

# The Children Who Lived

Using Harry Potter and Other Fictional Characters  
to Help Grieving Children and Adolescents



Kathryn A. Markell and Marc A. Markell

Illustrations by Morgan K. Carr-Markell

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# Introduction: The Children Who Lived

Grieving children and adolescents are, like Harry Potter in the novels by J.K. Rowling, the boys and girls “who lived.” They have experienced the death of someone they care about. Now they need to find a way to deal with their grief, and to continue on without the person they have lost.

Children and adolescents often identify with the fictional characters in the stories they read, and the way that these characters handle their problems may help children to cope with similar issues in their own lives. This book outlines activities to help grieving children and adolescents by focusing on fictional child and adolescent characters experiencing grief in eleven novels.

The majority of the book focuses on activities and discussions based on the characters in the seven Harry Potter novels by J.K. Rowling: *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, and *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*. The Harry Potter novels are a rich source for themes and issues related to grief and loss.

However, because certain grief issues are not addressed in the Harry Potter novels, and since some children may relate more to characters from other stories, grieving characters from the following four novels are also included: *Charlotte’s Web* by E.B. White, *The Secret Garden* by Frances Hodgson Burnett, *Where the Red Fern Grows* by Wilson Rawls, and *Ordinary People* by Judith Guest.



<i>Ordinary People</i>
<i>Where the Red Fern Grows</i>
<i>The Secret Garden</i>
<i>Charlotte's Web</i>
<i>Harry Potter 1–7</i>

Harry Potter and the other fictional characters analyzed in this book, like many grieving children and adolescents, find that grieving is a complicated process. They experience not only sadness and longing, but also anger, guilt and regret.

The grieving child's experience of loss makes him or her different from many of their peers, and may even become an important part of the child's developing identity. In a time when life expectancy is increasing, more and more children and adolescents are reaching adulthood without experiencing the death of someone important to them. Those that do may feel not only grief, but also that they have been "singled out." That can be especially difficult at a time in life when it is common to wish you were exactly like everyone else.

In Harry's case, as in the case of many children, the loss of his parents is synonymous with the loss of many other things: the loss of attention, the loss of love, and the loss of caring role models to turn to for advice. For Harry, these losses are experienced again and again, as he compares himself to his spoiled cousin Dudley, who gets ample attention from his parents, and later to his friend Ron, who has grown up in a large and loving family. Luckily Harry finds many people in the wizarding world, both adults and children, who care about him and help him to deal with his grief.

Other grieving fictional children and adolescents do not have the support that Harry finds in his wizarding world. In *The Secret Garden*,

Mary and Colin have been emotionally abandoned by adults to deal with their grief and their development by themselves. In the first half of the book, they have become pessimistic and angry children who no one, child or adult, wants to be around. At age 10, almost the same age as Harry is at the beginning of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, they find each other, and they find other children, Dickon and Martha, to help them see the world more positively. Just as the magic of the wizarding world helps Harry to heal and grow, the magic of the secret garden helps Mary and Colin to blossom.

In *Ordinary People*, we find that sometimes family and friends are not enough to help children and adolescents cope with the death of someone important to them. After the death of Conrad's brother in a boating accident, Conrad feels overwhelming grief. Conrad misses his brother, and the "normal" family life he had, and he also feels guilty that he survived the boating accident when his brother did not. Conrad's mother is so upset about the death of one of her son's that she cannot help the other. When Conrad attempts suicide to end the pain of his grief, his mother is not there to support him. Conrad finds that seeing a psychiatrist, Dr. Berger, helps him to feel better. He has not been able to talk to any of his family or friends about how he is feeling. Just as Harry Potter feels stressed when his friend Cho wants to talk about the death of their mutual friend Cedric, Conrad feels overwhelmed when the friends of his dead brother want to discuss their grief with Conrad. Dr. Berger helps Conrad to see that he is not at fault for his brother's death, and that sometimes grieving parents cannot help their children to deal with their loss.

