



## The representation of death in picturebooks.

Analyzing how directly or indirectly picturebooks that depict both life prior to and after the death of a sibling or parent represent death.

MA Thesis

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August 2024

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## Introduction.

Sooner or later, we all experience loss and grief in connection to the death of a loved one. As a consequence, existential questions about life and death may arise, as well as a variety of feelings such as sadness, anger, and anxiety (Wiseman, 2013) or other efforts to cope with the loss and one's reactions to that loss (Corr, 2004). Research shows that children and adults cope with grief differently. While adults might have experienced loss before, giving them a more layered understanding of grief as well as better tools to cope with their loss, for children, their first encounter with loss might be confusing as their understanding, way of communicating questions, and knowledge of coping mechanisms is more limited (Berns, 2004).

Besides factors such as a child's age and their relationship with the deceased person (Smit & Smith, 2023), children's grief reactions are also strongly influenced by the parental figures in their lives (Wiseman, 2013). Although there is a tendency to shield children from exposure to death, both out of protection and because of their perceived immaturity and limited capacity to understand death (Smith & Smith, 2023), research shows that children's emotional and intellectual understanding of death begins at age three (Danielson & Colman, 2023. Smith, 1980. Smit & Smith, 2023.) with some researchers even suggesting it starts at the very beginning of life (Ordal, 1984). As children develop a multifaceted concept of death - multifaceted meaning including biological, sociocultural, and emotional components (Poling & Hupp, 2008) - they do so by receiving information from a variety of sources, one of which is the picturebooks they read. Children's literature has been proven to successfully contribute to a child's understanding and coping of their grieving experience. A diversity of representations in books can not only validate someone's emotions and experiences, but also invite deeper self-reflection (Wiseman, 2013) and identification with grieving characters (Gibson et al, 1991). The safe distance as created in children's literature lowers the threshold for both children and adults to witness and discuss sensitive topics (Arruda-Colli et al, 2017), as (fictional) stories teach us about 'real' life without coming too close (Smit & Smith, 2023).

Using books (and other reading materials) for therapeutic benefits - such as helping children to understand, work through, and communicate any questions or feelings they experience as a result of loss - is called bibliotherapy (Jensen, 2020). Bibliotherapy has been proven to effectively assist children in overcoming emotional and behavioral problems (Berns, 2004), develop coping skills after experiencing trauma (De Vries et al, 2017), and normalize a child's grief reactions (Berns, 2004). Within children's literature, picturebooks hold a special position because of their combination of both pictures and words. Larry Sipe (1998) used the term 'synergy' to describe how text and illustrations in picturebooks are incomplete without each other, and thus meaning can only be derived by taking both sign systems into account. Research shows that visual cues strongly influence a child's overall interpretation of the story (Wiseman, 2013). Hence, when looking for suitable bibliotherapy literature, picturebooks can provide a valuable contribution.

Academic research on the representation of death in children's literature has mainly focused on elaborating on the history of death as a 'taboo' topic (Smith, 2017a. Gibson et al, 1991.

Ghesquiere et al, 2014.), providing systematic reviews, overviews and bibliographies of death-related children's literature for librarians, teachers, and parents (Arruda-Colli et al, 2017. Corr, 2004. Corr, 2009. Crosetto & Garcha, 2012. Paglia, 2014.), carrying out content analysis of death and bereavement in children's literature (Danielson & Colman, 2023. Ordal, 1984. Poling & Hupp, 2008. Prokopová, 2022. Schroth, 2017. Smit & Smith, 2023. Wiseman, 2013.), and studying the effects of bibliotherapy on children experiencing grief, loss, and trauma (Berns, 2004. De Vries et al, 2017. Jensen, 2020). Results of these different studies show the emergence of multiple patterns within death-related children's literature. For instance, most books are written from the perspective of a third party or child (Arruda-Colli, 2017. Schroth, 2017), with feelings such as anger, sadness, and fear being most common (Poling & Hupp, 2008). Despite research showing the importance of using clear, direct language in children's literature to prevent misconceptions about death (Danielson & Colman, 2023), most books use euphemisms, symbolism and other indirect language to describe death (such as the deceased falling asleep or going on a journey) or resort to an unambiguous representation where questions are deliberately left unanswered (Schroth, 2017. Arruda-Colli, 2017).

Interestingly, the patterns show two gaps. First: the most chosen characters to pass away are either older in age (e.g. grandparents) or (anthropomorphized) animals (e.g. a pet) (Arruda-Colli, 2017. Danielson & Colman, 2023). Connected to this, the most common cause of death (if specified at all) includes old age, illness, or an accident (Poling & Hupp, 2008. Danielson & Colman, 2023). As a result, representations of the loss of friends, classmates, parents and other family members (besides grandparents) are lacking, with in particular the death of the child itself being notably scarce (Arruda-Colli, 2017. Danielson & Colman, 2023. Wiseman, 2013). In other words: with children's literature preferring to choose grandparents or animals as the dying characters, we lack sufficient representation for children who lose other loved ones, such as siblings or parents (Wiseman, 2013).

Second: it is difficult to find books where a child character *prepares* for death (either their own death or someone else's) (Arruda-Colli, 2017). Even books that portray children living with a life-limiting illness, rarely provide insight into how that child prepares for their own death (Arruda-Colli, 2017). With (almost) all children's literature focusing on the grieving period *after* someone passes away instead of *prior* to someone's death, children will miss out on stories that can prepare them for (and possibly make them more comfortable with) death. It also results in a shortage of suitable books that parents / teachers can use to facilitate conversations about existential questions with their children / students. In other words: children's literature's focus on the grieving period *after* someone's death, results in a scarcity of books that provide preventive care by describing how children can deal with the possibility or proximity of (someone's or their own) death.

Although we cannot make assumptions about a child's relationship with grandparents or animals (and thus a child's grieving process), and research has shown how comforting and symbolic animals can be for children to understand and process emotions (Smit & Smith, 2023), we should remember the importance and impact of wider representation in children's literature. Academic research on the few books who do (partially) fill these two gaps mentioned above is

limited. To better understand how picturebooks portray the death of a sibling or parent, both before and after they pass away, this study asks: *How directly or indirectly do picturebooks that depict both life prior to and after the death of a sibling or parent represent death?*

To answer this research question, this study adopts a multimodal textual analysis approach (Smith, 2017b) where both text and illustrations of the following three picturebooks are analyzed: *Benjamin* by Elfi Nijssen and Eline van Lindenhuisen (Ill.) (2009); *The Perfect Shelter* by Clare Helen Welsh and Asa Gilland (Ill.) (2020); and *The Heart and the Bottle* by Oliver Jeffers (2010). To gain a deeper understanding of the techniques used to (in)directly represent death, my analysis will focus on the following components in both text and image: the personification of death, ideas about the afterlife, the use of indirect language and visualization, the impact of a naive or innocent child character, the 'blind spaces' of death, the ending of the story, and the difference in period before and after someone's death.

In order to establish a conceptual framework for the analysis, the second chapter reviews concepts and relevant studies on children's understanding of death, the multimodal nature of picturebooks and their role in bibliotherapy, and the academic research that has already been done on analyzing the directness of death representation in death- and grief-related picturebooks. In the methodological chapter, I will justify my chosen picturebooks, as well as further explain the steps of my multimodal textual analysis approach and my understanding of relevant components such as the personification of death, metaphors, and 'blind spaces' in children's literature. Altogether, through close reading the picturebooks, my analysis will investigate the ways in which picturebooks who depict both life prior to and after the death of a sibling or parent, can directly or (more) indirectly represent death. Lastly, I will open up the discussion and give suggestions for further research.

## Theoretical Framework.

In this section, I will explain and connect previously mentioned concepts in order to provide the foundation for my own research, highlight how picturebooks can provide support for trauma healing, and emphasize the importance of certain aspects within picturebooks about death that are currently under-researched. The concepts are: children's understanding of death, the text-image relationship in picturebooks, bibliotherapy, and the (in)direct representation of death in picturebooks.

### Children's understanding of death.

'During the first year of life – more than 28,000 infants under 1 year of age die each year in our society' (Toray, 2010). In the UK alone, 26,900 parents pass away each year (equating to one parent every 20 minutes), leaving behind an estimated 46,300 children between the ages of 0 and 17 (equating to 127 new children each day) (Childhood Bereavement Network, 2021). Research on children's understanding of death has tried to pinpoint specific elements about death that children have to develop to fully grasp the concept of death, and at what specific age-stages these developments take place. It is not until the ages of 3 to 7 years old that children show more curiosity in understanding death, resulting in an intensification of their development of the concept of death (Gibbons, 1992). However, before fully understanding death, children already perceive and become aware of death-related events and emotions. For example, a child might not (completely) understand why family members are more emotional, but they do notice differences in the emotional currents of their family members (Toray, 2010). Given that, from a young age, we are confronted with death, loss and grief, this increases the importance of comprehending what children do and do not understand about death and urges us to critically reflect on the current practices we employ when it comes to aiding children undergoing bereavement.

According to Speece & Brent (1984), there are three major components of death that children should understand. These are: irreversibility (understanding death as final, permanent and incapable of coming back to life), non-functionality (understanding that life-defining functions of the human body have stopped working), and universality (understanding death as inevitable, unescapable, and occurring to all living things). Before children develop correct understandings of these components - which commonly happens between the ages of 5 and 7 - many misconceptions exist. For example, children often view death as something that is temporary and can be reversed. Especially activities like sleeping and traveling are prevalent substitutions for dying, revealing a child's belief that death is something you can wake up from or return back home from. Besides this, children often expect a dead body to still be capable of certain functions such as breathing, feeling, and hearing - albeit in a diminished capacity in comparison to living bodies. Children also often believe that death is something one can avoid or is excluded from: for example, children often see teachers, own immediate family members, or themselves, as being incapable of dying (Speece & Brent, 1984).

More recent research by Slaughter (2005) confirms the importance of these three components, while separating some and adding others. According to her, the components of death include:

irreversibility or finality, universality or applicability, personal mortality (understanding that oneself might die), inevitability, cessation or non-functionality, causality (understanding malfunction of life-defining bodily functions as cause of death), and unpredictability. Of these components, universality and irreversibility are acquired around 5 or 6 years old, while cessation and causality take the longest to be understood. In general, children do not gain a full understanding of death before the age of 7 (Slaughter, 2005), meaning that any death-related information a child learns in the first 7 years of their life is incredibly influential for the development of their full comprehension of death.

Multiple researchers have emphasized how teaching children about biological factors of death can positively contribute to their understanding of death (Toray, 2010. Slaughter, 2005), as well as prevent any misconceptions and fears associated with death (Slaughter, 2007). Fears and anxieties related to death show up around ages 4 to 6 and score the highest among all fears and anxieties a child experiences around ages 7 to 10 (Slaughter, 2007). A child's understanding of the different components of death is crucial here. Before the age of 10, children frame death as a *behavioral* phenomenon instead of a *biological* one. This means that children tend to ascribe biological properties (such as breathing, eating, sleeping) to entities who are similar in behavior to human beings (such as monkeys or dogs), while depriving other entities (such as bees or plants) of this biological status. Teaching children about the biological functions of the body can help them understand the connection between a failure or abrupt ending of these biological functions as the cause of death, instead of purely associating death with specific behavior and activities (such as sleeping or traveling) (Slaughter, 2005).

This child's tendency to understand death as a behavioral instead of biological event leads to questions that seem unresolvable (Slaughter, 2007). For example, a child who thinks a dead person has traveled to another country might not understand why that person would not want to return to them. Or a child who thinks death is reversible, might experience difficulty grasping the idea that a buried dead person would like to live underground. The lack of answers possibly only further exacerbates a child's fear of death. Besides that, research found that '6- to 11-year-old children who scored higher than their peers on a general anxiety scale, were less likely to endorse the applicability/universality of death.' (Slaughter, 2007) This only further supports the idea that we can remove some of children's fear and anxiety around death, simply by discussing death and the process of dying in biological rather than purely social or behavioral terms. Picturebooks play a role here as well: through providing biological representations of death, children's fears and misunderstandings of death possibly decrease.

## Losing a parent or sibling.

Before diving into research on children's experience with loss, we should clearly distinguish the definitions of loss, grief, and trauma. Loss can be understood as 'the absence of something or someone important within one's universe' (Berns, 2004), whereas 'grief refers to the natural process of facing the loss of someone close [and] trauma denotes an event or chain of events which causes harm for the emotional or physical well-being of an individual' (Jensen, 2020). Research on children's reactions to the loss of a parent or sibling shows that both losses are traumatic for children (Worden, 1999). Whereas boys are more affected by the loss of a parent,

girls are more affected by the loss of a sibling. One possible reason could be that girls tend to turn to (mostly female) siblings above friends or parents to fulfill their intimacy and social needs (Worden, 1999). According to Gibbons (1992), bereaving siblings rarely discuss death and grieving experiences with other family members. This lack of communication impacts how children judge, understand and adapt to the loss they experience. It might lead to siblings feeling isolated, repressing or denying their loss, or experiencing survivor's guilt. As Gibbons writes:

'As early as 2 years of age, children may be plagued by guilt that they have lived while their sibling has died. They may have difficulty continuing the activities that they enjoyed before the death. Some survivors believe that they do not have a right to enjoy life. Siblings may manifest personality changes after the death, such as altering a lighthearted attitude to one that is very serious (Haase, 1990).' (Gibbons, 1992).

Similar to siblings, parents can experience survivor's guilt, as well as become either unavailable for and detached from their 'remaining' children or overprotective out of fear of losing them as well (Gibbons, 1992). Despite tools such as grief therapy and organizations such as *Stichting Broederziel* who organize activities for people who have lost a sibling (Stichting Broederziel, 2024), most of the support, guidance and influence when it comes to a child's grief and understanding of death relies on the social environment around the child (such as their parents, teachers, and other family members) (Gibbons, 1992). Given parents' influential role, it is crucial that parents can provide accurate information about death to prevent children from developing their own misconceptions (Toray, 2010). 'Developmentally appropriate preparation for death, beginning as early as age 2 or 3 years for some children, is essential in facilitating adjustment for survivors' (Gibbons, 1992). In fact: keeping a 'healthy' sibling away from their terminally ill sibling, for example through excluding the 'healthy' sibling from hospital visits, has been proven to cause great distress in 'surviving' siblings (Gibbons, 1992). A recurring problem, however, seems to be that parents often express feeling inadequately prepared to discuss the death of a sibling with the 'remaining' children (Gibbons, 1992). This is where the power of picturebooks and bibliotherapy comes in, as these tools are available to parents and could help them guide their children's understanding of and experience with death.

## The multimodal nature of picturebooks.

Research shows that picturebook readalouds (by a teacher in a classroom or by a parent with their child(ren)) strengthen literacy development in children (e.g. through discussing book affordances) and provide the opportunity to go beyond the text itself (Ghiso, 2007). Readalouds often result in discussions about the content of the book, leading to restorative practices where students discuss and learn about each other's social situations and differences in cultures (Koltz & Kersten-Parrish, 2020. Heggernes, 2019), as well as compare and reflect their personal experiences with those in the book (Leeck & Rowe, 2014). Besides teachers' and parents' engaging role (Ghiso, 2007), a reader's engagement with the book can also be intensified by the visual aspects of a picturebook (Heggernes, 2019). In fact, children's interpretation of a picturebook tends to be strongly influenced by the close attention they pay to a picturebook's

illustrations (Wiseman, 2013). How, then, can we define picturebooks and their (visual) affordances?

A picturebook combines two sign systems to tell a story: words and illustrations (Bird & Yokota, 2017). Each of these sign systems has their own strengths and ways of being read: 'Words are better able to convey temporal information that moves readers forward in time, while images can best convey spatial information and are also particularly effective in evoking emotions' (Martinez & Harmon, 2012). Instead of focusing solely on the text and taking illustrations only loosely into account, a picturebook reader must take both sign systems into consideration to fully understand the story. Since these two sign systems are processed differently (text being more sequential, image more simultaneous), the reader is not just demanded to pay attention to different sign systems but also exercise different ways of reading at the same time (Martinez & Harmon, 2012). And to complicate this dual nature even further, the relationship between text and image can take on different forms.

This multimodal relationship in picturebooks is famously described by Sipe (1998) as 'synergy'. Synergy refers to the fact that text and image are incomplete without the other, since the effect they produce together is greater than what each sign system would produce on its own. Hence: meaning can only be derived by taking both text and illustrations into account (Sipe, 1998). Sipe (2008) refers to the concept of 'transmediation' to further explain how a reader has to move back and forth between the two sign systems, constantly translating one sign system into another. This swinging back and forth between different modes is a learned skill, and one we, according to Shimek (2019) should encourage practicing more in the classroom. Especially since research has shown that, since children pay close attention to the visual images, literacy learning should include the visual aspects in the overall meaning making process of a book (Wiseman, 2013).

