Children's literature as storytelling: meaning-making around death in a secular context

Research Master Thesis

Alissa Kivits
S4463994

First supervisor: dr. B.E. (Brenda) Bartelink

Second supervisor: dr. B.M.H.P (Brenda) Mathijssen

11-09-2022

Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies

University of Groningen

Word count: 26.709

Summary

Meaning-making around death is shaped by narratives. Narratives about death which individuals shape for themselves are influenced by grand narratives, and vice versa. In this process, children's literature has a unique position. Since it stimulates audiences to read stories aloud and discuss them, it is studied as a form of storytelling. Through storytelling, audiences shape their personal meaning-making narrative around death in collaboration with others.

In the Netherlands, this process takes place in a secular context. By analysing (1) a recent inspirational policy report about the position of death in the Netherlands, (2) six children's books about death and (3) four interviews with the authors and illustrators of these books, the relation of storytelling through children's literature to this secular context is studied. I have found that secularism is connected to a dominant narrative around time, which entails that people have moved away from the authority of religion and towards freedom in using the individual agency in meaning-making. Dutch society and its children's literature respond to this narrative and reinforce it, but the stories they produce simultaneously prove that in reality, religion and secularism are interwoven in meaning-making around death. The secular narrative of progress towards individual agency needs religion to exist in children's literature, since people with diverse religions and philosophies are stimulated to use their agency in making meaning through storytelling.

Inhoudsopgave

Introduction

Tap, tap, tap, what a saraband!
Circles of the dead all holding hands!
Tap, tap, tap, in the crowd you can see
King and peasant dancing together!

- Saint-Saëns, *Danse macabre* (tone poem for orchestra)[1]

In his well-known tone poem, Saint-Saëns paints a vivid picture of a Danse Macabre. The image of king and peasant dancing together tells us that rank and status mean nothing in the face of death. What makes us all equal is the finality of life. If I were to rewrite this poem today and make it more meaningful in the Dutch context, I would have atheists and Christians, agnostics and Muslims, all dance together as well. After all, even though Dutch society is made up of people with a wide variety of religious, secular and spiritual convictions, what we have in common it that we all try to make meaning of the inevitability of death.[2] Even though we do this in different ways, many of the resources we use are shared. One of the main resources for children are books about death. This topic is increasingly popular in Dutch children's literature. The meanings we transmit to children and the way in which this is done tell us much about the ideas, convictions and values which are important in society. Children have many questions about death, and the diverse context of the Netherlands does not always provide clear-cut answers. The books which are read to children, however, have a certain focus and the narratives constructed by authors and illustrators can give us insight in the way children are encouraged to think about death.

Meaning-making is a concept which generally refers to all ways in which individuals or groups interpret the world around them; through social categories, moral understanding and cognitive means, for example.[3] Culturalists usually look at it as a collective effort, governed by institutions and rituals which offer ready-made interpretations of events, which people can use to understand what happens to them.[4] In this thesis, however, I focus on meaning-making as a process which does incorporate collective interpretations or narratives, but in which individuals have much room for reshaping and adjusting these to form their personal interpretations. As Winnicott puts it, people "play with reality". We work with what we perceive through our senses in the 'external' world, and interpret the meaning of what we perceive in our 'internal' world.[5] This is a process, but it is not a one-way road from meaninglessness to meaningfulness. There are setbacks, re-evaluations and evasions which do not always seem logical. This is why a definition such as the one used by Dransart, "a journey

[1] "Songs: Danse Macabre," OxfordLieder, accessed August 29, 2022, https://www.oxfordlieder.co.uk/song/4373 "Dance of Death," The LiederNet Archive, accessed August 29, 2022, https://www.lieder.net/lieder/get_text.html?TextId=9775.
[2] Joanna Wojtkowiak, Bastiaan T. Rutjens and Eric Venbrux, "Meaning-making and Death in a Secular Society: A Dutch Survey Study," *Archive for the Psychology of Religion* 32 (2010): 364, https://doi.org /10.1163/157361210X532059.
[3] Charles Kurzman, "Meaning-Making in Social Movements," *Anthropological Quarterly* 81, no. 1 (Winter 2008): 5, https://doi.org /10.1353/anq.2008.0003.
[4] Kurzman, "Meaning-Making in Social Movements," 6.
[5] Fereshteh Ahmadi et al., "Meaning-Making Coping Among Cancer Patients in Sweden and South Korea: A Comparative Perspective," *Journal of Religion and Health* 56, no. 5 (October 2017): 1796, https://doi.org /10.1007/s10943-017-0383-3.

towards an existential significance of loss,"[6] does not work for this thesis. A journey has start and a final destination. The process of meaning-making around death is usually intensified or re-directed by a loss, but it starts when we first hear about or encounter death. New experiences and narratives one encounters can continuously change the personal meaning-making narrative, so it does not have a final destination either. Taking into account that the definition of meaning-making which I choose to use must leave room for both the individual and the collective, as well as for the extensive and playful nature of the process, I have chosen to work with Wojtkowiak et al.'s definition: "a process that has beneficial results on attitudes towards life and as a search for an explanation for loss".[7] It emphasises that meaning-making is a process and a search and does not focus on either the individual or the collective. Also, it points out that making meaning of a loss has beneficial results on attitudes towards life: a theme which is central in children's books, as children usually have their whole lives ahead of them. This focus on life also does not have either secular or religious connotations, which is important since scholars like Ahmadi have criticised the references to the religious or transcendental which many definitions of meaning-making include.[8] I will examine a secular context in which people of diverse (non)religious backgrounds make meaning of death, so my definition must be respectful to both religious and secular meaning.

Furthermore, I will examine meaning-making as being dependent on narratives. For example, the poem of the Dance Macabre can be used in meaning-making, because it accepts death and connects it to the value of equality which we can experience in the here and now. This can have beneficial results on attitudes towards life. The poem is a narrative, a story that, even though it was written in 19th century France, I can reshape in order to draw on it for my personal meaning-making of death in the Dutch context today. To make meaning, everyone shapes their own narrative. The experiences and the ideas and beliefs a person encounters are connected and adjusted to form one coherent personal story. This story we write gives meaning to death and purpose to life.[9]

This individual meaning-making narrative is shaped under the influence of many larger narratives, connected to a certain culture and society. In the Netherlands, many of these stories coexist and overlap.[10] Yet overall, Dutch meaning-making culture is often described as 'secular' in scholarly literature. While many scholars have formed theories about secularism, a general consensus about the meaning of 'the secular' has not been reached in current debates. Therefore, anthropologists such as Wiering argue for the phenomenon to be studied 'bottom up'.[11] By examining what living in a secular society means to people who consciously or subconsciously interact with the concept on a daily basis, we might get a better

---

[6] Dolores Angela Castelli Dransart, "From Sense-Making to Meaning-Making: Understanding and Supporting Survivors of Suicide," *The British Journal of Social Work* 43, no. 2 (March 2013): 317, https://doi.org /10.1093/bjsw/bct026.

[7] Wojtkowiak, Rutjens and Venbrux, "Meaning Making and Death in a Secular Society," 363.

[8] Ahmadi et al., "Meaning-Making Coping Among Cancer Patients," 1796.

[9] Phillip L. Hammack and Bertram J. Cohler, "Narrative Engagement and Stories of Sexual Identity: An Interdisciplinary Approach to the Study of Sexual Lives," in *The Story of Sexual Identity: Narrative Perspectives on the Gay and Lesbian Life Course*, ed. Phillip L. Hammack and Bertram J. Cohler (Oxford Scholarship Online, 2009), 5.

[10] Nienke Pauline Margriet Fortuin et al., "Death and the search for meaning: canonical, utilitarian and expressive thanatological cultural niches," *Mortality: Promoting the interdisciplinary study of death and dying* 22, no. 4 (2017): 341-343, https://doi-org.ru.idm.oclc.org/10.1080/13576275.2016.1259213.

[11] Jelle Wiering, "There is a Sexular Body: Introducing a Material Approach to the Secular," *Secularism and Nonreligion* 6, no. 8 (2017): 1, https://doi.org/10.5334/snr.782017.

grasp of the concept itself. In this thesis I will therefore not work with 'lived religion', which contemporary scholars of religion tend to emphasise, but with 'lived secularism'.[12] Empirical data will serve as a starting point for theory development.

Narratives about secularism are often strongly interwoven with narratives of agency and autonomy. In these cases, secularisation is seen as a move away from the authority position of religion in meaning-making, and towards personal agency based on individual preferences and expressions.[13] I argue that we can study the importance of this idea in Dutch meaning-making around death especially well in children's books. These books are expressions of a tension field in Dutch society. On the one hand, individual meaning-making is valued. Therefore, children are encouraged to use their agency in meaning-making and come to their own conclusions about death. On the other hand, children's books always instruct. They respond to a certain image of childhood and to certain ideas about the amount of agency a child should have. This idea is called the paradox of agency.[14] In this paradox, we can examine the boundaries of 'secular' and 'religious' meaning.

Throughout the thesis, I work with the idea of a storytelling process, initiated by children's books, through which meaning is made. Many similarities can be found between the traditional art of storytelling and children's literature in particular. Since children, especially when they are under 10 years of age, are not yet that familiar with the written word, children's literature uses those types of stylistic features and forms of communication which simulate the act of oral storytelling for the sake of its audience.[15] Therefore, children's books facilitate conversation and discussion. They encourage children to make meaning in collaboration with the person who reads the story aloud, and with peers who might be listening as well. How audiences are stimulated to do this tells us much about what the author finds most important to accomplish and transmit. This is another reason why children's books are ideal for studying meaning-making. The role of the author and the illustrator in the storytelling process must not be forgotten, as it often is in scholarly works on children's literature and societal issues, and therefore, the last chapter is devoted to it. Authors and illustrators are, after all, the ones who take their own personal narrative, which is influenced by the culture they live in, and draw on it to tell a story which facilitates meaning-making for others. The meaning they create in their books influences many and is the basis of the storytelling process.

All in all, this thesis looks at the narratives found in children's books about death to gain a deeper understanding of Dutch meaning-making and how children are involved in it. This topic will provide insight in the way secularism is expressed in meaning-making around death. The thesis uses the following main- and sub-questions to analyse this theme:

---

[12] E.g.: Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *The Spiritual Dimensions of Lived Religion* (NYU Press: 2021).
[13] Jose Casanova, "The Secular and Secularisms," *Social Research* 76, no. 4 (Winter 2009): 1057, https://doi.org/10.1353/sor.2009.0064;
Judith Butler, "Sexual politics, torture, and secular time," *The British Journal of Sociology* 59, no.1 (2008): 3, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-4446.2007.00176.x.
[14] Feike Dietz, *Lettering Young Readers in the Dutch Enlightenment: Literacy, Agency and Progress in Eighteenth-Century Children's Books* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 6, https://doi-org.proxy-ub.rug.nl/10.1007/978-3-030-69633-7.
[15] Hans-Heino Ewers, "Children's Literature and the Traditional Art of Storytelling," *Poetics Today* 13, no. 1 (Spring 1992): 172-173.

Main question: How can we understand storytelling through children's literature in relation to meaning-making around death in the Dutch secular context?

Sub-questions:

1. How can we understand secularism in relation to the meanings ascribed to death in the advisory report *Mortals*, published by Dutch Council of Public Health and Society?

2. How much does children's literature instruct children and how much does it seek to empower children to make meaning on their own?

3. How is meaning-making around death depicted in the children's books under analysis, and how does this depiction play into the Dutch secular context of meaning-making?

4. How do authors and illustrators understand their own roles in the meaning-making process of storytelling, and what does this entail for studying meaning-making in the Dutch secular context?

The thesis consists of four chapters, each of which will answer one sub-question, in the order indicated here. First, I will elaborate on the methodology.

Methodology

This project employs two types of qualitative research in order to attain a deeper understanding of (1) meaning-making around death in children's books and (2) the role of authors and illustrators in storytelling and the meaning-making process. Both types are explained and discussed below. I will first describe both types of research, which are a content analysis and in-depth interviews with authors and illustrators, and my sampling methods. Then, I will explain the process of coding and analysis. Lastly, I will briefly reflect on the ethical considerations concerning the interviews.

(a) A content analysis of six popular children's books.

For the content analysis, the following six books have been analysed. This list includes the library's age indications:

Aerts, Jef and Marit Törnqvist. *Groter dan een droom (Bigger than a dream)*. Amsterdam: Singel Uitgeverijen, 2013. Ages 6 and up.

Bos, Tamara and Annemarie van Haeringen. *Papa, hoor je me? (Daddy, can you hear me?)* Amsterdam: Leopold, 2011. Ages 8 and up.

Breukers, Truus and Carolien Westermann. *Wolfje en de oude geit (Little wolf and the old goat)*. Amsterdam: Clavis, 2017. Ages 6 and up.

De Visser, Laurina and Linda Bikker. *Olifant op het feest (Elephant at the party)*. Utrecht: KokBoekencentrum, 2020. Ages 4 to 7.

Van Hest, Pimm and Lisa Brandenburg. *Misschien is doodgaan wel hetzelfde als een vlinder worden (Maybe dying is like becoming a butterfly)*. Hasselt: Clavis, 2018. Ages 5 to 8.

Van Hooft, Mieke and Ronald Heuninck. *Dag oma (Goodbye grandma)*. Zeist: Christofoor, 2014. Ages 4 and up.

In chapter three of this thesis I will go into detail by providing of a short summary of each book. A photograph of the cover of the books will also be included. For now, I will focus on the selection criteria. The books have been selected by means of purposive sampling, using four main criteria.[16] The first of these is popularity. There are many Dutch blogs and websites which have a page that recommends books which can help children cope with death.[17] The books listed above are named often on these webpages, which are usually aimed at parents who are looking to help their child with the grieving process. Most are available at several or many libraries throughout the country and they can all be ordered online. Additionally, some of the books have won prizes for Dutch literature, such as the 'Zilveren Griffel', which is the prize for best children's book of the year. All in all, if one does a general search of children's books to help cope with death, the listed books are likely to come up and to be available for

[16] Nicholas Walliman, *Social Research Methods* (SAGE Publications, 2006), 79, https://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781849209939.n7.

[17] Some examples of blogs and websites:
Christel Rengers, "13 kinderboeken over de dood," KiiND, accessed August 24, https://kiind.nl/13-kinderboeken-over-de-dood-2/;
Lisa van den Akker, "Hulp bij het rouwen: 9x bijzondere kinderboeken over de dood," JM Ouders, last modified May 17, 2020, https://www.jmouders.nl/kinderboeken-over-dood/;
Maaike van de Graaf, "Het proces van rouwen: 5 x mooie kinderboeken over de dood," Famme, last modified August 31, 2021, https://www.famme.nl/kinderboeken-over-de-dood/.

reading. The second selection criterium is the publication date. I want to investigate how the authors play into the current meaning-making climate in the Netherlands. Of course, there simply are not six popular books about the topic of death which have been published this year. Therefore, I have chosen books published between now and fifteen years ago. The third selection criterium is the availability of the author or illustrators for an interview – I will explain about this in the next section. Lastly, I took the age of the children who are targeted by the books into account. They are all written for children between about four and ten years old. At least, this is what Dutch libraries indicate. I have selected books for various different ages within this age group, in order to get a varied image of storytelling for children. This also makes it possible to analyse whether older children are introduced to a different approach of death than younger ones.

(b) Four in-depth interviews with authors and illustrators

Four authors and illustrators of the aforementioned books have participated in in-depth interviews. By including both authors (three participants) and an illustrator, I have gained insight into these related and complementary, but in some ways also essentially different, aspects of storytelling through children's literature. Although the main topics of the interviews were clearly defined and I had a list of open-ended questions to fall back on, there was also enough room to discuss related subjects which came up and which enriched my understanding of the experience of the interviewees. This is characteristic for this type of interviews, which "focuses the topic while providing the interactive space and time to enable the research participant's views and insights to emerge."[18] The flexibility of this approach allowed me to put the experience of the interviewees first, instead of taking theory as a starting point. In order to ensure this 'bottom-up' approach, the main part of the interviews consisted of reading the author's/illustrator's book(s) together. I asked the participants to tell about the meaning which lay in the pages and about their experiences writing the book. We then moved on to their personal experiences with meaning-making around death and discussing it in Dutch society, as well as their experiences with reading the books with others, mostly children, and the conversations which emerged in this storytelling context. It was a great pleasure to speak with the participants and gaining insight in their experiences as storytellers in a modern context.

(c) Coding and analysis

The books and interviews have been analysed using Atlas.ti. For the books, photographs of each page have been uploaded into the program, so the text and the illustrations could be coded simultaneously. They have been considered as part of a whole, but also separately, since the illustrator usually attached new meaning to the text and often told a story of their own. In order to identity themes and categories, both books and interviews were read several times. For the analysis, I used what Thomas calls a 'general inductive approach'. Most importantly, this means that I allowed "research findings to emerge from the frequent, dominant, or significant themes inherent in raw data, without the restraints imposed by structured methodologies."[19] Concretely, I initially analysed the data through open coding until core categories and related concepts emerged. In this phase, I stayed very close to the

[18] Kathy Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory, 2nd. Edition* (London: SAGE, 2014), 85.
[19] David R. Thomas, "A General Inductive Approach for Analyzing Qualitative Evaluation Data," *American Journal of Evaluation* 27, no. 2 (June 2006): 238, https://doi.org/10.1177/1098214005283748.

wordings and images as presented in the books. I then proceeded onto theoretical sampling and selective coding, meaning I applied concepts from the theory studied and compared in the literature review to the categories and concepts which had emerged and had formed patterns.[20] This approach is essential because throughout the thesis, I take on a 'bottom-up' perspective towards secularity and meaning-making around death. I want to understand how Dutch storytellers shape meaning as indicated by their experiences and the works they produce. A general inductive approach fits this objective, because it starts with raw data and uses it as a foundation, before working its way 'up' to theoretical frameworks.[21]

(d) Ethics concerning the interviews

The privacy of the interviewees has been taken very seriously, since they did not only tell me about the content of their books, but also about their personal views and experiences. Any personal and place names mentioned have been anonymised in the transcripts. In quotations used in the thesis, titles of books written or illustrated by participants are not mentioned, nor are references to their own books. This in order to ensure that the quotations cannot be traced back to the books and therefore to the names of the authors and illustrators. All participants have received an information sheet which specifies the goals on my research, as well as all specifics about anonymisation and the course of events during the interview. They have then been asked to sign an informed consent form.

(e) Note on translations

Even though some of the children's books have been translated into English, I have not been able to access these versions. Therefore, the English translations of the quotations are by my own hand. The same is true for the quotations from the interviews. Because the translations are my own, the original Dutch is always provided as well.

[20] Judith A. Holton, "The Coding Process and Its Challenges," in *The SAGE Handbook of Grounded Theory*, ed. Antony Bryant and Kathy Charmaz (SAGE Publications: 2006): 275-181.
[21] Thomas, "A General Inductive Approach, 238-242.

Chapter One:
Secularism and meaning-making around death and in the Netherlands

1.1 Introduction

"'But maybe you don't have to miss all those things, grandpa.'
'How come?'
'Maybe all those nice things are still there after we die.
We can imagine it ourselves, right?'"

"'Maar misschien hoef je al die dingen niet te missen, opa.'
'Hoezo dan?'
'Misschien zijn al die fijne dingen er na de dood nog steeds.
We mogen het toch zelf bedenken?'"[22]

This quote is taken from a children's book written to start the conversation about death with children age 5 to 8. The few short sentences hold a powerful message; one of freedom and choice in how we think about death. At the same time, it relays the thought that we cannot be sure about what happens after we die and that the meaning we attribute to death does not have to be shared. In this chapter it will become clear how this quote fits into the ideas about dealing with death in Dutch society. The starting point will be the inspirational advisory report *Mortals: A better coexistence with death* (Stervelingen: beter samenleven met de dood), which was published by the Dutch Council of Public Health and Society in 2021. The council, which advises the government about matters concerning health and wellbeing, publishes material on a diversity of themes which they deem relevant for Dutch society. On their website, they offer the following description of *Mortals*:

"In this inspirational advice, the Council investigates whether and how we can better coexist with death where this currently causes problems. This is certainly not just a task for policy makers. In this advisory report we ask how we as a society can better support each other with dying and mourning."[23]

In order to identify problems and offer advice, the authors of the report have consulted both leading scholars and those who work in the field, like spiritual caretakers, funeral directors and grief counsellors. They perceive two main problems around coexisting with death in Dutch society. The first is that we can postpone death more than ever before due to medical science. It has been removed from society and placed in the category of public health or medicine. By offering inspiration, most often in the form of various initiatives around the topic of death which have already taken place or are ongoing in society, the authors hope to normalise the topic. The other main problem which is identified is that the Netherlands is pluriform in religious, spiritual and ethical identifications and also secularised, which leaves it with very little shared ways of dealing with our mortality.[24]

In this chapter, we will dive into the theoretical debate which lies behind these two problems which *Mortals* identifies. For this, I have analysed the primary text by reading it several times, highlighting important sections and continuously comparing its contents to insights from scholarly literature. As will become clear, the dominant narrative around

[22] Pimm van Hest en Lisa Brandenburg, *Misschien is doodgaan wel hetzelfde als een vlinder worden* (Amsterdam: Clavis, 2018).
[23] "Stervelingen - Beter samenleven met de dood," Raad voor Volksgezondheid en Samenleving, accessed June 1, 2022, https://www.raadrvs.nl/documenten/publicaties/2021/12/9/stervelingen---beter-samenleven-met-de-dood.
[24] Raad voor Volksgezondheid en Samenleving, *Stervelingen: Beter samenleven met de dood* (Den Haag: Raad voor Volksgezondheid en Samenleving: 2021), 10.

dealing with death in the Netherlands which *Mortals* draws on is interwoven with secular narratives. Especially prominent is the idea that secularism is a move away from shared religious meaning-making. Because we have little shared narratives to draw on and meaning-making is individualised, inspiration is needed to help people coexist with death. This idea is present throughout *Mortals*, but, as I will argue, it can be nuanced and some aspects of it can even be refuted by a narrative perspective.

