words themselves. Middleton continued to write that “stories that rely on the images to complete the narrative, encourage active interpretation and engagement” (Middleton, 2018). This is just what appeared to me in my own
mind as I was writing. As I wrote the ending of the book, I realized it was incomplete without its partner, the illustrations. The idea is that the images at the beginning of the story are narrowed in on Finn and Milo as if captured by a camera. As the story progresses, Finn’s mother sits with him to discuss how we can keep the joy our pet brought us alive by keeping the memories of them alive. In the illustrations, his mother hands him a photo album that she has put together with all of those images we saw before throughout the book. Through active interpretation, children can put together that the mom had been collecting photos of the boy and his dog and made a photo album for him. None of this was stated in the text whether explicitly or indirectly. It was never mentioned through words. Yet, it pairs perfectly with the text. This is an example of how illustrations and words can provide two different, yet complementary stories in order to complete one whole book.

This same concept is present in other picture books as well, such as stories which are told by unreliable narrators. An example of this sort of story is John Klassen’s *I Want My Hat Back* in which one character denies knowing where the other character’s hat is in the text, but is shown with the hat in the illustrations. This turns the young readers into literary detectives, who utilize all of the clues of a picture book (both images and text) to piece together the complete story.
Because of the beauty that is created within the genre of children’s literature when words are combined with illustrations, I wanted to include illustrations with my text. Because I wanted the illustrations to be better than what I could create on my own, I had an artistically gifted friend of mine, Josh Salsbury, help me by turning my descriptions of the characters into initial drawings. With these, I was able to create descriptions and sketched outlines for many of the illustrations I had imagined throughout my writing process. These sketches give an idea of the direction I would like to take this project in collaboration with an illustrator, including content of the illustrations as well as how words and images are laid out on the pages. While the book shown within this thesis is not a fully illustrated, finalized project, I knew I needed to include illustrations for the full effect of the book to be felt and I hope one day it can become a fully illustrated work. See the appendices for these mock-up style sketches as well as Josh’s initial draft of the characters, based solely off of the character description I gave him.

The second lesson I learned through the writing process is how delicate words can be. After the outline and first few drafts I wrote which allowed me to narrow in on how I wanted the plot of the story to go and what concepts I wanted to cover, I had to write several more drafts that simply had to do with the addition, subtraction, and substitution of words. While the
overall idea of the story might have come quickly to me, finding the words that fit that meaning just right was a lot longer of a process. An example of this is the last line of the story “Now, Finn felt at peace.” Just five words, yet I changed this sentence around a plethora of times. I did this because I could not seem to find the right feeling to fill that last word of the sentence.

After Finn experiences the rainbow of emotions that come after losing a pet, and then discussing what came next with his mother, I wanted him to find peace. However, I could not decide what the perfect word was to put in that sentence. Saying Finn felt sad, mad, confused and now happy seemed like the simplest way to put it, but it did not truly express the emotion that I wanted the character to feel. The word “happy” felt like all of a sudden the pain of losing his best friend and family pet had disappeared. It almost erased all of the other feelings which I wanted children to know they were allowed to feel. However, replacing “happy” with the word “content” felt too formal. Especially for a children’s book aimed at such a young audience—ages two to six. I began looking at synonyms for the words I tried but did not seem to sit quite right but even still, the meanings of the words seemed to change dramatically among the synonyms. I had never imagined how intense diction could be before in my life. Eventually, after wading through synonyms and judging them not only on their meaning but on their meaning in the context of
my story, and in the context of being accessible language for young people, I found the language “at peace.” It simply felt right. “At peace” shows that Finn’s storm of emotions has calmed. He is okay with the fact that he has felt such a variety of negative emotions and while he is not happy that Milo had to die, he is at peace with the idea of loss. He is no longer struggling to understand or to ground his feet, instead, he is ready to take on the world again.