Nikolajeva and Scott (2001) distinguish five different categories of relationships between text and image:

- 1) Symmetrical: the text tells us the (exact) same story as the one we 'read' from the pictures, meaning there are two mutually redundant narratives since the sign systems convey similar meanings.
- 2) Complementary: here, words and pictures fill each other's gaps. For example: the illustrations show different but complementing information to the text.
- 3) Expanding or enhancing: words and illustrations extend each other's meaning. According to Nikolajeva and Scott (2001), the verbal narrative often depends on and is supported by the visual narrative.
- 4) Counterpointing: text and image contradict each other, meaning there are two mutually dependent narratives since the sign systems tell different stories.
- 5) Sylleptic: here, two or more narratives are independent of each other (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2001. Martinez & Harmon, 2012).

A more simplistic distinction and definition of relationships between text and image comes from Schwarz (1982) who distinguishes between congruency and deviation. A congruent relationship implies that text and image either tell the same story, amplify or enhance each other, or take turns in telling the story. A deviation relationship shows contradiction between text and image, or the two sign systems going different directions.

These different relationships impact the reader's imagination and the required active engagement in completing and understanding a book's story. 'If words and images fill each other's gaps wholly, there is nothing left for the reader's imagination, and the reader remains somewhat passive. The same is true if the gaps are identical in words and images (or if there are no gaps at all). (...) However, as soon as words and images provide alternative information or contradict each other in some way, we have a variety of readings and interpretations' (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2001). On top of this, picturebooks are known for their dual audience address, meaning that there might be different layers of meaning for adult and child readers, which can also be reflected in the relationship between text and image (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2001). For example, an illustration might be more directed at children, while the text provides a humoristic double meaning for the parents.

Besides increasing literacy skills and being crucial for the overall understanding of a picturebook, an illustration - more specifically: the way that characters and emotions are illustrated - holds special opportunities for developing identification within the reader. McCloud (1993) demonstrates the power of picturebooks for identification through explaining cartooning as a form where we can amplify through simplifying. In other words: 'When we abstract an image through cartooning, we're not so much eliminating details as we are focusing on specific details. By stripping down an image to its essential 'meaning', an artist can amplify that meaning in a way that realistic art can't' (McCloud, 1993). In other words: drawing a 'simple' smiley face conveys enough details for the reader to interpret the smiley as a human face and thus a human character. In fact, abstraction, rather than detailed representation, encourages identification in readers, since we see detailed faces as the faces of others, while more abstract faces (such as a smiley face) invite us to see ourselves (McCloud, 1993). Research has shown that identification can further allow children to personally connect with characters and characters' emotions in picturebooks (Wiseman, 2013).

## Bibliotherapy.

Bibliotherapy is a form of therapy that should be understood as a process as well as a tool (Berns, 2004), where books - and written materials in general - are used to help someone better understand what they are going through, to encourage reflection between the book and someone's own life, to open conversations in order to process emotions and experiences, and to look for solutions or healthy coping mechanisms to deal with one's trauma (Jensen, 2020. Berns, 2004. Gjini, 2023). Bibliotherapy can be combined with other forms of therapy, but it can also stand alone (Jensen, 2020). According to De Vries et al (2017), there are two types of bibliotherapy. 1) Cognitive bibliotherapy, which makes use of literature that directly refers to fears, anxieties and behavior difficulties, in order to create cognitive-behavioral changes. 2). Affective bibliotherapy, which focuses more strongly on the (repressed) thoughts and emotions

as represented in literature, in order to allow children to reflect and make connections between the characters and themselves.

In general, bibliotherapy consists of four different stages. 1) Identification, where a child's needs, trauma's, developmental and emotional levels are assessed, as well as a child's readiness to face and start healing this trauma. 2) Selection, where based on the information as provided during the identification stage, appropriate books (as well as activities and questions) are selected. 3) Presentation, where the literary materials are introduced and shared with the child. 4) Follow-up, where the (emotional) exploration of the written materials is shared and an assessment of the effect of bibliotherapy is made (e.g. to what extent certain healing goals have been achieved) (Berns, 2004. Jensen, 2020).

Research shows that bibliotherapy is effective for all kinds of traumatic experiences, but given the purpose of this thesis, we will now turn specifically to the ways in which it helps children with their understanding and processing of death and bereavement. Besides the identification and reflection that a book invites readers to go through, research has shown that 'children may be more inclined to share feelings directly through a third person such as a storybook character, cartoon, or animal to help make sense of their feelings of grief, loss, and pain' (Jensen, 2020). Especially younger children can experience difficulty in concretely defining and verbalizing their own thoughts and emotions (De Vries et al, 2017), something that both the text and image of a picturebook can help them with. Besides that, bibliotherapy allows children to share memories, process their own feelings and fears around grief, and encourages children to explore their understanding of death (together in group sessions or alone) (Jensen, 2020. De Vries et al, 2017). Noteworthy to mention here is that diversity in representation matters. Research shows that children with disabilities are having a difficult time connecting with characters, since these characters do not always show a reflection of themselves. As a result, disabled children are hindered in their therapeutic processes around grief, loss, death, and trauma (Gjini. 2023).

## Death in children's literature.

Prior to the 1970s, the representation of death in children's literature was scarce (Poling & Hupp, 2008). From the beginning of the twentieth century, children's literature shifted from fantastical themes to more practical ones in order to reflect on current social issues (think of themes like loyalty and patriotism during the two World Wars). This shift is still partly present today, with contemporary children's literature moving closer to realism, showing the wish to reflect sensitive topics and difficulties that children deal with (Prokopová, 2022).

This focus on reflecting reality raises the impression that the subject of death is nowadays freely explored in children's literature. However, two issues come to the forefront here. Firstly, the desire to reflect current reality means that children's literature presents a particular time and place, with death being affected by the current global perspectives towards death and children's (supposed) understanding of death. Prokopová (2022) writes: 'Gibson and Zaidman stress that when high infant mortality rates were common, death was presented more openly to children. In contrast, when children live longer, death as a subject in books for the young became taboo. Therefore, children's literature is still quite reluctant to explore the subject of death.' And

secondly, since the contents of children's literature are decided upon by adults (writers, publishers, etc.), many misrepresentations of death exist due to the 'protection attitude' of these adults who stigmatize certain death-related elements, deeming them taboo and inappropriate for children (Prokopová, 2022). Research shows that parents tend to shield their children from representations of death in books (35%), as well as in television and movies (75%) (Gutiérrez, et al. 2014).

Given all these reasons, it should not come as a surprise that, throughout the years, many children's books that deal with the topic of death or grief, have been censored or forbidden. To give some examples: both E.B. White's *Charlotte's Web* (1952) and Katherine Paterson's *Bridge to Terabithia* (1977) were banned due to including death as one of the book's themes (Cowing, 2023). *Ouch! A tale from Grimm* (1998) by Natalie Babbitt was deemed unsuitable because it included concepts of hell in its story. And more recently, *Bone Dog* (2011) by Eric Rohmann was challenged for being age-inappropriate due to dealing with (dog) ghosts and skeletons (Bibliocommons, 2018). In other words: death in picturebooks remains a controversial topic where adults have widely different opinions about what children need and should be allowed to read about. To gain a better overview of the current ways in which picturebooks (are allowed to) deal with death, we will now turn to academic research on death in children's literature.

## How to measure the representation of death?

Poling & Hupp's (2008) oft-cited analysis framework measures the multifaceted concept of death by distinguishing three dimensions of death-related information: biological facts, sociocultural practices and beliefs, and emotional responses. Biological facts regarding death include: irreversibility (dead things do not come back to life), nonfunctionality (bodily functions cease after death), inevitability or universality (death is unavoidable for all life), and causality (cause of death, e.g. illness). For sociocultural practices and belief, we can think of practices such as funerals and memorial services, and afterdeath beliefs such as heaven. Emotional responses to death can include emotions like sadness, anger, shock, confusion, denial, guilt, and longing (Poling & Hupp, 2008).

Wiseman (2013) placed more attention on specific features of the deceased / dying character, such as: *who* exactly died (animal or person), the age, gender, and race/ethnicity of the deceased / dying character, as well as their relationship with the main character, and the age of the main character. Wiseman also looked at the reactions to and coping strategies for death that other characters portrayed in the book (Wiseman, 2013). She does not provide details for her last category - called 'other strategies or interesting information' - but based on the elements that she highlights in her picturebook analysis, this category includes aspects such as: the role of illustrations (e.g. the use of colors to indicate emotions) and the use of metaphors (with comparisons to nature being common).

Prokopová's picturebook analysis (2022) underscores how the innocence and naivety we often ascribe to children, can affect how a child character understands and processes death and loss. Not only will adults and children focus on different aspects of death (e.g. an adult is more

concerned with organizing the funeral), but differences in the understanding of death can also shine through. Prokopová's analysis provides good examples here. In one book, a child strongly believes that the feather he has found on his doorstep has been sent by his deceased brother. When he happily tells his mother about the feather, he does not understand why his mother is not just as excited as him, since the feather is unquestionably a sign from his brother. In another book, a child character is first seen 'practicing her sad face in the mirror' (Prokopová, 2022) after seeing her mother cry, to later on also strongly associate death with old age when she asks her mother 'Uncle Frank was really old, right?' (Prokopová, 2022). These examples show a difference in the understanding of death, grief, and afterlife between child and adult characters, and how that might inform the lessons a child reader picks up from the book. Besides this, Prokopová (2022) highlights three aspects that frequently appear in picturebooks about death. First: ambivalent endings, and to which (possibly wrong) interpretations this leads. Second: how memories and grief can be reflected in specific objects that remind a child of the deceased person (e.g. a grandmother's scarves). And thirdly, the many comparisons with nature, weather, and the changing of the seasons. For example: a grandmother's declining health being reflected in the trees losing their leaves in autumn (Prokopová, 2022).

Gutiérrez (2014) focused on four categories: depictions of death (with special focus on how explicitly death is referenced to, e.g. 'dead', 'died', 'passed away'), emotional reactions to death, subconcepts of death as a natural process (think of Poling & Hupp's biological facts, such as nonfunctionality), and alternative conceptions or models of death (e.g. metaphors and afterlife beliefs). Schroth (2017) took a more narratological approach, looking at direct and indirect forms of narration, the use of stylistic devices such as metaphors, motifs, and repetitions, and the boundaries between fantasy and reality. Another interesting element Schroth mentions once in her analysis, concerns a child character's newness and unknowingness to death: 'When Sam's friend Felix dies and the protagonist is directly exposed to the destructive effect of death for the first time, he appears uncertain about his own ability to face this reality yet. Asked if he wants to see the dying boy, his answer is contradictory: 'Yes, I did. No, I didn't' (Schroth, 2017). This hesitancy in child characters is important, since it possibly shows child readers that it is okay to be unsure and/or feel or think a lot of things at the same time.

Comellas' analysis (2014) of the grief response and healing process in picturebooks emphasizes two aspects. First, the representation of emotions: to what extent do characters freely show their emotions, or do they only cry when (they think) no one is watching? And second: Comellas' mention of death events largely taking place 'off-stage', whereas events prior to and after someone's death are often fully shown. This reminds me of Curry's concept of 'blind space' when it comes to the way adult characters and adulthood are constructed in children's literature (Joosen, 2018). 'Blind space' originated as a term in film studies and refers to anything that is happening (partially) off-screen. In children's literature, many aspects of adulthood are moved to the 'blind space', meaning that adult life in picturebooks is rarely fully shown, but instead visually and metaphorically constructed in a more fragmented way where most aspects of adulthood are taking place outside of the book frame. Comellas' (2014) observation of death taking place 'off-stage' shows how we should pay attention to the 'blind spaces' of death in picturebooks.

Since a frequently occurring cause of death in children's literature - besides old age - is illness, I will now briefly turn to research on illnesses in picturebooks. Caldwell's study (2021) on the representation of dementia, examined what 'characters were pictured doing, wearing and touching at key points in the narrative in order to take account of changes that occur as the story progresses' (Caldwell, 2021). This focus on visual portrayals of dementia placed special attention on: 1) the difference in appearance and activities before and after the health diagnosis has taken place, and 2) the 'still the same person' narrative (meaning that despite the dementia, grandparents are still the same people we know and love). This shows that comparing the period prior to and after a health diagnosis can lead to interesting differences in behavior and emotions, or even a return or 'restoration' at the end of the book of the life lived prior to someone's death. Three other elements Caldwell looks at are: 1) the focus on happy, optimistic, well-rounded endings, 2) plants (and nature in general) serving as metaphors, and 3) using mechanistic metaphors that view the ill human body as a machine where certain parts (e.g. the brain for dementia) are not working properly, but 'can be fixed'.

### Frequently mentioned aspects of death.

In order to gain a better overview of the death-related elements that are lacking in picturebooks, I will now first turn to the different patterns and aspects of death that frequently reoccur in picturebooks about death, grief, and loss.

Poling & Hupp's research (2008) found that 13% of the picturebooks in their study included irreversibility, 45% nonfunctionality, 45% inevitability or universality, and 55% listed at least one cause of death. Regarding sociocultural information, 75% of the books included conceptualizations of heaven or discussed rituals like funerals or memorial services. Common spiritual beliefs about death also emerged, such as mentions of a God or views on the afterlife. Of all emotions, sadness was strongest represented (90%), with anger (65%) and longing (63%) in second and third place. And the most common causes of death were: illness or old age (45%) and accident (15%).

Prokopová (2022) mentions 'the denial in death's language', with which she refers to the lack of explicit mentions of death (e.g. 'he has died'), and the preference for more ambiguous and vague explanations (e.g. 'he has gone to a better place'). Only two out of the seven books she analyzed directly addressed death by words like 'die', 'dying', and 'death'. Other times, death had to be inferred from the context or was presented in a more figurative way. Not a single book mentioned *all* the subcomponents. Lastly, throughout her analysis, connections between death and nature often emerged. Here, someone's life cycle (or the passing of time in general) was often combined with seasonal symbolism.

Schroth (2017) found three characteristics that seem to appear in all analyzed books. 1) All books show close bonds between the protagonist and the dying / deceased character, connecting loss closely to love and something that can personally affect you. 2) All books end on an optimistic note, offering hope and closure. 3) None of the books present 'a complete and unambiguous representation of death, dying and bereavement' (Schroth, 2017). This is done

either through contrasting ideas or misrepresentations, or through not answering all the questions, allowing death to remain a mystery.

Wiseman's analysis (2013) shows the mention of cultural rituals and events (e.g. 'Days of the Dead' celebrations), as well as conceptualizations of heaven and the afterlife (e.g. spirits, dream-like environments, and clouds). Besides this, Wiseman focuses on the representation of metaphors, both in text and image, and their potential to convey emotions. Here, nature again proves to be a popular theme (Wiseman, 2013).

Comellas' analysis (2014) emphasized the popular choice of using animals (specifically pets) as the deceased or dying character. Her analyzed books also show emotions in a more abrupt way (e.g. a parent promptly bursting into tears) and connect supposedly opposing emotions (e.g. experiencing relief after crying), showing more diversity in the emotions one can experience as a consequence of loss. Only one book mentioned the inevitability of death directly: 'At one point in the story Jenny's mother tells her "He is going to die. No one can keep him alive. Not even you"' (Comellas, 2014).

Gutiérrez' analysis (2014) of both fictional and informational / educational books concerning death found that educational books included more explicit references to death than fictional books. Besides that, the deceased / dying characters consisted of human deaths (66%), animals (33%), and personified animals (6%). Interestingly, out of the 109 analyzed books, three also presented the death of a plant, and two books did not portray a specific death but focused more on rituals (e.g. Day of the Dead / *Días de Los Muertos*). Similar to other findings, grandparents are most commonly chosen as the deceased / dying person, and sadness is the most frequently represented emotion.

Besides revealing many ageist tropes, Caldwell's study on dementia (2021) also showed the dominance of the 'still the same person' narrative. Dementia is often associated with a 'loss of self', which these books go against by emphasizing the message that demented people are still the same people we know and love. Caldwell also found the common use of mechanistic metaphors, which allow us to explain dementia (or other illnesses) in terms of the body functioning as a machine. Here, illness is portrayed as the 'broken part' of the machine, which is 'fixed' as soon as the person is back to normal health.

## Under- and misrepresented aspects of death.

Whereas the previous section looked at the most frequently occurring aspects of death in picturebooks, this section turns to the under- and misrepresented aspects of death in picturebooks.