In what follows, I will first discuss the topic of secularism and it's role in the Dutch way of making meaning around death. Secondly, the reason why the report claims that death has been removed from Dutch society will be examined in light of this information. The last part of the chapter will connect the gained insights in the debate that is currently taking place around death to the study of storytelling about death through children's books.

1.2 Interpreting secularism

The first 'problem' which the report responds to is the lack of a shared meaning-making framework due to the largely secular context. In order to understand why this is considered a problem and how children's books are framed as a solution, I will first examine the scholarly discussion round the concept of secularism and position my perspective within it.

When it comes to the study of death-related meaning-making in the Netherlands, the context is often described as secular. Wojtkowiak, in her survey study on the topic, distinguishes between religious and secular strategies for meaning-making. Although examples of secular strategies are mentioned – "telling stories about the deceased, keeping material objects that belonged to the deceased or doing activities one used to do together"[25] – it is not specified *why* these are secular. One could presume that this is because they can take place outside of a religious framework and do not need to refer to this framework. However, the distinction becomes more complicated when we consider Quartier's findings in his empirical study on the difference between secular and religious All Souls celebrations in the Netherlands. He describes how the organisers of a secular All Souls ritual put up a mailbox in which participants could post letters to the dead. The box had angel wings on it, since angels are traditionally seen as the messengers between heaven and earth. The use of the mailbox proved very popular at the event. Although the use of the box does not have to imply a belief in an afterlife, it does express at least some form of transcendence. Quartier calls this *personalised transcendence*: the relationship with the deceased person as he/she was in life, or maybe just the memories of this person, live on.[26] So we see that not only the structures of religious rituals can be re-invented in secularism, but formerly religious concepts and images, such as that of angel wings, can also be re-invented as a secular way of meaning-making. Brennan would attribute this to the human tendency to take refuge in ideas and structures which are familiar and comforting when facing loss. He explains that meaning-making provided by religion is especially prominent in the face of the apparent meaningless generated by death.[27] What we see here, however, is the idea that the familiar religious concepts and structures are used, but their meaning does not have to be religious for those who use them. In

[25] Wojtkowiak, Rutjens and Venbrux, "Meaning Making and Death in a Secular Society," 365.
[26] Thomas Quartier, "Mourning rituals – Between faith and personalisation: changing ritual repertoires on All Souls Day in the Netherlands," *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 10, no. 4 (October 2010): 344, https://doi.org/10.1080/1474225X.2010.507735.
[27] Michael Brennan, "Condolence books: language and meaning in the mourning for Hillsborough and Diana," *Death studies* 32, no. 4 (2008): 336, https://doi.org/10.1080/07481180801974729.

the Netherlands, a very diverse range of meanings are attributed to death, ranging from religious to spiritual to secular.[28] Maybe religious structures and ideas are not just used because they are familiar and comforting, but because they offer narratives which connect individuals and their individualised narratives around death. The structures are not re-interpreted as secular per se, but stripped only of theological meaning to make them open to all.

It already becomes clear, then, that 'secularism' is too conceptual to describe the full complexity and diversity of meaning-making in lived reality. One reason why this is the case is that secularism is not often studied in this context of meaning-making. This is a relatively unexplored area – secularism is much more often studied in the context of the political realm.[29] Balagangadhara, who problematises the religious-secular dichotomy, explains how the distinction is based on the ideas of political thinkers such as John Locke. In the Western Europe and North America of the early modern period, the state was facing the question of how to reconcile clashing Christian groups, who all believed that their religion held the (only) truth. The answer was for the state to draw a line between religious and non-religious/secular matters. It was to take a neutral stance toward truth claims and could no longer intervene in religious matters. Among other things, this means that it was up to the state to define what was religious and what was secular.[30] According to the theory of secularisation, this dichotomy provided a foundation for the increasing privatisation of religion. And so, the term 'secularisation' could consequently be linked to the individualisation of meaning-making, which was increasingly confined to the private sphere.[31] Today, it is generally accepted that religion, in its traditional form, has declined.[32] As Charles Taylor states in his ground-breaking work *A Secular Age*, a shift took place from a society in which believing in God is unchallenged and unproblematic, to one in which this belief is one option among other, more prevailing options.[33] This modern-day society provides a new context in which all search and questioning about the moral and spiritual must proceed.[34]

Exhibition room Funeral Museum Tot Zover

As we will see later on when discussing *Mortals*, this theory of progression from a religious to a secular society is generally accepted in Dutch society. It is illustrated beautifully by an exhibition about funeral customs which I saw in Dutch Funeral Museum Tot Zover. In the exhibition room, seven coffins were displayed. In each coffin, items could be found which match a specific religious or culturally defined funeral. As can be observed in the photograph, the set-up of the exhibition presents

[28] Wojtkowiak, Rutjens and Venbrux, "Meaning Making and Death," 364.
[29] Talal Asad, "Thinking about the secular body, pain, and liberal politics," *Cultural Anthropology* 26, no. 4 (November 2011): 660, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-1360.2011.01118.x.
[30] S.N. Balagangadhara, "On the Dark Side of the "Secular": Is the Religious-Secular Distinction a Binary?" *Numen* 61, no. 1 (2014): 42, https://doi.org/10.1163/15685276-12341303.
[31] J. C. D. Clark, "Secularisation and modernisation: The failure of a 'grand narrative'," *The Historical Journal* 55, no. 1 (March 2012): 164, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X11000586.
[32] Casanova, "The Secular and Secularisms," 1050.
[33] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London: Harvard University Press, 2007), 3, https://doi-org.proxy-ub.rug.nl/10.4159/9780674044289.
[34] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 20.

the different funerary customs as distinct options. The coffin which was not related to any specific religion or culture was that of the 'personalised funeral', which is increasingly popular in the Netherlands as well as globally. Characteristics are informality, personal choice and a focus on celebrating the life and personality of the deceased.[35] This type of funeral provides meaning which does not have to be connected to religion, but it can be if the individual chooses so.

The theory of progression as put forth by Taylor is problematised by Casanova, who argues that secularism becomes an ideology when it entails a theory of what religion is or does. Today, this ideology takes on two forms. The first is *consciously held* and refers to a broad range of modern secular worldviews and ideologies. The second can be described as the taken-for-granted, normal structure of modern reality, as an 'unthought'. I will first discuss an important example Casanova gives of the first, consciously held, ideology of secularism, before moving onto the second form in the next paragraph. This example is the idea that to *be* secular means leaving religion behind. In this case, defining oneself as secular includes the idea of an emancipation from religion, "overcoming the nonrational forms of being, thinking, and feeling associated with religion. It also means growing up, becoming mature, becoming autonomous, thinking and acting on one's own."[36] Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt might link this to one of the four 'ideal types of secularity' which they have identified. They argue that there are multiple secularities, which are different types of cultural meanings underlying the differentiation between religion and non-religious spheres.[37] They have called the ideal type to which I am referring to here "secularity for the sake of individual rights and liberties".[38] This ideal-type is based on the freedom of conscience which emerged as a result of the separation of church and state in the early modern period. In the West, this developed into a deep cultural appreciation for individuality and autonomy, concepts which were then related to secularity.[39] Under the influence of 19th century freethinkers, the aversion to Christian autonomy and the preference for moral agency became entangled with the idea of the freedom of the individual citizen who had the right to elect political representatives.[40] In this way, autonomy in spiritual and religious matters became just as important as political autonomy. This narrative of increasing autonomy and agency can be linked to the issue of the lack of shared meaning due to secularism, as it is described in *Mortals*. With individual freedom also comes uncertainty because people have to choose for themselves how they interpret death and the afterlife.

The idea that Dutch society lacks shared narratives can also be understood in light of the second ideology of secularism as posed by Casanova is of more immediate interest. What characterised the first is that it is consciously held. The second can be described as the taken-for-granted, normal structure of modern reality, as an 'unthought'. Being secular or non-religious becomes the default option, experienced as natural and not in need of justification. In a society in which such an ideology is prominent, even those who do call themselves

---

[35] Eric Venbrux, Janneke Peelen and Marga Altena, "Going Dutch: Individualisation, secularisation and changes in death rites," Mortality 14, no. 2 (May 2009): 97, https://doi.org/10.1080/13576270902807508.
[36] Casanova, "The Secular and Secularisms," 1057.
[37] Monika Wohlrab-Sahr and Marian Burchardt, "Multiple Secularities: Toward a Cultural Sociology of Secular Modernities," *Comparative Sociology* 11 (2012): 876, https://doi.org/10.1163/15691330-12341249.
[38] Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt, "Multiple Secularities," 889.
[39] Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt, "Multiple Secularities," 889-896.
[40] Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford University Press, 2003): 24, https://doi-org.proxy-ub.rug.nl/10.1515/9780804783095.

religious can experience their belief as an option among many others. As a worldview which, in contrast to secular ideas, is in need of justification.[41] This latter ideology of secularism, I argue, is the context in which the re-invention of religious structures and concepts, such as the use of angel wings on All Souls day, must be understood. In a society where secularism is taken-for-granted and 'the normal way of things', the use of religious structures does not have to be associated with religion unless it is stated and justified why this is the case. These structures and concepts are building-blocks in the continuing search for meaning. A person living in a society where the ideology of secularism is taken for granted may assume that religious authority suppresses individual autonomy and agency, while simultaneously using religious ideas and images in meaning-making. This is possible because these ideas and images are re-integrated in the taken-for granted secular structure of society, which does not require attribution of religious meanings to these ideas and images. In this way, secular narratives become interwoven with religious ones.

So we see that even though there are still practices in Dutch society which spur the search for meaning in a social context, such as the All Souls day celebration or funerals, it is mostly up to the individual which meaning is attributed to the practices. The practices do not prescribe meaning, or at least to a lesser extent than those practices organised by religious institutions. According to recent research, in secular countries such as the Netherlands people are more likely to believe that life only has meaning if one gives it meaning oneself.[42] Although this individualism in making meaning is strongly associated with secularism, it must be remembered that (protestant) Christian belief also tends to put emphasis on individualism, freedom and personal responsibility.[43] So individualism does not only apply to those who value secular meaning most. Next to an ideology of individualism, we see a longing for community: collective remembrance rituals have become common in Dutch culture. Think of the All Souls example, but also of memorial concerts or silent marches.[44] Considering these examples, we could say that it is customary to make individual meaning together. Since this thesis is about children's books, the concept 'individualism' must be used with care, since children are strongly embedded within their families and other relations. For example, in her research on young children's meaning-making about the causes of illness, McIntosh found that this is significantly influenced by behavioural rules within families.[45] This paradox between Dutch individualism and children's meaning-making will be elaborated on in chapter two.

Overall, we see that meaning-making around death does not have to be secular in itself. Instead, it is diverse and strongly influenced by the individual. What can be said, however, is that this meaning is created against the background of a dominant ideology of secularism. 'Secular society' is a term which is linked to narratives of leaving shared religious meaning behind and being autonomous in meaning-making. People react to this narrative: it makes people justify their religious/spiritual beliefs and has others search for 'new' meaning

---

[41] Casanova, "The Secular and Secularisms," 1052-1053.
[42] "Ontkerkelijking leidt tot nieuwe verhoudingen in de samenleving," Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, last modified March 24, 2022, https://www.scp.nl/actueel/nieuws/2022/03/24/ontkerkelijking-leidt-tot-nieuwe-verhoudingen-in-de-samenleving.
[43] Richard F. Tomasson, "How Sweden Became so Secular," *Scandinavian Studies* 74, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 74, https://www.jstor.org/stable/40920355.
[44] Venbrux, Peelen and Altena, "Going Dutch," 99.
[45] Caroline McIntosh, Christine Stephens and Antonia Lyons, "Young children's meaning making about the causes of illness within the family context," *Health* 17, no. 1 (January 2013): 3-19, https://doi.org/10.1177/1363459312442421.

which is in accordance with the idea of a secular society, as happens in *Mortals*. So, secularism is something which certain societal groups and individuals *act from* and *react to*. This interpretation of secularism as it is found in society is called 'cultural secularism'. According to anthropologists such as Wiering, this concept can not be properly understood on a theoretical level without empirical research. By studying secularism 'bottom up', we can find our way out of theoretical discussions about its definition and understand the concept as it is relevant for meaning-making groups and individuals in society.[46] I intend to do just this by analysing *Mortals*, children's books and interviewing authors and illustrators. For now, I will discuss the second main problem identified in *Mortals*: the perceived disappearance of death from society.

1. 3 A break with the past

In *Mortals*, the theory of an progression from religious to secular meaning-making is generally accepted and not problematised. It is seen as part of a broader break with the past which also includes the disappearance of death from society due to the medicalisation of death. This transition is expressed in quite definite terms in the report by quoting from the song *Uncharted* by the band Kensington:

"No one knows just what to say
It's like we're in uncharted territory
No one knows the proper way
It's like the ground has fallen from under me"[47]

The use of this quote in the report struck me because it does not just imply a change in meaning-making, but a loss of past knowledge and ideas about death which has been replaced by uncertainty. When we go back to the topic of secularism, this idea matches Taylor's theory about the shift in society from an unchallenged belief in God to believing in God being but an option.[48] Now that the 'ground', which is meaning which belief in God provides, has fallen from under our society, people have to determine for themselves what the 'proper way' is to make meaning of death. The autonomy and room for personal agency which the secular narrative provides also leads to uncertainty. This uncertainty about how to make meaning becomes especially difficult because, as the authors of *Mortals* explain, death and mourning are no longer visible in society.

It seems contradictory that a report written partly because death is not visible describes many initiatives to discuss and make meaning of death which are currently taking place in society, such as exhibitions about death, the popularity of certain graveyards for walking and the development of a method to discuss death in elementary schools. In academia, the so-called 'death denial thesis', which argues that death is denied, not spoken about and avoided, has been criticised since at least the 1970's.[49] Some scholars have even said that we are "living in an age of grief", given the high interest in the topic in popular culture such as TV shows and books.[50] In young people's media, death is present in the stories they consume and

[46] Wiering, "There is a Sexular Body," 2-3.
[47] Raad voor Volksgezondheid en Samenleving, *Stervelingen*, 14.
[48] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 3.
[49] Laura Tradii and Martin Robert, "Do we deny death? II. Critiques of the death-denial thesis," *Mortality* 24, no. 4 (December 2017): 378, https://doi.org/10.1080/13576275.2017.1415319.
[50] Peter Clement Lund, "Recreational grief as resonance - sociological notes on grief in popular culture," *Mortality* 27, no. 1 (2022): 90-91, https://doi.org/10.1080/13576275.2020.1823354.

in their own communication as well. Think of death jokes and memes which mock mortality.[51] When children ask questions about death, these are often brought about by encountering a death in the media. Maybe they saw it on the news, but also think of the many Disney movies in which death is an important topic and in which specific meaning is attributed to it, such as *The Lion King* or *Coco*.[52] As became clear in the previous section, shared rituals or remembrance are common in the Netherlands. *Mortals* can be considered part of a specific discourse that, according to Zimmerman, frames death denial as an obstacle and continues to propose to tear it down. He argues that the idea of death denial is an integral component of this discourse and therefore it continues to be used.[53]

However, the persistence of the idea that death is denied could, in my view, be contributed to various other factors. One of these becomes clear when one considers the first two examples for inspiration which *Mortals* describes. The first is an 18-th century image of the Dance of Death or Danse Macabre. The second a photograph from 1904 of a woman in mourning clothes. Interestingly, next to both images it is emphasised that there used to be more awareness of death and that it used to be more visible, but there seems to be less emphasis on the religious background of these examples of cultural, or religious, heritage. Possibly, this is because they are offered as inspiration to a "partly secular" society. According to Margry, shared, Christian-inspired values and meanings are turned to throughout Europe in times of uncertainty or crisis. He argues that the sense of cultural, social and religious loss, as well as the lack of cohesion and personal identification, have led to shared feelings of displacement and uncertainty.[54] On an individual level, we see that experiencing a loss or traumatic event usually leads to a search for meaning. Furthermore, failure to accommodate a loss can lead to an identity crisis.[55] So, both meaning and identity are renegotiated in the face of death. The authors of *Mortals* point to Christian-inspired values and customs from the past because they were shared by many in the same society and can be used as an inspiration today to deal with feelings of displacement and uncertainty. They can be connected to a cultural identity as well: both the photograph of the women in mourning clothes and the Danse Macabre image are Dutch. Today, death is maybe as visible in TV shows or on social media as it used to be in churches where the Danse Macabre was depicted. Shared narratives are still present, but what is missing are ways of connecting to these narratives as a group which has the same beliefs. The emphasis on individual freedom in meaning-making leads to feelings of uncertainty and maybe also to a stronger need to discuss death together. The idea that death is denied could be partly based on this need. Additionally, it is of course the case that, due to medical science, death at a young age is less common and therefore people come into direct contact with death less and less. Death is not denied, but it is less visible in the way that it usually takes place in the hospital and later in life.[56]

---

[51] Gareth Schott, "'I know death. He's got many faces:' The presence of death in young peoples' media," *Mortality* 26, no. 4 (2021): 367-375, https://doi.org/10.1080/13576275.2021.1987669.
[52] Meredith Cox, Erin Garrett, and James A. Graham, "Death in Disney Films: Implications for Children's Understanding of Death," *Omega* 50, no. 4 (2004-2005): 268, https://doi-org.ru.idm.oclc.org/10.2190/Q5VL-KLF7-060F-W69V.
[53] Tradii and Robert, "Do we deny death?," 386.
[54] Peter Jan Margry, "Memorialising Europe: Revitalising and Reframing a 'Christian' Continent," *Anthropological Journal of European Cultures* 17, no. 2 (2008): 16, https://doi.org/10.3167/ajec.2008.170202.
[55] Katerina Tolstikova, Stephen Fleming and Brian Chartier, "Grief, Complicated Grief, and Trauma: The Role of the Search for Meaning, Impaired Self-reference, and Death Anxiety," *Illness, Crisis and Loss* 13, n. 4 (2005): 296.
[56] Fortuin, Schilderman and Venbrux, "Death and the search for meaning," 342.

Another reason why the idea of death denial lives on can also be derived from *Mortals*. The report puts emphasis on both the limitations and the power of language in grief and mourning. It calls on society to find more precise words to describe grief, as well as helpful metaphors. For example, it is pointed out that the common phrase 'I wish you lots of strength', which is said to those who have lost someone dear, does not leave enough room for pain and grief.[57] The children's books which will be analysed in the next chapters provide helpful ways of expressing the concept of death for children. Examples are the books *Maybe dying is like becoming a butterfly* and *Bigger than a dream*. This theme will be elaborated on in chapter four, but in the context of the idea that there is a break with the past way of dealing with death, it is interesting to briefly consider this perceived need for a better expression of death. Based on her article *Death and the search for meaning*, Fortuin might explain it in light of the three 'thanatological cultural niches' she found in her analysis of Dutch newspaper articles portraying people confronted with approaching death. She explains how these people drew from three groups of cultural meanings, which are called niches: the (1) canonical, (2) utilitarian and (3) expressive cultural niches. The first is based on religious authority and tradition, the second on rational and utilitarian reasoning and the third on authentic self-expression. An individual can draw from one of these niches in making meaning, but usually uses ideas from two or even three and weaves them together into a personal narrative about death. The inspirational advice offered in *Mortals* seems to draw mainly from the expressive niche, since it emphasises such things as acceptance, expression, personal legacy, communication, ritualising, expressing criticism, humour and other cultural meanings which can all be found in this niche. Since it is associated with communication and expression, the emphasis on finding new ways of expressing death could be explained by the authors of the report drawing their meaning mostly from the expressive niche.[58] Maybe the idea that death is invisible or denied is partly based on the cultural idea that meaning around death should be expressed better; that the expressions we have today are not sufficient to fully put the magnitude of death into worlds.

1.4 Finding meaning through stories

I will now connect the analysis of *Mortals* to the theme of storytelling through children's books. The basic function of storytelling is to simultaneously conserve and challenge the norms and values of the community. In order to do so, a storyteller weaves a narrative.[59] Essentially, the diverging perspectives on the place of death in society which have been discussed in this chapter can be called narratives which people take as a starting point to make meaning. *Mortals* tells the story of a society which has a complicated relationship with death due to secularism, diversity and the invisibility of death. It offers inspiration from the past to conserve forgotten values and tells of the heroes who are challenging the status quo by interacting with death in new and exciting ways which could bring balance back to the kingdom. I argue that Dutch society is (re)shaping reshaping the ways in which the religious and the secular are interwoven. People with diverse ideas about death still seek community and rituals, and express this need in creative ways which often include elements drawn from

[57] Raad voor Volksgezondheid en Samenleving, *Stervelingen*, 34.
[58] Fortuin, Schilderman and Venbrux, "Death and the search for meaning," 341-343, 351.
[59] Robert Matthew Little and Lynn Froggett, "Making meaning in muddy waters: representing complexity through community based storytelling," *Community Development Journal* 45, no. 4 (October 2010): 458, https://doi.org/10.1093/cdj/bsp017.

religion.

The question is which narrative is taken as a starting point by the children's books, and especially which norms and values they seek to either conserve or challenge for the future generation. Since children's literature is written to be read aloud, either by a parent or at social gatherings, it is open to additions or changes made by the person who reads it.[60] Furthermore, storytelling is co-creation. The listener attaches his or her own meaning to the narrative. Children feel compassion and empathy for the characters, ask questions and bring in stories from their own lives which they feel adds to the literature. This can start a discussion which might bring forth a new story shared by storyteller and 'listener'.[61] Perhaps then, this could be seen as a form of shared meaning-making which many, especially those in the expressive niche who value personal meaning and communication, are missing. A children's book does not only provide a narrative, it also stimulates the audience to come together as a group to make shared meaning of this narrative.

