

Tim Smedlund
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Annotated Bibliography: Grief and Loss in Supernatural YA Books

Grief and loss is one of the hardest things explain to anyone, let alone teenagers and children. And so often, adolescence is when people begin to experience loss, and it can be an extremely hard thing to deal with. Since it is such a difficult emotional experience to prepare someone for by talking about it, reading about it may be a better solution. Reading a novel about loss and grief would make it easier for young people to start to understand and prepare themselves for these kind of experiences. Obviously, it is mostly impossible to truly be prepared for a major loss as everyone experiences grief differently, but even just knowing that it is OK to grieve could make a big difference for a lot of people, and even a simple fact like that may be hard to talk about to a younger person.

So why choose the supernatural genre for this topic? Firstly, supernatural stories are a lot of fun usually, and at the very least I enjoy them quite a bit. Secondly, there are several different ways that supernatural books can talk about loss and grief that can be more subtle than simply attacking it head on like one would in a realistic fiction or drama type novel. Ghosts and other monsters can capture the imagination of whoever is reading it, while simultaneously tackling this real life issue that someone of a younger age may not have experienced in their lives yet. Particularly with a story like The Presence: A Ghost Story, the sorrow and the loss is veiled behind an exciting and interesting plot. Something like Frankenstein can do some of the same thing. While grief and loss is the main propulsion element of the story, the characters and the story itself does not get bogged down by it. An exception to this idea would be something more like The Lovely Bones, which really hones in on the experience of grief and how it can effect people in varying ways. Something I gathered from reading a few of the books of the list I have

compiled here is that each story takes grief and tackles it in a slightly different way, much like each individual would in everyday life.

Some of these stories, in particular The Lovely Bones, were really hard to get through because they were so depressing at points. Part of me thinks that is a flaw of the storytelling, but another part reminds me that actual grief and loss is always depressing, and it takes a lot to fight out of that emotional state. That is what I think is important about reading stories focused on this particular topic. Stories often inspire hope, and that is often what is found in these stories. By the end, even if it seemed to be an impossible road to travel, the story brings the characters back to something resembling normal life, and they find a way to deal with whatever tragedy they experienced. Optimism might seem like a simple goal for a teenager dealing with grief, but that doesn't make it easy to achieve. Even though it is obviously not real, narratives can help to inform everyday life, and maybe understanding that eventually people find a way to deal with loss, even if it is devastating and life changing. I think it is important to find a way to talk about and deal with these types of feelings that can often be so indescribable, and story is one of the best ways I can think of to take it on.

The Lovely Bones By Alice Sebold

Sebold, Alice. The Lovely Bones. Boston: Little, Brown, 2002. Print.

Summary: The Lovely Bones is the story of a girl who is brutally raped and murdered, and the telling of how her family and friends deal with both the loss of her, and the attempt to find her killer. What makes this story particularly compelling is that it is told from the perspective of the murdered girl from heaven. She is killed almost immediately upon starting the novel, and the rest

is told from her perspective, looking down on everyone she cared about on Earth. As her family and her few friends attempt to deal with what happened, a story of pain and growth unfolds.

Commentary: This book is a very hard hitting, unapologetic look at what the loss of a young girl can do to a family that was previously very happy, and although eventually they learn to move past the loss of the young girl, it is a long and difficult process. It can be hard to read sometimes, simply because of the fact that it is very depressing at parts, but that type of perspective is important to understand. But by the end of it, things are looking up for the family, and that is an important thing to remember about many of these other texts, that no matter how dark they are throughout, they usually end with some sort of optimism.

The Lovely Bones Directed by Peter Jackson

The Lovely Bones. Dir. Peter Jackson. Perf. Mark Wahlberg, Rachel Weisz, Saoirse Ronan. Dreamworks, 2009.

Summary: Similar to the novel, Susie is murdered at the age of 14 (though not raped) and the rest of the story is her family's attempt to deal with the tragedy and to find her killer. The murderers place in the plot is much more important than in the novel.

