

## The Expression of Death in Children's Picture Story Books

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### Abstract

*During preschool education, death is a rarely involve topic, instead, some foreign children's picture story books face death problems directly, and their present way is worth our using for reference. Their presentations are as follows: comprehend death with preschool children's inner experience, gradually cross-examine the meaning of death by preschool children's eyes and deepen the theme by searching for the continuation of love. These three aspects provide references for the creation of the picture story book of death theme in China.*

**Key word:** Picture story book, Death theme, Death education

"birth" and "death", Which is no one can avoid and resist. And death education is one of the important constituent in life education. We convey the joy of born to the children happily, we explain the essence of life to the children seriously, we tell children the flimsiness of the life, we talk to children with love, however, we are distressed to take or take no death education for children. In fact there is no need to say take or not to take, but how to take. We should use the way how to explain death, in what way to let the children experience positive emotions, set up the correct attitude, build up understanding in the talk. Young children education worker has always preference for picture books to teaching early childhood and think this is a kind of very good way, especially to implement death education for children, this is a more kind of effective way. This article through to take content analysis with the children's picture story book of foreign, provide the reference for our early death education.

### 1. Appreciation the arts of death theme

#### 1.1 Dose grandfather have his suit on?<sup>1</sup>

"Dose grandfather have his suit on?" Bruno asking, and want to see the situation in the coffin, because he only can see the sole of the black leather shoes out of the coffin. Someone put him up, he finally see his grandpa carefully: grandpa wearing a suit, with his hands folded on his chest and closed eyes. "Grandpa is not dead, just asleep!" Bruno Shouting, and his feet gently onto the ground. Bruno had finished his grandpa's funeral. But he still can't imagine what is "the death". Where is grandpa now? Saywell said "in the graveyard." Father said "in heaven." Mother said, "they are both right." But Bruno knows: a person can't be in two places at the same time. He went to see grandpa's room, perhaps grandpa has already come back. How can grandpa in the graveyard and heaven at the same time? Mother said that because of grandpa's body is in the churchyard, but his soul is going to heaven. Slowly, Bruno understood what his father said "grandpa had already died, but he lived in our memories." "I will not forget you!" He vowed. He felt his grandpa was in the heaven and smile at him. Gradually, Bruno felt the "hole" in his chest was getting smaller and smaller. One year later, Bruno found the pain in his chest has already disappeared. He never got anger with his grandpa, just sad. One day, Saywell told him, aunt Meetz gave birth to a baby. Mother looked at the baby and said: "maybe grandpa back to us." Bruno was surprised, and looked at the baby carefully: no, not in the least like. This is not my grandpa. More important is: grandpa in suits and black leather shoes.

#### 1.2 Grandpa has turned to be a ghost<sup>2</sup>

Grandpa is the person Aspen most like, but he had a heart attack and collapsed in the street and never woke up. Mother said grandpa was going to heaven and become the angel; father said grandpa was going to earth and become the clay. Aspen cannot imagine out what is grandpa looks like when he is become the clay.

<sup>1</sup> This book draw by Jacky Germany, written by Amelie Fried, published in China by Children's Publishing House in 2006.

<sup>2</sup> This book draw by Eva Eriksson, written by Kim Fupz Aakenson, published in China by the Hubei Arts Publishing House in 2007.

On this night, grandpa suddenly came back, he sat on the cabinet and stared at the darkness. So, Aspen think grandpa was become the ghost, that night, Aspen just looked at grandpa back and forth in a wall, when the dawn is coming, grandpa disappeared. In the evening, grandfather came back, he was back and forth in a wall constantly and read a book about phantom, grandpa found he was forgotten something so that he became a ghost. So Aspen and his grandpa were going to the room where grandpa once lived. Grandpa was remembered his brother, his wife, his son, a cat... But he can't remembered which thing he was forgotten. The second night, Aspen and his grandpa were going to the town to looking for the forget thing, grandpa was remembered a lot of things when he was young, but there was no thing he must found. The third night, Aspen was waiting for grandpa all night, but grandfather didn't come. So he shouted to grandpa around the house, went to grandpa's home and town to find grandpa, but he can't find grandfather. When he returned to his room exhausted, he found his grandfather was sitting on the cabinet and smiled with him. And then grandpa told Aspen he was remembered the forget thing is: say "goodbye" to him. Finally, grandpa through the wall and disappeared in the dark.