This chapter has discussed the background of the discussion amidst which children's books about death have emerged. These books express a paradox. Adults value agency and autonomy in meaning-making, also for their children, but they simultaneously want to transmit certain messages about death to them. As demonstrated, this emphasis on individual agency part of a secular narrative of progression. In chapter two, the question of agency, as an aspect of a secular narrative, is taken as a starting point for understanding the interaction between adults and children in literature.

[60] Hans-Heino Ewers, "Children's Literature and the Traditional Art of Storytelling," *Poetics Today* 13, no. 1 (Spring 1992): 169-173.
[61] Olga Nelson, "Storytelling: Language Experience for Meaning Making," *The Reading Teacher* 42, no. 6 (February 1989): 386-387, https://www.jstor.org/stable/20200160.

Chapter Two:
Agency in children's literature

2.1 Introduction

"Could it be that somewhere, behind all those white clouds,
there is a heaven where everyone goes after death?
Where hedge sparrows chatter, where cool brooks swirl,
where buttercups bloom along the banks of a ditch?

Could it be that the dead just go on living there?
And is it true what grandpa says; that grandma is there now?"

"Kan het bestaan dat ergens, achter al die witte wolken,
een hemel is waar iedereen naartoe gaat na de dood?
Waar heggenmussen kwetteren, waar koele beekjes kolken,
waar boterbloemen bloeien langs de oevers van een sloot?

Kan het bestaan dat doden daar gewoon weer verder leven?
En is het waar wat opa zegt; dat oma daar nu is?"[62]

This is the beginning of a poem called *Heaven*, from a 2015 children's book consisting only of poems about death. It poses questions, but does not answer them. This is left up to the children, or to the parents, teachers or peers who discuss the poem with them. By asking these questions, the poem encourages children to think about the possibility of an afterlife or to take comfort in the beautiful images with which it is described. Children are asked to formulate their own answers or to choose not to do so. In short, they are given agency in their own meaning-making process. Note also that the questions can be answered in diverse ways. Even though they may remind the reader of a Christian conception of life after death, they can accommodate all who find themselves in a society were an ideology of secularism is taken-for-granted. In wider society, there are many occasions where children are encouraged to make up their own minds about a topic and act out of their own convictions, instead of taking the word of authority figures. When meaning-making comes up in schools, you will often hear the questions 'what do you think?' or 'how would you handle this?', which are to be answered using arguments based on personal ideas and beliefs. Children are encouraged to educate themselves about societal issues and politics, for example through TV-programs like *NOS Jeugdjournaal* (News for youth). Social media enables them to follow current trends, sometimes even more closely than their parents. This suggests that children have many possibilities to use their own agency and are encouraged to do so.

In this chapter, I will examine the topic of agency in children's literature: How much does children's literature instruct children and how much does it seek to empower children to make meaning on their own? Of course, the answer to this question will focus on meaning-making in particular. As became clear in chapter one, meaning-making is mostly individualistic in the Netherlands, and the secular narrative emphasises individual agency and autonomy in meaning-making. Storytelling through children's books is, however, a shared meaning-making practice. To properly understand the trends and assumptions concerning agency and children's literature today, it is necessary to first look towards history. Literature for children, which is written and bought by adults, has always played into cultural notions of childhood. It responds to what those producing it expect from and want to stimulate in

[62] Levity Peters, "Bette Westera en Sylvia Weve – Doodgewoon: Over het belang van doodgaan," Meander, last modified May 17, 2015, https://meandermagazine.nl/2015/05/over-het-belang-van-doodgaan/#:~:text=Kan%20het%20bestaan%20dat%20ergens,de%20oevers%20van%20een%20sloot%3F.

children. The notions we see today are derived from and interact with those of earlier times. Before diving into history, the concept of children's agency and the debate about it will briefly be explored.

2.2 Children's agency for meaning-making in literature

Agency can be defined as "the ability or capacity to act". [63] When it comes to meaning-making around death, this means that a child, as an individual, is able to give direction to "a process that has beneficial results on attitudes towards life and as a search for an explanation for loss". [64] Since this ability has a positive influence on wellbeing, it seems like something that should be stimulated. However, since it concerns children, caution must be exercised. One reason for this is that, when you are in possession of agency, you sometimes also have the responsibility to act on your own. [65] Therefore, the complex entanglement of factors which allow children to make meaning must be taken into consideration. For one, up to the age of ten – generally speaking –, children are developing their cognitive ability to understand death. Concepts like the universality of death or the causes which lead to the decease of the body are difficult to grasp up to a certain age, which complicates the meaning-making process. [66] Furthermore, as has been mentioned in the previous chapter, children's meaning-making is embedded in the family unit and in the customs and ideas of the groups in which they find themselves. [67] Children do not only make meaning in dialogue with others, they also copy what they learn. Therefore, children's books about death can certainly foster agency in children to make meaning, but this is an agency which is strongly connected to the meaning-making of the family unit and can be limited by children's cognitive abilities to understand death.

Additionally, books, whether they are educational or fictional works, transmit certain (culturally determined) ideas about right and wrong, about societal and political issues and about making meaning of life and death. [68] Although the ideas which books about death offer give children the opportunity to learn and think about the topic in order to shape their own meaning, they are inevitably the product of a certain culture and strand of thought in which some things are depicted as more important than others. For example, in many Dutch children's books (as we will see in chapter four), fostering continuing bonds with the deceased is depicted as more important than letting go of the dead loved one. Messages such as these are then poured into the mall which is a certain genre of children's literature, which has not only its own literary and stylistic features, but also works with certain ideas of what a

---

[63] Steven Accardi, "Agency," in *Keywords in Writing Studies*, ed. Paul Heilker and Peter Vandenberg (Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press, 2014), 1.
[64] Wojtkowiak, Rutjens, and Venbrux, "Meaning Making and Death in a Secular Society," 363.
[65] Accardi, "Agency," 1.
[66]Georgia Panagiotaki, Michelle Hopkins, Gavin Nobes, Emma Ward and Debra Griffiths, "Children's and adults' understanding of death: Cognitive, parental, and experiential influences," *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology* 166 (2018): 97, http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jecp.2017.07.014.
[67] Caroline McIntosh, Christine Stephens and Antonia Lyons, "Young children's meaning making about the causes of illness within the family context," *Health* 17, no. 1 (January 2013): 3-19, https://doi.org/10.1177/1363459312442421.
[68] Emer O'Sullivan, "Comparative Children's Literature," *PMLA* 126, no. 1 (January 2011): 190, https://www.jstor.org/stable/41414091.

child is, how to best get a message across to children and what is important in childhood. [69] This includes the extent to which a child is perceived to have agency and the amount of agency which is desired from children.

The recognition of children's agency is an important topic in recent scholarly literature. For the last 30 years, many scholars have enthusiastically responded to the "new" social study of childhood, which includes the view that children are active subjects in society instead of products of their environment. They participate in the construction of childhood, instead of merely accepting adults' construction of this stage of life.[70] Although the 'academic spotlights' are certainly pointed towards this idea in childhood studies, scholars such as Ryan question the newness of it. He argues that it was in fact already visible in 17th century and it's development has thrived up until today, when it is being described particularly clearly and it is taken advantage of as a theoretical framework. Furthermore, studying childhood means that we as adults are inevitably shaping and representing it. Valuing agency in children means that we as adults are shaping an image of what is 'right behaviour' or of what a child should be: an active social actor. As Ryan puts it: "the child […] will continue to occupy a paradoxical position as an object of knowledge and a subject who knows."[71] Oswell explains how in the period from the late 19th century up until today, children's capacity to act in society has in fact increased, along with the areas in which they can act, including social, natural and technological areas. This does not mean, however, that children have suddenly developed capacities which they did not have before. Instead, their place in society has changed. Their social environment and the extent to which adults value their input has changed, which has led to more possibilities for children to express themselves as individuals. [72] For example, the extent to which children's opinions about effective schooling are valued by adults strongly influences the capacity of children to act towards positive change in schools. Another scholar who draws attention to the 'paradox of agency' is Dietz, who describes how the creation of agents has always gone hand in hand with the disciplining of young people. "Critical scholarship approaches them as the autonomous co-producers of their own lives and their surrounding society ('entrepreneurs of the self'). As such, their agency is spurred as well as controlled by dominant discursive regimes that govern ideas about what successful children should look, act and be like."[73] Books are ideal for studying this paradox, since they are written, published and bought by adults, but often for the purpose to empower children and teach them to use their own agency.

2.3 Children's agency in literature: a historical sketch

When we look at the way literature plays into our ideas of childhood and the amount of agency that comes with it throughout history, it is only logical to start in the sixteenth- and seventeenth centuries. After all, before this, in the Medieval world, children were not seen as

[69] Karen Coats, "Conventions of Children's Literature: Then and Now," *Style* 35, no. 3 (Fall 2001): 389-392, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5325/style.35.3.389.
[70] Patrick J. Ryan, "How New Is the "New" Social Study of Childhood? The Myth of a Paradigm Shift," *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 38, no. 4 (Spring 2008): 555. https://www.jstor.org/stable/20143705.
[71] Ryan, "How New Is the "New" Social Study of Childhood?," 576.
[72] David Oswell, *The Agency of Children: From Family to Global Human Rights* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 3, https://doi-org.proxy-ub.rug.nl/10.1017/CBO9781139033312.
[73] Feike Dietz, *Lettering Young Readers in the Dutch Enlightenment: Literacy, Agency and Progress in Eighteenth-Century Children's Books* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 6, https://doi-org.proxy-ub.rug.nl/10.1007/978-3-030-69633-7.

full-fledged people until they reached the age of seven and started to participate in adult society and literature – which consisted mostly of oral storytelling.[74] In the sixteenth- and seventeenth centuries, the first steps towards a category of children's literature were made. Lamb, who discusses children's reading practices in Britain during these Early Modern times, explains how texts for children in these days were mostly written to teach children how to read. This was an essential step towards becoming an adult and starting to read the standard educational works such as the Bible and Ovid. Children were seen as cognitively inferior to adults. Adults thought of childhood as a time of the imagination in which reason was lacking. Writers in this period often describe those works they deem inferior as 'childish', which signifies how texts produced for and by children were perceived. At the same time, we see that early modern children respond to the texts produced for them in unexpected ways. They read books which haven't been assigned to them, they discuss about them with peers and family members and they write notes in the margins, for example. In this way, children demonstrated autonomy and their capacity to shape their own lifeworld and identity through literature.[75] Since much of their literature was religious – reading the Bible was very popular among children and adults alike – this also meant that children in this time used literature to shape their own meaning-making processes, which were firmly grounded in the Christian tradition.

In the Netherlands, it is commonly assumed that the true beginning of the category of children's literature lies much later than in early modern times. Namely, in 1778, when *Proeve van kleine gedichten voor kinderen (Selection of short poems for children)*, by Hiëronymus van Alphen, was published. At Dutch secondary schools today, it is taught that this book stems from Enlightenment ideas about the child being born good and innocent, and this goodness needing to be preserved by teaching right from wrong.[76] This idea is confirmed by Goldstone, who explains that under the influence of John Locke, the 18th century saw the child as an empty vessel, and literature as an enjoyable way to teach children morality.[77] *Proeve van kleine gedichten* places emphasis on the importance of both morality and learning. Interesting to know is that the topic of death was not shunned in this book, there is a poem devoted to it:

Ach! mijn zusjen is gestorven,	*Oh! My little sister died,*
nog maar veertien maanden oud.	*Only fourteen months old.*
'k Zag haar dood in 't kisje liggen:	*I saw her dead in the small coffin:*
ach wat was mijn zusje koud!	*Oh my sister was so cold.*
[…][78]	*[…]*[79]

This demonstrates that death and coming to terms with it has been an important topic in Dutch children's literature since the very beginning of the category. To be able to connect this to enlightenment thinking and to put the secondary school textbook description into context, I turn towards Dietz' recent research on lettering young readers in the Dutch enlightenment. In

[74] Bette P. Goldstone, "Views of Childhood in Children's Literature Over Time," *Language Arts* 63, no. 8 (1986): 792-793.
[75] Edel Lamb, *Reading Children in Early Modern Culture* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018): 1-15, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-70359-6.
[76] "Proeve van kleine gedichten voor kinderen," Literatuurlijn, Montessori Lyceum Amsterdam, last modified 2022, http://literatuurlijn.nl/verlichting/proeve-van-kleine-gedichten-voor-kinderen/.
[77] Goldstone, "Views of Childhood in Children's Literature Over Time," 797.
[78] Montessori Lyceum Amsterdam, "Proeve van kleine gedichten voor kinderen."
[79] This is my own translation.

1762, Rousseau made his plea for active learning, based on children's own curiosity and experiences. He thought of books as transmitters of authoritative knowledge which obstruct this learning process and turn children into passive consumers. Dietz argues, however, that while books were restrictive to some measure, they also empowered Dutch children. In the eighteenth century, Dutch discourse was obsessed with the idea of social and economical decline. A solution was seen in fostering agency in children, so they would choose to uphold virtues and restore the glory of the past. Education was aimed at shaping people who combined reason and faith in their civil morality – faith, because the Dutch enlightenment was both moderate and Christian in nature. To foster an inner motivation in the young to become virtuous people, they needed freedom and agency, but also instruction on what virtuousness entails.[80] This idea is expressed beautifully in the most famous poem from *Proeve van kleine gedichten voor kinderen*, named *Jantje zag eens pruimen hangen*. In this poem, Jantje sees the most delicious plums hanging on a tree, but his father has forbidden him from picking them. No one is around and Jantje knows that they will never miss five or six of the fruits. He then asks himself if he shall be disobedient for a hand full of plums and decides not to pick them. It then becomes clear that his father has been listening to tis trail of thought and as a reward for choosing for the morally correct option, Jantje receives a hat full of plums from him. So, the child reading this poem is instructed that it is virtuous to obey one's parents and that you will be rewarded for it, but also learns that Jantje made the choice to obey by himself, using his own agency and ability to separate right from wrong. The poem assumes that this ability is present in children and therefore empowers them and encourages them to listen to their own knowledge and sense of morality – which is, paradoxically, taught to them by authority figures.

Furthermore, the poem teaches both reason and (Christian) morality. Although reason tells Jantje that no one will know if he picks the plums, it also tells him that a snack is not worth being disobedient – an ideal grounded in moral behaviour. The idea that the enlightenment, with it's focus on reason and autonomy, went hand in hand with religion, has only become commonly accepted in the last 30 years or zo, since the enlightenment is traditionally seen as the cradle of secularisation.[81] This traditional idea rhymes with the idea of secularisation as described by Casanova (chapter one), which entails that to be secular is to be freed of the authoritarian shackles of childish religion, to be autonomous, reasonable and free-thinking.[82] If we bring religion into the enlightenment, Sheehan writes, we must also reconsider notions we might have of a reasonable secularism which constitutes modernity.[83] And indeed, as we have seen, today people make meaning of death using religious ideas or spiritual notions within the boundaries of the ideology of secularism. What is important in children's books in the eighteenth century for now, however, is that their goal was to teach children to use their agency and reason in order to be virtuous in the world of adults.

Around 1850, things took a new turn as children's books were influenced by romanticism. Up until this point, rationalism brought forth characters which were generally nice children who made mistakes because of their young age, were corrected by adults, saw

[80] Dietz, *Lettering Young Readers in the Dutch Enlightenment*, 2-12.
[81] Jonathan Sheehan, "Enlightenment, Religion, and the Enigma of Secularization: A Review Essay," *The American Historical Review* 108, no. 4 (October 2003): 1062-1066, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/529788.
[82] Casanova, "The Secular and Secularisms," 1057.
[83] Sheehan, "Enlightenment, Religion, and the Enigma of Secularization," 1079.

their own flaws and corrected them. Stories were sober and told of realistic events.[84] In Dutch literature, this classic example of this image is the *De brave Hendrik (The well-behaved Hendrik)*, published in 1810. Hendrik always takes of his hat when he passes people on the street, folds his clothes orderly, always knows his lessons and is satisfied with his life, even though he has little. He has no bad qualities and is, in the eyes of many early 19th-century adults, the ideal type of a child.[85] From 1850 onwards, however, romantic thinkers who followed Rousseau shaped a different image of childhood. They envisioned a child which is born with a special perception, which is unique, innocent and without prejudice or bias. Children were perceived to live in a different, more magical world than adults. They had their own spaces such as nurseries, their own fashion and toys. Here we truly see a genre of literature emerge which is reserved for the innocent and magical world in which children are perceived to live. This conception of childhood brought forth classics such as *Peter Pan* and *The Secret Garden*.[86] In American history, around which much of the scholarly work on history of children's literature has been structured, this romantic image of the world or children was also made possible because of the fading of the sober Calvinist doctrine from literature.[87] In the Netherlands, the soberness and realism characteristic for Calvinism did no such thing as fade away in the late 18th century, but the image of children does shift under the influence of this romantic image of a unique and separate world for children. Instead of well-behaved Hendrik, the protagonists of the story were now often little boys who were naughty, defied authority and generally "behaved like children". Think of Dik Trom and Pietje Bell, who had amusing conflicts with their teachers and were up to all kind of mischief. They had their own type of "childlike" agency and got away with behaviour which would not be tolerated from adults. Stories were amusing and humorous, not only concerned with teaching moral lessons. It seems as though in childhood, cheerfulness began to be valued more than obedience.[88] The adventures were, however, still grounded in the real world and contained no fantasy other than descriptions of unlikely situations.[89]

In 1901, we see the occurrence of a major change for Dutch children: it became obligatory to go to school (or to receive home schooling).[90] Therefore, instead of contributing to the income of the family, children were now drawing from it. The birth rate dropped and the child death rate went down. Alle this resulted in much emotional investment in children and intensified relationships in family units. Since a child's life was now devoted to school (in many cases instead of work), parents were interested in stimulating and measuring their

---

[84] Anne Scott MacLeod, "From Rational to Romantic: The Children of Children's Literature in the Nineteenth Century," *Poetics Today* 13, no. 1 (1992): 141-144, https://www.jstor.org/stable/1772794.
[85] "Brave Hendrik," Oneindig Noord-Holland, last modified 2022, https://onh.nl/verhaal/brave-hendrik; "Van Brave Hendrik tot Dik Trom: Jeugdliteratuur in de 19e eeuw," Literatuurgeschiedenis, accessed July 28, 2022, https://www.literatuurgeschiedenis.org/19e-eeuw/van-brave-hendrik-tot-dik-trom#:~:text=In%20de%20loop%20van%20de,van%20der%20Hoop%20Juniorszoon.
[86] Goldstone, "Views of Childhood in Children's Literature Over Time," 795.
[87] MacLeod, "From Rational to Romantic," 141-143.
[88] Peter N. Stearns, "Obedience and Emotion: A Challenge in the Emotional History of Childhood," *Journal of Social History* 47, no. 3 (Spring 2014): 607, https://doi.org/10.1093/jsh/sht110.
[89] "Van Brave Hendrik tot Dik Trom: Jeugdliteratuur in de 19e eeuw," Literatuurgeschiedenis, accessed July 28, 2022, https://www.literatuurgeschiedenis.org/19e-eeuw/van-brave-hendrik-tot-dik-trom#:~:text=In%20de%20loop%20van%20de,van%20der%20Hoop%20Juniorszoon.
[90] "Geschiedenis," Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap, Rijksoverheid accessed July 29, 2022, https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/ministeries/ministerie-van-onderwijs-cultuur-en-wetenschap/organisatie/geschiedenis#:~:text=Op%201%20januari%201901%20is,en%20de%20medezeggenschap%20wettelijk%20geregeld.

children's intelligence.[91] They were also interested in parenting the individual child (although the verb 'parenting' did not exist back then).[92] This interest was first rooted in behaviourism, with Freud installing ideas like thumb sucking being associated with psychosexual problems. The focus of the debate soon shifted to a psychological approach, however, which placed emphasis on childhood anxieties, fears and wishes.[93] So, the focus was less on morality and creating virtuous adults, and more on intelligence and 'healthy' childhood behaviour and thoughts.

2.4 Contemporary trends (1950's – today)

As relationships between parents and children intensified, communication between them became very important. A large part of parenting became fulfilling the child's wishes, which were interwoven with the parent's wishes for their children, like striving to study at a good school or university, receiving status and a well-paying job in which they could find fulfilment.[94] So, as control by adults increased in the sense that behaviour was monitored more closely and the child had to work hard in school, this also meant that children had more opportunity to use their agency by communicating their own ideas and wishes. Because they all received education, they had more knowledge about societal and political issues, in which they could more easily take part. Additionally, children became a target for market consumption. With access to radio and later to television, they developed their own taste in the stories and amusements they enjoyed. Television also caused influence from visual culture in children's books. They now had to be visually attractive and include illustrations to capture the attention.[95]

In the 1970's, children became even more emphasised as free individuals. Freedom in development was seen as essential for healthy development. In the Netherlands, this view was accompanied by depillarisation and the subsequent individualism in meaning-making. Education became more progressive and believed in the innate goodness of children and their natural will to learn, which was obstructed by too much discipline.[96] From this period onwards, we see the idea that the world of adults and that of children grew closer together, or even – according to some – that childhood is disappearing altogether. Children and adults wore the same types of clothing, both spend their time in the same rooms indoors (since children often prefer television or video games to playing on the street). Since the internet children are sometimes even more aware than adults of trends in popular culture, and even of societal and political matters. At the same time, adults want to preserve their own childhood and youth, which is visible in the increasing adult interest in children's fiction. A literary category which has also become very popular is crossover fiction. This includes books like *Harry Potter* and *His Dark Materials*, which are written for and read by both children and adults.[97] So, children's freedom and agency are valued by adults, who themselves often think

---

[91] Peter N. Stearns, "Conclusion: Change, Globalization and Childhood," *Journal of Social History* 38, no. 4 (2005): 1041, https://www.jstor.org/stable/3790489.
[92] Charlotte Faircloth, *Militant lactivism?: attachment parenting and intensive motherhood in the UK and France* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2013), 31.
[93] Fiona McCulloch, Children's literature in context (London, New York: Continuum, 2011), 21-22, SmartCat.
[94] McCulloch, *Children's literature in context*, 22-23.
[95] Kathy G. Short, "What's Trending in Children's Literature and Why It Matters," *Language Arts* 95, no. 5 (May 2018): 289-290, https://www.jstor.org/stable/44810091.
[96] McCulloch, *Children's literature in context*, 24.
[97] McCulloch, *Children's literature in context*, 24-25;
Goldstone, "Views of Childhood in Children's Literature Over Time," 796-797.

longingly of a period in life when you could lose yourself in fantasy worlds and pastimes which take place outside of the complicated 'adult' world of societal issues. The separation between the world of adults and the world of children seems has disappeared almost completely from literature.