Commentary: The plot of the film is abbreviated somewhat from the plot in the book, as the film takes place or just a couple of years or so, and the novel looks through something like 15 years of life after Susie's death. Because of this, much of the pain of the family is glossed over, and it is more a story of trying to catch her killer than it is the story of a family grieving. The film hits you a little less hard, but it still gives you the very real sense of the pain within the family, despite it not going through the really tough parts of the novel.

The Presence: A Ghost Story Eve Bunting

Bunting, Eve. *The Presence: A Ghost Story*. New York: Clarion, 2003. Print.

Summary: This story revolves around two characters, a young girl named Christina and a ghost named Noah. Catherine was recently involved in a car crash that killed one of her best friends, a pen pal from Scotland who was visiting Catherine at the time. She goes off to visit her grandmother in California to try to escape from the accident, and she is brought to a church where this ghost, obsessed with finding a mate for himself abides and attaches himself to Catherine. Catherine struggles to understand this presence and fight against its ultimate wish; to bring her into the afterlife to spend eternity with him.

Commentary: This book is much tamer than *The Lovely Bones*, and it only deals with the fact that Catherine experienced this loss in a more superficial way, but that I think this is good because it makes it more suitable for younger readers. The story itself is fairly interesting and compelling, but having something that is easier to read and exists more as an entertainment piece is just as important as a more serious work when it comes to YA literature.

The Ghost of Crutchfield Hall by Mary Downing Hahn

Hahn, Mary Downing. *The Ghost of Crutchfield Hall*. Boston: Clarion Books, 2010. Print.

Summary: When twelve-year-old Florence boards the crowded horse-drawn coach in London, she looks forward to a new life with her great uncle and aunt at Crutchfield Hall, an old manor house in the English countryside. Anything will be better, she thinks, than the grim London orphanage where she has lived since her parents' death. But Florence doesn't expect the ghost of her cousin Sophia, who haunts the cavernous rooms and dimly lit hallways of Crutchfield and concocts a plan to use Florence to help her achieve her murderous goals. Will Florence be able to convince the others in the household of the imminent danger and stop Sophia before it's too late (Taken from www.goodreads.com)?

Commentary: This seems like a story that could be very suspenseful and interesting for younger readers. This text also deals with the death of parents, which is something that could be of use to children who have been through something like that. But it also has the element of the ghosts parents, and I wonder if that could give another viewpoint from an adults standpoint of the loss of a loved one.

The Great Blue Yonder, by Alex Shearer

Shearer, Alex. *The Great Blue Yonder*. New York: Scholastic, 2004. Print.

Summary: After finding himself dead from a bike accident, Harry emerges on the Other Side, a strange land where the sun is always setting but never quite disappears, and dead people wander about, waiting to move on to the Great Blue Yonder. Harry's not sure exactly what the Great Blue Yonder is, but he doesn't want to go there until he's found some way to let his sister know that he's sorry for the mean things he said to her just before the accident. To do that, he'll have to return to Earth as a ghost--and face what life there is like without him (Taken from www.goodreads.com).

Commentary: Harry and his family have to come to terms with his death, but instead of it being depressing, Shearer creates a novel that is funny and sometimes downright happy. This makes The Great Blue Yonder an important book to include because it is lighter but is also tackling grief and loss directly, but balances it with humor and lightness. This would probably be a more enjoyable read for young audiences, and could be used as a stepping stone into this topic.

A Monster Calls By Patrick Ness

Ness, Patrick, Siobhan Dowd, and Jim Kay. *A Monster Calls*. London: Walker, 2011. Print.

Summary: At seven minutes past midnight, thirteen-year-old Conor wakes to find a monster outside his bedroom window. But it isn't the monster Conor's been expecting-- he's been expecting the one from his nightmare, the nightmare he's had nearly every night since his mother started her treatments. The monster in his backyard is different. It's ancient. And wild. And it

wants something from Conor. Something terrible and dangerous. It wants the truth (taken from www.amazon.com).