Poling & Hupp (2008) found that 28% of books did not mention any biological aspect of death at all. Irreversibility was not only mentioned the least, but most books actively advocated the opposite idea: death as something that can be reversed. This reversibility of death was mostly reflected in ideas about the afterlife. Not only in stories such as 'Grandpa fell asleep' or 'Grandma went on a journey', but also in ideas that deceased people continue to exist in a

spiritual sense (e.g. their soul) or objects that remind alive people of the deceased. Similar to Poling & Hupp, Prokopová found that books attempt to directly address death as a biological concept, but often end up being self-contradictory. These subcomponents of death (irreversibility, unpredictability, inevitability, and non-functionality) were, if addressed at all, often 'simultaneously reinforced and undermined within the same story' (Prokopová, 2022). Besides this, according to Prokopová (2022), children's literature is incapable of representing the unpredictable factor of death, which also supports the idea that the deceased / dying person is usually older in age. 'Gibson and Zaidman claim that while "old age is a more logical cause of death, losing a loved one in youth or the full bloom of life is more difficult for a child to understand," which indicates that death is presented as something to be expected after a long life, rather than a possibility at any given moment' (Prokopová, 2022).

This underrepresentation of the loss of a younger character was also emphasized by Wiseman (2013), who advocates for better representations of the loss of a sibling in children's literature. Additionally, Wiseman criticizes the lack of concrete and specific descriptions regarding the cause of death, arguing that this kind of 'protection' or omission of details can result in misunderstandings or fears in child readers. Similar to Poling & Hupp and Prokopová, Wiseman found that books lack sufficient biological factors or elements. 'This contrasts with psychological research that demonstrates that the more children understand about biological factors, the less anxiety and fear they feel' (Wiseman, 2013). For Poling & Hupp, this lack of biological aspects raises the question 'whether the endorsement of any form of immortality poses problems for a biological understanding of death in which all biological and psychological functions cease and can never be revitalized' (Poling & Hupp, 2008).

Comellas (2014) is positive about indirect representation and ambiguity or vagueness regarding death, since it is a more 'gentle' way of introducing children to the topic of death. Her book analysis shows the use of many metaphors and moments open to interpretation. For example, causes of death are hardly explicitly mentioned, but the illustrations do show an ambulance driving away, leading to child readers having to interpret themselves what the ambulance indicates. Similarly, Gutiérrez (2014) also found that death is often represented indirectly. She writes: 'Cat Heaven depicts cats perched on clouds and happily engaged in other activities in heaven but does not mention that the cats had died. Similarly, in *A Fish in his Pocket*, the young protagonist inadvertently causes the death of a fish, which is described as not moving but not as dead' (Gutiérrez, 2014).

In summary, despite the many death-related picturebooks that have been published and analyzed over the years, certain elements regarding the direct representation of death continue to be lacking. Hence, this thesis will analyze three different picturebooks that include the death of a sibling or parent, as well as the period both before and after their death, to better analyze how direct or indirect death is represented in picturebooks that include some of the frequently occurring gaps that I and other scholars have identified.

## Methodology.

In order to analyze and understand the different ways in which death is directly or indirectly represented in picturebooks, I adopted a multimodal textual analysis.

'Multimodal analysis includes the analysis of communication in all its forms, but is particularly concerned with texts which contain the interaction and integration of two or more semiotic resources – or 'modes' of communication – in order to achieve the communicative functions of the text' (O'Halloran & Smith, 2012). In other words: in contrast to texts that make use of one mode or semiotic resource (e.g. only writing), a multimodal text includes multiple semiotic resources that create the meaning of a text together. These modes have their own affordances and constraints, which means that meaning-making happens on both an individual and collective level. Most scholars draw on a social semiotic view of multimodality, which considers how socially and culturally constructed these modes are as meaning-making resources. Examples of modes include: image, writing, image-text relation, page-layout, sound, music, gaze, gesture (face, hand, and body), speech, moving image (Jancsary et al, 2016. O'Halloran & Smith, 2012).

Children's literature, with the picturebook in particular, is known for its use of illustrations, which gives way to different kinds of relations and power dynamics between text and image, and changes the way we can understand and read a picturebook. By taking all different modes / semiotic resources into account, multimodal textual analysis will help me understand the different layers of meaning a picturebook can hold. Besides text and image, multimodal textual analysis allows me to focus on other (potential) meaning-making elements in picturebooks, such as: design (e.g. borders, text boxes), typographical features (e.g. color, size, framing), information zones (e.g. where elements are placed in an image), gaze and interpersonal distance (e.g. contact between character and reader), and modality itself (concerning how realistic or lifelike an image is) (Kelly & Kachorsky, 2022). In other words: picturebooks are complex texts that convey a representation of reality by drawing upon many different semiotic resources to create and communicate meaning. Hence, in order to fully understand picture books, a multimodal textual analysis is needed.

For my research, I wanted to add a new perspective and layer of understanding to the academic research that has already been done on the representation of death in picturebooks. I did this through first becoming acquainted with the common patterns in death-related picturebooks as mentioned in academic research, allowing me to compile both a list of frequently occurring and lacking patterns in death-related picturebooks. Based on this, I formulated the specific criteria that the picturebooks I wanted to analyze had to conform to.

Of all the gaps within death-related picturebooks that my theoretical framework mentions, there are two lacking aspects that my research will specifically address. First, the fact that most dying / deceased characters are older in age (such as grandparents) or (anthropomorphized) animals (such as someone's pet) - with old age being a common cause of death - leads to a lack of representations of the loss of young(er) characters (Danielson & Colman, 2023. Wiseman,

2013), or other family members besides grandparents such as a child's parents. Specifically, the death of a young child (protagonist) is notably scarce (Arruda-Colli, 2017). Hence, my first criteria: I looked for picturebooks who depicted a human death (instead of an animal) of a sibling or parent of a young (child) protagonist.

Second, it appears to be the case that (almost) all children's literature focus on the grieving period *after* someone has passed away instead of *prior* to someone's death. This results in a scarcity of books that provide preventive care by describing how children can deal with the possibility or proximity of (someone's or their own) death. Research shows a lack of books where a child character prepares for (their own or someone else's) death (Arruda-Colli, 2017). With most books starting *after* someone has passed away, we not only lack suitable books that parents / teachers can use to facilitate conversations about existential questions with their children / students, but child readers also miss out on stories that can prepare them for (and perhaps make them feel more comfortable with) death (in general). Hence, my second criteria: I looked for picturebooks about death that include *both* the period *prior to* and *after* someone has passed away.

The following three picturebooks will be analyzed: *Benjamin* by Elfi Nijssen and Eline van Lindenhuisen (Ill.) (2009); *The Perfect Shelter* by Clare Helen Welsh and Asa Gilland (Ill.) (2020); and *The Heart and the Bottle* by Oliver Jeffers (2010). To my knowledge, no academic research has been conducted on any of these three books.

*Benjamin* by Elfi Nijssen and Eline van Lindenhuisen (Ill.) (2009) was chosen because it portrays a human family experiencing the sudden loss of a very young character (a newborn baby). Additionally, the story is told through the perspective of a young protagonist (the toddler Robin), who has a sibling-relationship with Benjamin. And lastly, because the book starts *before* Benjamin's death (when Robin's mother is still pregnant), meaning the book includes both the period before and after someone's death.

*The Perfect Shelter* by Clare Helen Welsh and Asa Gilland (Ill.) (2020) was chosen because it portrays a human family experiencing the illness journey of a young character (estimated age: 8-10 years old). Additionally, the story is told through the perspective of a young protagonist (estimated age: 6-8 years old) who has a sibling-relationship with the ill character. And lastly, because the book starts *before* any health diagnosis has taken place and concludes with an open ending, meaning the book includes both the period before and during someone's illness, and leaves room for interpretation regarding the period after her illness has been cured.

*The Heart and the Bottle* by Oliver Jeffers (2010) was chosen because it portrays a human girl experiencing the loss of a parent. The story is told through the perspective of this young protagonist, who, throughout the book, grows from a toddler to a young adolescent (allowing the reader to see how grief can affect a person over a longer period of time). Additionally, the book starts with the girls' father still alive, and ends with her coming to terms with her grieving. This means the book shows both the period before and after someone's death.

Through examining the analysis frameworks of other academic research on picturebooks depicting death, I was able to concretize the specific elements, techniques, and narrative structures I wanted to focus on for my own analysis. In addition, I looked through many picturebooks including death to see whether there were any other elements I deemed interesting and that had not been mentioned in death-related research before. For example, the concepts of 'blind space' and studies on dementia do not directly emerge within death-related research on picturebooks. However, for both, I saw a strong link between these concepts, their findings, and the application of them when it comes to measuring the (in)directness of representation of death in picturebooks.

For my analysis of the three aforementioned picturebooks, I adhered to the following list of aspects to focus on:

1. *The personification of death.*

This category concerns questions regarding how directly or indirectly death is personified or characterized. For example: Is death (concretely) connected to a person or (more metaphorically) reflected in an object? And how specific is the book about the deceased / dying person's age, gender, and relationship with the main protagonist? This category also looks at how concretely someone's illness or the cause of death is explained. Hereby, the choice of words is crucial (e.g. 'has cancer' vs 'is sick'). I am also interested in the physical appearance and activities of the deceased / dying person. For example: regarding illness, does the book show any actions such as coughing or vomiting, or differences in physical appearance - e.g. a wheelchair or headscarf - or location - e.g. a hospital bed. For *The Perfect Shelter* specifically, I will focus on the 'body as machine' metaphor. Lastly, biological functions regarding death will be taken into consideration here as well. Think of the inevitability or universality (death is unavoidable for all life), as well as nonfunctionality (bodily functions cease after death). Here, correct straightforwardness is seen as direct representations (e.g. sentences like 'he's not coming back'), whereas incorrect views on biological functions are seen as indirect (e.g. instilling the idea that a dead person can come back to life, or that death does not occur to young people).

2. *The afterlife and the irreversibility of death.*

This category concerns questions regarding how directly or indirectly ideas and aspects of the afterlife are described or visualized. Ideas of the afterlife can include: ways of conceptualizing heaven (where is heaven and what does it look like), understanding loss (where does someone go after passing away), and the dead portrayed as spirits or reflected in objects (e.g. a feather). This is also where representations regarding nonfunctionality (bodily functions cease after death) and irreversibility (dead things do not come back to life) are analyzed, and to what extent a book endorses the opposite idea (death as reversible, e.g. through spiritual means).

3. *Indirect language and visualization.*

This category focuses on the use of metaphors, euphemisms, and metonyms, and how these are (further) explained or supported by indirect and direct language and visuals. Think of metaphors using nature (e.g. the changing seasons) to reflect the passing of time or the decline

of someone's health. Or how plants (e.g. trees), animals (e.g. butterflies), the weather (e.g. rain versus sunshine), and differences in color-use can represent someone's emotions or grieving stage. This practice of projecting human emotions onto nature, inanimate objects, or animals is also known as 'pathetic fallacy' (Britannica, 2024). Another aspect to focus on is how straightforwardly 'death' or 'dying' is mentioned, or whether a book resorts to euphemisms to soften the pain (e.g. 'moving to a better place'). I understand metaphors as multifaceted, meaning they are layered and not purely 'good' or 'bad'. The common practice in children's literature of representing death in metaphors has both its strengths and weaknesses. The purpose of this study is not to judge the inherent goodness of a metaphor, but to analyze its layers of direct- and indirectness. In general, most metaphorical uses will be seen as indirect representations of death, as they provide a way to suggest or hint at a death-related element, without having to mention the death-related element itself.

#### 4. *Naive or innocent child characters.*

This category concerns questions regarding how the limited knowledge, (mis)understanding, and possibly naive or innocent perspective of a child character influence the directness of representation of death. Narratological devices such as focalization and point of view will be employed here. If a child character misunderstands death, for example through believing they will see a dead character again or that death is something that only happens to old people, they will not only inform the child reader of this 'naive' information, but might also show a different (perhaps less sad) grieving experience. If misunderstandings like these are not clearly explained, the book perpetuates an indirect representation of death as it wrongfully describes death's biological aspects. Note that this category works both ways: a child perspective can be misleading, but also constructive or helpful. For the latter, we can view the child character as the 'teacher' that provides the reader with lessons and insights about the value of life, or a child character who is open about their uncertainty and readiness regarding death. In other words: the limited experience of children can both be direct (e.g. practicing sadness in front of a mirror) and indirect (e.g. misleading perspectives).

#### 5. *Blind spaces and gaps.*

This category will slightly overlap with others, but has a more specific focus on everything we are *not* allowed to see or read about (in full). It concerns aspects that are perhaps hinted at or suggested, but that mostly take place off-screen in that 'blind space'. This means the blind space is connected to indirect representation. For example: a book only showing the moments before and after, with the death event itself taking place 'off-stage'. Any gaps between text and image also come into play here, since these 'blind space' elements can be fully censored in one medium (e.g. illustrations) and not or partially visible in the other (e.g. text). For example: visually, something might take place in a room with a closed door, but, textually, does get described. In a similar fashion, certain emotions might fully take place 'off-screen' or only be represented in one medium, which would allow me to analyze whether (certain) emotions are neglected or deemed as inappropriate to publicly share or show.

6. *The ending and period before and after someone's death.*

This category focuses on how directly or indirectly the ending of the story is, as well as any clear differences between the period before and after someone's death or health diagnosis. How vague, clear, open, or ambivalent is the ending? How much room for interpretation is left or does the ending provide closure (through directness)? And does the ending undermine the biological nature of death (irreversibility, nonfunctionality) or not? (Whereby undermining is seen as indirect representations.) Regarding the difference in periods, I am interested in how directly or indirectly all other (non-dying / alive) characters' experience of death is represented. For example, in the ways it impacts their activities (before, during, and after death), as well as their relationship with the deceased / dying person and other affected characters. The 'still the same person' narrative can also be applied to grieving characters, as it allows me to analyze how (in)directly someone copes with grief, and whether they explicitly mention having learned something from their experience with death. An example of a direct representation here could be explicit changes in activities, moods, or behavior of grieving characters.

My analysis will be carried out per book. For each book, I will first provide a short synopsis before moving onto the analysis. Using the method of multimodal textual analysis, and adhering to the analysis steps as mentioned above, I will create a layered understanding of the different ways in which picturebooks can directly or indirectly represent death.

## Analysis - Chapter 1: Benjamin.

***Benjamin* by Elfi Nijssen and Eline van Lindenhuisen (Ill.) (2009).**

### Synopsis.

In *Benjamin*, we meet the toddler Robin who undertakes all kinds of fun activities with his parents. When his mother gives birth to a boy named Benjamin, everyone is excited. Unfortunately, Benjamin is very sick and passes away shortly after his birth. The book shows how this loss impacts Robin and his parents. When we discover that Robin's mother is pregnant again, things start to look up. After a healthy baby girl named Britt is born, the family resumes their happy life and activities, while never forgetting Benjamin. According to libraries and bookstores, the target audience is 4 to 6 year olds (Bibliotheek, 2024. Bol, 2024. Amazon, 2024).

### The personification of death.

Death is clearly connected to the newborn Benjamin who is described as Robin's 'babybroertje'<sup>1</sup> (p.4), which makes his gender and relationship with the main protagonist (Robin) clear. No specific age is mentioned, but since the illustrations show a newborn baby still in his crib with people coming on maternity visits, there are explicit indications of Benjamin being very young. Hence, the picturebook provides a direct link between death and Benjamin. This connection is further supported by the authors, who included personal texts on the layout pages. Nijssen writes: 'Lieve schat, we houden van je, van hier tot aan de sterretjes en helemaal terug. Je bent voor eeuwig onze Benjamin. Dank je wel!'<sup>2</sup> Nijssen has unfortunately experienced a stillborn herself, which was one of her main motivations to write this picturebook (De Standaard, 2004). Another personal text includes a midwife's experience with stillbirths and sick newborns, where she mentions the importance of adequately supporting grieving parents and siblings. A last personal text is seen at the end of the book, where the page is filled with stars including names of newborn babies who have passed away (see figure 1). This text comes from a self-help group for parents who have lost a baby called *Met Lege Handen*<sup>3</sup>. They write: 'Benjamin is niet het enige sterretje dat aan de hemel staat. Er fonkelen nog veel meer lichtjes in het donker. Al deze namen vormen een eerbetoon aan overleden kindjes, elk met hun eigen verhaal.'<sup>4</sup> These personal texts show a connection between reality and this fictional story, which, to those reading these personal notes, possibly increases the plausibility and directness of this text.

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<sup>1</sup> baby brother

<sup>2</sup> Dear darling, we love you, from here to the stars and all the way back. You are forever our Benjamin. Thank you!

<sup>3</sup> With Empty Hands

<sup>4</sup> Benjamin is not the only star in the sky. There are many more lights twinkling in the dark. All these names are a tribute to deceased children, each with their own story.



Figure 1. Benjamin lay-out page.