### 1.3 Badger's parting gifts<sup>3</sup>

Badger was dependable, reliable, and always ready to help when was needed. He was also very old, and he know almost everything. Badger was so old that he knew he must soon die, would going to the long tunnel underground. The badger not afraid of death, he just worried that his friends would become sad when he was leaving. One night the badger wrote a letter when he finish his supper and sit on his rocking chair fell asleep. He dreamt he was running fast in a long tunnel, finally, his feet deviated from the ground, and seemed to have escaped from his own body, he was free. The next day, the badger not got out and said good morning to others as usual, his friends were very worried, fox was bring the news to others: the badger was died. And the latter for everyone said: I was going to the other side of the long tunnel, goodbye! All the animals were very sad, especially the mole, he was desperately sad. It snowed; the snow covered the earth, but won't cover everyone's sadness. Spring was coming, and the animals were beginning to each other's house, they chatted the day when badger was being alive. The mole told everyone that the badger how to teach him make a paper cutting, the frog told everyone that the badger how to teach him skating, the fox think of the badger how to teach him tying a tie, miss rabbit recalled the badger teach her how to bake the gingerbread which have the shape of rabbit... All of the animals have the special memories about badger the things he taught them. The badger leaved the gift to every friend, these gifts can let they help each other. Finally, the snow melted away, and melted their grief. A warm spring day, the mole climb up to the hillside which he finally saw the badger, he want to think the badger's parting gifts. He said softly: "badger, thank you." He believed that the badger must be able to hear.

## 2. The expression of "death" in the story picture book for the children

### 2.1 To feel the "death" in children's internal experience

The books *Dose grandfather have his suit on? Grandpa has turned to be a ghost* are both the books which treat the "death" in the eyes of children. Those books which talk about "death" in the view of the children, are much easy to contact the emotion of the writer and that of the children, so that it's easy for the children to understand what the writer want to express. A good story picture book which describe the death in eyes of children can produce a great resonance in there emotion both the little reader and the writer. Singer, Decety & Lamm, Lieberman they have two consensus in the condition of "to have a resonance": one is: in the resonance there comes both the emotion and the cognition; another is: the resonance is reaction of feeling which comes from distinguishing oneself and the others, and he knows that this emotion is from the others but not he himself. (Liu Conghui, 2009, p967) The two picture story books *Dose grandfather have his suit on? Grandpa has turned to be a ghost* can meet both the two consensus.

Bruno has penetrated a grandpa who is always in a suit and his black leather shoes in all of the book, *Dose grandfather have his suit on?*, he showed his curiousness by the questions time and time again; he expressed his deep affection to his grandpa in his incessant querying; and he remembered his grandpa forever in his silence memory. The total story is narrated through what Bruno he sees, what he thinks, what he does. When the children read this story, they will fallow the experience of Bruno, to feel the sadness of losing the grandpa, to release the grief of missing the grandpa, to recognize what death is together with Bruno.

<sup>3</sup> This book draw and written by Susan Varley, published in China by Children's Publishing House in 2006.

*Grandpa has turned to be a ghost*, this is a book who takes us to recall the past times of the grandpa and grandchild in the view of Aspen, where their deep affection is, which bring our treas. This is a story that the grandchild helps his death grandpa to look for his passed memory after his death. Aspen showed his love to his grandpa by his action to help him. It's easy for the children to have a resonance together with little Aspen. Those are the picture books which show us the world of the child by the oral languages of child, and those culture pictures. They turned the education of death to be the interesting stories. To show us a pure world of the child, with their innocence, their curiosity. Even us the adult we are moved by their simple love, by their deep affection.

## 2.2 To examine what's the meaning of death in the eyes of the child

*Dose grandfather have his suit on? Grandpa has turned to be a ghost* the two books have lead our little readers to understand what's the real meaning of death step by step, and this just meet the children's cognitive and psychological development characteristics.

The Picture story book Piaget has found that there are those following features for the children of this stage: (1) the spirit theory: they thought that everything in the world is alive. People are always living, and death is just a deep sleep. They worry that if the dead is comfortable, is hungry, cold or quite lonely; (2) the magical thinking: they give everybody with a kind of strength that they are controlled by other's wishes. One can die or come back to live just because of other's desire. They believe that myth, for example, they believe that the prince can change into a frog, the dead princess can come back to live because of a kiss. They couldn't know the irreversible of death; (3) human socialist: they believe that the things are designed for the purpose of human beings. If the broken toy can be rebuild, that the men should also can be saved. Bad ideas and bad behaviors can cause the death. They may think that it is because they have done something badly that cause the death of their relatives. 6 to 8 years old children think that young and healthy people will not die, only those old and sick people will die. 9 to 12 years old children know that all living things would die, death is normal, irreversible, but they still think they will not die now when he's still young, but he will die when he's old. The children of this phase know that diseases, accidents can lead to death. (Zhu Liqi, 2006, p91)

The present study generally thought that the research of Piaget on the stage framework has underestimated the cognitive abilities of children. The research of Zhang Xiangkui and so on, in our country their research shows that the children's cognition to death has advanced. Both the research of Nguyen and Slaughter have found that 6 years old children have already knew that animals and plants will die, it shows that children have preliminary their concept to death.

From the Angle of psychology in research on the concept of death in the eyes of children, we can see that the development of children's ability in understanding what death is, provides a theoretical support and scientific basis for the education about death, based on this, we can use the picture story books to effective for the education in theme of death.