This makes it possible to instrumentalise children's literature for fostering their agency by introducing them to topics which are often considered 'difficult' or painful to speak about by adults. Two of the interviewees showed me books which they had also been working on, which were about refugees and war, for example. Books like these can serve as an introduction to and an aid to cope with such topics. Simultaneously, they reflect how societal issues now have a place in children's literature, and the importance attached to fostering diversity and social justice at an early age.[98] Agency in children is stimulated by an introduction to societal discussions, but – and here we arrive again at the paradox of agency – in a way which teaches children to think about these issues in an 'appropriate way'. Take this starting line from an article about using children's books about refugees in the classroom as an example:

> As educators of young children, it is our responsibility—both professionally and ethically—to promote diversity and equity in our schools. Not only does this shape the way children see themselves, but it also greatly influences the ways in which they view others. Teaching children to understand and appreciate diversity strengthens their own mental health and well-being and instils in them the desire to live in harmony with other people, regardless of their similarities or differences.[99]

This quote reflects beautifully how concerns about child wellbeing are being combined with what is today regarded as the moral way to interact with others. By introducing children to topics such as the refugee crisis in a way that teaches them about respect and the benefits of diversity, they are given agency. Simultaneously, an effort is made to urge them to use this agency in a way which befits today's model citizen. Even though our viewpoints about what a good and healthy child 'should be' has changed since the beginning of children's literature, the paradox of agency is just as applicable today as it was then. What has to be added to this statement is that we do see a significant increase in the value we attach to stimulating agency in children.

2.5 The child in children's literature

Up until now I have focussed mostly on adults' perception of children and their role in society, but it is also important to think further about the way children directly influence literature. Where exactly do we find the child in children's literature? Is it only a recipient of adult writings or is it an inspiration and a dialogue partner whose voice can be found in the stories themselves? Scholars seem conflicted about this question. Perhaps the author who is most rigid in her viewpoint that the child is in fact not involved in the category of children's literature is Jacqueline Rose:

> There is no child behind the category 'children's fiction', other than the one which the category itself sets in place, the one which it needs to believe is there for its own purposes.

---

[98] Hillary A. Libnoch and Jackie Ridley, "Using Picture Books about Refugees: Fostering Diversity and Social Justice in the Elementary School Classroom," *YC Young Children* 75, no. 5 (December 2020): 28-36, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26979181.

[99] Libnoch and Ridley, "Using Picture Books about Refugees," 29.

Children's fiction sets up a world in which the adult comes first (author, maker, giver) and the child comes after (reader, product, receiver), but where neither of them enter the space in between. To say that the child is inside the book—children's books are after all as often as not about children—is to fall straight into a trap. It is to confuse the adult's intention to get at the child with the child it portrays. If children's fiction builds an image of the child inside the book, it does so in order to secure the child who is outside the book, the one who does not come so easily within its grasp. [100]

So, Rose sees children's literature as a category which separates the adult from the child, instead of bringing them together. When adults write children's books, they respond to their own image of childhood as a separate category from adulthood. We have seen, however, that even in the earliest days of literature for children, which is the early modern period, children already have more agency than commonly assumed, since they developed their own reading practices and discussion topics.[101] It is no surprise, then, that many have critiqued and nuanced Rose's viewpoint, saying that maybe we could best look at children's literature as a 'muddy middle ground' in which children's and adults' agency are mixed together.[102] Furthermore, as is argued by Gubar, excluding children from the category would draw our attention away from children's reaction to and interaction with literature, which is an important field of knowledge to which I hope to contribute with this thesis.[103]

Next to this, adult's vast contribution to children's literature is shaped by the children they know and love, as well as by their own childhood. The authors and illustrators interviewed for this thesis (to which more attention will be given in chapter five) referred to the influence of children on their work in various ways. One interviewee said that she felt the child in herself when she illustrated. Another explained how he had written about his own experiences as a child. In saying this, they indicated that they did not only respond to the cultural concept of 'childhood', but to the child they once were. If you think about it in this way, it is rather impossible to separate the world of children and adults in children's literature. The child we once were, and the experiences we had as a child, are part of us. Some authors and illustrators connect with children through connecting with this part of themselves, which is not a cultural stereotype but direct experience. Of course, memories and feelings are not hard proof of what childhood 'is' and they might very well be affected by the cultural image of childhood, but they have their own essence as well.

The most important reason that this thesis does not look at children's literature as something that separates adults and children is that it does not focus only on the meaning-making which is produced by authors, illustrators and publishers, but on meaning-making as a process which children live through and in which children's books can play an important role. When children and adults read and discuss books together, their narratives and their agency are brought together instead of separated. Children integrate the meaning which they take from the book into their own personal narrative construction about the meaning of death, which can constantly be adjusted by conversations, in play or by experiences with the topic.[104]

---

[100] Jacqueline S. Rose, "The Case of Peter Pan: The Impossibility of Children's Fiction," in *The Children's Culture Reader*, ed. Henry Jenkins (New York and London: New York University Press, 1998), 58 and 65.
[101] Dietz, *Lettering Young Readers in the Dutch Enlightenment*, 2-3.
[102] Marah Gubar, "On Not Defining Children's Literature," *PMLA* 126, no. 1 (January 2011): 210, https://www.jstor.org/stable/41414094.
[103] Gubar, "On Not Defining Children's Literature," 215.
[104] John Potter and Kate Cowan, "Playground as meaning-making space: Multimodal making and re-making of meaning in the (virtual) playground," *Global Studies of Childhood* 10, no. 3 (2020): 248–263, https://doi.org/10.1177/2043610620941527;

As has been discussed, storytelling and the discussions and activities which surround it play a crucial role in both introducing and integrating meaning into the personal narrative. When the interviewees read the books with children in the classroom, they noticed that children quickly connected the story to their own experiences with death and wanted to share these. In doing this, children used their agency to make meaning of their own experiences through children's books. They were encouraged to do this because the story was read to them and room was made for the expression of their thoughts.

2.6 Agency, secularism and storytelling

So, in storytelling, meaning is made in interaction with the group which the child is part of, usually either the family or the school class. This brings us to a tension field in secular Dutch society. In meaning-making, individuality and autonomy are valued – at least in the dominant secular narrative. Those who produce children's literature also value agency in children. On the other hand, the process of meaning-making through storytelling is shared in group contexts.[105] In the secular narrative which is prominent in popular discourse, the focus on agency and autonomy is often linked to the secular-religious dichotomy. In these cases, religiosity and individual agency are framed as opposite ends of a spectrum. This is especially visible when it concerns religious minorities such as Muslims in Western societies. Think of material symbols such as headscarves being linked to authority and oppression.[106] Since secularisation on both the level of the state and on a micro level is usually explained as the decline of the authority of religious institutions, this characterisation is not surprising.[107] It is presented as logical that the disappearance of religious authority automatically leaves room for meaning-making derived from personal preferences and agency.

I argue that this is not the case, and children's books are a perfect example of the reason for this. Not only do they enable children and adults to make meaning together through storytelling, the meanings that are represented in their stories are also derived from contemporary ideas about how children should act and react in society, which have authority on the subject matter and thus compromise individual preferences. We could even go one step further and say that the ideology of secularism itself might now hold an authority position. This viewpoint can find support in the debate about C. S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia*. The publisher, HarperCollins, considered bringing out a new Narnia series with no correlation to Christianity. This idea is an expression of anxiety about evangelism, which could lead to conversion to a particular authoritative view. (Admittedly, worries about the commercial aspects of selling books rooted in Christian theology to secular parents and children must also be factored in).[108] Meaning, however, is found in secular books just as well as in Christian ones, and will always be influenced by shared societal narratives which to a certain extent conflict with personal agency.

Erin E. Toolis and Phillip L. Hammack, "The Lived Experience of Homeless Youth: A Narrative Approach," *Qualitative Psychology* 2, no. 1 (2015): 52, http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/qup0000019.

[105] McIntosh, Stephens and Lyons, "Young children's meaning making about the causes of illness within the family context," 3-19.

[106] Anna Korteweg, "The Sharia Debate in Ontario: Gender, Islam, and Representations of Muslim Women's Agency," *Gender and Society* 22, no. 4 (August 2008): 435, https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243208319768.

[107] Abdolmohammad Kazemipur, *Sacred as Secular: Secularization under Theocracy in Iran* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2022), 22-34.

[108] Anne F. Howey, "Secular or Spiritual: Rereading "Anne of Green Gables"," *Christianity and Literature* 62, no. 3 (Spring 2013): 396, https://www.jstor.org/stable/44315075.

In chapter four, it will be examined which meanings are most prominent in popular children's books about death, based on an qualitative analysis of six Dutch children's books. First, however, chapter three will provide a brief overview of the books used in the analysis.

Chapter Three:
A brief overview of children's books

This chapter consists of a short overview of the six children's books used in the analysis of chapter four. Included is an image of the cover and a short summary written by myself.

Aerts, Jef and Marit Törnqvist. *Groter dan een droom (Bigger than a dream)*. Amsterdam: Singel Uitgeverijen, 2013. Ages 6 and up.

Summary

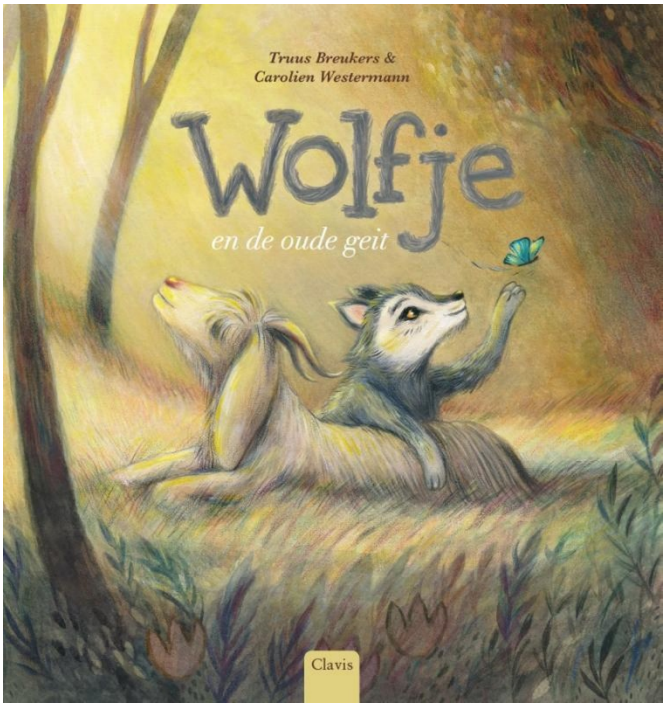
A boy hears his sister whisper in his ear. His sister who died before he was born. He has never met her, but has always experienced that she was present in the family in some way. At bedtime, the boy, who remains unnamed throughout the book, asks his mother about death. She says that it is like dreaming, only bigger. The same night, his deceased sister visits him and takes him on a bike ride. She shows him the graveyard where she's buried and the hospital she was in. They eat marzipan, bond and in the end fall asleep together. In the morning, when the boy wakes up, his sister is gone. He tells his mother that she was bigger than a dream. The illustrations show that the house is fuller or more whole, because the presence of the sister is not just made up of an undefined sadness anymore, but of a loving bond between siblings.

Bos, Tamara and Annemarie van Haeringen. *Papa, hoor je me? (Daddy, can you hear me?)* Amsterdam: Leopold, 2011. Ages 8 and up.

Summary

Polle's father died. Sitting beside his body, Polle describes everything that is happening: that people have come to visit, that he didn't have to go school, that his mother and brother are grieving and the details of the funeral. He also tells about how his father was sick. They thought at first that he was going to get better, but it then became clear that this would not happen. Polle then speaks about the memories he has of his father, both good and bad. At the end of the book, he thinks about where his father is now and if he can still see what Polle does in life. He decides he is going to continue talking to his father, because he knows he is listening.

Breukers, Truus and Carolien Westermann. *Wolfje en de oude geit (Little wolf and the old goat)*. Amsterdam: Clavis, 2017. Ages 6 and up.



Summary

When little wolf is exploring in the forest, he meets an old goat, who tells him that this is her last day. Little wolf does not know what death is, but he is very curious and asks about the reality of death and its meaning. He learns that death is like a great adventure and that you continue to exist after you die. Goat teaches him that you do not have to be afraid. After spending the day together, the goat grows tired and they lie down together. Goat dies, but the little wolf still feels her all around him. He then goes about his day.

De Visser, Laurina and Linda Bikker. *Olifant op het feest (Elephant at the party)*. Utrecht: KokBoekencentrum, 2020. Ages 4-7.

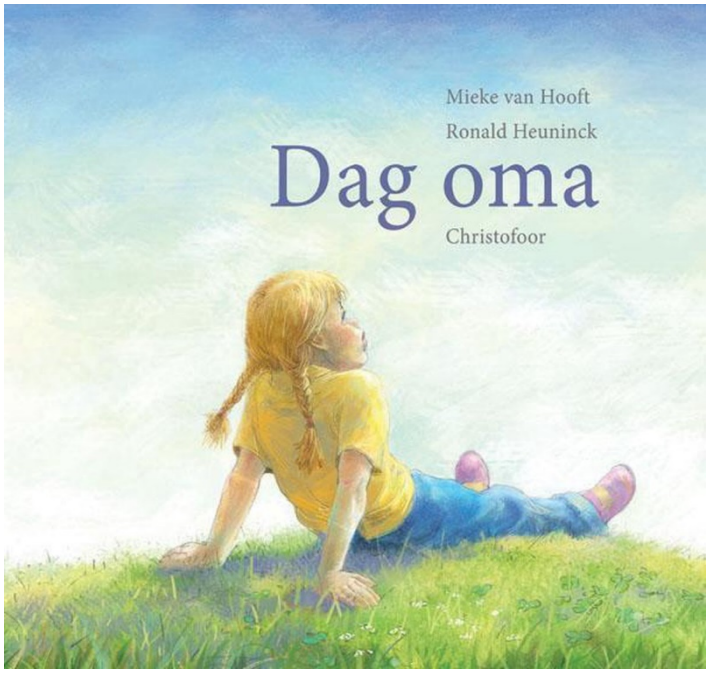
Summary

This book is about sadness and grief in general, and about the necessity of making room for it. It's Mouse's birthday and he is having a party with all his friends. His best friend, Elephant, cannot enjoy the party because he is so sad. All the other animals try to help and come up with solutions, but none of these are helpful. The only thing which helps is when Mouse sits next to Elephant and shares his sadness. Elephant cries and talks. After this, he realises that the sadness is gone. All the animals then enjoy the party more than ever.

Van Hest, Pimm and Lisa Brandenburg. *Misschien is doodgaan wel hetzelfde als een vlinder worden (Maybe dying is like becoming a butterfly)*. Hasselt: Clavis, 2018. Ages 5-8.

Summary
Christiaan and his grandfather are spending a nice day in the park. They discuss about death, about both practical and philosophical questions. Questions like: can we know when we die? Why do we die? What happens after we die? Christiaan thinks about their dialogue and then writes his grandfather a letter. Maybe, he writes, dying is like becoming a butterfly.

Van Hooft, Mieke and Ronald Heuninck. *Dag oma (Goodbye grandma)*. Zeist: Christofoor, 2014. Ages 4 and up.



Summary
Lieveke is very sad, because her grandmother died. Snail, Butterfly, Bumblebee, Mouse, Frog and Ant bring her objects which remind her of her grandmother. Lieveke's mother suggests they make a garden in which she can put all these memories. She also tells her that when she feels the sun on her skin, grandma is with her. In the end, when she looks up to the sun, Lieveke realises that grandma is not so far away after all.

Chapter Four:
Meaning-making in children's books about death

4.1 Introduction

I would like to start this chapter by reflecting on an important theme from chapter one and two, which provides important background for the analysis of the children's books. In chapter one, it became clear that the secularism as it is understood in *Mortals* is very much a secularism based on time. It entails a form of progress from religious to secular; from shared meaning-making to individualistic meaning-making. This can be understood in the context of the grand narrative of secularism as a move away from the authority of religion and towards agency and autonomy in meaning-making. As we have seen, this is an idea which started developing when church and state were separated and the church slowly but surely became a symbol of oppression of personal freedom. As Butler writes, this idea that freedom emerges through time is a secular conception of history.[109] In chapter two, I argued that children's agency in literature is also often understood to emerge through time. In reality, children have always had agency. Instead, it is our focus that has shifted. Where we once valued Christian morality and obedience in children, we now value children who are psychologically healthy, cheerful and able to use their agency to make up their own minds. Of course, we usually want them to make up their minds to think in a way we find acceptable. The freedom in meaning-making is relative, as I suggested at the end of chapter two. The (taken-for-granted) ideology of secularism could actually be seen as having an authority position, or at least as being a dominant voice in Dutch meaning-making, which strongly influences children's meaning-making through literature.

This chapter discusses the meanings around death as depicted in children's books in a broad sense, but the idea of time and progress (or the lack of it) can be linked to the main observations. The analysis consists of three parts. First, I will come back to the theory discussed in chapter two and discuss the position of children and the image of childhood in the books. The question of agency and how it is portrayed will be central in this section. These themes will be continued in a discussion about the amount of agency that is required from children when it comes to either biological or philosophical questions answered or discussed in the books. With these observation about the portrayal of the child and its agency in mind, I will then examine one main contemporary trend in meaning-making around death which the children in the books use and are introduced to: the concept of 'continuing bonds'. After this, special attention will be given to metaphors and symbols, which are plentiful and have a special position in meaning-making in a secular context, since they transcend specific religions, beliefs and systems of making meaning. To some extent, they do not fit into the idea of secular progress. Lastly, I will briefly reflect on the most important observations and relate them back to the theme with which I started this introduction: that of the secular narrative of time.

[109] Judith Butler, "Sexual politics, torture, and secular time," *The British Journal of Sociology* 59, no.1 (2008): 3, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-4446.2007.00176.x.

4.2 Children making meaning

Before getting into the meanings attributed to death in the children's books, I will first discuss how children and their lifeworld are depicted. The image of the child which the authors and illustrators create is intrinsically connected to the way they give meaning to death, as will become clear by comparing *Maybe dying is like becoming a butterfly* and *Little wolf and the old goat*. Both of these books are not about a specific death in the past, but about an impending death, which occurs at the end of the story. They also both consist of a dialogue between an old and a young character, but the characteristics of 'old' and 'young' and the dynamics between the two are quite different.

"Well, I think we are born to learn
all sorts of things in the world.
And some do that faster than others.
Right?'
Grandpa's eyes become teary.
He nods.
'You just taught me something very beautiful,
my dear.'"

"'Nou, ik denk dat we geboren worden
om van alles op de wereld te mogen leren.
En dat doet de een sneller dan de ander.
Toch?'
Opa krijgt er tranen van in zijn ogen.
Hij knikt.
'Je hebt me zojuist iets heel moois geleerd,
lieve schat.'"

- Maybe dying is like becoming a butterfly

"Then Goat winks at him.
Little Wolf tries to do so as well,
but it doesn't really work out.
He sighs. 'You know so much, Goat.'
'You will grow up to be like that too.'"

"Dan geeft Geit hem een knipoog.
Wolfje probeert het ook,
maar dat lukt niet zo goed.
Hij zucht. 'Wat weet jij toch veel, Geit.'
'Zo word jij later ook.'"

- Little wolf and the old goat

The first quote is from a conversation between a grandfather and a grandson. The second is between a very young wolf and an old goat. The dialogue partners talk about what death is and how they feel about it. In both cases, the conversation is mostly kept going because the child (I will henceforth call the little wolf a child as well) keeps asking questions. So the children are inquisitive. In *Little wolf and the old goat*, the questions are answered by a character who has gained much wisdom over her many years, is fully at peace with her impending death and is the one who explains instead of being explained to. She looks at little wolf with an "endeared" expression when he jumps around cheerfully after learning the word 'instinct', unmistakably the calm and knowing 'adult' in the conversation. The little wolf, on the other hand, is playful, cheerful and curious. He likes adventures and running around, but he also likes to learn and does so be making his share of mistakes. In *Maybe dying is like becoming a butterfly* it is also clear who is the adult and who is the child, because the grandfather knows more about the facts and the existing philosophies concerning death. However, here we see a child who brings insightful ideas into the conversation and also broadens the viewpoint of the grandfather, like in the quotation above. The child is thoughtful and not only accepts the answers to the questions he askes, but evaluates them and (re)shapes them to form the meaning which helps him accept the reality of death in the best way. The dialogue partners are more equal. This is also visible in the illustrations, in which grandfather and grandson are playing together: both are on the swings and dance cheerfully in the rain. Furthermore, at the ending of the book, it is the grandson who comes up with the main metaphor of death maybe being like becoming a butterfly. Interestingly, the meanings

attributed to death in *Little wolf and the old goat* are more fixed than in *Maybe dying is like becoming a butterfly*. The little wolf is told that life goes on after death, that you go 'into space' when you die, and he accepts this as a fact. The grandson is told that different people have imagined many different things concerning the afterlife, and that we can imagine one ourselves if we want to. Clearly, the amount of agency asked from and expected of the (fictional) children is interwoven with the way questions are answered. By having the grandfather name multiple afterlife ideas and accrediting the child with the capacity to shape his own meaning based on it, it is acknowledged that children encounter different ideas and have to make sense of them, but also that there is no definite truth when it comes to afterlife beliefs. A belief is an option among many others, which, as has been discussed in chapter one, can be related to the ideology of secularism.[110] It is then also interesting that in *Little wolf and the old goat*, afterlife belief is slightly more defined in the sense that the little wolf is not offered choices, but is told that "you continue to exist, somewhere in space." Do note that even though this is presented as a certainty, it is not exactly specific and leaves much room for interpretation by the readers and storytellers. We see that the image of the child that is created and the amount of agency he or she has is strongly interwoven with the way death is given meaning.