Quickly after his birth, the reader is told that Benjamin 'is erg ziek'<sup>5</sup> (p.5). This cause of death is vague and indirect, as the reader is never informed about specifics of this sickness such as a clear diagnosis, symptoms, or whether Benjamin was born with the illness or not. We can only assume that it was a serious illness (*erg* = very), and that the doctor saw no reason to try any medications, as the book does not mention anything regarding treatment options. Any signs of illness cannot be found in the illustration of Benjamin himself either: Benjamin is lying happy and satisfied in his crib, with a smile on his face and no signs of medical devices (such as a drip or a heart rate monitor). The only sign of illness in the illustrations is the partial appearance of a doctor. The doctor is acknowledged in the text as well: 'De dokter zegt dat Benjamin dood is.'<sup>6</sup> (p.6). Here, we see a direct use of the 'd-word' (death), which means the book does not omit this word or resort to other euphemisms. This death is hinted at earlier, when the text mentions: 'Benjamin is erg ziek. Hij wordt nooit meer beter.'<sup>7</sup> (p.5) Important to mention here, is that once the new baby is born towards the end of the book, the text clearly uses the opposite words than they did for Benjamin's experience by saying 'Britt is gezond. Ze leeft.'<sup>8</sup> (p.20). In other words: the book is direct about Benjamin passing away due to sickness, but - both in text and illustrations - there is a lack of other direct details regarding his illness or death. The reader is left with many questions about Benjamin's health, which are never explained throughout the rest of the book.

<sup>5</sup> is very sick

<sup>6</sup> The doctor says that Benjamin is dead.

<sup>7</sup> Benjamin is very sick. He'll never get better.

<sup>8</sup> Britt is healthy. She lives.

The book never explicitly mentions universality (e.g. through saying that death could happen to anyone). However, by showing the death of an infant, the book does implicitly go against the common trope in picturebooks of only older (senior) characters passing away. By including Robin's grandparents, the book directly shows old(er) characters still being alive whilst Benjamin is not. Inevitability can be found in the sentence: 'Benjamin is erg ziek. Hij wordt nooit meer beter.'<sup>9</sup> (p.5), since it underscores the unalterable health condition of Benjamin. Although not directly connected to universality, I think that the inevitability of death can also be found in how 'suddenly' someone passes away. There is a lack of control and rapidness associated with Benjamin's short life. We read about Benjamin being very sick and passing away all in the same spread, which comes directly after the spread he is born. Consequently, the book shows friction between happiness and sadness. After Benjamin's birth, the mother's bedroom is decorated with birthday flags, there is cake, and people bring gifts. But then after Benjamin's death, some of these celebratory items are still visible, as well as mentioned in the text. For example: 'Op de tafel staat een groot boeket bloemen. Maar niemand viert feest.'<sup>10</sup> (p.7) Hence, through certain rituals (and their connected objects such as gifts, flowers, or flags), the reader sees celebrations and grieving happening at the same time, which supports the idea that his death was sudden. Thus, although the book never directly represents ideas about inevitability or universality, there are some implicit ideas and take-aways shining through in both the language used and the visual representations of death.

### The afterlife and the irreversibility of death.

The book strongly enforces the idea that Benjamin has an afterlife as a star in the sky. Robin's mother starts this idea: 'Volgens mama reist hij naar de sterren. Daar is hij dicht bij de maan.'<sup>11</sup> (p.6). This implies that Benjamin, through losing his human body and turning into a star 'dat het mooiste schittert'<sup>12</sup> (p.24), is able to continue his life after death. On the last page, we also learn that Benjamin watches over the house like a guard ('Benjamin waakt nu over het huis'). In other words: Benjamin not just continues to exist, but actively carries out activities as a star. This not only undermines the idea of nonfunctionality of bodily functions after death, but it can also lead to confusion in children learning about death and possibly raise questions such as why a deceased person would not return from their travels (Speece & Brent, 1984. Slaughter, 2007).

Visually, we do not see Benjamin becoming a star or traveling to the moon. We do see, however, the yellow star reappearing throughout the entire book. It starts with the cover, where Robin waves at a bright star in the sky (see figure 2). Additionally, the title of the book has the same bright yellow color as this star, which is likely another connection between Benjamin and the star. Throughout the book, multiple illustrations clearly include the star. This means that, albeit in a metaphorical sense, Benjamin continues to appear as a recognizable character throughout the story. It also shows how the book plays with the directness of irreversibility. On the one hand, the book is straightforward in addressing the irreversible nature of death. The text

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<sup>9</sup> Benjamin is very sick. He'll never get better.

<sup>10</sup> On the table stands a large bouquet of flowers. But nobody is celebrating.

<sup>11</sup> According to my mother, he travels to the stars. There, he is close to the moon.

<sup>12</sup> that is shining the brightest

mentions: 'Benjamin komt nooit meer terug.'<sup>13</sup> (p.7). On the other hand, his (metaphorical) continuation of life as a star contradicts this idea and makes it seem like death is partly reversible. This fits with Poling & Hupp's (2008) finding that most children's literature actively advocates the opposite idea of irreversibility. That is, death as something that can be reversed, or through representing deceased people as continuing to exist in a more spiritual sense (such as a star in the sky). Analyses like these show the thin line between metaphors and reality, and to what extent a metaphor can (negatively or positively) influence a child reader's perception of reality. In this case, the star metaphor shows a clear continuation of life, hence goes against biological factors of death such as irreversibility and nonfunctionality. In the third book of this analysis, *The Heart and the Bottle* (by Oliver Jeffers), we will see a different kind of memorialization and continuation of life after death that is more direct and less undermining than this star metaphor, since it is more about keeping someone's *memory* alive instead of their actual *body*.

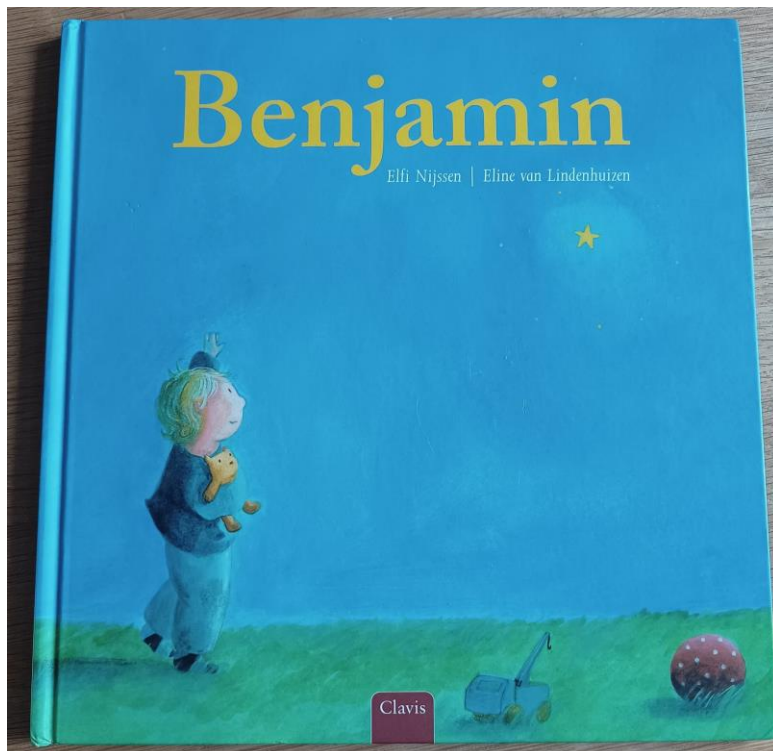


Figure 2. *Benjamin* cover.

As a consequence of the star afterlife metaphor, multiple rituals or actions in the book are connected to the belief of Benjamin being a star. For example, on a few occasions, Robin tries to find a way to reach the sky (e.g. through a ladder, a space rocket, or by tying a drawing to a balloon). Robin also blows a kiss to the star every night: 'Elke avond zegt Robin welterusten tegen de maan. En hij gooit een handkusje naar het sterretje dat het mooiste schittert.'<sup>14</sup> (p.24) Although the book never explicitly mentions 'heaven', these activities do show an emphasis on

<sup>13</sup> Benjamin will never come back.

<sup>14</sup> Every night, Robin says goodnight to the moon. And he blows a kiss to the star that shines the brightest.

the sky 'above us' as the place where Benjamin went after his death, and that communication with deceased people can be done through looking at, talking to, or gesturing to the sky. On the one hand, these rituals and activities support the idea that we can act upon the belief that death is (partly) reversible. On the other hand, they might present a realistic struggle of children to accept death as something that is final.

### Indirect language and visualization.

We have already established the biggest metaphor: Benjamin becoming a star in the sky. We know this metaphor is not just carried throughout the story, but also grounded in reality through the addition of personal stories (from the author and the self-help group) who refer back to the stars. ('Benjamin is niet het enige sterretje dat aan de hemel staat. Er fonkelen nog veel meer lichtjes in het donker.'<sup>15</sup> (lay-out page)) This metaphor is an indirect way - both in text and illustrations - to depict and deal with the death of Benjamin.



Figure 3. Benjamin, stuffed animals and toys.

Other indirect visualization is seen in the facial expressions of Robin's toys and stuffed animals, who are given a 'simple' smiley face. As McCloud mentioned (1993), a simple 'smiley' face is enough to convey to the reader that these stuffed animals and toys have a more human-like character and are capable of expressing emotions. At Benjamin's birth, we see a couple of anthropomorphized stuffed animals (e.g. teddybear, rabbit, polar bear) as well as toys (e.g. a toy car) who show a smile on their face and happily sit up straight (see figure 3.) However, from the moment of Benjamin's death, the smiles on these stuffed animals and toys disappear, and their posture becomes more gloomy (bend back, head faced down, etc). In fact, most toys

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<sup>15</sup> Benjamin is not the only star in the sky. There are many more lights twinkling in the dark.

actually lose their mouth after Benjamin's death, leaving them more 'emotionless', as it becomes harder to identify their emotions based on three dots (two for eyes, one for nose) only. This lack of emotions fits with someone going through grief, as grieving can result in people shutting off and building a shelter around themselves to no longer feel all their emotions. Also noteworthy are the changes of position: at Benjamin's birth, the toys and animals take a prominent position on the page. Throughout the rest of the book, they move more towards the background, or cannot sit up straight on their own but need to be carried by Robin or sadly hang against toy boxes to stay up straight. Using stuffed animals and toys is an indirect way to express emotions and moods.

### Naive or innocent child characters.

The star afterlife metaphor that Robin is told by his mother, is something he not only instantly believes in, but also continues to believe in for the entire book. Consequently, Robin thinks that Benjamin still lives, and that he can communicate or visit him through building something that will help him reach the sky. Robin undertakes multiple steps to try to achieve this. 'Samen met opa wil Robin een ladder bouwen'<sup>16</sup> (p.11), and: 'Misschien kan Robin een ruimteraket bouwen'<sup>17</sup> (p.12). Each time, the reader is informed of the reason behind Robin's actions, showing that Robin thinks it will bring him closer to his deceased baby brother. The ladder has to be 'zo lang (...) dat hij hoog boven de daken komt. Dan kan hij misschien naar Benjamin klauteren.'<sup>18</sup> (p.11). And the space rocket is meant to help Robin fly to the moon, 'En dan kan hij een kusje geven aan Benjamin'<sup>19</sup> (p.12).

These ideas (the ladder, the space rocket) are never reflected in the illustrations. Perhaps because the adult characters let Robin know that his ideas are not possible. When asking his grandfather for help with the ladder, we read: 'Opa kijkt sip. Hij kan geen ladder maken die lang genoeg is.'<sup>20</sup> (p.11) Similarly, when Robin shares his space rocket idea with his mother, we read: 'Maar mama zegt dat dat niet kan. Ze huilt.'<sup>21</sup> (p.12). Two interesting observations here. First: whereas Robin's mother is the one who initially makes up the star metaphor, she later on rejects Robin's idea that is fully based on her own metaphor. Hence, she is contradictory, perhaps because she is confronted with the limitations of her own metaphor but does not want to tell Robin the truth. Second: both the mother and grandfather reject Robin's ideas, but their explanations for rejection are either lacking (the mother simply says it is not possible, but not *why*) or continue to support the metaphor (the grandfather does not say the ladder is an impossible idea, simply that *he* would not be able to create a ladder that is long enough). Connected to this, we read how the teacher also goes along with grandfather's explanation: 'De juf begrijpt hem. Ze zegt dat er geen ladder lang genoeg is. Je zou ook te moe worden van al

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<sup>16</sup> Together with grandpa, Robin wants to build a ladder.

<sup>17</sup> Perhaps Robin can build a space rocket.

<sup>18</sup> so long that it will reach high above the roofs. Then, he [Robin] can perhaps climb to Benjamin.

<sup>19</sup> And then he [Robin] can give a kiss to Benjamin.

<sup>20</sup> Grandpa looks sad. He cannot make a ladder that is long enough.

<sup>21</sup> But his mother says that is not possible. She cries.

die trappen.<sup>22</sup> (p.13). Instead, the teacher decides to make a drawing with Robin 'met kleine sterretjes en een grote maan'<sup>23</sup> (p.13), which will then be attached to a red balloon that will go up in the sky, on its way to Benjamin. This shows the influence adult characters have when it comes to afterlife metaphors, as they both hold the power to instill and uphold a child's belief. Robin's naive belief is detrimental to keeping this metaphor - and thus indirect representation of Benjamin and afterlife - alive. Additionally, his belief rejects biological factors of death such as irreversibility and nonfunctionality. This means that both the child and adult characters can enhance indirect representations of death.

Robin's strong belief in the star metaphor allows him to be less sad and more optimistic about continuing his life *with* Benjamin. The strong connection he continues to feel, means that, to Robin, Benjamin is never really gone, which impacts the way he grieves in comparison to his parents. Throughout the book, we see his mother cry or his parents looking sad (while also, similarly to the toys and (stuffed) animals, losing their mouths to look more 'emotionless'). The only moment Robin appears to be sad is when we see him getting hugged by his grandmother, but this is quickly overshadowed by his ladder and space rocket ideas. Robin's lack of sadness leads to a more optimistic and/or adventurous plot that is based on Robin's belief in an indirect representation of death.

This does not mean, however, that Robin is ignorant of his parents' sadness. In fact, he seems to be very aware of his parents' emotions. After Benjamin's death, Robin tries to console his sad mother: 'Mama staart voor zich uit en huilt. Robin knuffelt haar om haar te troosten. Het helpt niet echt.'<sup>24</sup> (p.7). Besides this, Robin's wish he attached to the balloon reads: 'Robin wil dat mama en papa weer gelukkig zijn'<sup>25</sup> (p.14), showing a correct reading of his parents' current mood. Additionally, Robin is aware of changes in the atmosphere at home and his interaction with his parents. For example, it is only at aunt Sandra's place that Robin can have fun again ('Dan kan Robin weer rollebollen en knutselkoken.'<sup>26</sup> (p.15)), or that he sometimes forgets how much he misses Benjamin ('Bij tante Sandra vergeet hij soms dat hij zijn broertje mist.'<sup>27</sup> (p.15)). Or when the new baby has been born, Robin notices that 'Mama kan opnieuw knuffelen. En kusjes geven.'<sup>28</sup> (p.21), showing that Robin clearly felt a change in his mother after Benjamin's death, but now sees the 'old' habits or mannerisms of his mother returning again. This also means that the reader, apart from some illustrations (e.g. where we see the mother cry), has to rely on indirect interpretations of the parents' sadness, since it is through Robin's eyes that we receive most information on his parents' moods.

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<sup>22</sup> The teacher understands him. She says that there is no ladder long enough. You would also become tired of all those stair steps.

<sup>23</sup> with little stars and a big moon

<sup>24</sup> His mother stares in front of her and cries. Robin tries to hug her to console her. It does not really work.

<sup>25</sup> Robin wants his mother and father to be happy again.

<sup>26</sup> knows fun games. There, Robin can roll around and bake again.

<sup>27</sup> With aunt Sandra, he sometimes forgets that he misses his little brother.

<sup>28</sup> His mother can hug again. And give kisses.

## Blind spaces and gaps.

The biggest blind space is the death of Benjamin taking place off-stage. We are not presented with a deceased body, nor do we attend a funeral or bury the body. Instead, we see a spread (see figure 4) where Robin stands on the threshold of a partially open door, looking into a room of which the readers only see the edge of his mother's bed, a partial white doctor's coat, and a doctor's bag with a stethoscope hanging out. There are suggestions, but never all-encapsulating answers. For example, the text mentions that 'Benjamin is erg ziek'<sup>29</sup> (p.5), and we assume that the white coat and stethoscope belong to a doctor. However, as established before, we never learn what sickness Benjamin specifically had, concrete symptoms, or treatment options. After mentioning that Benjamin will never get better, we read: 'Mama en papa kijken triest. En oma en opa fluisteren met elkaar.'<sup>30</sup> (p.5) This is all indirect, as well as indicating secretiveness: the whispering likely indicates that they are discussing a sensitive topic that is not suitable for children's ears.



Figure 4. Benjamin, blind space.