*Dose grandfather have his suit on?* is a story begin with the description of one scene of death. In the binging Bruno asked: "Dose grandpa has his suit on?" At the funeral ceremony, he asked: "what is grandpa doing now inside (the coffin)? Could he hear the pastor's prayer?" After a few days, Bruno began to ask: "Where is grandpa now?" "how could Grandpa he's in the grave and in the heaven at the same time?" "What is it the soul?" "Is Soul is alive in heaven?"... Slowly Bruno looking forward to the apparent of grandpa, but he didn't appear, he was so angry but he is quite afraid of forgetting grandpa's look, until embrace grandpa's photos to sleep. Bruno used his own way to understand what death is, he kept asking the meaning of death, but neither of his father, his mother nor his brother didn't give him a satisfied answer, Bruno didn't give up, and he kept on looking for the answer, kept on asking this question in his way of a child, in this process, he felt that grandpa is just smiling to him in the far always of the heaven.

In the story *Grandpa has turned to be a ghost*, Aspen is so sad because he lost his grandpa forever, in the beginning, he doesn't know what is it the death. His mother said that grandpa has been to the heaven and became an angel, his father said that grandpa has down to the earth and became the soil, but Aspen is doubt about his parents' answer. Until one night grandpa appeared suddenly, and from then on, Aspen understood that after the death, man will become the ghost. The ghost is the preliminary understanding for the meaning of death, and when he began to help his grandpa to find the forgotten things in this world, he has a further better understanding of the death.

This is in the continuous process of looking for answers, he finally understand that: death is as a calm good-bye, it means to miss each other sometimes, (but not keep thinking about him), “it means to watch the grandpa lost in the dark” disappeared.

It needs a process for the young children to understand what is it “death”, there’s no doubt that it’s a good way to understand the meaning of death in the constant cross-examine. The teacher of kindergarten and the parents may not able to give a perfect explanation to “death”, they also may not be able to answer the child’s question, but it’s a nice choice for the children to open the inlet and outlet of the emotion. In the whole process, we can’t see the sermon of the adults, but the truth of the children.

### **2.3 To deep in this theme in the continuation of searching for love**

The writer use the realistic approach to express directly the profound meaning of death in the book *Dose grandfather have his suit on?*. The authors he showed us the confusion and the bewilderment of little Bruno during one year after the death of his grandpa by describing of all kinds of his behaviors and the heart activities. In this sad mood, Bruno keep looking for his dead grandfather: run to see grandpa’s room, sit on the big sofa where grandpa often sit in before his death, find out the wooden boat which grandpa most prefer, to sleep on holding grandpa’s photos... Bruno keep on looking for true love of grandpa in his childish act, it was also in the process, Bruno successfully a releasing out his emotion depressive. It is just in this method in this work he change the grief of death into the miss to the relatives, change the fear of dying into the treasure to the life, and merge the education of death with the education of life.

In the story *Grandpa has turned to be a ghost*, the writer showed we a dying beyond words. Grandpa came back after his death because he forgot one thing to do when he’s alive, then both of the two generations began to look for and recall experience the good things in the night, to review feelings of love between each other, and their love continued in this process. In the end, the grandpa found that he forgot saying “goodbye” to Aspen. Grandpa’s death is neither so important or so unimportant, it was just a normal part of life, such as the flowers blossom and fall, such as a calm good-bye, but because of love and the memories, because he can miss his grandpa in heart, it seems that it’s not insurmountable between life and death. The most precious is to remember the memories.

*Badger’s Parting Gifts* is a sad but warm story, the authors use several simple lines, plus a few wipe lightly watercolor, put the heavy topic to be easy. Everyone is so sad that the badger has been to the other end of the long tunnel, they are so sad that even the thick snow can’t cover their sad. When spring comes, everyone begins to look for the present which are left by the badger-the gift of love, each of the animals has a special memory of the badger, at the same time when they look for love, the snow melts, and melt everyone’s sadness. “Life is beautiful like the summer flowers and death like the autumn leaves.” The badger went quietly to the other side of the long tunnel, the parable of the image is to avoid the sermon, also made the lovely image of death, and it gives the children a true feeling.

Those works above are all written about death, there’s no sermon of adults, but they teach the children to learn to face death actively, to recognize what death is. What they take to the children is not just the death education, but more respect of life, love for relatives. A child, when he had certain knowledge to death, he will learn to respect life, including humans, animals and plants, even the whole society. So that the picture story book in the theme of death is more than a death education, it is the education of life, the education of love. How to talk about death with the children in use of the picture story books is still an intractable problem for the present education in our country. Just when they pay attention to the physical and mental development level and their understanding of death for the children, and perfectly combined the pictures as well as the characteristics with the form of the picture story book, can the picture story books successfully to finish their mission.

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