Of course, a dialogue format, which these two books have, is ideal for understanding the extent to which agency is attributed to a child in a conversation between parents or older (authority) figures and children. An aspect of the way we view childhood which can easily be studied in all of the books is the child's process of meaning-making in relationship to others. In four out of six analysed books, family relationships were central. These were also the four books in which human children were the main characters, instead of animals. Children interacted almost exclusively with parents, grandparents and/or siblings. In reality, an important aspect of children's meaning-making is interacting with peers in play and conversation.[111] The one book where children interact only with peers is *Elephant at the party*. All the animals' friends, who could be seen as children, are present at the party and first come up with solutions for Elephant's sadness which are not helpful to him, like giving him cake or a pretty balloon. In the end, what really helps him is sharing his sadness with a friend. This interaction would probably have been written very differently if Elephant would have been surrounded by older family members. By having the other animals (the peers) make mistakes when they try and comfort Elephant, children learn – among other things – that having good intentions does not mean that another person will feel better.

That all of the 'human children' which I came across were mostly described interacting with family could well be due to the adult perspective of childhood taking place within the family context and of family relations being intensified since the 1950's. It is interesting to know that when children themselves, especially girls, tell a story they have made up, they also usually describe their main character in the context of the family.[112] So possibly, the family context is also the main framework through which children make meaning with storytelling. The most important point to be taken away from all this is that the

[110] Casanova, "The Secular and Secularisms," 1057.
[111] David M. Csinos, *Little Theologians: Children, Culture, and the Making of Theological Meaning* (London/Chicago: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2020), 148-149;
Potter and Cowan, "Playground as meaning-making space."
[112] Ageliki Nicolopoulou, "Children's Storytelling: Toward an Interpretive and Sociocultural Approach," *Storyworlds: A Journal of Narrative Studies* 3 (2011): 32-28,
https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5250/storyworlds.3.2011.0025.

meaning-making around death in the analysed children's books is a process which mostly takes place withing the family context. The agency which the child has in making his or her own meaning is thus also defined by, shaped by and expressed in this context.

4.3 Agency and children's cognitive understanding of death

Given children's developing cognitive understanding of death, it is understandable, even necessary, that their meaning-making around the topic is shared and shaped by those close to them. When children ask questions about the fact concerning death and dying, they need a family member, teacher of peer to provide an answer. It is interesting to see how the question of agency in meaning-making is entangled with factual information about death in the analysed books. For example, one of the first things children learn or realise about death is that it is irreversible. When you combine irreversibility with religious meaning, biological reality can suddenly be viewed in a different light. If Jesus raised the dead and was himself resurrected, is death really as irreversible as it seems, a child might ask. Scholars disagree on the way in which biological and religious conceptions of death develop and coexist in the minds of children. In extensive research using the 'death concept interview', Panagiotaki found that children developed their biological understanding of death first, and only later connect it to supernatural or religious beliefs.[113] Misailidi and Kornilaki, on the other hand, found that children develop their belief in a psychological afterlife from their fifth year onwards. The intensity of this belief grew less strong as children's understanding of biological death increased.[114] Although the outcomes of these two studies did not correspond, they both found that biological and religious or spiritual conceptions of death can coexist in the minds of children and that they can distinguish between the two. However, to avoid confusion, it is best to use biological facts when explaining religious or spiritual beliefs.[115] This is done beautifully in *Daddy, can you hear me?*:

We are going to the crematorium.	*We gaan naar het crematorium.*
There you will be burnt.	*Daar word je verbrand.*
Not all of you.	*Niet jij helemaal.*
Only your body of course.	*Alleen je lichaam natuurlijk.*
What's in your head, that is long gone.	*Dat wat in je hoofd zit, dat is er allang uit.*
That roams around.	*Dat zwerft rond.*
And that is in my head.	*En dat zit in mijn hoofd.*

-Daddy, can you hear me?

Here it is made very clear that the body and 'what's in your head' are two distinct things which do different things when death comes. Notice also how 'what's in your head' can be interpreted as a soul or spirit, but because of the sentence 'and that is in my head' it could also just be memories or the personality of the deceased. Those who read the book can adjust it to fit their own meaning-making narrative. It enables them to use their own agency, to connect

[113] Panagiotaki, "Children's and adults' understanding of death," 108-112.
[114] Plousia Misailidi and Ekaterina N. Kornilaki, "Development of Afterlife Beliefs in Childhood: Relationship to Parent Beliefs and Testimony," *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly* 61, no. 2 (April 2015): 308-309, https://doi-org.proxy-ub.rug.nl/10.13110/merrpalmquar1982.61.2.0290.
[115] Victoria Talwar, "Talking to Children about Death in Educational Settings," in *Children's Understanding of Death: From Biological to Religious Conceptions*, ed. Victoria Talwar, Paul L. Harris, and Michael Schleifer (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 107.

their own beliefs about the souls or the absence of it to the book. But making meaning of this quotation also requires quite a lot of insight and thinking about what constitutes a person. It implies the expectation that children, possibly in collaboration with storytellers such as parents or teachers, have the ability to reflect on the aspect of a person that continues to exist after we die. The biological reality, which we might call factual, is explained clearly, but the philosophical or religious questions are for a large part up to the interpretation of the reader. This is something we see in *Little wolf and the old goat* and *Maybe dying is like becoming a butterfly* as well. Agency, then, is expected of children and other readers when it comes to matters of faith and philosophy, but not when it comes to the facts about death which are necessary as a foundation for making meaning. Individual freedom in meaning-making does not apply to what have been accepted as biological facts.

This observation can be linked to historical trends. First, we see the influence of the focus on child wellbeing which first emerged at the beginning of the 20th century. Psychologists have shown that knowing the facts about death, without being confused or even frightened by euphemisms like 'we've lost him' or 'death is like going to sleep', enables a child to grief in a healthy way.[116] The books seem to incorporate this insight by providing children with a realistic, though simultaneously comforting image of death. The part that is comforting stems from the encouragements and thoughts which help readers find an explanation for loss and move towards a positive attitude towards life. Put shortly, it helps them make meaning. One main trend in meaning-making which featured very prominently in the books is that of continuing bonds. It will be examined in the next section.

4.4 Continuing bonds

The main model found for coping with death and grief in all the books is that of continuing bonds. This is not surprising, since this has been the main approach in western psychology and bereavement counselling since the 1990's. Before this, professionals usually thought it healthy to let go of grief and of the relationship with the deceased. This does not mean that everyone agreed with them or tried to let go, but the combination of Judeo-Christian theology in which the afterlife is not connected to our world and the rational Enlightenment idea of the dead being 'gone' did make letting go the commonly accepted grieving practice.[117] Today, healthy grieving is viewed differently. Fostering or acknowledging continuing bonds with the deceased is now common in bereavement counselling, and it has also become the dominant model in scholarly research. As Klass puts it: "death ends life; it does not end a relationship [...] the successful resolution of grief requires the mourners to construct a durable life story that enables them to integrate memory and continuing interaction with the deceased in their ongoing lives."[118] Three of the children's books express this idea most clearly, probably because these are the three books which are about an actual death which has occurred, whereas the other three are more about death as a concept or about sadness. The way in which the bonds between the bereaved and the deceased are described in these books also support three recent critical arguments which have been made against the continuing bonds paradigm.

---

[116] Sarah Longbottom and Virginia Slaughter, "Sources of children's knowledge about death and dying," *Philosophical Transactions: Biological Sciences* 373, no. 1754 (September 2018): 2-3, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26486391.
[117] Avril Maddrell, "Living with the deceased: absence, presence and absence-presence," *Cultural Geographies* 20, no. 4 (October 2013): 506, https://doi.org/10.1177/1474474013482806.
[118] Maddrell, "Living with the deceased," 506.

I will first illustrate the concept of 'continuing bonds' by some remarks on the book *Daddy, can you hear me?*, and then discuss these three critical arguments one by one using examples.

In *Daddy, can you hear me?* a little boy who has lost his father to cancer still speaks to him. In fact, the whole book is a monologue by the boy, who tells his deceased father everything that happened after and before his death. The book ends with the sentences: "Because you will always be my daddy. And I know that you can hear me."[119] These sentences indicate two things. The first is that the social roles two people have in life, that of father and son, continue to exist after one of them dies. These roles are what Bloch calls the 'transcendental social', which means that social roles and the types of behaviours that come with them exist separately from the person who holds them. Even though the mutual interactions in daily life stopped when the father died, he is still 'daddy' to his son.[120] The second thing the sentences indicate is that communication, which has become more and more important in family units since the 1950's, is also important in grief and in fostering continuing bonds. Think also of the mailbox with the angel wings from chapter one, which could be used to post letters to the dead. Communication with the deceased, through speaking to them, writing letters, leaving pictures on their grave or any other form, allows bereaved to express their emotions and make meaning of their loss by continuing the relationship, which includes the love they feel for the deceased person.[121] So in *Daddy, can you hear me?* we see how the continuing bonds paradigm is expressed towards children. The bond between the father and the son lives on in the communication.

Although the social roles of 'father' and 'son' remain, the way in which they are fulfilled does change after the father is cremated. When the father's body was still in the living room, the boy talked to him as if he was alive. Afterwards, he kept on talking to him, but now had to decide for himself how far away his father was and if he looked down at him from somewhere in the clouds. This brings us to the first critique on the continuing bonds paradigm. Mathijssen prefers to use the term 'transforming bonds', since bereaved renegotiate the bonds they have with the deceased. She argues that bonds can become tighter or looser. Also, parts of the deceased's identity can be idealised or made absent through ritual.[122] In this way, the bonds do not simply continue, but they transform. The transformation of a bond is most visible in *Bigger than a dream*, which is about the continuation of a relationship between a brother and a sister. In this case, the sister has died before the brother was born. He experiences what Maddrell calls absence-presence: "whatever or whomever is absent is so strongly missed, their very absence is tangible (i.e. it becomes a presence)."[123] This is beautifully expressed in this quote:

All at once I felt myself growing sad.	*Plotseling voelde ik me verdrietig worden.*
And it wasn't ordinary sadness.	*En het was niet zomaar verdriet.*
It was something I'd always felt.	*Ik had dit altijd al gevoeld.*
It was old, dried-out sadness.	*Het was een oud verdriet zonder tranen.*
It covered the walls of our house	*Het hing als behangpapier*

[119] Bos and Van Haeringen, *Papa, hoor je me?*, 43.
[120] Maurice Bloch, "Why Religion Is Nothing Special but Is Central," *Philosophical Transactions: Biological Sciences* 363, no. 1499 (June 2008): 2056, https://doi.org/10.1098/rstb.2008.0007.
[121] Sally O. Hastings, Judith D. Hoover and George W. Musambira, ""In My Heart for Eternity": Normalizing Messages to the Deceased"," *Storytelling, Self, Society* 1, no. 2 (Spring 2005): 22-24, https://www.jstor.org/stable/41942904.
[122] Brenda Mathijssen, "Transforming bonds: ritualising post-mortem relationships in the Netherlands," *Mortality* 23, no. 2 (2018): 228, https://doi.org/10.1080/13576275.2017.1364228.
[123] Maddrell, "Living with the deceased," 504-505.

like wallpaper.	*in alle kamers van ons huis.*
Sometimes you found it in Mom's soup,	*Het zat verstopt in de soep van mama,*
in the jobs Dad did around the house,	*in het klussen van papa*
or in a woolly hat for when it's cold.	*Of in een muts voor de kou.*

-Bigger than a dream

In the book, the deceased sister takes her little brother on a nightly adventure. They ride their bikes together playfully, bond and visit the sister's grave and the hospital she was in. In this way, her presence transforms from an 'old, dried-out sadness' into a loving bond. In the illustrations, whenever the sister is not drawn, we see a cat, which I assume signifies her absence-presence. Additionally, at the beginning of the book, the illustrations show the boy sitting at a large and empty dinner table with three chairs. At the end, he sits at the same table, but it is fully made with lots of food and a fourth chair is added. Overnight, the bond has been transformed. In my interpretation, this fits into a theme of healing, of growing into understanding of life and loss, which can be found in most of the books.

This brings me to the second criticism of the continuing bonds paradigm. Árnason explains that many scholars use the paradigm as a critique of the prominence of Westen individualism in research. Instead of focussing on the individual, these scholars want to focus on relationships. Árnason argues, however, that the focus is still on the individual. After all, the continuing bonds model examines relationships from the perspective of the experiencing subject, which is inseparable from the individual.[124] Similarly, in the books, the continuing bond which is described seems to be in service of the journey towards healing and understanding which the individual child makes. To illustrate this, I refer to *Goodbye grandma*. In this book, we see little Lieveke crying at the beginning and smiling at the end. She is crying because she lost her grandmother, but all kinds of small animals like a snail and a mouse bring her items which her grandma loved when she was alive. Lieveke's mother then suggests to make a garden in which all these items are placed. Her mother tells her that she can feel grandma in the sunshine, and when she greets the sun with a 'hi grandma' it is like she hears her voice answering her. So we might say that Lieveke is smiling because she has gone through a personal process of healing in which she learned that the bond with her grandmother is still there. Her grandmother is in objects which remind Lieveke of her, in memories and in the sunshine. It is not the continuing bond which begin and end the book, but Lieveke's emotions. So we see that a focus on continuing bonds in the children's books goes hand in hand with individualism.

I have previously linked individualism to secularism, and *Goodbye grandma*, as well as the other books, allow me to do the same here. At the end of the book, Lieveke realises that the bond with her grandma still exists when she looks up to the sky. What is left open is if grandma is actually still there, looking down at her. This is left up to personal interpretation. The sun might symbolise a soul in heaven, our memories of the deceased or the idea of a person living on in nature. Lieveke smiles because she feels that her grandma is with her. The reader can decide on the form they prefer this feeling to have. Because the focus lies with Lieveke's life and the continuing bond is approached from her perspective, it is made possible to omit details about an afterlife and privilege the individual beliefs of the reader in meaning-making. I argue, therefore, that the continuing bonds paradigm in the children's books is not

[124] Arnar Árnason, "Individuals and Relationships: On the Possibilities and Impossibilities of Presence," in *Emotion, Identity and Death: Mortality Across Disciplines*, ed. Chang-Won Park and Douglas J. Davies (London and New York: Taylor & Francis Group, 2012), 68, ProQuest Ebook Central.

only in service of the individual, but it can also coexist with and even strengthen the secular narrative of progress towards individualism and agency in meaning-making. The focus is on the bond and on the journey towards healing which the child makes, but the interpretation of the form of this bond is left open for individual meaning-making. The focus on the relationship with the deceased can work for a diversity of faiths and beliefs, no matter if they are religious, spiritual or secular. In this way, the narrative of the continuing bond, which does not need religion to work, is in service of individual agency and autonomy in meaning-making.

Lastly, I will briefly discuss the third criticism of the continuing bonds paradigm. Even though in research the focus is usually on this continuing bond, qualitative research shows that in reality people do not always experience it. Seigal, a counsellor for bereaved parents, found that emotions like anger and guilt can stand in the way of a continuing bond with their deceased children.[125] Interestingly, these emotions are very rarely found in the books. The emotion most found in the books was sadness, which was always related to death or loss. There is one exception, which is *Elephant at the party*, in which sadness is the central theme and the reason for it is not specified. We also see cheerfulness, associated with childhood, life and a sense of meaning. Calmness is a common emotion as well, and it can be linked to finding support in relationships and to making peace with death. It stands out that the book which is aimed at the oldest children (8 and up), *Daddy, can you hear me?*, is the most emotionally complex, with the brother of the main character responding with anger to his father's death and the main character acknowledging that he sometimes wasn't happy with his father when he was still alive, like when he was shouting at his son during a soccer match. Probably, the books take the emotional development of children into account, since children only start to understand complex emotions such as shame and pride from age six to eleven. Children of four and five years old are learning to verbally reflect on emotions, and storytelling through children's books is an excellent way to stimulate this development.[126] So, it is possible that the continuing bonds paradigm is not problematised in the books – although some bonds are 'transforming' more then they are 'continuing' – because they are aimed at children and do therefore not include emotions which are too complex. Emotions shape the personal narrative about death and grief and are an important part of the processes we go through in acknowledging and living with the reality of death.[127] However, hearing or reading about a full array of complex emotions is not helpful for one who is still learning which emotions there are, what causes them and how they are expressed.[128] The more complex emotions like guilt are usually the ones which complicate the continuation of bonds in reality. So we see that in children's literature, the continuing bonds paradigm faces little problems or obstacles because of the target audience.

All in all, we see that the children's books substantiate Mathijssen's criticism that bonds do not only continue. Instead, they transform in a variety of ways. Furthermore, even though relationships are central, they are approached from the perspective of the individual, as

---

[125] Catherine Seigal, *Bereaved Parents and Their Continuing Bonds: Love After Death* (Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2017), 98.
[126] Janet Kuebli, "Young Children's Understanding of Everyday Emotions," *Young Children* 49, no. 3 (March 1994): 37-38, https://www.jstor.org/stable/42725566.
[127] Ana Aleixo, António Pazo Pires, Lynne Angus, David Neto and Alexandre Vaz, "A Review of Empirical Studies Investigating Narrative, Emotion and Meaning-Making Modes and Client Process Markers in Psychotherapy," *Journal of Contemporary Psychotherapy* 51 (2021): 31, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10879-020-09472-6.
[128] Kuebli, "Young Children's Understanding of Everyday Emotions," 37-38.

Árnason has pointed out. I argue that the way the continuing bonds feature in the stories even strengthens the secular narrative of progress towards agency and autonomy. Lastly, a possible reason why all bonds are continued and this is not criticised in the books, is that they are aimed at children and do therefore not feature a complex array of emotions.

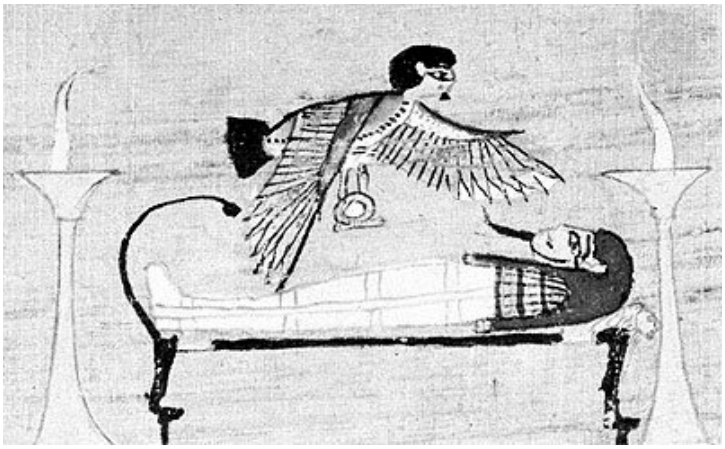
4.5 Birds and butterflies

Next to the continuing bonds model, the most prominent way of meaning-making in the books were metaphors and symbols. In this section, I will discuss two metaphors and/or symbols and their function in the books in relation to meaning-making. The Cambridge Dictionary describes a metaphor as: "an expression, often found in literature, that describes a person or object by referring to something that is considered to have similar characteristics to that person or object" and a symbol as "a sign, shape, or object that is used to represent something else."[129] Metaphors create new meaning because they allow us to make connections between things we already know and things about which we have little knowledge and which we therefore find it hard to express or think about. Using knowledge from another field in order to think about what we do not know, gives it new meaning.[130] Death means different things for different people. It even means different things to an individual person as beliefs, viewpoints and experiences alter. Therefore, we find common ground in metaphors and symbols, which can encompass multiple meanings at once. To illustrate this, I will start by discussing birds, butterflies and flying as a representation of dying. In discussing this example, I would like to draw attention to the power of illustrations for making and transmitting meaning. In the illustrations, we see a character's features, their emotions, expressions and intentions.[131] They add meaning to the story which would not have been there if it had just been the text. Stories speak through images, and these images often survive throughout the ages. The image of the bird as a symbol for death and/or the soul is most clearly visible in the illustrations of *Bigger than a dream* and *Little wolf and the old goat* and by including this image, the illustrators place themselves an a long tradition of meaning-making. In ancient Egypt, the soul-bird hovers over the body of the deceased before flying to the afterlife. In ancient Greece, the psyché (which can be very loosely compared to the Christian soul), which often takes the form of a bird, can be spotted at graves or at battlefields where men find their deaths. In the Middle Ages, a bird represents the soul leaving the body at the moment of dying.[132] This imagery may look similar (as is demonstrated on the next page), but the meaning attributed to the images has changed over time. In all of the images on the next page, an aspect of the deceased person continues to be. All the birds fly to the afterlife. In the image from *Little wolf and the old goat*, however, the goat's spirit flies 'into space' and

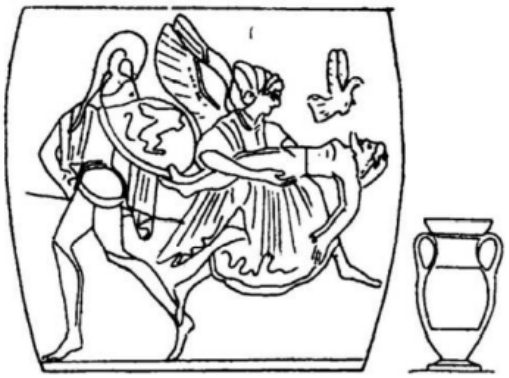
[129] "Meaning of metaphor in English," Cambridge Dictionary, last modified 2022, https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/metaphor;
"Meaning of symbol in English," Cambridge Dictionary, last modified 2022, https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/symbol.
[130] Brigitte Nerlich, "Pandemics, Metaphors and What It Means to Be Human," in *Being Human During COVID-19*, ed. Paul Martin et al. (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2022), 20.
[131] Sirke Happonen, "Choreography of characters: movement and posture in illustrated texts for children," *Literacy* 35, no. 3 (November 2001): 99-105, https://doi-org.proxy-ub.rug.nl/10.1111/1467-9345.00170.
[132] Massimo Leone, "Signs of the Soul: Toward a Semiotics of Religious Subjectivity," *Signs and Society* 1, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 125-133, https://doi.org/10.1086/670169;
Moshe Barasch, "The Departing Soul. The Long Life of a Medieval Creation," Artibus et Historiae 26, no. 52 (2005): 15, http://www.jstor.com/stable/20067095.

we are not provided with a clear idea of what exactly will happen in this space, or even of what type of space we speaking.