Concerning gaps between text and image, the book mostly shows a complementary relationship (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2001). The 'blind space' spread discussed above, for example, needs the

<sup>29</sup> Benjamin is very sick.

<sup>30</sup> His mother and father look sad. And his grandmother and grandfather whisper to each other.

text to provide (partial) answers, since the illustrations only give suggestions. Another common technique in *Benjamin* is that the illustrations will pick out one or two elements of the text to visualize, hence expanding or enhancing the text (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2001). For example, when the text mentions that Robin's dad teaches him how to play soccer, ride a bike, be a boxer or roll around, the illustrations only show the last activity. In these cases, the illustrations do not complement the text by filling in the gaps, but simply add another dimension through selecting elements or creating a fitting scene. In general, the text often provides more directness than the images do. This impacts the 'blind spaces' in the text in the sense that gaps or off-screen elements from the text are never directly visualized in the illustrations. In other words: illustrations do not resolve but uphold the indirect (textual) representation throughout the book. This is also seen in the more symmetrical relationship of the star metaphor, as the illustrations visualize Benjamin as a yellow star in the sky, hence showing a coherence with the indirect ideas that the text presents. The only small contradiction between text and image is when the text mentions that Robin's mother has to cry, whereas the illustrations do not show any tears. Since this is the spread where the parents lack a mouth and look 'emotionless', the text might help a child reader to interpret the parents' facial expressions.

### The ending and period before and after someone's death.

*Benjamin* shows a restoration narrative, where we start with a happy family, who then experience a loss which makes them sad, to eventually return to happiness once the new baby is born. This happy - sad - happy plot can be seen in both emotions and activities. Regarding emotions: when Benjamin is born, we read: 'Het is feest en iedereen is blij.'<sup>31</sup> (p.4). After Benjamin has passed away, we read: 'Mama en papa kijken triest.'<sup>32</sup> (p.5). And when the mother is pregnant again, we read: 'Mama straalt weer. En papa fluit weer.'<sup>33</sup> (p.17). Note how the text says 'again', suggesting a return of the way things were before. And regarding activities: the book starts with Robin sharing all the fun things he does with his parents, to later on mention he can only do them with his aunt Sandra nowadays, and then end with: 'Het huis is weer warm. Mama kan opnieuw knuffelen. En kusjes geven. [...] Papa speelt opnieuw voetbal. Hij gaat ook weer fietsen.'<sup>34</sup> (p.21/22). Thus, there is a clear return of events, albeit modified (for example, Robin's baking with his mother has turned to preparing feeding bottles together for Britt). These changes are direct representations of the impact someone's death can have. They also fit within the 'still the same person narrative', as Robin interprets his parents' happiness by looking at the return of previous emotions and activities.

Given that Robin is young and dependent upon his parents, his life is influenced by his parents' coping mechanisms. The fact that Robin's life kind of stands still, is due to his parents temporarily no longer undertaking all those fun activities with him. Fortunately for Robin, his

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<sup>31</sup> It is a party and everyone is happy.

<sup>32</sup> His mother and father look sad.

<sup>33</sup> His mother 'shines' again [meaning she radiates happiness]. And his father whistles again [indicating a happy whistle].

<sup>34</sup> The house is warm again [referring to the communal mood]. His mother can hug again. And give kisses. [...] Dad plays soccer again. And he is also biking again.

grandparents, aunt and teacher support him where possible. His grandfather repairs his toys, something his father used to do. His teacher finds a solution for communicating with Benjamin, something his mother simply said was not possible. And his aunt allows him to have fun and play games again. This is a direct representation, since it is common for grieving children to not always get the support they need from their parents, as those parents are undergoing their own grieving process. It also fits with Gibson's (1992) research which indicated that bereavement affects the whole family system, which can result in parents becoming unavailable to their children. Consequently, a child's support system often consists of their wider social environment, which *Benjamin* shows by including grandparents, an aunt, and the teacher.

Since the book follows Robin's perspective, all other characters' emotions are focalized through Robin's eyes. Besides the mother who occasionally cries, the grandparents, aunt and teacher are not explicit in their emotions. Instead of viewing this as a negligence or suppression of emotions, it likely serves the Robin-oriented plot. This does not justify how indirect and lacking these emotions are, but it does explain *how* Robin experiences other people's emotions. To him, his grandfather perhaps has less time to be sad, as he is busy repairing Robin's toys and will hopefully help him build a ladder. The text does mention somewhere 'ledereen mist Benjamin'<sup>35</sup> (p.7), but this is generic and not specifically reflected in all characters.

The book ends with Robin saying goodnight to the moon and blowing a kiss to a star in the sky that represents Benjamin. This ending provides a hopeful closure since it makes clear to the reader that Benjamin has died but lives on as a star, meaning Robin and Benjamin will stay connected. This is also emphasized through the text, which says: 'Elke avond zegt Robin welterusten tegen de maan.'<sup>36</sup> (p.24). Besides this, the 'restoration' plot means that Robin's life is seemingly 'back to normal' since Britt's birth. This can be reassuring for readers, as well as feel like a good, optimistic point in the story to finish. This fits with Caldwell's (2021) finding that most death or illness-related children's literature focus on providing an optimistic, well-rounded ending. The ending is built upon the indirect metaphor regarding Benjamin's afterlife, which on the one hand further supports beliefs that go against biological factors of death, but on the other hand could promote a more therapeutic or spiritual approach in bibliotherapy.

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<sup>35</sup> Everyone misses Benjamin.

<sup>36</sup> Every night, Robin says goodnight to the moon.

## Analysis - Chapter 2: The Perfect Shelter.

***The Perfect Shelter* by Clare Helen Welsh and Asa Gilland (Ill.) (2020).**

### Synopsis.

In *The Perfect Shelter*, we meet two sisters who love to build shelters in the woods together. At first, everything is perfect. Then, the older sister becomes sick (cancer is implied, but never specified). Through the younger sister's perspective, we experience how a hospitalized sister impacts the family. Slowly but surely, the older sister becomes stronger and whilst still in recovery, the sisters make plans to one day go back to the woods to build a perfect shelter. Bookstores vary in their target audience, some say this book is meant for 3 to 6 year olds (Amazon, 2024), whilst others say this book is appropriate for 4 to 8 year olds (Letterbox Library, 2024).

### The personification of death.

The book connects the illness directly to the older sister. No specific age is given, but the illustrations do show a clear height difference between the two sisters indicating who is older. The gender and relationship with the main protagonist (younger sister) are hence also clear: female and siblings. Similar to *Benjamin*, *The Perfect Shelter* handles illness on two levels: in the story itself and as reality-grounded quotes in the layout pages. The author (Welsh) writes: 'Dedicated to the memory of Shane Bownes. And to all those giving me courage on my journey with cancer.' Welsh' mention is directly about her own experience with breast cancer, as well as the loss of her uncle who suddenly passed away from a brain tumor (Edwards, 2020). Thus, the story in the book relates to her own knowledge of and experience with cancer (recovery). This specific mention of cancer in the layout pages is interesting, since the story itself never chooses 'cancer' as a word to describe the sister's illness. The book's blurb mentions 'they told me my sister was sick', without specifying more. And just below, we see 'A beautiful, powerful and uplifting story, exploring the complicated emotions we feel when someone we love has a serious illness.' The use of 'serious' indicates that the illness as depicted in the book is likely more than a common fever, but still, there is ample room for own interpretation. In other words: the book is indirect about the specific type of sickness. In an interview, Welsh said the following about the book: 'The Perfect Shelter sets out to unravel the difficult emotions we face when a loved one is diagnosed with a serious illness, such as cancer. It is not a book about loss, but rather living with life's uncertainty. I hope that it brings love and support to others going through difficult times.' (Edwards, 2020). This shows that cancer is indeed the most implied illness, but since the author wanted to focus on providing more general support to people dealing with the uncertainty of any illness, it is plausible she intentionally kept the illness more vague and indirect, hence appealing to a broader audience.

The book shows many indicators that the older sister is sick. Textually, we see a slow increase of sickness. Initially, we read that the sister is 'a bit tired' (p.5). Next, the little sister tells us 'then they told me my sister was sick' (p.9), showing a concrete use of 'sick' without further explanations. Later on, we learn that, as the younger sister is at home, her older sister 'was with

the doctors' (p.11) and 'having an operation' (p.11). During a hospital scene, the text specifically mentions the location ('In the hospital, ...' (p.13)). And later on, we get descriptions from the sister's health journey such as her getting 'stronger and brighter' (p.18). These sentences show both a direct- and indirectness. The directness is found in the mentioning of words like 'doctors', 'operation' and 'hospital', clearly indicating that the sister is sick. The indirectness is found in the lack of specificity or explanation behind these words: which operations and what kind of doctors? Since we also, for example, do not get to see the operations taking place in the illustrations, I would argue this is an indirect way to describe the sister's treatment. Of course, we should take into account that the focalizing character (the younger sister) might not know all the details, and if so, possibly because they are not considered 'child-appropriate' knowledge.

Visually, we start by seeing the sisters build a shelter in the forest. Once the older sister gets 'just a bit tired' (p.5), we see a change in emotions on all characters' faces (from happy to worried (parents), tired (older sister), and confused or shocked (younger sister), as well as a clear shift in positions: first, the parents were sitting next to a tree as their daughters ran around, now, the older sister sits between her parents (underneath a blanket, getting hugged by her father) while the younger sister sits alone in their shelter. Here, we see a clear separation of the two sisters, as well as the support from the parents towards the older sister specifically. On the spread where we are told 'my sister was sick' (p.9), everyone sits on the couch, looking worried or sad (the mother's face shows a tear). Interestingly, the sisters have sort of swapped positions here, as in this case, it is the younger sister (receiving the bad news) that is seated on the father's lap and getting hugged by her older sister. Additionally, a clear indicator of the sister's illness can be found in the change of location, as the older sister, once admitted to hospital, never leaves the hospital for the rest of the book. Hence, visually, there are some more direct changes that could indicate the sister's sickness and its impact on the family.

Other clear visualizations of the illness can be seen in the hospital spreads, such as the sister's hospital room with her bed and a doctor holding notes. We also see hospital equipment in the background such as a drip and heart-rate monitor. Equipment like this is a direct representation, however, interestingly, there is a clear contrast in drawing style between the equipment and the rest of the illustrations (see figure 5). Whereas the equipment is only drawn by its outline, not in color, and kind of fading away in the background, the rest of the illustration is in full color and detail. Hence, the book does try to lead the focus away from the equipment and more towards the rest of the spread.



Figure 5. *The Perfect Shelter*, hospital scene.

Another important visualization of illness is the physical appearance of the sister herself. The older sister often looks tired (low eyebrows, small eyes) or sad (frowning lips). We never see her perform actions such as coughing, vomiting or taking her medications, neither do we get to see the actual treatment or operations taking place. If we were to compare this with Caldwell's study (2021) on dementia, we see a lack of the 'body-as-machine' metaphor, where a sick body is viewed as a machine of which certain parts need fixing. The only physical change is that, towards the end, the sister suddenly wears a sort of bonnet that probably hides her hair loss (due to chemotherapy). Thus, regarding physical appearance elements or hospital visualizations, the book is selective in what they show directly. The bonnet is a direct representation of illness, but the book lacks (potentially shocking) direct visualizations or mentions of medication or other side-effects of cancer treatment. The hospital equipment is also directly shown (albeit more in the background), but in a static manner: as if purely for decorative purposes, as it only hangs in the background and we never get to see it used. Hence, there is directness, but these 'direct terms' are more suggestive than actually specified or explained.

The lack of direct mentions of any biological factors of death is understandable, since the older sister never passes away. Regarding inevitability or universality of illness, we see that, similar to *Benjamin*, selecting a child character to become ill gives more of an implicit message that young people can experience cancer as well. Besides this, although less sudden than *Benjamin* given that there is a slow build up in *The Perfect Shelter*, there is a quick turn of events when the older

sister is suddenly too tired to participate in building the shelter. In this sense, the book does show how cancer can suddenly appear and disrupt the 'normalcy' in someone's life. Concerning nonfunctionality, we see a clear decrease in energy levels, which impacts the kinds of activities she can undertake. Besides this, the hospital equipment indicates that her body is sick and undergoing treatment. Regarding irreversibility, the book does not provide full closure, as it ends with the sister getting stronger but not fully healed yet. Hence, there is the hope for improvement (and thus a return of health), but that is never directly mentioned.

### The afterlife and the irreversibility of death.

Due to the story being told from the younger sister's perspective, we do not get an insight into the older sister's thoughts, emotions and experience, nor the impact her illness has on her future perspective (which is where ideas about the afterlife could also come up). Different to *Benjamin*, where the story was also told through a sibling, the sister in *The Perfect Shelter* never dies and thus could have shared more of her own thoughts. Given that this is such an underrepresented topic and age group, it is great to see a book representing a young character experiencing illness at all. At the same time, this finding also fits with the earlier-mentioned research that picturebooks that portray children living with a life-limiting illness, rarely provide insight into how that child prepares for their own death (Arruda-Colli, 2017). Although not necessarily a consequence, this does often result in a lack of insights from the sick or about-to-decease child character, resulting in more indirect representations as we experience the sister's sickness through the eyes of the younger sister.

### Indirect language and visualization.

*The Perfect Shelter* is full of indirect visualization. The book uses the shelter, the weather, the animals and toys, and the environment to further express the emotions of the younger sister and the illness journey of the older sister (which indirectly also expresses the passing of time).

The 'shelter' in the book carries a double meaning: a physical shelter for the sisters to build and play in, and a metaphorical shelter for the sisters as a form of protection and support as they undergo this difficult journey. To the sisters, their shelters were their safe space, but now that they can no longer build them together, that secure place is gone. Similarly, when someone is sick, people can experience insecure times. In the book, the stability of the physical shelter corresponds with the strength of the older sister: whenever there is a setback in the sister's health, the shelter breaks off or fully collapses. For example, the shelter breaks right after we are being told the older sister is sick, and then collapses again immediately after a hospital scene. At first, the younger sister always repairs the shelter, but after a while she stops trying to fix the shelter and tells us: 'I didn't even care. I just wanted my sister to be better.' (p.15) Towards the end, when the older sister starts feeling stronger and brighter, the sisters successfully build a shelter in the hospital room with blankets and pillows. This 'adapted' shelter once again fits with the sister's health journey, as we see how the sister is strong enough to build the shelter, yet not fully back to health to make one in the woods, so they compromise and build one inside the hospital. Despite the fact that the illness is specifically located in the older

sister, this shelter visualization shows another, more indirect way to let the reader know how the illness journey is going.



Figure 6. *The Perfect Shelter*, river of rain.

Using nature in metaphorical ways fits with both Prokopová's (2022) and Wiseman's (2013) findings that connections between death or illness and nature often emerged, mostly to indicate the passing of time, someone's illness developments, or grieving emotions. Whereas, in *The Perfect Shelter*, the shelter mostly represents the older sister's health journey, the weather is more of an indirect visualization of the younger sister's emotions. At the beginning of the story, when the sisters play in the forest, there is a clear sky and lots of yellow colors to indicate sunshine. The text emphasizes this sunshine and their happiness by saying: 'It was the perfect weather' (p.1) and the family was enjoying their 'perfect day' (p.1). The night after the older sister starts becoming tired for the first time, 'a wild wind blew. HOOOOWOOOOO!' (p.6) The illustrations show a cloud blowing a hard wind and in the background we see a dark night full of stars. Fittingly, this spread shows the younger sister feeling confused, sad, and sitting alone in her shelter. On the next spread, we read: 'But the wind was no match for us' (p.7), so the sisters decide to repair the shelter together. 'We sang as we worked and we worked as we sang: it's the perfect, perfect shelter!' (p.8) The sisters seem happy again, which the weather reflects by the wind settling down. After being told her sister is sick, the younger sister's shock, worries and sadness are reflected in the weather again: 'That night a river of rain fell from the sky. RUSH, RUSH, ROAR.' (p.10) Figure 6 shows a strong resemblance between the raindrops that are visualized for the weather and the tears of sadness the younger sister must experience. A little

later, in the hospital, we meet an anxious younger sister full of questions: 'In the hospital I felt cross, and sad, and frightened, all at the same time. 'How did it get there? Why can't she come home? Why MY sister?'" (p.13) She is experiencing many emotions, which is limiting her capacity to listen to the doctor's answers, and simultaneously visualized in a thunderstorm: 'I tried my best to listen, but I saw a bright light. FLASH! I heard a loud sound. CRACK!'" (p.13/14) The spread shows a dark sky and thunder behind the hospital's window. By the time 'The storm eased. Snow settled.' (p.17), the older sister is becoming 'stronger and brighter' (p.18), which likely calms the younger sister's emotions. Obviously, the shelter and the weather are connected to each other, since the shelter often breaks after bad weather (such as a wild wind, a river of rain, a thunderstorm). This makes sense, since the younger sister's emotions are also connected to the older sister's health journey. Either way, both the weather and shelter serve as metaphors to indirectly provide more information to the reader.

