

I will remember these things forever

Children and young people give creative voice to their experience of grief

Julie Edwards & Nicole Rotaru

Outreach Grief Services, 72pp

This is an inspiring and exquisite book. Conceived and created with elegant simplicity, social workers Julie Edwards and Nicole Rotaru have succeeded in giving voice to bereaved children and young people. Their own reflections bracket the book at beginning and end, releasing the centre for the creative art and words of the children. As I read it, I felt deeply privileged to be allowed into their world. The children's identity is protected, with names changed and illustrative photographs not of the actual children themselves, so the reader is not made to feel intrusive as is often the case in the media's portrayal of bereaved people.

The sensitivity and creativity which this book embodies, with its superb quality production, parallels the sensitivity and creativity of the service offered by the Victorian agency Outreach Grief Services. In the editors' words:

When we engage with bereaved children we utilise media that are accessible and familiar – play, drawing, painting, music. Play is a natural, safe and constant part of children's lives. It grounds them. Play and various art forms allow children to express and explore feelings that they may not be able to express verbally because of their developmental stage.

The work and words which form this book come out of the therapeutic groups offered by Outreach Grief Services to children aged 4 to 14 (the Kids Grieve Too program) and to adolescents and young adults (the Good Grief program). At the end of the book we are given a brief description of the group programs and how the monthly sessions are structured. This helps the reader make the link with interventions after and not before becoming immersed in the art work and accompanying words of the children and young people themselves. This is very effective as it allows the reader to absorb something of their experiences unfettered by the program or professional preoccupations.

That Julie Edwards and Nicole Rotaru describe themselves as the editors of this book, not its authors, speaks for itself. They see themselves as arranging the creative work of the children and young people, not writing about them. I think that it is this quality of genuine humility and respect which makes this book so special. The down to earth manner in which the details which indelibly mark the memories of death and loss are at times recounted, gives the book a profound authenticity. There is not a trace of the saccharine pseudo-spirituality which characterises much of the 'grief and loss' literature these days. The things to which the children give salience remind us that the ways they process experiences of loss are both similar to and different from those of adults.

Throughout the book the children are always individualised, never objectified. Theories and stages of bereavement are put aside, and the reader is invited to 'listen deeply' rather than interpret and intellectualise. Through their attempts to 'listen deeply' to the voices of bereaved people, the staff at Outreach Grief Services have come to the conclusion that the children

and the adults they see are often seeking ways to keep alive a connection with the deceased. This is affirmed, not pathologised. One of the tasks is therefore to assist the person to find individualised and creative ways in which the bond can be sustained. The very title of the book 'I will remember these things forever' comes from the heart of a 12-year-old boy grieving for his father. It is implicitly obvious that the service offered to him is not about pushing him to 'let go' but about enabling him to 'hold on' to that which he so treasures about his father. This dimension of the book will resonate strongly with readers for whom the deep desire to stay connected with the deceased is central to their own subjective experience of bereavement. Perhaps this desire is less easily satisfied in our culture than in some others. Perhaps we are beginning to reinvent such opportunities.

The children's work and words are deeply moving and at the same time uplifting. As Jane Miller, Chief Social Worker at the Royal Children's Hospital says in her Foreword, 'This is a marvellous book. It is immediate, confronting, painful and delightful.' It is indeed all of these. Accordingly, it does not avoid the reality that some children are bereaved as a result of a parent's suicide or murder, and when children make reference to such facts, this is conveyed succinctly in their own words. The intense sadness and longing of the children and young people is also powerfully captured as is anger and confusion, exemplified by ten year old 'Rosa'. She describes what is happening in the last of a series of drawings which chronicle the death of her father in hospital, saying 'I'm very sad. I'm yelling "I hate you". I thought that no one did anything to stop daddy from dying.'

The book is easily obtained directly from Outreach Grief Services. I hope that it will be read by many people. At one level it is a short 'picture book' which could be read by a child or by an adult with a child. At another level, it is a book which adults, be they relatives of bereaved children or professionals, could use to get a glimpse of what may be happening for the bereaved child. On a different level again, *I will remember these things forever* demonstrates in a very contemporary style the power of using art to express that which is at the core of the human condition, something our species has done from the earliest of times. The beauty with which the book does this makes it a work of art in itself.

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[This publication can be obtained from Outreach Grief Services, 34 Brunswick Street, Fitzroy, Vic 3065, Tel. 03 9415 1522, at \$19.95 per copy, or by completing the order form enclosed with this journal.]