(Text continues after images)



Ba, the Egyptian soul-bird, hovering over a dead man, from a papyrus of the Book of the Dead.



Amphora from the Bourguignon collection in Naples, of Sicilian origin. The psyché flies away from the dying warrior.

Stuttgart Psalter, detail. Upon the event of her death, the soul flies out of the woman's mouth in the form of a bird.

Illustration from *Little wolf and the old goat*. When she dies, the spirit of the old goat flies out of her body to join the other spirits in the sky, depicted as birds.

(For sources, see bibliography)

Similarly, the metaphor of dying being like becoming a butterfly, which features in two of the books and is even the title of one of them, provides us with an image of change, but also of continuity. The caterpillar transforms into something beautiful which flies away, just like death is a transformation. But at the same time, the butterfly is connected to the caterpillar. Maybe they share a certain essence or at least a sense of continuity. As the little boy from *Maybe dying is like becoming a butterfly* tells us:

That you turn into something else,	*Dat je verandert in iets anders,*
Which you can't imagine yet.	*Wat je nog niet kunt bedenken.*

Both the metaphor of this quote and the one of the goat flying into space provide us with images which comfort and give us hope. Moreover, they are not limited to a specific religious tradition. The ancient Egyptians and the Medieval Christians used the image of a bird to represent the soul, but that bird would fly to an afterlife which' nature was worked out into great detail. In the modern children's book, the bird flies to a space which is yet to be imagined by the those who read the books. In the Dutch diverse society, this allows people to attach their individual preference for afterlife beliefs to the symbol. At the same time, it provides us with an image we can all share, not only with our contemporaries, but also with those who have shaped the way we think about death today throughout history.

Staying on the topic of animals, the second and last example I would like to discuss is from *Elephant at the party*. This story was inspired by song lyrics from *The Bowery* about 'the elephant in the room' which is not talked about, while everyone is laughing and telling funny stories. The book is about an actual elephant who is sad and in the end shares and expresses his sadness. This seems to be a metaphor for real life situations in which sadness or grief is 'the elephant in the room'. For me, the image of the elephant made the issue of not expressing and sharing emotions very clear. The elephant and the sadness alike are so big that no-one can deny them, and the issue of ignoring the sadness therefore seems more problematic. Animals have been symbols for the meanings we attribute to life and death for a long time and in different traditions. Think, for example, of the whale representing death and rebirth in the Book of Jonah in the Hebrew Bible.[133] *Elephant at the party* also uses animal characteristics which have been transmitted to us in the form of narratives, such as a fox being intelligent.[134] This is another example of how the narratives in children's books use meanings which have been shaped over the ages and integrate them into the meaning-making narrative they want to convey today. One of the animals in the book represents an especially powerful image: that of Jesus. The mouse who in the end sits with Elephant, asks him to talk about his tears, cries with him and simply says: "I'm sorry for you, Elephant," is meant to be Jesus. This, however, is not mentioned anywhere in the book and one Christian publisher actually did not publish it because Jesus or heaven were not explicitly mentioned. Still, when you know, you see how the image of the small mouse who is helpful simply by being there for the elephant in need and who shares his grief, can very easily be reconciled with Christian belief and theology. After all, in Jesus, God becomes human and shares the suffering of man.[135]

---

[133] Peter Vande Vyvere, "Walvis als metafoor van dood en nieuw leven," Bisdom Gent, last modified October 2, 2017, https://www.kerknet.be/bisdom-gent/artikel/walvis-als-metafoor-van-dood-en-nieuw-leven.
[134] Pelayo Benavides, "Animal Symbolism in Folk Narratives and Human Attitudes towards Predators: An Analysis of their Mutual Influences," *Folklore* 124, no. 1 (April 2013): 64, http://dx.doi.org/l0.1080/0015587X.2013.767484.
[135] See for example: Kyubo Kim, "The Power of Being Vulnerable in Christian Soul Care: Common Humanity and Humility," *Journal of Religion and Health* 56, no. 1 (February 2017): 355-369, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-016-0294-8.

Now, then, we have seen that religious images such as the mouse do not necessarily have to be interpreted as religious. The mouse could just as well be a non-religious example of how to be most helpful when someone is in pain. Other symbols such as birds are used by those who prefer secular meaning, but can be equally helpful to religious people. Metaphors and symbols, it seems, bring us closer together. They can be seen as a bridge between religious and secular meaning, or as proof that these meaning-making systems are interwoven. Also, they show us that even though those in Dutch society attribute diverse meanings to death, they do share the narratives and metaphors which have been passed down to us by our ancestors, and which we all still use in shaping our personal meaning-making narrative.

At the same time, it is important to reflect on the thought that one publisher denied *Elephant at the party* because is was not explicitly Christian. This shows us that shared images and metaphors have boundaries. A secular audience might find Narnia too Christian, and this publisher did not find *Elephant at the party* Christian enough. So symbols and metaphors can bring a diverse audience together, but the audience's reactions to these symbols also show us where to find tension and boundaries.

4.6 Reflection

In the introduction, I mentioned Butler's argument that freedom emerging through time is a secular concept of history. What I have not yet mentioned is another aspect of her argumentation. This entails that secular time is marked with "a syncretism of religious and secular ideas."[136] This is not the place to explain the context and details of her argument, since they concern the state and are not relevant when it comes to meaning-making around death. What is of interest is here is the idea that secular time can include religious elements, since this chapter provides evidence for this argument in the context of meaning-making. We see, for example, that the books portray the social bond between the deceased and the bereaved as continuing. Because it is left up to the audience if the bonds continue in a religious or a secular way, the books support the secular narrative of autonomy and agency of the individual. On the other hand, metaphors and symbols which have been used throughout a religious past are often used to describe how the bonds continue. The meanings attached to them are just made less specific in order to leave room for the individual interpretation. What makes them 'secular' is that they can be interpreted as such. However, the broadness of possibilities for interpretation and the religious connotations they have coexist with this possible secular interpretation. The idea of freedom emerging through time is key here. After all, to leave interpretation up to the audience is to give this audience freedom. At the same time, the broadness of meaning-making as it is depicted in the books can be experienced as limiting. For the Christian publisher, for example, the absence of specifically Christian terms and imagery is seen as limiting to Christian meaning-making. Also, freedom is framed in a specific way. The children in the books make meaning in a family context. They are given freedom in matters of philosophy and faith, but not in matters accepted as biological facts. The books demonstrate that shared meaning in a secular society combines the religious and the secular. The elements drawn from religion actually make it possible that meaning is shared, since they are familiar to the audience – whether this audience is religious or not. Time, then, doesn't move in a progressing line from religious so secular. Secular meaning

[136] Elizabeth Olson, "Gender and geopolitics in 'secular time'," *Area* 45, no. 3 (June 2013): 148, https://doi.org/10.1111/area.12013.

needs religion to guarantee the idea of freedom (even though this freedom is a relative idea as well), because shared symbolism is based on a shared religious past – a past which helps us make meaning today. The secular has not taken the place of religion in meaning-making around death, but instead draws from religion, is interwoven with it and needs it to guarantee autonomy and agency.

This symbolism is passed to us most directly through the authors and illustrators of the books. They shape the narrative which others then use for individual and shared meaning-making. Therefore, to fully understand the role of children's books in Dutch meaning-making, the next chapter will examine how authors and illustrators perceive their own role as storytellers in the Dutch secularised context.

Chapter Five:
The perspective of authors and illustrators

5.1 Introduction

"And so I write the way I myself would like the book to be – if I were a child. I write for the child within me"

-Astrid Lindgren[137]

Astrid Lindgren is one of my favourite children's book authors. I did not consciously think about her books when I chose the topic for my thesis. It was only when I started reflecting on what makes me interested in the topic of death in children's books that I remembered how touched I was as a child by her books *The Brothers Lionheart* and *The Red Bird*. These are stories about death which stayed with me. Although I do not think about them often, they whisper to me sometimes to remind me that death is not only something that causes pain and grief. It is also something that inspires storytellers to tell wondrous tales which foster hope and a sense of what is important in life in the hearts of their audiences. Although they are sometimes overshadowed by the stories they tell, authors and illustrators are crucial in the storytelling process. They strongly influence which meanings are transmitted by putting them into words and images. That is why their role should not be overlooked, and why I will examine this role in the storytelling process in this chapter. As demonstrated by the quote above, authors have their own ways of finding inspiration and of imagining their audiences. How their personal process influences the larger process of meaning-making for both children and Dutch society in general will be analysed.

The analysis is based on four interviews: three with authors and one with an illustrator. The interviews were conducted in Dutch, the translations of the into English are by my own hand. What is important to mention is that I treat the quotes and findings as personal experiences. Because of the limited scope of this research, they cannot be generalised. Still, the experience of these professional storytellers reflects the larger discourse and gives us insight into the perspective of authors and illustrators. Throughout the chapter, I will often refer to authors and illustrators simply as 'storytellers' in order to ensure a good flow of the text. Therefore, it is important to remember that they are not the only storytellers: the audience completes the storytelling process. However, authors and illustrators are the storytellers who are central in this chapter and therefore I will refer to them as such. Sometimes, I will only speak of authors, because the literature research I draw on does not often include the perspectives of illustrators. It is then important to remember that much of what I say is probably just as true for the illustrator – I just cannot substantiate this argument with previous research.

I will start with a theoretical reflection on the position of authors and illustrators in the storytelling process. After this, attention will be given to the way they experience creating a book. The interviews will then be embedded in the discourse on religion and secularism in meaning-making through children's books.

[137] "The Quotes," Astrid Lindgren Company, accessed August 28, 2022, https://www.astridlindgren.com/en/quotes?tags=Astrid+Lindgren.

5.2 The author and the story

"[Storytelling] does not aim to convey the pure essence of the thing, like information or a report. It sinks the thing into the life of the storyteller, in order to bring it out of him again. Thus traces of the storyteller cling to the story the way the handprints of the potter cling to the clay vessel."[138]

-Walter Benjamin

This quotation describes beautifully how the topic of death first "sinks into the life of the storyteller", becomes interwoven with the storyteller's meaning-making narrative and is transformed by it, before it is expressed in the form of a book. In this section, we will be looking at the "handprints of the potter", or "traces of the storyteller", to borrow Benjamin's metaphors, which are found in children's books about death. Before getting into the analysis of the interviews, I will first discuss the way in which I understand the role of the storyteller in the books and in the process of meaning-making through storytelling.

In Benjamin's analogy, it is clear that the potter and the clay vessel are two separate things. Yet, the clay vessel has sprung from the mind of the potter and he has left a clear mark upon it. As Lanser describes it, the author is the 'inventor' or 'producer' and therefore tied to what is produced. At the same time, the book or story makes the author, since he or she would not have this title without the existence of the story. "Having produced the text, the author must surely exist outside and before the text; yet if the text produces the author, then the author can only be found *in* the text."[139] The author which is constructed by those who read the book is called the 'implied author'.[140] It is the sense that you get about the person behind their work when you are reading: their beliefs, values, concerns, and other elements of the personal background.[141] So, the implied author exists separately from the actual author, although they are likely to have similarities. When you read a children's book in which the main character dies and goes up to heaven to be with Jesus, you will probably imagine that the author is a Christian. You are then creating an implied author, since the actual author might define their belief in different terms than you would expect. This is quite a simple example, because the personal beliefs of the authors and illustrators who produced the books used in the analysis are not nearly as clearly defined by the stories they create. The implied author is also often imagined as similar to the narrator of the story, the 'he', 'she', 'I' or the omniscient narrator who tells the story.[142]

So the audience produces an author, but the author also produces an audience, called the 'authorial audience'. This is the type of audience which the author addresses: is it an audience that beliefs in an afterlife? An audience which has experience with death? Does it consist of adults, children or both?[143] Because children's literature resembles traditional storytelling, the actual audience, which consists of the actual people wo read and interact with the book, is given a powerful voice in the storytelling process. They often converse about the story and shape their own meaning based on this. According to Brennigan, storytellers do not

[138] Richard White, ""The Storyteller" and the Possibility of Wisdom," *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* 51, no. 1 (Spring 2017): 7, https://doi.org/10.5406/jaesteduc.51.1.0001.
[139] Susan S. Lanser, "(Im)plying the Author," *Narrative* 9, no. 2 (May 2001): 153, https://doi.org/10.2307/20107241.
[140] Lanser, "(Im)plying the Author," 154.
[141] Lanser, "(Im)plying the Author," 155.
[142] James Phelan, "Authors, Resources, Audiences: Toward a Rhetorical Poetics of Narrative," *Style* 52, no. 1-2 (2018): 2-4, https://doi.org/10.1353/sty.2018.0001.
[143] Phelan, "Authors, Resources, Audiences," 8.

only tell a story, which is connected to their own experiences and personal meaning-making narrative, but they also pass on the power of narrative to their listeners.[144] Of course, traditionally, storytelling was most often the art of repeating stories. This gave the story itself, which was passed on from generation to generation, more power than the storyteller.[145] Children's books are a product of the authors themselves, but like traditional storytelling, they do pass on the power of narrative. This is not only because stories are read aloud, but also because the authors, in many cases, actively strive to enable children to use their story as a stepping stone for forming their own meaning-making narrative around death, in collaboration with the parents, teachers and/or peers who are also involved in the process of storytelling. Consider these quotes from the interviewed authors (the 'I' stands for 'interviewer' and the P for 'participant'):

1: *P: "And that's the thing with books: enter into conversation. The book actually doesn't provide any answers. X (character) gives his idea, Y (character 2) gives his idea, but nowhere does it say: this is the truth."*

Dutch: P: "En dat is het een beetje met boeken: ga het gesprek aan. Er staan ook eigenlijk geen antwoorden in het boek. X (personage) die geeft zijn idee, Y (personage 2) geeft zijn idee, maar er staat nergens in: zo is het."

2: *I: "What types of responses do you get from the children [when you read your book to them in the classroom]?*

P: Usually they start to tell. Sometimes just about a rabbit that died. […] Yes [about] all the possible people they lost. And that is really nice that they can just talk about that. And usually you so see those teachers [being hesitant] because they are afraid to bring up thing that might be painful. While of course it is also comforting to talk about it. […] That is why the book is often used in such contexts."

Dutch: "I: Wat voor reacties krijgt u bij de kinderen [bij het voorlezen van uw boek in de klas]?

P: Meestal beginnen ze te vertellen. Soms is dat gewoon over een konijn dat gestorven is. […] Ja [over] alle mogelijke mensen die ze verloren hebben. En dat is wel heel fijn dat ze daar gewoon over kunnen praten. En meestal zie je die leerkrachten wel [aarzelen of ongemak ervaren], want ze zijn dan toch bang om dingen die misschien pijnlijk kunnen zijn om die naar boven te halen. Terwijl natuurlijk is het ook een stukje troostend om het erover te hebben. […] Daarom wordt het boek wel veel gebruikt in zulke contexten."

In the first quote, we see an actual author who uses the narrative device of dialogue between two characters because he wants the actual audience to use the power of narrative themselves to make meaning around death. He wants the audience to use their own agency and in order to stimulate them, he gives them a foundation of a conversation in which meaning is made. Here we see the paradox of agency again. Since he hopes or envisions that the audience enters into conversation, but it not sure that this actually happens, we could say that he is speaking about the authorial audience. In the second quote, the actual author interacts with the actual audience by reading his book to them and making room for conversation. By telling his story, he gives the children room to tell theirs. He does this though the characters and storyline he created. Phelan summarises the process of narrative construction which takes place between

[144] John Brannigan, ""The Storyteller": Narrative Authority and Cultural Nationalism in Brendan Behan's Short Fiction," *Journal of Narrative Theory* 31, no. 3 (Fall 2001): 284, https://doi.org/10.1353/jnt.2011.0047.
[145] Brannigan, ""The Storyteller,"" 284.

author, book and audience very clearly in this chart, which I take from his article *Authors, Resources, Audiences: Toward a Rhetorical Poetics of Narrative*:[146]

Chart of Constants and Variables in Narrative Communication

Author	←→	**Resources**	←→	**Audience**
Actual/Implied		Occasion		Authorial and Actual
		Paratexts		
		Narrator(s)		
		Characters/Dialogue		
		FID		
		Genre		
		Fictionality/ Nonfictionality[5]		
		Voice		
		Style		
		Space		
		Temporality		
		Arrangement/Gaps		
		Narratee		
		Narrative Audience		
		Intertextual References		
		Ambiguities		
		Etc.		

This is not the place to discuss all the 'resources' listed by Phelan, which are used by both authors and audiences to make meaning. The chart does help in understanding the process of storytelling in which meaning is made. Authors produce books and their resources, as well as authorial audiences. Three out of four interviewees also read the books to children, usually at schools, and thus made meaning in interaction with the actual audience, but also in interaction with the book. The actual audience usually interacts with the resources created by the author, and with the implied author. One interesting resource to highlight is the character. The characters in the book are interacting with the topic of death and might have similar questions as the children. They can affirm the actual child's questions, emotions and ideas, as well as introduce them to people (characters) who expand their horizon and have them consider the topic in a new light. Having a character who goes through a similar experience as yourself and is the same age can be comforting and provide support, since it feels like you are not alone in what you are going through.[147] Throughout the whole process of storytelling of this type, the book is central, but the meaning generated in producing and using it flows from author to audience and back again, continuously interacting.

Before moving onto the next section, I also want to briefly draw attention to a broader perspective: that of intertextuality. Authors write in dialogue with literary history, just like

[146] Phelan, "Authors, Resources, Audiences," 7.
[147] Jennifer Miller, *The Transformative Potential of LGBTQ+ Children's Picture Books Book* (University Press of Mississippi, 2022), 4-6.

illustrators work in dialogue with images and metaphors which have been used for ages, as discussed in the previous chapter. This process can happen consciously or subconsciously, since many books and texts from the past are present in our subconscious, cultural and shared memories.[148] I argue that we can use this concept of intertextuality in every step of the meaning-making process. Authors draw on cultural memory and on previous texts to shape meaning in their books. The audience does so as well, because it interprets this new work in light of their own meaning-making narrative, which has been shaped under the influence of other texts and meanings.[149] In storytelling, meanings and ideas which have been formed over many years and with the help of many storytellers and audiences, are connected and renegotiated.

5.3 The experience of storytellers

In scholarly literature, there is much attention for the role of children's books in societal discourses and issues. The discourse about death and wellbeing is among the topics. Other issues around which there is much debate are racial and gender equality, representation of mental health issues and climate change, for example.[150] The storytellers interviewed for this thesis told me how they conceived the ideas for their work as a response to certain perceived needs, feelings, intrinsic motivations or questions and ideas from others. One storyteller, for example, felt it was limiting for children that so many of their parents tell them that their deceased loved ones are now a star. He wanted to write a book which could help parents provide their children with more ways of making meaning of death, as well as a way of entering into conversation. So he responded to a clear need which he perceived in society and adjusted the used resources, like characters and plot, to this need. This description of the process of writing is in accordance with the format of much academic research about the role of children's books in societal discourses and issues, because this research usually focusses on the resources and not on the actual author. I will give some examples of this.

Consider this quote from the introduction to a 2016 article aimed at teachers: "Exploring books on climate change may be crucial to the future of the planet."[151] The article then provided selection criteria for literature to discuss in the classroom. The books did not only have to provide scientifically accurate information, but this information also had to be presented sensitively and various cultures had to be represented in the books.[152] In the article, these criteria are based on the recourses of the book. The resources, like characters and fictionality, are treated as the foundation of the storytelling process; a process that is assumed to lead to knowledge about climate change and respect for the earth among children. What is left out of the criteria is the consideration of the actual author and their experiences and thoughts, which have led to framing climate change in a certain way. A story may not be

---

[148] Marko Juvan, *History and Poetics of Intertextuality* (Purdue University Press, 2008), 14.
[149] Dan P. McAdams and Kate C. McLean, "Narrative Identity," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 22, no. 3 (June 2013): 233-238, https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721413475622.
[150] E.g.: Frank Taylor, "Content Analysis and Gender Stereotypes in Children's Books," *Teaching Sociology* 31, no. 3 (July 2003): 300-311, https://doi.org/10.2307/3211327;
Brynn F. Welch, "The Pervasive Whiteness of Children's Literature: Collective Harms and Consumer Obligations," *Social Theory and Practice* 42, no. 2 (April 2016): 367-388, https://doi.org/10.5840/soctheorpract201642220.
[151] George L. Boggs et al., "Beyond the Lorax: Examining Children's Books on Climate Change," *The Reading Teacher* 69, no. 6 (May/June 2016): 665, https://doi.org/10.1002/trtr.1462.
[152] Boggs et al., "Beyond the Lorax," 667.

culturally diverse because it is based on the experiences of the author and on the social environment which she is familiar, for example. The author makes meaning of an issue or topic in ways which fit their personal meaning-making narrative. Their books may be aimed at an audience because they are published, but this does not necessarily have to mean that the storyteller creates the book with the audience in mind.[153] One if the interviewees wrote about his personal experience of growing up without one of his family members and included the context and place he was familiar with in his text. He told me that it has helped him to think about his past and that the death of this family member had had much influence on who he was today. So, from the actual author's perspective, the resources used in the books do not have to be only in the service of the audience. In fact, they might help the storyteller make meaning in the first place, and the actual audience can than profit from the storyteller's meaning-making process through reading, thinking about and discussing the book.