Other metaphorical elements include the animals and toys who are, similar to *Benjamin*, slightly anthropomorphized. On the cover, we see a stuffed bunny and camel toy smiling (just as the sisters are), with the bunny's ears standing straight up. After being told the sister is sick, the bunny's ears drop, and his head is tilted downwards. Additionally, the bunny is seated on the younger sister's lap, as if he needs to be comforted as well. In the hospital, when the younger sister fires off all her questions, the rabbit is once again on the sister's lap, holding up one ear, as if listening along to the questions and answers. And once the sister becomes stronger and brighter, the bunny starts sitting up straighter, he seems cheerful, and has both ears up in the sky again. These anthropomorphized illustrations signal the emotional tone for the reader.

Lastly, the reader also (in)directly receives information from the changing locations, such as the forest and hospital. On the one hand, one could argue this is a direct visualization as we directly see the locations change on the spreads. At the same time, the book does not further explain the difference in locations, or show important direct representation in those locations. (Such as operations taking place in the hospital). There are two reasons the environment is important to consider in the analysis. First, because the older sister, once diagnosed with cancer, remains in the hospital. This shows a clear shift from the woods and her home to the hospital, as well as a clear difference between the older and younger sister (since the youngest is free to move in and out of the hospital, whereas the oldest is not. According to Gibbons (1992), this would be a good thing, since research shows that siblings can experience great distress when not allowed to visit their ill sibling in the hospital). Second, because the book starts by creating a happy association with the woods, and then builds on this almost nostalgic feeling for the rest of the story. The only thing the younger sister wants is for her older sister to get better, which she connects to being able to build shelters together in the woods again. Additionally, the younger sister loses interest in the woods as long as her older sister is not there to accompany her. Hence, the different locations hold different connotations, which can possibly be picked up by the reader, thus providing another indirect layer to the story.

## Naive or innocent child characters.

Since the youngest sister tells the story in the past tense, there is a certain omniscience involved in her perspective, as she already knows how certain things went. The story also starts with: 'At first nobody knew' (p.1), implying she looks back at a time prior to her current knowledge about her sister's illness. This retrospective point of view means she can be more selective in her storytelling. For example, after her sister has overcome her initial tiredness, we read: 'But something still wasn't right.' (p.9) Thus, the younger sister has a hunch, but does not share where that hunch comes from or what it might lead to. Throughout the book, there are also multiple moments where we notice the younger sister has already reflected on certain events. For example, when her parents tell her 'Your sister's just a bit tired' (p.5), she informs the reader that she knows this is not the whole truth. We read: 'Mum and dad didn't want me to worry' (p.5), which is likely something she only realized afterwards, when the 'real truth' came out about her sister's illness. This retrospective manner where the story is influenced by the younger sister's acquired answers to certain questions, leads to a less innocent or naive, and a more mature perspective. She can perfectly see through adults' lies and correctly explain adult behavior (as if she is one of them). The mix of emotions ('I felt cross, and sad, and frightened' (p.13)) and the kind of questions she asks in the hospital ('How did it get there? Why can't she come home? Why MY sister?' (p.13)), are a bit more childlike. Not because an adult cannot experience this mix of emotions or questions, but because I think an adult would be more conditioned to keep emotions to themselves or ask less impulsive questions. In other words: it is not the emotions or questions per se that make it childlike, but the way she publicly expresses them.

Whereas, in *Benjamin*, the limited experience of Robin with death strongly influenced his belief in metaphors and led to wrong understandings of death and the afterlife, *The Perfect Shelter* shows a child perspective that is not necessarily misleading (instead, mature and accurate), and provides the younger sister with the opportunity to be more selective with what she shares. This makes us wonder: does this careful curation of storytelling lead to a more direct and educational child perspective, where the child characters turn into teachers providing the reader with correct lessons about death and loss? In *The Perfect Shelter*, it is not the younger, but the older sister who takes on a supportive, 'adult-like' role. She is the one who comforts her younger sister (allowing her to sit on her lap during bad news), battles through her tiredness to build the shelter together (taking the younger sister's worries away), and opts to build a shelter inside the hospital room towards the end (making the younger sister happy again). The parents also try to console their younger daughter, but she is more drawn to and reliant upon her older sister. For example, when her mother invites her to repair the shelter, the younger sister 'didn't even care' (p.15), or when her father wants to make cupcakes together, we read: 'I didn't sing. I couldn't work. I was too worried' (p.12). Thus, only her older sister can truly take her worries away, no matter how hard her parents try. This fits with Worden's (1999) finding that girls tend to turn to (mostly female) siblings above parents or friends to fulfill their intimacy and social needs.

The most direct 'teacher moment' comes at the end, when the older sister suggests they build a shelter in the hospital room. The text plays an important role here: 'Now we make plans to go back to the woods to ride out the toughest storms. But until then...today's the perfect day to

build a shelter together.’ (p.22/23) Given that the narration is done by the younger sibling, technically, she is the one who makes the lesson or moral of the story more explicit. However, it is the older sister who initiates the action of building the hospital shelter, which is what helps the younger sibling realize the implicit lesson that you cannot put life on pause, but should try to live with the uncertainty of illnesses and make the best of the present. In other words: the younger sister is rarely innocent or naive given her mature retrospective outlook on the situation, decreasing indirectness. Additionally, the older sister also shows maturity, given that she takes on the adulting role by taking her younger sister under her wings. The ‘teacher’ moments here are direct, since they are explicitly called out by the younger sister.

### Blind spaces and gaps.

Unlike with *Benjamin*, there are no scenes in *The Perfect Shelter* where we deliberately are only shown part of a room, or are given insight to only parts of an adult conversation. Nevertheless, many scenes take place ‘off-screen’. For example, we do not receive any information about how the older sister found out she had cancer, or how her parents initially dealt with this news. As mentioned before, we also do not see any operations taking place, or read about the older sister’s experience in the hospital. There is one conversation with a doctor, but this is one-sided as we only read the younger sister’s questions and not the doctor’s answers. In other words: the ‘blind spaces’ are found in the lack of specificity (e.g. about the operations or treatment) and most scenes happening ‘in between’ the spreads, rather than being shown on the spreads. All of these blind spaces are considered to be indirect representations.

Concerning the relationship between text and image, most spreads are symmetrical or enhancing (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2001). Think of the previously described spread such as the ‘perfect day’ with ‘perfect weather’ (p.1) showing a happy, smiling family who is playing in the woods while the sun is shining. Or the spread including the ‘river of rain’ where we see a sad cloud who is crying big tears (rain drops), with a river of water on the bottom of the page. Occasionally, the illustrations further explain ambiguities from the text. For example, a sentence like ‘I couldn’t work’ (p.12) is broad since ‘work’ can mean a number of things. With help from the illustrations that show her father trying to entuse the youngest sister to decorate cupcakes together, the reader is informed that ‘work’ refers to decorating cupcakes. Specific details about the illness are more often found in the text than illustrations (e.g. when we read: ‘she was with the doctors’ or ‘she was having an operation’ (p.11)). On the contrary, the weather and shelter metaphors are strongest in the illustrations.

Whenever emotions are mentioned textually, we often see them reflected back in the illustrations as well. For example, ‘people were crying’ (p.9) is accompanied by the mother showing tears on her cheek. In addition, most emotions are explicitly mentioned (such as: ‘In the hospital I felt cross, and sad, and frightened, all at the same time’ (p.13)). Another indicator of happiness (or a lack thereof) is whether the siblings are singing or not. Singing is strongly associated with happy times, whereas, when the younger sister is alone and sad, we read: ‘I didn’t sing’ (p.12). Similar to *Benjamin*, the finding that the relationship between text and image is often symmetric and enhancing, means that the gaps in one mode (e.g. text) are not filled in by the other mode (e.g. images), leaving a lack of direct representation for those gaps.

## The ending and period before and after someone's death.

*The Perfect Shelter* ends with the older sister still in hospital, but feeling good enough to build a shelter in the hospital room. Since the sister is still sick and the reader is given no information (besides 'stronger and brighter' (p.18)) about her current health condition, or any expectations regarding the future, there is no full closure. In fact, the reader is actually left with many questions the book never provides an answer to. To still gain some closure or acceptance, the reader can learn from the moral of the story ('Now we make plans to go back to the woods to ride out the toughest storms. But until then ... today's the perfect day to build a shelter and be together.' (p.22/23)), and find comfort in the fact that, for now, the older sister is doing better than before. Or, since the ending is open, readers can decide for themselves how they think or would like for the story to end. Since the sister has not passed away, the book's ending does not undermine biological aspects of death (such as irreversibility and nonfunctionality). Instead, it offers a realistic situation for someone experiencing cancer. The ending does rely heavily on the shelter metaphor. With *Benjamin*, we saw an ending using an afterlife metaphor (the star). In *The Perfect Shelter*, we see a return of an activity that is related to the sister's health: being able to build a shelter means the sister's health is (partially) improved, since she was unable to build a shelter earlier on during her illness. In other words: the ending is not direct about the future or the illness, but is direct about the lesson we can take away from the uncertainty we feel when someone we love is sick.

For the younger sister, the ending is satisfactory in the sense that she has been waiting, throughout the book, for her sister to get better (or good enough) to build shelters with her again. This brings me to the differences in the period prior to the cancer diagnosis and during her cancer treatment in the hospital. As established before, the book starts with the 'perfect day' (p.1) showing the sisters building a shelter together in the woods. When the older sister gets tired, we instantly see a change in mood within the younger sister, as the tiredness is affecting the older sister's ability to build shelters together. From the moment the older sister is admitted to the hospital, the younger sister seems too sad and worried to do anything (fix a shelter, decorate cupcakes, etc). The younger sister's primary focus on being able to build a shelter with her sister again, could be connected to the 'still the same person narrative' as it shows her desire for the older sister to return to the person she was before. The information we receive about what the family liked to do prior to the cancer diagnosis is limited, since we only know they spent a fun day in the woods, having a picnic and building a shelter. Hence, our frame of reference to compare different periods with, is confined. Still, we see a clear return of these activities towards the end where the older sister shows initiative to build a shelter in her hospital room. Soon after, their parents join and we see them enjoying a picnic in the new 'hospital' shelter (see figure 7). This way, the happiness we saw at the beginning of the story is restored, albeit in a hospital room instead of the woods.



Figure 7. *The Perfect Shelter*, ending.

Another difference between the two periods is the separation of the sisters. At first, they do everything together. However, when the younger sister asks the doctor 'Why can't she come home?' (p.13), it clearly shows that the older sister is 'left behind' in the hospital, whereas the younger sister gets to go home. Despite visiting her older sister, the book includes many scenes where the younger sister is seen sad and alone. It is not until the older sister whispers: 'I think it's the perfect time, I think it's the perfect place, to build a shelter ... right here, right now!' (p.18) that we see a smile return on the younger sister's face. In other words, there is a return of activities and happy emotions, but in a modified way where the older sister's situation and location (hospital) is taken into account. Since this is a clear return, we see a direct representation in both text and image.

## Analysis - Chapter 3: The Heart and the Bottle.

***The Heart and the Bottle* by Oliver Jeffers (2010).**

### Synopsis.

In *The Heart and the Bottle*, we meet a curious young girl who shares an adventurous life with her father. After her father passes away, she decides to lock her heart up in a bottle to protect herself from all the grieving emotions. This, however, only leads to her feeling lonelier and no longer curious about the world. One day, she meets a young girl who helps her realize that life is more colorful without a locked up heart. After putting her heart back in her body, the girl's loneliness vanishes and her curiosity returns. Libraries and bookstores unanimously agree that this book is meant for children from the age of 5 (Bibliotheek, 2024. Bol, 2024. Amazon, 2024). One thing people seem to be unable to agree on, however, is whether the 'father' figure is her father or her grandfather. Online, different interpretations emerge (Goodreads, 2024). For the purposes of this analysis, where representation of deceased / dying *parents* is of importance, I view the elder character as her father.

### The personification of death.

Similar to *The Perfect Shelter*, *The Heart and The Bottle* never specifies on its cover that this book represents death-related elements. The blurb inside mentions 'something' happened ('Then one day something occurred that caused the girl to take her heart and put it in a safe place.'), but this is vague and could mean anything. Underneath the blurb, information on Oliver Jeffers himself is given: 'He deals with the weighty themes of love and loss with an extraordinary lightness of touch and shows us, ultimately, that there is always hope.' Here, words like 'love' and 'loss' provide some more concreteness, but still hold ample room for interpretation. In fact, it is not just the cover or blurb, but the entire book never concretely mentions words like 'death', 'dying', 'passed away', and so forth. This connects to what Prokopová (2022) called the 'denial in death's language', referring to the lack of explicit mentions of death.

The story starts with the adventures the girl and her father have, such as looking at the stars and visiting the beach. On the second spread, we see the father sitting in a big red chair, reading his daughter stories about the wonders of life, such as sea animals and planets. Here, an important connection is created between the father and the chair, which the book will later rely on to indicate the father's passing. This is done by first showing illustrations where the daughter and father are always together. Then, we are shown a spread where the girl is alone, busy drawing something for her father. This does not raise any suspicion, especially as the right page of this spread shows the girl running away with her drawing to show it to her father, hence implying that the father is 'just around the corner' (on the next page). On this next page, however, we are suddenly confronted with an empty red chair (see figure 8). There is a double emphasis on the empty chair, as it is both visualized and mentioned in the text ('the day she found an empty chair' (p.13)). In other words: death is connected to the father, but in an indirect way through the use of the red chair and its sudden emptiness.



Figure 8. *The Heart and the Bottle*, empty chair.

Using an empty chair means that we do not see the father passing away or receive information about his cause of death (which corresponds with Wiseman's (2013) critique on a lack of concrete and specific descriptions regarding the cause of death in children's literature). In general, we receive limited information about the father figure. As previously established, the figure itself is a mystery: online, people are unsure about his age and relationship with the main protagonist (father or grandfather). The text never confirms or denies this, instead, it focuses on the girl and her curiosity for the world. We know, based on conventional gender images and ideas regarding someone's physical appearance, the older figure is a man. We do not get strong indications the father's health is declining. One spread shows him using a walking cane, but this is overshadowed by all the active, outdoor activities he undertakes with his daughter. Of course, his death could have been suddenly happened while he was in perfect health. In other words: the book is lacking information regarding the father figure and his death, thus not presenting a direct and concrete personification of death.

The book does not explicitly mention or visualize ideas regarding inevitability or universality, however, similar to *Benjamin* and *The Perfect Shelter*, the suddenness and unpredictability of someone's death could be connected to this. The reader is truly confronted with the empty chair, which shows how death could happen to anyone at any time. This means that all three books of my analysis do implicitly say something about the unpredictability of death or illness

(either through suddenness or by choosing a (relatively) young character to pass away), which goes against Prokopová's (2022) finding that children's literature is incapable of illustrating and describing the unpredictable factor of death. Given that the father simply disappears, we are not presented with information regarding nonfunctionality. The same applies to irreversibility: in clear contrast to *Benjamin, The Heart and the Bottle* does not provide afterlife metaphors or ideas. This could possibly be due to the girl deciding to put her heart in a bottle, preventing her from feeling or thinking about his death and/or ideas regarding heaven or afterlife. Thus, there is a complete lack of biological factors of death. Instead, the book focuses on the metaphor of the 'empty chair' and/or on experiential accounts of death (since her father is there one minute, and not there the next).

### The afterlife and the irreversibility of death.

Since the book is written from the girl's perspective, we are mainly concerned with her grieving process. Instead of relying on or believing in certain afterlife ideas, the girl decides to cope with taking her heart out and feeling nothing. Consequently, we are not given an insight into the way the girl processes her loss or thinks about life after death. In this sense, the book is both direct and indirect about someone's grieving process. It is direct since the idea of not wanting to feel all your emotions is realistic and concretely represented in this book (both visually and textually). And it is indirect since this prohibits the book from delving into ideas concerning the afterlife or other biological factors of death.

### Indirect language and visualization.

In *Benjamin and The Perfect Shelter*, we saw a use of nature, the weather, (stuffed) animals and toys to indirectly convey emotions or someone's grieving or illness journey. In *The Heart and The Bottle*, these indirect visualizations are not as clearly present, but do provide the reader with some insight into the girl's grieving journey.

