

Turning the Page: Grief and Growth in Sixth Grade

BY LAUREN MCGOVERN

How I got sixth-graders to take a look—and talk about—the themes of death and resiliency as part of their reading class.



I SCROLLED THROUGH JOB listings at my kitchen counter. Nearing fifty, I felt shackled to the professional identity I'd shaped for nearly twenty years, and I was experiencing longer bouts of burnout as the sole mental health provider at a private middle school. Later, tragedy crashed onto the scene—my personal and professional lives collided. My younger son died by suicide, and that devastating loss reinforced my desire to pivot. I became a sixth-grade English teacher at the same school where I'd counseled for years, masking up and entering the classroom in September 2020.

Even though I stockpiled lesson plans, dove into curriculum maps, and embraced the new role, there were a couple of times when I went off-script. Things seemed to spring wildly from the grief that I was carrying.

Early in that first year, I tried to extend our discussion about Michelle Cuevas's *The Care and Feeding of a Pet Black Hole*. We were outside, eating a snack and standing far apart in a circle, and we'd just read the book in class. The main character, Stella, is struggling with the loss of her father, and we talked about the theme of loss. I told students, "Everyone dies." The words dangled there like ropey pieces of string cheese. The students blinked back at me. I unscrambled myself and coughed up a few examples of personification we'd heard in the story, and let them have their recess.

Eventually, I was able to pull together a decent wrap-up to the novel. I was two years into my bereavement and not sure how I'd respond if the students asked me about my own experience of grief while we explored Stella's development. I was focused on the surface—on the fictional grief of the characters, instead of the reality of my own. My internal monologue: Please don't ask me anything personal! I'm freaking out and trying to do this new thing!

Once Stella made it out of the black hole, I offered up *The Fourteenth Goldfish* by Jennifer L. Holm. In the front row: "What, no pictures?" Later, students exclaimed, "It's so descriptive!"

In *Goldfish*, eleven-year-old Ellie lives with her mom, but soon Ellie's scientist grandfather, Dr. Melvin Sagarsky, moves in. He's a grumpy and opinionated seventy-six-year-old man residing in a thirteen-year-old body—HIS thirteen-year-old body.

Melvin, who has two PhDs, has discovered the serum *T. melvinus*, which he's used to turn back time, and he holds out hope for a Nobel. But first, he has to attend middle school with Ellie.

Melvin's go-to outfit consists of polyester pants, practical shoes, and button-down shirts. He gets detention and naps at the Halloween dance. Melvin educates Ellie about Marie Curie, Jonas Salk, Louis Pasteur, and J. Robert Oppenheimer.

Death and grief make brief appearances in scenes about Melvin's long and loving relationship with his wife, a grandmother whom Ellie never really knew. The book ends with Melvin heading out on a road trip across the United States that he and his wife had always meant to take together.

Grief and loss have bit parts in *Goldfish*. Holm gives them major roles in *The Third Mushroom*, *Goldfish's* sequel, in which Melvin is reunited with Ellie and her cat, Jonas (as in Salk).

When I brought *The Third Mushroom* to the class, another year had passed for Melvin, and for me. While Melvin was away, he had launched a blog and read all the romance novels that his wife had left behind. In *Mushroom*, Holm points to Melvin's sorrow through his blog; in the caption beneath a dandelion photo—a reference to his wife's garden and affection for flowers—he writes: "I see you everywhere."

This time, I envisioned the slideshow I'd present to my new crew of students when we'd finished *Mushroom*, designing a solid summary of the grief and growth we'd witnessed together.

While *Mushroom* is ostensibly about Melvin helping Ellie with a science project, the themes of grief and growth continue from the first book. Melvin talks about being destroyed by his wife's death from cancer, particularly how angry and frustrated he felt when his decades as a scientist couldn't save her from the malignant cells.

Ellie, a budding cook, draws inspiration for her culinary feats from her grandmother's recipe box. Melvin is transported by taste and smell, wistful for the past as he enjoys Ellie's versions of banana bread and quiche.

As I cued up the slideshow, some of my students got comfortable on the carpeted floor, close to the screen, sinking into bean bags. Others stayed at their desks, doodling or fiddling with putty. I'd "sold" the slideshow earlier in the week:

“It’ll be about one of the book’s themes!”

“It’s about something that happens to everyone—like puberty!”

“You can shift your perspective from unprepared to empowered!”

I defined grief. I included slides about getting comfortable with uncomfortable topics, grief reactions we saw in the book, how to help yourself and others in grief (a slide titled “Don’t be a Griefus Doofus”), and, finally, the ways in which Melvin—in a new-and-improved adult body—embraced change and wove his grief into the fabric of his life (“It’s NOT about Getting OVER It”).

As the slideshow progressed, the students started to speak up about people they knew who had died: a great uncle, the mother of a friend, a classmate at another school. They wanted to talk about cancer, the pets they’d put down. “I love this slideshow!” they said. “I’m so glad we’re talking about this!”

But then, “So, wait. Did you go through grief?”

It was another year into my grief and growth, so I told them about my son and his brief life. I talked about how he’d attended the school years ago, and his gifts as an actor. I explained that a special feature in the new performing arts center—the slide installed along the winding staircase—is a memorial to him.

“I love that slide!”

“I’ve seen that plaque!”

This led to a sidebar about the different ways that people memorialize loved ones.

In the final parts of the presentation, we remembered how Melvin had pushed his way through his nervous energy to go on a date with Mrs. Barrymore, the widowed librarian he’d befriended; the poignant scene when he settled into a new apartment and carefully placed his wedding photo on the mantel; and how he had pondered aloud to Ellie about leaving his lab behind for a new career as a science teacher.

Not everything I present in class is linked to death, grief,

and loss, but because I’ve taught students ways to identify how a character figures something out, makes decisions, and changes throughout the story, they read at a deeper level. They notice the tough questions that characters wrestle with, and they celebrate those “A-ha!” moments embedded in the text. Students engage in an exercise together, articulating whether a narrative is a reflection of their own lives (a mirror), or they’ve been exposed to a new perspective (a window). These connections with books—and each other—enrich their reading experiences.

Melvin said there was no way he was ever going to set foot in another middle school, but that’s where he and I differ. For me, the middle-school English classroom is an ideal blend of experimentation and the opportunity to create a nurturing community. I believe that one of the best ways to help students understand the world is through reading; and I know that through helping them grapple with the concept of grief, I’ve also helped myself. ■

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