Going back to academic research on society issues and children's literature in general, the focus in often almost exclusively on the interaction between the book's resources and the actual audience. One of the most illustrative examples of this is Welch's argument, which entails that the pervasiveness of white characters in children's literature contributes to racial stereotypes and impedes the cultivation of compassion for others. Since this is not something most consumers want to contribute to, they should be held accountable for their individual purchases and not only buy books with white characters, he writes.[154] By making this argument, Welch has a clear focus on the aspect storytelling which starts when the audience chooses a book. The experience of the actual author in writing the story is not fully considered. Namely, according to the interviews, this experience does not consist only of rational thought about what is best for society. To a large extent, it relies on personal experience, sudden great ideas, revelations, and inspiration. The story produced by the actual author, a person with her own personal narrative, is made a part of a higher purpose by Welch: that of cultivation of compassion for all races. He positions storytelling through children's books in a grand narrative of the move towards a more just society. In the case of all characters being white, the resources created by the actual author clash with this grand narrative, making the personal narrative of the author move to the background. In order to appreciate and understand the full process of meaning-making through storytelling, I argue, scholars must be more aware of all of the steps and factors involved. This includes the actual author and their narrative as well as the power of the actual audience to (re)shape meaning. This point will be illustrated with an examination of the grand narratives around and personal experiences with religion and secularism found in the interviews.

5.4 Narratives of religion and secularism

In order to situate the words of the authors in the larger theoretical framework about secularism and religion, I will first go back to the inspirational report *Mortals*, discussed in chapter one. As you might recall, the report takes the grand narrative of the progression from religious to secular meaning-making in the Netherlands for granted. Secularism was linked to a lack of shared meaning, since it prioritises individual autonomy and agency in meaning-making. The report responded to this by giving examples of ways of dealing with death

[153] Shaun Tan, "The Purposeful Daydream: Thoughts on Children's Literature," *The Iowa Review* 45, no. 2 (Fall 2015): 101, https://www.jstor.org/stable/43999807.
[154] Welch, "The Pervasive Whiteness of Children's Literature," 367-369.

stemming from past and present. Some of these were derived from religion, but the authors made no mention of God or other theological or supernatural ideas, making these originally religious customs and ideas fit into a framework of secularism. The idea of progression from (authoritarian) religious to (individual) secular meaning-making is what you might call a grand narrative, which can be seen as a framework which groups of people refer to in meaning-making.[155] In this last section, I will examine how the viewpoints of the storytellers fit into this grand narrative which has been discussed in previous chapters.

What stood out in the interviews was that the authors all said that they experienced the situation in the Netherlands when it comes to speaking about death as quite open. At the same time, they did think that books which help start the conversation were beneficial or even necessary. Those authors who read books to children in the classroom all experienced that children themselves were very active in discussing the topic of death. It was the teachers who were usually uncomfortable or afraid that the children would find the topic painful to speak about. The difficulty in speaking about death is, according to the participants, not so much found in conversations between adults (although they sometimes also have trouble with finding the right words, said the participants), but more in discussing death with children.

"It used to be easier. […] the number of children who still go to church, that has just become very small. While 30 years ago it was still very different. And then there were answers to those questions. Or then something happened and people would say: He's going to heaven. And what does he do there? Then you had stories that the parents could tell about how it goes. But those are no longer there, so every parent makes up their own story, it will go like this or that. And when it comes to children, it is often different than, yes I think there are a lot of parents who think when you are dead you are under the ground and it is done. There isn't anything else. But if a child then asks them that, I think they will often say yes, there is something after you die and you live on in.. So that is something, so I think that people, adults as well, are missing something to hold onto in talking about it, what is death."

"Vroeger was dat makkelijker. […] het aantal kinderen dat nog naar de kerk gaan ofzo, dat is gewoon heel laag ondertussen. Terwijl 30 jaar geleden was dat nog een heel groot verschil. En dan waren er ook antwoorden op die vragen. Of dan had je nog iets dat gebeurde en dan zeiden mensen: die gaat naar den hemel. En wat doen die daar? Dan had je verhalen die de ouders konden vertellen van dat gaat dan zo. Maar die zijn er niet meer, dus iedere ouder verzint zo zelf een beetje van het zal dit zijn of dat zijn. En als het dan tegenover kinderen gaat is dat toch vaak anders dan, ja ik denk dat er heel veel ouders zijn die denken als je dood bent dan zit je onder de grond en het is gedaan. Dan is niks meer. Maar als een kind dat dan aan hun vraagt denk ik dat ze toch vaak zullen zeggen van ja, dan is er toch nog iets of dan leef je toch verder in. Dus dat is ook wel iets, dus ik denk wel dat mensen, ook volwassenen, dat wel een beetje missen zo die houvast in hoe praat je daarover, wat is de dood."

So, as this participant frames it, children's books are something to hold onto in the conversation about death. Since the stories we use to make meaning are, overall, no longer based on religion, the story in the book can serve as a guideline to which people can then attach their own personal meaning-making. The same participant told about how happy he was that people from different countries and cultures, also Islamic countries for example, could find meaning in his book. He said that because what he wrote is a small, personal story, the book can also help those who do refer to religious narratives in making meaning. The quotation reflects the narrative from *Mortals*, which entail that decline of religion has led to uncertainty and a lack of shared meaning-making. This author presents the book as a narrative which can to some extent take the place of religion as a guideline for discussing death with

[155] Fortuin, Schilderman and Venbrux, "Death and the search for meaning," 340.

children. The meaning presented in the book is, however, not so much about faith or philosophy. Instead, it provides universal meaning for religious and non-religious people, because the story is personal and strongly interwoven with the author's experiences.

What is also interesting is that the authors experience that people especially need stories when discussing death with children. Parents and teachers want to provide children with comfort in the face of uncertainty, which can be found in narrative.[156] In *Mortals* the lack of shared narratives is framed as one of the main problems Dutch society faces when it comes to meaning-making around death, but the interviews suggested that it is also a lack of comforting narratives for children that is missing. We see that the personal freedom in meaning-making, which is the outcome of the secular narrative of progression, can be experienced as limiting. For making individual meaning, according to the participant, you need narratives to draw from. But having freedom in meaning-making also means that you do not have to familiarise yourself with various narratives about death. A lack of narratives makes it difficult to choose comforting words for children. It seems there is a fine line between freedom and uncertainty.

In the interviews, an echo of the grand narrative of freedom of choice being interwoven with secularism was also present.

"I: Yes and at the end she also leaves [the meaning-making in the children's book] open. Maybe there is something there [after you die], or maybe, yes you can adjust it a bit so it fitting for you.

P: And I think that is the way it should be, everyone has to do it themselves. Not everyone, yes you study religious studies, so there, yes then you may believe in a heaven, but you can also come up with something else.

I: Yes, then maybe it (the meaning-making) is a bit more prescribed.

P: Yes and that's fine too, but I think there is also room to fill it in differently. […] And nobody knows for sure. So.. that's also nice."

Dutch: "I: Ja en op het einde laat ze [de betekenisgeving in het kinderboek] ook open. Van misschien is er wel iets [na de dood], of misschien, ja je kan het een beetje zelf aanvullen dat het bij jou past.

P: En dat moet denk ik ook zo zijn, iedereen moet dat zelf. Niet iedereen, ja jij studeert dan religiewetenschappen, dus daar, ja dan geloof je misschien in een hemel, maar je kan ook iets anders verzinnen.

I: Ja dan wordt het misschien wat meer ingevuld.

P: Ja en dat is ook prima, maar er is ook ruimte om het anders in te vullen denk ik. […] En niemand weet het ook zeker. Dus.. dat is ook wel prettig."

The picture painted in this quote is that in meaning-making outside of the boundaries of religion, there is more room for individual agency. This is a good thing because no-one knows for sure what happens after we die. Interestingly, a Christian author whom I interviewed described how she experienced less freedom of expression, and thus less individual agency, because of the dominance of secularism.

[156] Lindsay Zajac and Chris J. Boyatzis, "Mothers' Perceptions of the Role of Religion in Parent–Child Communication About a Death in the Family," *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 13, no. 2 (2021): 235-237, https://doi.org/10.1037/rel0000309.

"And I hope, and that's what I just said about taking your place, […] I would find it very harmful if we in the Christian world don't use our talents because we kind of wouldn't be allowed to. […], and I, oh no, I am not allowed to write about this piece. Later, that piece [of society and religion] will then not be described. […] And I think we should take our place more."

"En ik hoop, en dat is wat ik net zei over je plek innemen, […] ik zou het heel schadelijk vinden als wij in de christelijke wereld niet onze talenten benutten omdat het een soort niet zou mogen. […], en ik o nee over dit stuk mag ik niet schrijven. Dat is dan later een gebied onbeschreven. […] En ik denk dat we daar onze plek meer mogen gaan innemen."

Here we see the other side of the story. If books have to leave meaning-making around matters of religion and philosophy open in order to facilitate freedom for the audience, then those storytellers who make meaning through religion cannot express that part of their narrative identity in their book. In this way, freedom for the audience can limit the freedom of the storyteller.

The reference this participant makes to the future is also very relevant. If Christian authors would feel that they should not write about specific Christian meaning because the majority of society cannot relate to it, then they confirm the grand narrative of the progression from religious to secular meaning-making. Even though this grand narrative of progression to agency and autonomy is not correct, because children have always had agency and religion and secularism are interwoven today, it is so dominant that this author feels pressure to conform to it. If she does, then people would find little reference of Christianity in the future, because it would only have be expressed individually and privately, instead of being written down. This idea of the Christian aspect of society not being described and therefore being forgotten by future generations motivates this participant to be more open about her personal meaning-making in the stories she writes. I think that this idea is very important, because it shows us that authors and illustrators play a key role in meaning-making which connects past, present and future. For meaning-making today, both storytellers and audiences draw on narratives they know to shape personal meaning. For these narratives to be known, they had to be spoken aloud or written down, in order to be passed on to us.

In the interaction between authors, resources and audiences, much personal meaning is made in the 'internal world' before being shared with others. The words we choose to settle on to describe the meaning of death is what is eventually passed on. By writing and illustrating, storytellers make meaning concrete. Their narratives are used and passed on. In my opinion, it is therefore extremely important that storytellers are given room to express specific and well-defined meaning – not only meaning which everyone can relate to. After all, we sometimes need specific narratives to fall back on in the face of uncertainty. If meaning-making about matters of faith and philosophy is for the most part left open, then audiences need to make connections with specific narratives they already know in order to fill in the gaps left open. Meaning is made across history and cultures, as this thesis has demonstrated. Narratives interact with each other through storytelling. If personal meaning is not described in service of a grand narrative or ideology, the interaction will be narrowed down to this grand narrative. Of course, secular storytellers can also find meaning in the idea of freedom and personal choice, and this reflects and important part of Dutch culture. But is it in the interaction between well-defined narratives and those which have open endings and multiple interpretations, that meaning is made. Therefore, the focus of academic research on children's literature and society also needs to leave room for the personal narratives of the authors, instead of merely focussing on resources and audiences.

Conclusion

This thesis has examined how we can understand storytelling through children's literature in relation to meaning-making around death in the Dutch secular context. This main question is answered by means of four sub-questions, each of which has its own chapter. I will first briefly summarise the arguments made in each of the chapters, before circling back to the main question. Based on this, recommendations for future research are made.

The first chapter focussed on how we can understand secularism in relation to the meanings ascribed to death in the advisory report *Mortals*, published by the Dutch Council of Public Health and Society. In *Mortals*, we see the idea that Dutch society has moved away from shared religious meaning-making and towards individual meaning-making. I argue that this corresponds with the dominant secular narrative of progress from religious authority in meaning-making to individual autonomy and agency. What was added by the report was that individuality has led to uncertainty; it is like the ground of shared meaning-making has fallen from under Dutch society. This feeling is reinforced, the report indicates, by the disappearance of death from Dutch society. As a response, I argue that death has, in fact, not disappeared. Some scholars even say that we live in an 'age of grief', with shared narratives about death being widely accessible through social media, television and literature. Instead, what is missing are ways of connecting to these narratives as a group which has the same beliefs. Individuals connect their own diverse meaning-making narratives to these shared stories. However, for children, storytelling through literature provides a way of meaning-making in a group context. In storytelling, personal narratives are reshaped by connecting them to the viewpoints of others.

The second chapter zoomed in on the question of individual agency in Dutch children's literature, in order to understand if there is some truth to the secular narrative of progression towards agency and autonomy which seems to be dominant in the Netherlands. A historical analysis proved that children have always had agency in making meaning through children's literature, even though religion was dominant in the past. So the idea that children's agency itself emerged recently and partly because of secularism is false. However, both societal and academic discourses do put more emphasis on children's agency than in the past. Today, they actively strive to acknowledge and make room for children's input and individual processes. At the same time, the paradox of agency which is always present in children's literature must be acknowledged. Even though children's literature today does strive to empower children to make meaning on their own, it also instructs them. Through literature, children are taught that they should be curious and active in meaning-making. Philosophical and religious ideas are left up to them to interpret. Because of this, we can say that secularism and its focus on agency has become a narrative which holds authority itself. Dutch literature instructs children to be active in meaning-making as individuals, which is an instruction all the same.

The next chapter is based on an analysis of six Dutch children's books. It examines how meaning-making is depicted in these books and how this depiction plays into the Dutch secular context of meaning-making. Next to the debate about agency, it explores the two main ways through which meaning is made in the books: (1) the continuing bonds model and (2) metaphors and symbols. Concerning the continuing bonds model, I found that overall, it is not problematised in the books. However, the argument that bonds transform, not only continue, is present. Interestingly, the continuing relationships between the deceased and the bereaved were in service to the journey towards healing which the individual child makes. Because of

this, and because continuing bonds fit a wide variety of religious and secular interpretations, the portrayal of the model supports the secular narrative of progression to individual agency in meaning-making as it is found in *Mortals*. Simultaneously, the books use metaphors and symbols which have been used throughout history in a wide variety of religious cultures. In order to conform to the grand narrative of individual agency in meaning-making, the books need images, metaphors and symbols which fit religious meaning just as well as secular meaning. In this, the books demonstrate how religion and secularism are actually interwoven. So, even though the narrative of progression is responded to and strengthened by the children's books, they also teach us that this narrative does not prove correct in reality. Religious elements are part of the storytelling process around death and are even necessary in order to ensure the survival of the focus on individual agency in meaning-making.

The last chapter examines how authors and illustrators understand their own role in the meaning-making process of storytelling. It is based on four interviews with authors and illustrators. Academic research on children's literature usually only focusses on the resources found in the books and on the audience, but it is important to realise that the resources flow from the meaning-making narrative of authors. In the interviews, I found that the secular idea of the importance of individual expression in meaning-making, which opposes religious authority, was experienced and conformed to. One author even said that she sometimes felt that she should not express specific religious meaning, because not everyone can relate to it. However, meaning is made in the interaction between specific and multi-interpretable narratives. Individual expression of personal meaning by authors, including religious meaning, is important because it deepens the storytelling process in such a way that we can fall back on it in the face of the uncertainty which the focus on individual agency can cause.

Circling back to the main question – how can we understand storytelling through children's literature in relation to meaning-making around death in the Dutch secular context? – we see that two narratives about the relationship of religion and secularism intertwine throughout the thesis. The first, which I call 'the narrative of agency', entails that through time, Dutch society has moved away from the authority of religion and towards individual agency and autonomy in meaning-making. I call the second 'the narrative of interwovenness', since it entails that religion and secularism are interwoven. The narrative of agency is responded to in *Mortals*, the children's books and the interviews. The books stimulate their audiences to use their agency in making their own meaning by using metaphors, asking questions and leaving endings open. This encouragement is a way of meaning-making in itself. It tells us that choosing how you interpret matters of faith and philosophy yourself is more important than having certainty about it. Freedom is given a central position in life. In my analysis, however, I have found that even though this narrative is dominant and is reacted to in society, it is intertwined with the so-called narrative of interwovenness. In order to facilitate freedom in meaning-making for people with diverse religious and cultural backgrounds, the basis of the story has to be shared and understandable for all readers. Many of the metaphors and symbols used have been used in religion throughout history. Because their religious connotations are not mentioned, they can today be interpreted as both secular and religious. They show us that meaning-making around death may be framed in a grand narrative of secularism, but this narrative cannot exist without religion. Religious elements are reinterpreted, but because they are conceived in religious cultures, they can never be fully free from religious meaning. Therefore, I argue, storytelling through children's literature around death has not moved away from religion. Instead, in order to actively stimulate individual agency and autonomy today, it needs religion.

The perspective of storytelling through children's literature has suggested that meaning-making in an individualised, secular society is more shared than often assumed. We share many resources, images and metaphors, which are often based on meanings which have religious connotations. The storytelling process is made up of individuals, families and groups with diverse faiths and convictions, but the interaction of their narratives tells us that we need each other to give death a place in our lives. The interwovenness of secularism and religion is what makes this interaction possible, and what makes the storytelling process central in negotiating the feeling of uncertainty around death in conversation with children.

Recommendations for future research

The 'bottom-up' perspective on storytelling shows how secularism is made up of narratives which can clash, but are also interwoven in lived reality. It has made visible how the interwovenness of religion and secularism makes room for imagination and co-creation in meaning-making. Although the bottom-up perspective has been used by some scholars recently, the combination with the narrative approach broadens our perspective. This is because it takes people's ability to tell stories and weave narratives which make up 'secularism' as a starting point, instead of secularism as a concept. It shows that secularism itself is a grand narrative to which groups and individuals respond. For future research, I recommend that this narrative perspective on secular meaning-making around death is developed further. It can shine a new light on the how some major theme's in death research, such as continuing bonds and secular individualism, are intertwined.

A second recommendation concerns the role of authors and illustrators in storytelling. In scholarly works about children's literature and societal issues, the role of the author has been given very little attention. In order to understand why particular meanings are formulated and transmitted in literature, and how they play into grand narratives about morality and childhood, the focus on the recourses and audiences of the books is not broad enough. The personal processes of authors and illustrators are what shape the narratives. I hope future research combines the role, the personal narrative and process of the author with a recognition of the possibilities the audience has for reshaping meaning to fit their own preferred narratives. Only then can we understand the full complexity of the interaction of narratives and can societal change be initiated through children's books, if this is desired. I have only had the opportunity to interview four authors and illustrators and a general conclusion about the role of authors in shaping secular and religious meaning cannot be based on such a low number of personal accounts. Therefore, this thesis could serve as a foundation for those who would wish to undertake more in-depth research on this issue in particular.

Lastly, although children and those who read the stories to them have a central position in this thesis, I have not had the opportunity to do empirical research with them. Their response to the books, their discussions, as well as children's own experience of their agency in meaning-making, would be an immensely valuable addition to the study of storytelling through children's literature. Their perspectives would complete the 'circle' which starts with authors and illustrators, moves into the resources found in the books and ends with children and their parents and teachers. Research of this type could be used to support, question and deepen the arguments of this thesis.

Bibliography

Accardi, Steven. “Agency.” In *Keywords in Writing Studies*, edited by Paul Heilker and Peter Vandenberg, 1-5. Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press, 2014.

Ahmadi, Fereshteh, Jisung Park, Kyung Mee Kim and Nader Ahmadi. “Meaning-Making Coping Among Cancer Patients in Sweden and South Korea: A Comparative Perspective.” *Journal of Religion and Health* 56, no. 5 (October 2017): 1794-1811. https://doi.org /10.1007/s10943-017-0383-3.

Aleixo, Ana, António Pazo Pires, Lynne Angus, David Neto and Alexandre Vaz. “A Review of Empirical Studies Investigating Narrative, Emotion and Meaning-Making Modes and Client Process Markers in Psychotherapy.” *Journal of Contemporary Psychotherapy* 51 (2021): 31-40. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10879-020-09472-6.

Ammerman, Nancy Tatom. *The Spiritual Dimensions of Lived Religion*. NYU Press: 2021.

Árnason, Arnar. “Individuals and Relationships: On the Possibilities and Impossibilities of Presence.” In *Emotion, Identity and Death: Mortality Across Disciplines*, edited by Chang-Won Park and Douglas J. Davies, 59-70. London and New York: Taylor & Francis Group, 2012. ProQuest Ebook Central.

Asad, Talal. *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*. Stanford University Press, 2003. https://doi-org.proxy-ub.rug.nl/10.1515/9780804783095.

Asad, Talal. “Thinking about the secular body, pain, and liberal politics.” *Cultural Anthropology* 26, no. 4 (November 2011): 657-675. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-1360.2011.01118.x.

Astrid Lindgren Company. “The Quotes.” Accessed August 28, 2022, https://www.astridlindgren.com/en/quotes?tags=Astrid+Lindgren.