Throughout the book, nature is almost a character. It is present during the outdoor activities of the girl and her father (looking at stars, swimming in the ocean, admiring flowers in the forest), hence creating an association of nature and being outdoors with happy memories for the girl. Nature also provides a moment of comparison for the reader as the return of the same locations shows a contrast in the girl's experience after losing her father. One spread shows the girl, now lacking her heart, walking underneath those same stars and on the same beach looking sad and devoid of wonder. The text reads: 'Nothing was the same. She forgot about the stars and stopped taking notice of the sea. She was no longer filled with all the curiosities of the world and didn't take much notice of anything.' (p.16/17) Similarly, the animals in this book - not anthropomorphized – only show up during moments the girl is curious and does not have her heart locked up. This shows another comparison moment, where the return of the girl's wonder for animals shows how she is slowly healing and learning to deal with her grief in a way that does not suffocate her. I will further analyze these comparison moments later on, as they connect to the 'still the same person' narrative in the last category of this analysis.

The emptiness the girl feels after her father passes away, is also visualized in the way the illustrations work with white spaces. The first few spreads are colorful and fully filled. For example, when admiring flowers in the forest together, the entire spread covers the forest with its many trees and flowers. In other words: no 'empty' or white spaces anywhere. This changes when we enter the spread where the girl is making a drawing for her father. Here, the spread is white, except for the girl, her drawing, and her crayons. Perhaps, this emptiness indicates what is yet to come, which is the spread with the empty chair. From the moment she decides to put her heart in a bottle, the spreads include a lot of 'empty' spaces: white backgrounds, illustrations not filling the entire page, and so forth. For example: on the spread where she has lost her curiosity, the illustrations are shaped in the form of text bubbles, not fully covering the entire page (see figure 9).



Figure 9. *The Heart and the Bottle*, empty spaces.

On the spread where we read: 'She was no longer filled with all the curiosities of the world and didn't take much notice of anything' (p.17), the background is grey for the first time. This grey-ness shows a lack of color, both on the page and in her life now that her heart is locked up. At the end, when the girl returns to her father's chair, the spread is mostly filled with a gigantic text bubble full of the girl's curiosities that have returned. This indicates that the empty spaces did not just signify the lack of feelings she had while her heart was gone, but also the disappearance of her curiosity and wonder for the world. Through allowing herself to feel and

wonder again, her life instantly becomes more colorful. Although directly shown on the spreads, this use of empty spaces is an indirect representation since it is a visualization of something else (the emptiness she feels).

The practice of putting your heart in a bottle is an interesting visualization of someone's coping mechanisms while experiencing grief. Although the idea is metaphorical and unrealistic, the intentions behind it seem logical and realistic. Experiencing grief can be overwhelming, with people feeling a mix of emotions and having many unresolved questions. Consequently, it is natural for grieving people to crave a less overwhelming state of being. Hence, the girl's idea to get rid of her heart seems the successful albeit unrealistic execution of a realistic thought that grieving people can have. This book simply plays upon that image. To the question whether the heart in the bottle should be understood as a direct or indirect representation of death, I am slightly torn. On the one hand, I could use similar argumentation as I did before with the use of empty spaces: technically, the heart in the bottle visualizes something else (the desire to stop feeling), meaning it is indirect and metaphorical. On the other hand, it is a direct execution of this directly-expressed desire and often prominently shown on the pages. Thus, it is quite direct as well.

A last indirect visualization is the red empty chair, as it indirectly visualizes the death of the father. However, I would not classify it as a metaphor in the same way as I did with the star in *Benjamin*. The star in *Benjamin* showed clear signs of afterlife ideas, as well as strongly went against biological factors of death such as irreversibility and nonfunctionality. The empty chair, however, does not explicitly go against any biological factors of death, but instead shows a different kind of memorialization and continuation of life after death that I view as more direct and less undermining than the star metaphor. Reason being that the chair is more about keeping someone's *memory* alive instead of their actual *body*, which to me is more realistic and less contradictory regarding biological factors of death. Additionally, the chair is an object that actually belonged to the deceased person, and that the girl and her father have created real memories with together. The star in *Benjamin* was never used by Benjamin, or understood that way (as an afterlife) prior to Benjamin's death. In other words, *Benjamin's* star is an afterlife metaphor, whereas the red empty chair is a sign of loss and an invitation for the girl to continue her life without her father but just as colorful as it was before.

In *The Perfect Shelter*, we saw how the condition of the shelter resembled the health of the older sister. In other words: it was sort of a stand-in representation for her illness journey. This shelter bears both similarities and differences to the red empty chair when it comes to their indirect visualizations. Both the shelter and chair are objects that were used (and built) by the deceased / ill person, that hold memories for the deceased / ill person and the people around them, and that do not undermine biological factors. However, whereas the chair remains the same, the shelter is continuously broken and built up again. Of course, this has to do with the fact that the sister's illness has ups and downs, whereas the father's passing stays the same. Nevertheless is this difference important since it impacts the intensity of the indirect visualization: the shelter appears throughout the book, whereas the chair only appears at the beginning and end.

In other words: most indirect visualizations in *The Heart and The Bottle* represent the girl's grieving journey instead of the father's death. Only the chair is indicative of death, but also crucial to the girl's healing process as the return of the chair towards the end indicates a return of color and curiosity in her life. In the case of the empty spaces and the bottle, the visualizations are directly shown on the page and often also accompanied by direct textual cues, but since the illustrations still indirectly represent something else (the girl's grief and her coping mechanisms), they fit within the category of indirect visualization.

### Naive or innocent child characters.

Since the book does not explicitly mention death-related elements, the story does not include misunderstandings regarding death (such as death being reversible or unavoidable). Here, similar to the previous category, we should shift from a focus on death to a focus on the girl's grief and coping mechanisms and how those reflect her ideas of death. The girl's naive decision to put her heart in a bottle is unrealistic, yet also shows a child's imagination and creativity when it comes to the ways we can deal with grief. It presents an interesting mix of willpower (it is daring to take your own heart out), spontaneity (she immediately goes for it), and innocence or inexperience (she strongly believes it to be the best solution for grief).

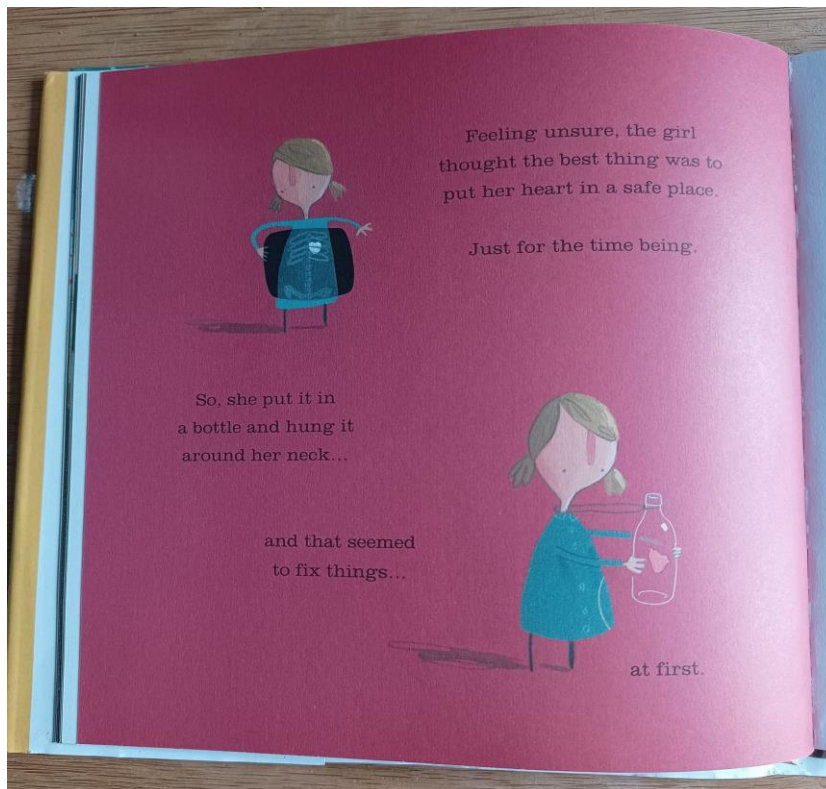


Figure 10. *The Heart and the Bottle*, a child's insecurity regarding grief.

The girl's specific train of thought when taking her heart out, reads: 'Feeling unsure, the girl thought the best thing was to put her heart in a safe place. Just for the time being. So, she put it in a bottle and hung it around her neck' (p.15) (see figure 10). The insecurity she feels fits with

Schroth's (2017) finding that, occasionally, a child character can also express newness and/or unknowingness to death. Additionally, the girl devises this plan only 'for the time being', showing she views it as a temporary solution. Since the only adult character in the book is her father, we see a lack of any adult characters who can help her out or give her advice. The girl herself does slowly age: she gets taller and longer hair, starts wearing different clothes, and slowly undertakes adult activities such as cooking dinner for herself or doing the dishes.

Once her heart is locked up, it is made clear that the girl is not feeling or experiencing much. For example, when thinking of the empty red chair, she no longer feels sad or filled with grief, but the illustrations show an emotionless face (again, the mouth has disappeared). Her naive plan of the bottle is not working the way she thought it would, which the text emphasizes: '[it] seemed to fix things at first. Although in truth, nothing was the same.' (p.15) In fact: '[she] didn't take much notice of anything ... other than how heavy ... and awkward the bottle had become.' (p.17/18) This text is accompanied by illustrations that show her trying to have dinner while holding the bottle up high with one hand, as it gets in the way of eating the food. Or when washing the dishes, the bottle is stuck between her stomach and the kitchen sink.

Ultimately, it is another small girl that gives the protagonist the biggest insight. The following happens: while walking on the beach, our protagonist meets a small girl who asks her a question about swimming elephants. The text reads: 'It might never have occurred to the girl what to do had she not met someone smaller and still curious about the world.' (p.20) In other words: the protagonist meets a girl who reminds her of the curious person she used to be before putting her heart in a bottle. On the next spread, we read: 'There was a time when the girl would have known how to answer. But not now. Not without her heart.' (p.23) This realization that she has changed because of the bottle also gets confirmed by the illustrations, where we see the protagonist with an empty gray text bubble above her head (indicating her lack of an answer). Motivated to be able to give an answer and gain her curiosity back, our protagonist decides to get her heart back. However: 'It was right at that moment she decided to get it back out of the bottle. But didn't know how. She couldn't remember.' (p.23/24) The following illustrations showcase the different ways the girl tries to get her heart back. For example, we see her shaking the bottle, trying to break it with a hammer, and throwing it from a tall wall. Sadly: 'nothing seemed to work. The bottle couldn't be broken. It just bounced and rolled ...' (p.25/26) This is where the small girl returns, because the bottle bounces and rolls '... right down to the sea. But there, it occurred to someone smaller and still curious about the world that she might know a way. And it just so happened ... she did.' (p.27-29) The small girl clearly steps into a teacher role here, as she both provides the initial insight that motivated the protagonist to get her heart back, and because she is - while the protagonist is not - able to actually get the heart out of the bottle since she is 'still curious about the world' (p.27).

Put differently, the innocence or naivety of child characters is not so much found in misunderstandings about death (and its biological factors), but in the inexperienced way someone deals with grief. This does not mean that our protagonist is completely naive, since she ultimately learns a rather mature lesson – with help from the little girl - that the best way to live your life is by allowing yourself to feel everything. Thus, the innocence of the child

characters initially results in an indirect representation of grief (putting the heart in a bottle), but this indirectness ultimately leads to a direct lesson and/or confrontation regarding grief.

### Blind spaces and gaps.

Death is one big blind space: we do not see the death taking place, a dead body, signs of illness or death, funerals or other burying rituals, etc. We only get an indirect and vague suggestion of death through an empty red chair, meaning the actual death took place 'off stage'. Other blind spaces are found in the lack of specificity the book shows: not just regarding death, but also regarding the age or relationship of the main characters. This fits with Poling & Hupp's (2008) and Wiseman's (2013) findings that children's books lack sufficient biological factors or elements. In addition, the concrete focus on the girl's idea to put her heart in a bottle, means that many other scenes take place 'off screen' or remain unanswered. The girl's loneliness also explains the lack of any 'adult' scenes or conversations taking place 'off screen' (like we saw in *Benjamin* with the doctor scene).

Regarding the relationship between text and image, the book mostly shows symmetry or enhancement (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2001). Since the book places more emphasis on the illustrations, the text mainly supports what the images already expressed. Sometimes, this is literal: for instance the spread where the girl stumbles upon the empty chair, with the text: 'until the day she found an empty chair.' (p.13) What the illustrations add here, is a time-component: the right page shows a similar illustration to the left page (again, the girl looking at the empty chair), but then with a dark sky, moonlight and shadows (instead of the bright, white left page). This indicates that the chair was not just empty for one moment, but stayed empty for the entire day. This time-component adds to the sadness as it makes clear the father is not returning at all. Other times, the text is more enhancing: when the girl sits in her father's chair at the end, the text adds: 'And the chair wasn't so empty any more' (p.31/32), referring to her returned curiosities in the gigantic text bubble. Or, occasionally, more complementary (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2001): for instance the gray spread where the illustrations show an emotionless girl thinking of an empty chair, with the text underscoring that this means 'She was no longer filled with all the curiosities of the world and didn't take much notice of anything.' (p.17)

Some spreads do not include any text at all: for example, the spread where she makes a drawing for her father. It is also common for the sentences to be split into two or three parts divided over different spreads, adding suspense but also allowing the illustrations to speak for themselves and fill in those textual silences. Given their symmetrical or enhancing relationship, there are not necessarily gaps between text and image, but more so in the illustrations itself with a lot happening off screen as well. Since the text usually affirms the illustrations, the text does not answer or fill in these visual gaps but continues to let them exist in the illustrations. This means that the vagueness or indirectness of the illustrations stays the same. As a result, as Nikolajeva & Scott (2001) pointed out, if gaps stay the same in text and image (meaning they do not get resolved), the reader remains more passive than would be the case if words and images provided alternative or contradicting information.

The characters are limited in their expression of emotions, not only because the lack of a heart prevents the girl from feeling, but also because the book mainly mentions interests (wonders and curiosities) or states of being (not taking much notice of anything), instead of specific emotions. The only explicitly mentioned feelings are 'delight' (in the sentence: 'She took delight in finding new things.' (p.9)) or 'awkwardness' (in the sentence: 'how heavy and awkward the bottle had become' (p.18)). Similarly to the previous two books, we do see a clear disappearance of the mouth once a character is no longer happy, resulting in an 'emotionless' face. In other words: the book does not condemn or shame certain emotions, but it simply does not express many emotions given the locked up heart. In a sense, the book actually promotes how wonderful emotions can be, since they make your life much more colorful.

### The ending and period before and after someone's death.

Since the book focuses on the girl's grieving experience, the reader is given good insights into what her life and activities looked like prior to and after her father's passing. We know that the girl initially undertook all kinds of adventurous activities with her father (e.g. swimming in the ocean), and that after his passing, the girl loses her curiosity and wonder. In the theoretical framework, I mentioned survivor's guilt as a common phenomenon in grieving siblings. As a consequence of survivor's guilt, siblings 'may have difficulty continuing the activities that they enjoyed before the death. Some survivors [...] manifest personality changes after the death, such as altering a lighthearted attitude to one that is very serious' (Gibbons, 1992). The girl's coping mechanism of the bottled heart might partially originate from feeling guilty about possibly having fun without her father. Consequently, we see a massive personality change: from happy and curious to sad and indifferent. In other words: the bottled heart might not just be a coping mechanism to grief in general, but more specifically a solution to the survivor's guilt she feels. Due to the small girl on the beach, things slowly return to the way they were (albeit without her father this time). Clear indicators of 'still the same person' are the return of the smile on the girl's face, her regained curiosity and colors in life, and, as established before, the different experiences of the same locations. ('Although in truth, nothing was the same. She forgot about the stars and stopped taking notice of the sea' (p.16)). Additionally, the bottled heart prevents the girl from reminiscing and honoring her father, which weakens their relationship. At the end, sitting in her father's chair again, keeping his memory alive, it feels like their relationship is getting stronger again. This restored relationship is another 'still the same person' aspect that has returned. Since we see the girl grow and become a young-adolescent, the book shows how, over time, someone's understanding and experience of grief can change. These different phases in the girl's life are expressed directly on the page, but they do only concern her grieving experience, not so much her direct understanding of death.

The book ends with the girl happily sitting in the red chair, with an empty bottle on the next page. The text reinforces this newfound meaning of emptiness: 'And the chair wasn't so empty anymore. But the bottle was' (p.30/31) (see figure 11). This shows a round ending, since it refers back to the beginning (the red chair, the stories from her father), provides closure (the problem with the heart is solved), and shows that happiness and curiosity have returned to the girl. Besides referring to her father, the return of the chair also shows the girl's strength and growth as she can face the 'emptiness' and fill it with her own wonders again. Similarly to

*Benjamin's* ending, this fits with Caldwell's (2021) finding that most death or illness-related children's literature focus on providing an optimistic, well-rounded ending. The ending does not undermine biological natures of death such as irreversibility or nonfunctionality since the father himself does not actually reappear. Instead, the chair serves as a stand-in to keep the girl's memory of her father alive. Despite the blind spaces in this book (with death happening 'off-screen'), the ending is direct due to its satisfactory closure and clear moral.



