



Learning to deal with death

Stephanie Owen Reeder examines some recent children's picture books which deal with the difficult subject of death

Death is a fraught subject at the best of times, but when it is presented in picture books questions are bound to be asked about the suitability of such a subject for, in particular, young children. However, death has always had a place in stories for the young, including folk and fairy tales.

Duck, Death and the Tulip by Wolf Erlbruch (Gecko Press, 32pp, \$29.99) at first glance looks like a picture book for preschoolers. The collage illustrations, with their succinct lines and pastel colouring presented on cream backgrounds, are uncluttered and engaging. Erlbruch uses minimal body language and facial expression for maximum impact, presenting Duck as an elongated angular shape, carefully balanced by the organic roundness of Death's skull. The strangely endearing Death is dressed somewhat incongruously in chequered robes, and he grasps a black tulip in his hand. Blocks of colour representing symbolic bodies of water and decoratively patterned black-and-white images of foliage occasionally introduce some added visual interest, but for the majority of the story the reader interacts only with Duck and Death.

The text, translated from German, is similarly pared down, as Duck and Death indulge in a dialogue which explores their ongoing relationship. The central idea behind this thought-provoking and ultimately profound story is the same one explored by Philip Pullman in the *His Dark Materials* trilogy – death is with us as a constant companion and integral part of our life. Duck, coming to the end of her life, confronts her own death, grows fond of it, and finally embraces it. Is this a book for children? It is definitely not for all children, and for younger ones it needs the intercession of a caring adult. For young adults and adults, however, it is a book to mull over

and be moved by.

Mending Lucille (Lothian, 32pp, \$28.99) by J. R. Poulter and Sarah Davis deals with the aftermath of the death of a loved one – the grief, the sense of loss and the necessary readjustments. Aimed at a young audience, it tells the story of a girl who has lost her mother. The mother is represented visually by the silhouette of a bird in full flight. The child's grief is represented by her doll, Lucille, who is broken. The girl's father is unable to mend Lucille – or his daughter, or himself for that matter, trapped as he is by his own emotions.

It is only when Chrissie comes into their lives that both father and child find someone who can mend them all. This is a moving story about the power of love. Both the writing and the illustrations are suffused with symbolism and tenderness. The photorealistic pictures are heart-warming, haunting and sometimes very beautiful. They perfectly capture the essence of a child's sense of loss and ultimate ability to move on.

A different sort of loss is dealt with in *The Dog on the Tuckerbox* (Black Dog Books, 32pp, \$24.99). In this carefully researched retelling of the story of the dog which steadfastly remained on the tuckerbox "five miles from Gundagai" waiting for a master who never returned. Corinne Fenton and Peter Gouldthorpe have produced a fitting memento of Australian pioneering history. The well-known story is retold with vigour and commitment, as Fenton builds up a picture of the relationship between the dog and her master, and creates a snapshot of the life they led tramping the bush with a bullock team as they brought much-needed supplies to early settlers living in rugged isolation.

However, it is Gouldthorpe's illustrations which entrance. They are glorious recreations of another era. His figures have a sculptural quality which perfectly captures the strength and courage needed to survive in the bush in a time before mass communications and motorised transport. And his landscapes have a clarity and strong sense of light which bring to life the countryside in its many moods – on

a mist-shrouded morning, in the searing heat of a summer day, in the star-studded coolness of the night, in the ravaged aftermath of a bushfire, or in the dank drizzle of a cold winter's day.

The Dog on the Tuckerbox is an important addition to the Australian picture book tradition of recording moments in our history for children to savour. It is a dramatic and moving story of companionship and love, told with compassion for the animal at its centre and presented in images that will remain with the reader long after the book is closed.

John Marsden is best known for his novels for young adults and the controversial picture book *The Rabbits*. His latest picture book, *Home and Away* (Lothian, 32pp, \$28.99), is illustrated by Matt Ottley, whose *Requiem for a Beast* recently won the Children's Book Council Picture Book of the Year Award. His win was met with both critical acclaim and much controversy. *Home and Away* should generate similarly strong responses. This is a disturbing book, but it is also brilliant.

From the start, Marsden turns our preconceptions about refugees on their head. The title, with its clever reference to a familiar Australian soap opera, is presented on the cover with an image of a boy behind a barbed-wire fence. Inside the book, a 15-year-old boy introduces us via email to his ordinary Australian family and their comfortable middle-class existence. And then the war starts. Australia is invaded and the family's life changes forever. A familiar scenario? It is the one Marsden used so successfully in his *Tomorrow* series. But here the family does not fight back. They escape on a leaky boat and suffer the same fate as the many refugees who have arrived on Australia's shores over the past decade.

Ottley's images are unforgettable, especially the heart-rending child-like drawings, which are interspersed with stark, unrelenting and absolutely compelling images, such as the blood-spattered fish tank with a winking, gun-toting cowboy on the TV screen behind it, and a blown-up Sydney Harbour Bridge with a



soldier throwing food packages to a sea of grasping hands. Death has become an integral part of life in this dark tale, and *Home and Away* is definitely not for the very young. It is chilling, confronting and

upsetting. It is also compulsory reading for all thinking people.

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Peter Gouldthorpe's illustrations in *The Dog on the Tucker Box* are a lovely evocation of an earlier era.