A third realization I had throughout both researching and the creative process involved in this project, was the lack of Spanish language resources. As mentioned in the “Personal Inspiration” section of this project, I have been spending over twenty hours each week in a public school kindergarten classroom in which 70% of the school day is taught in Spanish. Because of this, language and everything that has to do with it has seemed to have been on the forefront of my thoughts lately. I chose to incorporate Spanish-English side-by-side texts into my children’s book in order to create a resource that was accessible to more families after it occurred to me that throughout my research on children’s literature and the topic of death, no Spanish resources had come up. After taking the time to perform searches in Spanish, I was able to find several children’s books in Spanish about death which I am grateful for, however I wanted to continue with the idea of a bilingual text to contribute to this genre of literature.
It is important that my book be accessible to more families than just those that are confident in reading and speaking in English, because all families should have access to a wide variety of literature. It is especially important in regards to the theme of my book in particular, though, because of the powerful subject I am covering within it. Death is a universal experience. Essentially every person will experience the loss of a loved one or a pet at some point in their lifetime. Everyone deserves to be able to learn about how to get themselves, as well as the children in their life through these difficult experiences. That being said, death can be experienced or seen differently in different cultures. I am fully aware of this and admit to not being able to include every culture’s customs when it comes to death in this children’s book, however I hope that for those who choose to read it, the words I have chosen to use can be a stepping stone for families to open up and talk about how they see death within their own mindsets. In order to achieve this goal, I have based the character’s actions in the story on the knowledge that I acquired through the extensive research I did on how children experience loss and the best methods for adults to aid children through the grieving process. Taking all of this information into account, I was able to formulate a story that is a starting point for family discussions and healing hearts.
Appendix

First drafts of the “Memories of Milo” characters; Milo, Mom, and Finn. Designed by Josh Salsbury.
Mockup style sketches of possible illustrations and page layouts for the book. Drawn by me.

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Cuand Finn se vistió como Finn el Superhéroe, Milo estaría volando a su lado.

Milo and Finn grew up together.
Milo y Finn se crecieron juntos.
Together, they were cowboys

Juntos, eran vaqueros

and astronauts,
y astronuatas,

pirates, piratas,

and artists.
y artistas.
Eventually, when Finn got home from school, Milo wasn’t always waiting at the door to greet him anymore.

Eventually, cuando Finn llegó a su casa de la escuela, Milo no estaba esperando en la puerta para saludarlo.

When Finn went outside to practice his swing, Milo stayed inside.

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Finn decidió a dar tiempo a Milo para descansar y mejorar.
But Milo only got slower and sleepiër.

Pero Milo solamente se hizo más lento y más cansado.

“Milo is getting old,” Finn’s dad told him.
“He’s lived in this house even longer than you.”

– Milo se está haciendo viejo– dijo el papá de Finn.
– Él ha vivido en esta casa más tiempo que tú.
Milo’s body was getting tired.

El cuerpo de Milo se estaba cansando.

One day, Milo’s body decided it was time to give up.

Un día, el cuerpo de Milo decidió que era hora de rendirse.
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Al principio, Finn estaba triste.

Everywhere he went, a rain cloud followed.
Dondequiera que iba, le seguía un nube de lluvia.

Then, Finn was mad.
Luego, él estaba enojado.

His rainstorm turned into a roaring ocean.
Su aguacero se convirtió en un océano rugiente.
Then, he didn’t know what he should think or feel. Finn just felt confused.

Después, él no sabia cómo pensar ni sentir. Finn solo se sintió confundido.

Finn’s mom sat down with him. She had been sad, mad, and confused at one point too.

La mamá de Finn hablo con él. Ella había estado triste, enojada, y confundida al principio también.
"Our pets can't live forever," Finn's mom said, "But we can give them the best life we can while they're here. That is exactly what you did!"

—Las mascotas no pueden vivir para siempre— dijo la mamá de Finn, —pero podemos darles la mejor vida posible cuando están aquí con nosotros. ¡Esto es lo que hiciste!
“You hugged Milo,”
- Lo abrazaste a Milo,

“...And you played with Milo,”
- Jugaste con Milo.

“...And you loved Milo.”
- Y te encantó a Milo.
"So when we think about Milo we can remember just how happy he was and also how many smiles he brought us. Remembering our dog can keep our memories of him alive."

Entonces cuando pensamos en Milo, podemos recordar que feliz estaba y cuántas sonrisas nos dio. Recordando a nuestro perro puede ayudar a mantener vivos nuestros recuerdos de él.
Finn thought about how much fun he and Milo had together. Finn pensó en cuánto se divertieron él y Milo juntos.

from dressing up and getting loud
desde disfrazando y corriendo

to just lying around.
hasta simplemente relajando

Finally, Finn didn’t feel sad, or mad, or even confused.

Por fin, Finn no se sintió triste, o enojado, o incluso confundido.
Now, Finn felt at peace.

Ahora, Finn se sintió contento.
Bibliography, with Select Annotations:


City Dog, Country Frog is a book about time passing and the life cycle.