For many children, their first experience of grief and loss comes after the death of a pet. The focus of both *Charlotte's Web* and *Where the Red Fern Grows* is on the life and death of animals. Charlotte the spider helps Wilbur the pig, and the readers of *Charlotte's Web*, to understand that death is a part of life. She shows him how important loyal friends are in helping anyone through the rough times in life. Billy, in *Where the Red Fern Grows*, is also a ten-year-old child at the beginning of the story. He has saved money for two years to buy two hound dogs. He is finally able to buy two puppies that he names Old Dan and Little Ann. He hunts with these dogs almost every day, and eventually enters them in a contest. Just as Hagrid's many pets in the Harry Potter books are important to him, Old Dan and Little Ann are as important to Billy as

his friends and family members. When their pets and animal friends die, both Hagrid and Billy grieve.

The issues, discussion questions, activities, craft projects and games presented in this book are designed to help grieving children and adolescents (and maybe some adults too) deal with grief and loss issues by identifying with grieving fictional characters and with fictional worlds. The authors hope that the variety of issues and activities presented in this book will help adults working with grieving children and adolescents to find the themes and activities that will work best with that specific child. For example, one grieving child may find that **Theme 1: The Mirror of Erised** activities and discussion are helpful to them, while another may find that focusing on **Theme 2: Harry's Scar**, or **Theme 50: True Names for Pets** about pet loss, is more helpful.

Children and adolescents realize that all stories must come to an end. This realization does not diminish the pleasure of reading good stories, or stop people from rereading them. Reading a story can change the reader's life and rereading it can give them new insights each time. In the "real world," when someone dies, the story of their life and death lives on and continues to affect those who knew them. But after someone dies, people may not know how to talk about that life anymore, and they may be reluctant or afraid to discuss that person's death. Some fictional characters are as real to their readers as friends and family. Reading and rereading the story of a character's loss and how he or she copes with grief, can be a model for grieving readers, and can give readers hope.

The lives of real people, as well as the lives of fictional characters, show us that there is no one "right way" to grieve. Although the lives of characters are often complicated, they are "concrete" and unchanging in ways that are usually not true for living people. Therefore, it may be easier for some children to relate to fictional characters who they identify with, and to apply what the characters are going through to their own lives.

### **The Authors' Story**

We are siblings. Our father died when we were very young (Katie was seven years old and Marc was five years old), in 1963. Our mother was left to raise five children (ranging in age from one to eight years of

age) by herself. There was little support available for grieving adults at that time, let alone for grieving children. In the small town we grew up in, we sometimes felt identified as the “children whose dad had died.” We knew few other children who had lost a parent to death, and we never talked to anyone, inside or outside of our family, about our grief.

In talking to each other about our father’s death later in our lives, we realize that we divided our childhood into two parts: before our “daddy” died and after he died. Before he died, our father was a carpenter, and our mother was a “stay at home mom,” caring for five children. Our father often took on extra work in the evenings to make ends meet, and so we did not see him as often as we wished. Some of our fondest memories of our father are of combing his hair while he sat on the couch after Sunday dinner. He always kept a small comb in his pocket, and we would take turns combing his rather greasy Brylcreemed hair into what we believed were fashionable hairstyles. Our mother would sometimes tell us to stop bothering our father, but he was always patient with our hair combing, and told her to let us be.

One morning our father had such bad stomach pains that he had to be rushed to the hospital. Katie was already at school, but Marc remembers wiping his shoes off as he lay on the couch, so that they would be clean in the car going to the hospital. We never saw our father alive again. His stomach had split open, and he spent one week in the hospital as the doctors tried to battle all the complications that ensued. He died on June 4, 1963 at the age of 44. His death certificate said that the cause of death was pneumonia. On that day, seven-year-old Katie came home from school to find five-year-old Marc waiting for her in the yard. He said there was some bad news. She told him she didn’t want to hear it. They both went into the house, where their mom and grandmother were sitting with one of the priests from the church. Katie was told what Marc already knew: their father was dead.

For the next several days, everything was disorganized. Neighbors put us to bed at night while our mother tried to sort everything out. On the day that our mother picked out our father’s casket, we followed our older brother and one of his friends several miles across town. We were scared and excited to be so far from home, and worried that people would be angry with us for leaving without telling anyone. But when