Figure 11. *The Heart and the Bottle*, ending.

In the theoretical framework, I mentioned how Schroth (2017) found three elements that appeared in all her analyzed books. Having reached the end of my analysis, I can say that those three elements also appear in all three of my analyzed books. These elements are: 1) All books show close bonds between the protagonist and the dying or deceased character. In *Benjamin* and *The Perfect Shelter*, we see close sibling relationships, whereas *The Heart and the Bottle* presents a daughter's love for her father. 2) All books end on an optimistic note, offering hope and closure. In my analysis, this is achieved through using a 'still the same person' narrative (showing a restoration of the way things were prior to someone's death or health diagnosis), while also relying on metaphors (the star in *Benjamin*) or memorial objects (such as the shelter or red chair. 3) None of the books present 'a complete and unambiguous representation of death, dying and bereavement' (Schroth, 2017). As my analysis has shown, there is a lack of concrete biological information regarding death and illness, as well as misleading information through a child's naive belief in metaphors that undermine these biological factors, and a lot of mystery or vagueness regarding death-related elements that remains due to books providing gaps in text and image that do not get resolved.

## Discussion.

In this study, I adopted a multimodal textual analysis to analyse and understand the different ways in which death is directly or indirectly represented in picturebooks. In the analysis section, I examined three different picturebooks following six different categories. In this conclusion, I will summarize and highlight the main findings, including the overall similarities between all three books as well as different nuances per book.

Regarding the personification of death, all three books directly connected death or illness with one character. In most cases, the gender, age and relationship to the main protagonist of the deceased / dying character were also made concrete. Only in *The Heart and the Bottle* did the two last elements remain more of a mystery. My analysis showed that it is not uncommon for authors to include personal texts to underscore how these stories are grounded in reality, possibly increasing the plausibility and directness of a text. Interestingly, all three books omitted the specific cause of death. Instead, more ambiguous and indirect words were used, such as 'very sick', 'just a bit tired', and 'she found an empty chair'. On the lay-out pages or covers, however, sickness or death was concretized more (such as Welsh specifically mentioning cancer in her personal statement). Visually, only *The Perfect Shelter* showed direct signs of illness *in* a character (such as the bonnet). In general, the surrounding environment (albeit 'faded') proved to be a good place to include (direct) signs of illness (such as hospital equipment or a doctor('s coat)).

Only *Benjamin* explicitly and directly mentioned the 'd-word' ('De dokter zegt dat Benjamin dood is' (p.6)<sup>37</sup>). Where *The Perfect Shelter* included words such as 'sick', 'doctors', and 'operation', *The Heart and the Bottle* showed a true 'denial in death's language' as Prokopová would have called it, as it never used words like 'death', 'dying', or 'passed away'. Concerning biological factors of death, all books never mentioned 'universality' explicitly, but by placing young characters at the forefront, there was an implicit message that death or sickness could happen to anyone (instead of only older / senior characters). Similarly, 'unpredictability' was never concretized, but all three books did show a 'suddenness' or 'rapidness' when it came to how quickly someone passed away or was diagnosed. Only *Benjamin* provided clear 'inevitability' ('Benjamin is erg ziek. Hij wordt nooit meer beter.' (p.5)<sup>38</sup>), as well as ideas about 'irreversibility' (such as the star afterlife metaphor). Lastly, no picturebook was explicit about nonfunctionality of the deceased body in the sense of providing concrete or direct information about the body's biological process of passing away. However, analysis did show how *Benjamin* used the star afterlife metaphor to express the idea that a dead person continues to live on and undertake activities (such as traveling or guarding). Additionally, *The Perfect Shelter* showed a clear decrease in energy levels and increase in hospital equipment, indicating that the sister's body is sick and undergoing treatment. In other words, biological factors of death were mostly indirectly handled.

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<sup>37</sup> The doctor says that Benjamin is dead.

<sup>38</sup> Benjamin is very sick. He'll never get better.

*Benjamin* most clearly depicted ideas about the afterlife: the book strongly relied on the star afterlife metaphor, showed awareness of heaven as 'above us', and enforced the idea that deceased people live on. This showed an interesting contradiction as *Benjamin* was initially direct in addressing the irreversible nature of death ('Benjamin komt nooit meer terug.' (p.7)<sup>39</sup>, but then also relied on this indirect star metaphor that indicates death is (partly) reversible. The theoretical framework showed how previous research on death-related elements in picturebooks also commonly focused on spiritual and religious elements and rituals (e.g. going to a funeral in a church or burying a dead person). These aspects were initially taken into account for my analysis as well. However, since they turned out to be less prevalent of a theme in my books, they were eventually removed from my study.

While conducting my analysis, I was confronted with a distinction I had to make when it comes to the ways in which a book can use an object to represent a deceased or dying character. Instead of viewing all objects as the same, or all objects as a (indirect) metaphor that undermines biological factors of death, I found that each object shows a different kind of memorialization and continuation of life after death. This is how I came to the conclusion that the star afterlife metaphor in *Benjamin* is less direct than the empty red chair in *The Heart and the Bottle*, since the star shows a continuation of someone's actual *body* (with the star personifying Benjamin), whereas the chair is more about keeping someone's *memory* alive (with the chair being an object that the deceased person actually used as well).

Regarding the use of indirect language and visualizations, some similarities emerged. For instance, the illustrations in both *Benjamin* and *The Perfect Shelter* played with the facial expressions, body posture, and spread position of the illustrated toys and stuffed animals to indirectly represent grieving emotions. Additionally, all three books showed the disappearance of a character's mouth once they experienced sad emotions. Analysis showed how, in *The Perfect Shelter*, the weather always corresponded with the emotions of the younger sister (showing pathetic fallacy), and the shelter with the health journey of the older sister. The color use was only of significance in *The Heart and the Bottle*, as it clearly included more whiteness and less color in its illustrations to visualize the emptiness the girl feels after her father's death. These examples are indirect representations, as they refer to or try to express something else.

In both *The Heart and the Bottle* and *The Perfect Shelter*, nature and outdoor environments played crucial roles. First, they provided information about the 'normal' / 'before' state of being, such as how the siblings always build shelters in the forest. Consequently, a return of outdoor locations (or a version of them) was influential in how I analyzed the period before, during and after someone's death. For example, the differences in the girl's experience of the same locations. ('She forgot about the stars and stopped taking notice of the sea.' (p.16)) Secondly, these books used nature to implant nostalgia within the reader, as they often referred to 'the way things were' and 'the situation we would like to return to'. For instance, all the little sister wanted was to be out in the forest again, building shelters with her sister. Similarly, the analysis showed how different locations can hold different connotations, such as the clear distinction

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<sup>39</sup> Benjamin will never come back.

between the hospital versus their home or a forest. Since these (outdoor) locations express or indicate something else (such as life changes or grief phases), they are indirect representations.

Lastly, all three books relied on objects to stand in for something else, as well as provide comfort for the grief as experienced by the characters. For *Benjamin*, this was the star (to indirectly represent Benjamin). For *The Perfect Shelter*, this was the shelter (as both a physical shelter for them to build and play in, and a more metaphorical shelter that indirectly represented the sister's health journey). And for *The Heart and the Bottle*, this was the bottle with the girl's heart (which represented her coping mechanism for overwhelming grief) as well as the red empty chair (to indirectly indicate the death of the father).

My analysis also looked at how the possible naiveness or innocence of a child character can influence their perception of death and/or grief. Of all three books, *The Perfect Shelter* presented the least 'naive' child character by working with a retrospective point of view, which showed a certain omniscience and more 'mature' perspective. In *Benjamin*, Robin instantly and continuously believed in the star afterlife metaphor, which impacted both his limited expression of emotions and his actions (such as the ladder or space rocket), and resulted in the reinforcement of many indirect representations of death. Whereas Robin's naiveness impacted his understanding of *death*, naively putting your heart in a bottle as a coping mechanism impacted the girl's understanding of *grief*. This girl's naiveness is met with uncertainty and inexperience, while also showing a lack of adults. In both *The Heart and the Bottle* and *The Perfect Shelter*, a child character steps into the 'teacher' or 'adult' role and provides the crucial insight or lesson of the story. Only in *Benjamin* did the adult characters uphold the indirect representation of the star afterlife metaphor, which led to Robin continuously believing in this metaphor. Hence, my analysis showed how child characters, although initially believing in indirect representations themselves, were also often the ones who eventually burst through that indirect bubble and directly and concretely shared the moral of the story.

All three books contained blind spaces in both text and illustration, although some more explicitly and hence directly than others. Whereas, with *Benjamin*, the reader was clearly confronted with receiving only partial information regarding adult conversations or partial visualizations of a room, *The Perfect Shelter* and *The Heart and the Bottle* mainly relied on a reader's imagination to fill in any scenes that happen 'in between' the spreads (rather than being shown on the spreads). Direct representations of sickness and death mostly took place 'off-screen'. For instance, we never saw death taking place, a dead body, funerals, and so forth.

Concerning the relationship between text and image, all three books showed complementary, symmetrical, and enhancing or expanding relationships. Most noteworthy here is how the text was often more concrete and direct than the illustrations, meaning that the visuals more often supported the text than the other way around. *The Heart and the Bottle* is the only exception here, since the book included more illustrations than text, with some spreads not including any text at all. My analysis shows how the often symmetrical or enhancing relationships, led to the gaps in one sign system not be filled in by the other. Thus, those gaps remained, leading to the lack or indirectness of certain information not being resolved.

All three books showed elements of a 'restoration narrative', where the happy start of a book is disrupted by death, grief or sickness, to eventually be restored again to a happy and more optimistic ending. In all cases, this happy - sad - happy plot was reflected in both emotions and activities, and supported the 'still the same person narrative' (since someone's happiness was often measured through a return of pre-death or -sickness activities and emotions). Analysing the differences between the period before, during and after someone's death or health diagnosis showed me how the protagonists in all three books, albeit in different ways, continue to have a relationship with the deceased or ill character (as a star, as sisters, through their curiosity, etc). In other words: these kinds of narratives and plot formulas were directly represented in the books.

In general, all endings provided hope and forms of closure. Only *Benjamin's* ending undermined biological natures of death such as irreversibility and nonfunctionality. Closure was most often 1) found in the restored happiness of the main characters (giving the reader a 'round', optimistic and hopeful ending), 2) built upon certain metaphors (the star, the shelter) or memorialized objects (the chair), or 3) not achieved by being direct about death, illness or the future, but by being direct about the moral of the story. Hence, directness could be found, but only in specific features of the ending. This shows how closure is achieved through 'softening' or 'talking around' death (for example, through metaphors or a focus on the morals). Interestingly, this means that, according to the way these stories are shaped, a reader derives more closure from indirect representations of death than direct (and accurate biological) information about death.

In summary and answer to my research question: for each category of my methodology, the three picturebooks both directly and indirectly represented death-related elements. Although death was always directly connected to a character, the 'd-word' itself was often omitted, and any biological factors regarding death were lacking or dealt with indirectly. Indirect language and visualizations proved to be popular, especially metaphors using nature, weather, the environment, and anthropomorphised stuffed animals. However, these metaphors proved to be layered, with directness occasionally shining through. For example, the bottled heart is a metaphorical way to depict the realities of grief and coping mechanisms. The three books showed varying impacts of naiveness and innocence, with child characters both upholding indirect representations as well as sharing retrospective views or directly stepping into a 'teacher' moment. Direct representation of sickness and death took place in the blind spaces, which also never got resolved or further explained since text and image showed mostly symmetrical or complementary relationships. Restoration and 'still the same person' narratives were often directly represented, providing hope and closure. Elements I mentioned in my methodology, but ended up not being as influential or apparent as expected, were: spiritual and/or religious elements and rituals and Caldwell's (2021) body-as-machine metaphor.

## Conclusion.

The three picturebooks I have analysed add a new dimension to the already existing research on the representation of death within children's literature. As established in the introduction and theoretical framework, previous studies have mainly focused on providing an overview and history of death as a topic within children's literature, as well as studied the effects of bibliotherapy on children experiencing grief, loss, and trauma. The content analysis research on death-related picturebooks that does exist, mostly includes books with common patterns such as the deceased or dying character being a senior or animal, or only focusing on the period *after* someone's passing. For my research, I specifically wanted to focus on two gaps within children's literature that - to my knowledge - have not been researched within picturebooks. Firstly, books which present the death or sickness of a sibling or parent. And secondly, books which include both the period prior to and after someone's death or health diagnosis.

This focus has not only led to a study that adds a new perspective on under-represented elements within death-related children's literature research, but also raised awareness to the importance of providing a wide and direct representation of death. Not only to cater to every child's needs, but also to prevent any misunderstandings or fears regarding death, to be able to successfully incorporate death-related picturebooks in bibliotherapy, and to challenge the standard in children's literature to resort to euphemisms, symbols and other indirect language and visuals to describe death.

My focus on the directness of representation meant that, in this study, any metaphor was underscored as being 'indirect'. In the theoretical framework, multiple points *against* indirect representation were made. For instance, the finding that children's misconceptions and fears about death can be overcome or decreased through providing clear, direct biological elements (Slaughter, 2005. Slaughter, 2007). Throughout my research, I was constantly confronted with the boundaries and potentials of metaphors to play with the *directness* of representation. If a picturebook, such as *The Heart and the Bottle*, strongly relies upon a metaphorical idea of the bottled heart, how and to what extent can the story still depict the 'realities' of death directly? As I wrote in the analysis: the bottled heart is unrealistic and metaphorical, yet also a logical and realistic way to express those feelings of grief which are so difficult to express.

While developing my methodology, I had to create clear distinctions and categorisations between what I deemed direct or indirect representation and why. Metaphors are known for representing something else, hence they imply indirectness. In addition, previous academic research on this topic also always categorized metaphors as indirect representation. However, after having finished my research, I would argue for more close-reading of death-related metaphors in picturebooks in order to highlight the 'layeredness' of metaphors. Not only to better understand how metaphors can still show (elements of) direct representation, but also to be able to distinguish between types of metaphors which could possibly help metaphors get rid of their generalizing status as potentially increasing children's misconceptions and fears about death. The empty red chair from *The Heart and the Bottle* is a good example here, since the chair itself is metaphorical and used to represent the death of her father (instead of resorting to

direct representation such as using the d-word itself), which makes it indirect. However, at the same time, it shows a direct experience of the girl: one moment the chair is filled, the next her father is no longer there. Hence, metaphors are rarely purely indirect, and hold a lot of potential to depict the direct realities or experiences of death and grief.

In a similar vein, biological messages about death such as universality or inevitability were rarely communicated explicitly, yet definitely shining through in a more implicit manner. For instance, the author's choice to depict a young character's death, shows how death does not only happen to older people. Or the suddenness involved in all deaths or health diagnoses implicitly tells the reader something about the unpredictability of death. This made me question my own definitions of 'directness' and 'explicitness', as I often perceived explicit mentions as direct representations and expected directness to be more explicit. However, a direct representation does not always have to be explicit. For example, the red empty chair communicates a direct example of the lived experience of someone dying (as the girl is confronted with an empty chair her father used to sit in), yet does not explicitly mention or represent information about death. And an explicit mention does not automatically presuppose that it is a direct representation. For example, Benjamin's star is often explicitly mentioned (even functioning as a 'character'), but shows a metaphorical (and thus indirect) representation. On top of this, my analysis also showed that something can be direct without being explicit. Letting a young character suddenly die, albeit 'off-screen' and through metaphors, still suggests some direct ideas about the universality, inevitability, and unpredictability of death despite never mentioning anything explicitly. Hence, I think it would be beneficial to explore our definitions of 'directness' and 'explicitness' in future research to better concretize our understanding of direct representations of death in picturebooks.

Given the limited existing research on these specific gaps within death-related picturebooks, there is still ample room and opportunity left for future research. Whereas this study closely analysed one Dutch and two English picturebooks, it would be beneficial to look at more languages to provide a better overview of the ways in which different languages and countries present death-related elements in picturebooks. Besides this, although mentioning the benefits of bibliotherapy and the effects of death-related information on child readers, my study has mainly presented a literary perspective. Future studies could perhaps combine these findings with more empirical and/or ethnographic research, in order to better understand the impacts of direct and indirect representation on the child reader's understanding of death (and perhaps grieving experience). Given the important role of the surrounding environment, future research can, instead of solely focusing on the child reader, also take the conversations they might have with their parents, teachers, siblings, classmates, and so forth into account. Lastly, it would be interesting to take a closer look at the decision-making process of publishing houses and bookstores (for example, their ideas about and guidelines for 'acceptable' death representation in picturebooks), as well as the reasoning behind the creative process of authors and illustrators when it comes to how they think death should or could be presented.

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