Balagangadhara, S. N. “On the Dark Side of the "Secular": Is the Religious-Secular Distinction a Binary?” *Numen* 61, no. 1 (2014): 33-52. https://doi.org/10.1163/15685276-12341303.

Barasch, Moshe. “The Departing Soul. The Long Life of a Medieval Creation.” *Artibus et Historiae* 26, no. 52 (2005): 13-28. http://www.jstor.com/stable/20067095.

Benavides, Pelayo. “Animal Symbolism in Folk Narratives and Human Attitudes towards Predators: An Analysis of their Mutual Influences.” *Folklore* 124, no. 1 (April 2013): 64-80. http://dx.doi.org/l0.1080/0015587X.2013.767484.

Bloch, Maurice. “Why Religion Is Nothing Special but Is Central.” *Philosophical Transactions: Biological Sciences* 363, no. 1499 (June 2008): 2055-2061. https://doi.org/10.1098/rstb.2008.0007.

Boggs, George L., Nance S. Wilson, Robert T. Ackland, Stephen Danna and Kathy B. Grant. “Beyond the Lorax: Examining Children's Books on Climate Change.” *The Reading Teacher* 69, no. 6 (May/June 2016): 665-675. https://doi.org/10.1002/trtr.1462.

Brannigan, John. “"The Storyteller": Narrative Authority and Cultural Nationalism in Brendan Behan's Short Fiction.” *Journal of Narrative Theory* 31, no. 3 (Fall 2001): 283-298. https://doi.org/10.1353/jnt.2011.0047.

Brennan, Michael. “Condolence books: language and meaning in the mourning for Hillsborough and Diana.” *Death studies* 32, no. 4 (2008): 326-351. https://doi.org/10.1080/07481180801974729.

Butler, Judith. “Sexual politics, torture, and secular time.” *The British Journal of Sociology* 59, no.1 (2008): 1-23. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-4446.2007.00176.x

Cambridge Dictionary. “Meaning of metaphor in English.” Last modified 2022. https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/metaphor.
Cambridge Dictionary. “Meaning of symbol in English.” Last modified 2022. https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/symbol.
Casanova, Jose. “The Secular and Secularisms.” *Social Research* 76, no. 4 (Winter 2009): 1049-1066. https://doi.org/10.1353/sor.2009.0064.
Charmaz, Kathy. *Constructing Grounded Theory, 2nd. Edition*. London: SAGE, 2014.
Clark, J. C. D. “Secularisation and modernisation: The failure of a ‘grand narrative’.” *The Historical Journal* 55, no. 1 (March 2012): 161-194. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X11000586.
Coats, Karen. “Conventions of Children's Literature: Then and Now.” *Style* 35, no. 3 (Fall 2001): 389-392. https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5325/style.35.3.389.
Cox, Meredith, Erin Garrett, and James A. Graham. “Death in Disney Films: Implications for Children’s Understanding of Death.” *Omega* 50, no. 4 (2004-2005): 267-280. https://doi-org.ru.idm.oclc.org/10.2190/Q5VL-KLF7-060F-W69V.
Csinos, David M. 2020. *Little Theologians: Children, Culture, and the Making of Theological Meaning*. London/Chicago: McGill-Queen's University Press. SmartCat.
Dietz, Feike. *Lettering Young Readers in the Dutch Enlightenment: Literacy, Agency and Progress in Eighteenth-Century Children’s Books*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021. https://doi-org.proxy-ub.rug.nl/10.1007/978-3-030-69633-7.
Dransart, Dolores Angela Castelli. “From Sense-Making to Meaning-Making: Understanding and Supporting Survivors of Suicide.” *The British Journal of Social Work* 43, no. 2 (March 2013): 317-335. https://doi.org /10.1093/bjsw/bct026.
Ewers, Hans-Heino. “Children's Literature and the Traditional Art of Storytelling.” *Poetics Today* 13, no. 1 (Spring 1992): 172-173.
Faircloth, Charlotte. *Militant lactivism? : attachment parenting and intensive motherhood in the UK and France*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2013.
Goldstone, Bette P. “Views of Childhood in Children's Literature Over Time.” *Language Arts* 63, no. 8 (1986): 791-798.
Gubar, Marah. “On Not Defining Children’s Literature.” *PMLA* 126, no. 1 (January 2011): 209-216. https://www.jstor.org/stable/41414094.
Hammack, Phillip L. and Bertram J. Cohler. “Narrative Engagement and Stories of Sexual Identity: An Interdisciplinary Approach to the Study of Sexual Lives.” In *The Story of Sexual Identity: Narrative Perspectives on the Gay and Lesbian Life Course*, edited by Phillip L. Hammack and Bertram J. Cohler, 3-22. Oxford Scholarship Online, 2009.
Happonen, Sirke. “Choreography of characters: movement and posture in illustrated texts for children.” *Literacy* 35, no. 3 (November 2001): 99-105. https://doi-org.proxy-ub.rug.nl/10.1111/1467-9345.00170.
Hastings, Sally O., Judith D. Hoover and George W. Musambira. “"In My Heart for Eternity": Normalizing Messages to the Deceased”.” *Storytelling, Self, Society* 1, no. 2 (Spring 2005): 11-25. https://www.jstor.org/stable/41942904.
Holton, Judith A. “The Coding Process and Its Challenges.” In *The SAGE Handbook of Grounded Theory*, edited by Antony Bryant and Kathy Charmaz, 265-289. SAGE Publications: 2016.

Howey, Anne F. “Secular or Spiritual: Rereading "Anne of Green Gables".” *Christianity and Literature* 62, no. 3 (Spring 2013): 395-416. https://www.jstor.org/stable/44315075.
Juvan, Marko. *History and Poetics of Intertextuality*. Purdue University Press, 2008.
Katerina Tolstikova, Stephen Fleming and Brian Chartier, “Grief, Complicated Grief, and Trauma: The Role of the Search for Meaning, Impaired Self-reference, and Death Anxiety,” *Illness, Crisis and Loss* 13, n. 4 (2005): 293-313.
Kazemipur, Abdolmohammad. *Sacred as Secular: Secularization under Theocracy in Iran*. McGill-Queen's University Press, 2022.
Korteweg, Anna. “The Sharia Debate in Ontario: Gender, Islam, and Representations of Muslim Women's Agency.” *Gender and Society* 22, no. 4 (August 2008): 434-454. https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243208319768.
Kuebli, Janet. “Young Children's Understanding of Everyday Emotions.” *Young Children* 49, no. 3 (March 1994): 36-47. https://www.jstor.org/stable/42725566.
Kurzman, Charles. “Meaning-Making in Social Movements.” *Anthropological Quarterly* 81, no. 1 (Winter 2008): 5-15. https://doi.org /10.1353/anq.2008.0003.
Kyubo Kim, “The Power of Being Vulnerable in Christian Soul Care: Common Humanity and Humility,” *Journal of Religion and Health* 56, no. 1 (February 2017): 355-369, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-016-0294-8.
Lamb, Edel. *Reading Children in Early Modern Culture*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-70359-6.
Lanser, Susan S. “(Im)plying the Author.” *Narrative* 9, no. 2 (May 2001): 153-160. https://doi.org/10.2307/20107241.
Leone, Massimo. “Signs of the Soul: Toward a Semiotics of Religious Subjectivity.” *Signs and Society* 1, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 115-159. https://doi.org/10.1086/670169.
Libnoch, Hillary A. and Jackie Ridley. “Using Picture Books about Refugees: Fostering Diversity and Social Justice in the Elementary School Classroom.” *YC Young Children* 75, no. 5 (December 2020): 28-36. https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26979181.
Literatuurgeschiedenis. “Van Brave Hendrik tot Dik Trom: Jeugdliteratuur in de 19e eeuw.” Accessed July 28, 2022. https://www.literatuurgeschiedenis.org/19e-eeuw/van-brave-hendrik-tot-dik-trom#:~:text=In%20de%20loop%20van%20de,van%20der%20Hoop%20Juniorszoon.
Little, Robert Matthew and Lynn Froggett. “Making meaning in muddy waters: representing complexity through community based storytelling.” *Community Development Journal* 45, no. 4 (October 2010): 458–473. https://doi.org/10.1093/cdj/bsp017.
Longbottom, Sarah and Virginia Slaughter. “Sources of children's knowledge about death and dying.” *Philosophical Transactions: Biological Sciences* 373, no. 1754 (September 2018): 1-7. https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26486391.
Lund, Peter Clement. “Recreational grief as resonance - sociological notes on grief in popular culture.” *Mortality* 27, no. 1 (2022): 90-106. https://doi.org/10.1080/13576275.2020.1823354.
MacLeod, Anne Scott. “From Rational to Romantic: The Children of Children's Literature in the Nineteenth Century.” *Poetics Today* 13, no. 1 (1992): 141-153. https://www.jstor.org/stable/1772794.
Maddrell, Avril. “Living with the deceased: absence, presence and absence-presence.” *Cultural Geographies* 20, no. 4 (October 2013): 501-522. https://doi.org/10.1177/1474474013482806.

Margry, Peter Jan. “Memorialising Europe: Revitalising and Reframing a 'Christian' Continent.” *Anthropological Journal of European Cultures* 17, no. 2 (2008): 6-33. https://doi.org/10.3167/ajec.2008.170202.
Mathijssen, Brenda. “Transforming bonds: ritualising post-mortem relationships in the Netherlands.” *Mortality* 23, no. 2 (2018): 215-230. https://doi.org/10.1080/13576275.2017.1364228.
McAdams, Dan P. and Kate C. McLean. “Narrative Identity.” *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 22, no. 3 (June 2013): 233-238. https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721413475622.
McCulloch, Fiona. *Children's literature in context*. London, New York: Continuum, 2011. SmartCat.
McIntosh, Caroline, Christine Stephens, and Antonia Lyons. “Young children's meaning making about the causes of illness within the family context.” *Health* 17, no. 1 (January 2013): 3-19. https://doi.org/10.1177/1363459312442421.
Miller, Jennifer. *The Transformative Potential of LGBTQ+ Children’s Picture Books Book*. University Press of Mississippi, 2022.
Misailidi, Plousia and Ekaterina N. Kornilaki. “Development of Afterlife Beliefs in Childhood: Relationship to Parent Beliefs and Testimony.” *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly* 61, no. 2 (April 2015): 290-318. https://doi-org.proxy-ub.rug.nl/10.13110/merrpalmquar1982.61.2.0290.
Montessori Lyceum Amsterdam. “Proeve van kleine gedichten voor kinderen.” Literatuurlijn. Last modified 2022. http://literatuurlijn.nl/verlichting/proeve-van-kleine-gedichten-voor-kinderen/.
Nelson, Olga. “Storytelling: Language Experience for Meaning Making.” *The Reading Teacher* 42, no. 6 (February 1989): 386-390. https://www.jstor.org/stable/20200160.
Nerlich, Brigitte. “Pandemics, Metaphors and What It Means to Be Human.” In *Being Human During COVID-19*, edited by Paul Martin, Stevienna de Saille, Kirsty Liddiard and Warren Pearce, 20-27. Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2022.
Nicolopoulou, Ageliki. “Children's Storytelling: Toward an Interpretive and Sociocultural Approach.” *Storyworlds: A Journal of Narrative Studies* 3 (2011): 25-48. https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5250/storyworlds.3.2011.0025.
Olson, Elizabeth. “Gender and geopolitics in 'secular time'.” *Area* 45, no. 3 (June 2013): 148-154. https://doi.org/10.1111/area.12013.
Oneindig Noord-Holland. “Brave Hendrik.” Last modified 2022. https://onh.nl/verhaal/brave-hendrik.
O’Sullivan, Emer. “Comparative Children’s Literature.” *PMLA* 126, no. 1 (January 2011): 189-196. https://www.jstor.org/stable/41414091.
Oswell, David. *The Agency of Children: From Family to Global Human Rights*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012. https://doi-org.proxy-ub.rug.nl/10.1017/CBO9781139033312.
OxfordLieder. “Songs: Danse Macabre.” Accessed August 29, 2022. https://www.oxfordlieder.co.uk/song/4373.
Panagiotaki, Georgia, Michelle Hopkins, Gavin Nobes, Emma Ward and Debra Griffiths. “Children’s and adults’ understanding of death: Cognitive, parental, and experiential influences.” *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology* 166 (2018): 96-115. http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jecp.2017.07.014.

Peters, Levity. “Bette Westera en Sylvia Weve – Doodgewoon: Over het belang van doodgaan.” Meander. Last modified May 17, 2015. https://meandermagazine.nl/2015/05/over-het-belang-van-doodgaan/#:~:text=Kan%20het%20bestaan%20dat%20ergens,de%20oevers%20van%20een%20sloot%3F.

Phelan, James. “Authors, Resources, Audiences: Toward a Rhetorical Poetics of Narrative.” *Style* 52, no. 1-2 (2018): 1-34. https://doi.org/10.1353/sty.2018.0001.

Potter, John and Kate Cowan “Playground as meaning-making space: Multimodal making and re-making of meaning in the (virtual) playground.” *Global Studies of Childhood* 10, no. 3 (2020): 248–263. https://doi.org/10.1177/2043610620941527.

Quartier, Thomas. “Mourning rituals – Between faith and personalisation: changing ritual repertoires on All Souls Day in the Netherlands.” *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 10, no. 4 (2010): 334-350. https://doi.org/10.1080/1474225X.2010.507735.

Raad voor Volksgezondheid en Samenleving. “Stervelingen - Beter samenleven met de dood.” Accessed June 1, 2022. https://www.raadrvs.nl/documenten/publicaties/2021/12/9/stervelingen---beter-samenleven-met-de-dood.

Raad voor Volksgezondheid en Samenleving. *Stervelingen: Beter samenleven met de dood*. Den Haag: Raad voor Volksgezondheid en Samenleving: 2021.

Rengers, Christel. “13 kinderboeken over de dood.” KiiND. Accessed August 24. https://kiind.nl/13-kinderboeken-over-de-dood-2/.

Rijksoverheid. “Geschiedenis,” Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap. Accessed July 29, 2022. https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/ministeries/ministerie-van-onderwijs-cultuur-en-wetenschap/organisatie/geschiedenis#:~:text=Op%201%20januari%201901%20is,en%20de%20medezeggenschap%20wettelijk%20geregeld.

Rose, Jacqueline S. “The Case of Peter Pan: The Impossibility of Children’s Fiction.” In *The Children's Culture Reader*, edited by Henry Jenkins, 58-66. New York and London: New York University Press, 1998.

Ryan, Patrick J. “How New Is the "New" Social Study of Childhood? The Myth of a Paradigm Shift.” *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 38, no. 4 (Spring 2008): 555-576. https://www.jstor.org/stable/20143705.

Schott, Gareth. “‘I know death. He’s got many faces:’ The presence of death in young peoples’ media.” *Mortality* 26, no. 4 (2021): 367-375. https://doi.org/10.1080/13576275.2021.1987669.

Seigal, Catherine. *Bereaved Parents and Their Continuing Bonds: Love After Death*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2017.

Sheehan, Jonathan. “Enlightenment, Religion, and the Enigma of Secularization: A Review Essay.” *The American Historical Review* 108, no. 4 (October 2003): 1061-1080. https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/529788.

Short, Kathy G. “What's Trending in Children's Literature and Why It Matters.” *Language Arts* 95, no. 5 (May 2018): 287-298. https://www.jstor.org/stable/44810091.

Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau. “Ontkerkelijking leidt tot nieuwe verhoudingen in de samenleving.” Last modified March 24, 2022.

https://www.scp.nl/actueel/nieuws/2022/03/24/ontkerkelijking-leidt-tot-nieuwe-verhoudingen-in-de-samenleving.
Stearns, Peter N. “Conclusion: Change, Globalization and Childhood.” *Journal of Social History* 38, no. 4 (2005): 1041-1046. https://www.jstor.org/stable/3790489.
Stearns, Peter N. “Obedience and Emotion: A Challenge in the Emotional History of Childhood.” *Journal of Social History* 47, no. 3 (Spring 2014): 593-611. https://doi.org/10.1093/jsh/sht110.
The LiederNet Archive. “Dance of Death,” Accessed August 29, 2022. https://www.lieder.net/lieder/get_text.html?TextId=9775.
Thomas, David R. “A General Inductive Approach for Analyzing Qualitative Evaluation Data.” *American Journal of Evaluation* 27, no. 2 (June 2006): 237-246. https://doi.org/10.1177/1098214005283748.
Talwar, Victoria. “Talking to Children about Death in Educational Settings.” In *Children's Understanding of Death: From Biological to Religious Conceptions*, edited by Victoria Talwar, Paul L. Harris, and Michael Schleifer, 98-115. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011.
Tan, Shaun. “The Purposeful Daydream: Thoughts on Children’s Literature.” *The Iowa Review* 45, no. 2 (Fall 2015): 100-115. https://www.jstor.org/stable/43999807.
Taylor, Charles. *A Secular Age*. Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London: Harvard University Press, 2007. https://doi-org.proxy-ub.rug.nl/10.4159/9780674044289.
Taylor, Frank. “Content Analysis and Gender Stereotypes in Children's Books.” *Teaching Sociology* 31, no. 3 (July 2003): 300-311. https://doi.org/10.2307/3211327.
Tomasson, Richard F. “How Sweden Became so Secular.” *Scandinavian Studies* 74, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 61-88. https://www.jstor.org/stable/40920355.
Toolis, Erin E. and Phillip L. Hammack. “The Lived Experience of Homeless Youth: A Narrative Approach.” *Qualitative Psychology* 2, no. 1 (2015): 50-68. http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/qup0000019.
Tradii, Laura and Martin Robert. “Do we deny death? II. Critiques of the death-denial thesis.” *Mortality* 24, no. 4 (December 2017): 377-388. https://doi.org/10.1080/13576275.2017.1415319.
Van de Graaf, Maaike. “Het proces van rouwen: 5 x mooie kinderboeken over de dood.” Famme. Last modified August 31, 2021. https://www.famme.nl/kinderboeken-over-de-dood/.
Van den Akker, Lisa. “Hulp bij het rouwen: 9x bijzondere kinderboeken over de dood.” JM Ouders. Last modified May 17, 2020. https://www.jmouders.nl/kinderboeken-over-dood/.
Vande Vyvere, Peter. “Walvis als metafoor van dood en nieuw leven.” Bisdom Gent. Last modified October 2, 2017. https://www.kerknet.be/bisdom-gent/artikel/walvis-als-metafoor-van-dood-en-nieuw-leven.
Van Hest, Pimm and Lisa Brandenburg. *Misschien is doodgaan wel hetzelfde als een vlinder worden*. Amsterdam: Clavis, 2018.
Venbrux, Eric, Janneke Peelen and Marga Altena. “Going Dutch: Individualisation, secularisation and changes in death rites.” *Mortality* 14, no. 2 (May 2009): 97-100. https://doi.org /10.1080/13576270902807508.
Walliman, Nicholas. *Social Research Methods*. SAGE Publications, 2006. https://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781849209939.n7.

Welch, Brynn F. “The Pervasive Whiteness of Children's Literature: Collective Harms and Consumer Obligations.” *Social Theory and Practice* 42, no. 2 (April 2016): 367-388. https://doi.org/10.5840/soctheorpract201642220.
White, Richard. ““The Storyteller” and the Possibility of Wisdom.” *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* 51, no. 1 (Spring 2017): 1-14. https://doi.org/10.5406/jaesteduc.51.1.0001.
Wiering, Jelle. “There is a Sexular Body: Introducing a Material Approach to the Secular.” *Secularism and Nonreligion* 6, no. 8 (2020): 1–11. https://doi.org/10.5334/snr.782017.
Wohlrab-Sahr, Monika and Marian Burchardt. “Multiple Secularities: Toward a Cultural Sociology of Secular Modernities.” *Comparative Sociology* 11 (2012): 875-909. https://doi.org/10.1163/15691330-12341249.
Wojtkowiak, Joanna, Bastiaan T. Rutjens and Eric Venbrux. “Meaning-making and Death in a Secular Society: A Dutch Survey Study.” *Archive for the Psychology of Religion* 32 (2010): 363-373. https://doi.org /10.1163/157361210X532059.
Zajac, Lindsay, and Chris J. Boyatzis. “Mothers’ Perceptions of the Role of Religion in Parent–Child Communication About a Death in the Family.” *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 13, no. 2 (2021): 235-245. https://doi.org/10.1037/rel0000309.

Images

Breukers, Truus and Carolien Westermann. *Wolfje en de oude geit*. Amsterdam: Clavis, 2017.
Leone, Massimo. “Signs of the Soul: Toward a Semiotics of Religious Subjectivity.” *Signs and Society* 1, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 115-159. https://doi.org/10.1086/670169. Page 132 and 148.
The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. “Ba.” Encyclopaedia Britannica. Accessed August 9, 2022. https://www.britannica.com/topic/ba-Egyptian-religion.

Analysed children’s books

Aerts, Jef and Marit Törnqvist. *Groter dan een droom (Bigger than a dream)*. Amsterdam: Singel Uitgeverijen, 2013.
Bos, Tamara and Annemarie van Haeringen. *Papa, hoor je me? (Daddy, can you hear me?)* Amsterdam: Leopold, 2011.
Breukers, Truus and Carolien Westermann. *Wolfje en de oude geit (Little wolf and the old goat)*. Amsterdam: Clavis, 2017.
De Visser, Laurina and Linda Bikker. *Olifant op het feest (Elephant at the party)*. Utrecht: KokBoekencentrum, 2020.
Van Hest, Pimm and Lisa Brandenburg. *Misschien is doodgaan wel hetzelfde als een vlinder worden (Maybe dying is like becoming a butterfly)*. Hasselt: Clavis, 2018.
Van Hooft, Mieke and Ronald Heuninck. *Dag oma (Goodbye grandma)*. Zeist: Christofoor, 2014.