Commentary: Although this is a story about impending loss, I think the significance is just the same. By framing Conor's grief about his mother within a monster story, the novel can tackle the emotional stress with the familiarity of a monster story, and can lessen some of the tension through it.

Teen Spirit by Francesca Lia Block

Block, Francesca Lia. *Teen Spirit*. New York: HarperTeen, 2014. Print.

Summary: After Julie's grandmother passes away, she is forced to move across town to the not-so-fancy end of Beverly Hills and start over at a new school. The only silver lining to the perpetual dark cloud that seems to be following her? Clark—a die-hard fan of Buffy and all things Joss Whedon, who is just as awkward and damaged as she is. Her kindred spirit. When the two try to contact Julie's grandmother with a Ouija board, they make contact with a different spirit altogether. The real kind. And this ghost will do whatever it takes to come back to the world of the living (taken from www.goodreads.com).

Commentary: This is a particularly interesting piece to me because it is also something of a romance novel, which could have a wider appeal than a few of the other texts on this list. This could possibly get young girls into this book initially, although it is still a book dealing with loss and grief in a serious way. But the romance can help move the plot forward and keep things more upbeat.

Frankenstein by Mary Shelley

Shelley, Mary Wollstonecraft. *Frankenstein*. London: Penguin, 2003. Print.

Summary: At once a Gothic thriller, a passionate romance, and a cautionary tale about the dangers of science, *Frankenstein* tells the story of committed science student Victor Frankenstein. Obsessed with discovering the cause of generation and life and bestowing animation upon lifeless matter, Frankenstein assembles a human being from stolen body parts but; upon bringing it to life, he recoils in horror at the creature's hideousness. Tormented by isolation and loneliness, the once-innocent

creature turns to evil and unleashes a campaign of murderous revenge against his creator, Frankenstein (taken from www.goodreads.com).

Commentary: Although this is also a science fiction novel, to me it walks the border of science and the supernatural, so I am including it here. What interested me about Frankenstein was that every action taken by both the monster and Frankenstein are driven by grief; the monster's grief of never having someone to love, and the fact that many of Frankenstein's loved ones are killed by the monster. Although this is ultimately a monster story, it is also surrounded by death, grief, and emotional pain.

Nothing But Ghosts by Beth Kephart

Kephart, Beth. *Nothing But Ghosts*. New York: HarperTeen, 2009. Print.

Summary: Ever since her mother passed away, Katie's been alone in her too-big house with her genius dad, who restores old paintings for a living. Katie takes a summer job at a garden estate, where, with the help of two brothers and a glamorous librarian, she soon becomes embroiled in decoding a mystery. There are secrets and shadows at the heart of *Nothing but Ghosts*: symbols hidden in a time-darkened painting, and surprises behind a locked bedroom door. But most of all, this is a love story—the story of a girl who learns about love while also learning to live with her own ghosts (taken from www.goodreads.com).

Commentary: Mystery novels have always fascinated me as they fascinate many young readers, so this book pulled me in for many reasons. The main character is dealing with the loss of her mother, while simultaneously dealing with this trying to unravel this mystery. The mystery keeps the reader engaged, and the grief of our main character keeps the reader thinking.

The Afterlife by Gary Soto

Soto, Gary. *The Afterlife*. Orlando, FL: Harcourt, 2005. Print.

Summary: You'd think a knife in the ribs would be the end of things, but for Chuy, that's when his life at last gets interesting. He finally sees that people love him, faces the consequences of his actions, finds in himself compassion and bravery . . . and even stumbles on what may be true love. A funny,

touching, and wholly original story by one of the finest authors writing for young readers today (taken from www.goodreads.com).

Commentary: This is a somewhat similar story to The Lovely Bones in the way it is told being that the main character is the ghost, and he is examining his life and the lives of the people around him. It is essentially the story of him attempting to find happiness, both for himself and those he left behind. Despite The Lovely Bones strength as a novel, it might not connect quite as much with male readers simply because the protagonist is female, but this story would probably be easier to connect with for male readers while still giving a similar look at life after death from the perspective of the ghost.