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A Hospice recommends: 10 books to help children and young adults understand death, dying, grief and loss

For World Book Day we've put together our own reading list with a very important theme: **death**.

Why is it so important? Dying and mortality is a difficult thing to come to terms with for anyone, and, whilst it can be upsetting, children and young people alike have curious minds and can often surprise us with the depth of their resilience. Like people, grief - for whatever reason - is as unique and individual as a thumbprint.

This is not a list full of self-help or inspirational guidance books, nor is it a collection of morbid tomes full of 'doom and gloom'. We've compiled a list of *stories*; well-loved novels and fictional worlds from beloved authors that explore themes of death and loss from different points of view, to help make sense of it all. Between their dust jackets lie authentic characters dealing with relatable emotions - no matter if their world is real or not. Whether your discoveries come in lightning bolt epiphanies or soft realisations - we hope that you find a new story that will remain with you and your child long after the very last page has turned. You may even stumble across something you'd never noticed before in an old favourite.

[My Father's Arms Are a Boat by Stein Erik Lunde and Oyvind Torseter](#)

This story is told from the viewpoint of a young boy who cannot sleep for his troubles and sorrow, and seeks reassurance from his father as he struggles to understand why his mother isn't going to wake up again. The paper-sculpture illustrations alone are works of art, but the questions and answers between father and son, and the observations of their journey through the forest that ease the small boy's worries, are what earns this book a place on our list.

[Saying Goodbye to Hare by Carol Lee and Donna Bell](#)

This one is particularly special to **ellenor** – it's one from our own library that we often share with children who use our support services. We've picked this one in part for Bell's beautiful illustrated depictions of young rabbit, who learns that his good friend hare is ill. This book is sensitively honest and recognises a lot of the more difficult emotions and questions children may have about illness, death and sadness. *Saying Goodbye to Hare* also includes some guidance notes for adults at the end, and is recommended for children who are experiencing the illness and expected death of a loved one.

[The Heart and the Bottle by Oliver Jeffers](#)

The theme of bereavement in this one is a little more subtle, but still one that smaller children will notice and understand. A young girl is full of curiosity and questions, and shares her excitement for learning with her grandfather – until one day, he is gone. So she bottles up her heart, and her feelings, quite literally. *The Heart and the Bottle* is the wonderful kind of picture book where the illustrated story says so much more than the words. It is also a lesson in what happens when you try to protect and shield yourself

from difficult emotions. There's also a fantastically innovative [iPad app version](#) available for those who prefer to get a bit more interactive.

[Duck, Death and the Tulip by Wolf Erlbruch](#)

Duck notices she is being followed by a hooded figure, which turns out to be Death, for whom she has many questions. Don't be alarmed by the title or synopsis of this unusual yet brilliant picture book – at times funny and oddly comforting, this one addresses the complexity of death, the afterlife, and the world left behind, in a simple and endearing way - a real conversation starter.

[Charlotte's Web by E.B. White](#)

This tale of an unlikely friendship between a pig and a spider is packed with metaphors and lessons about the cycle of life and death, appearing particularly as the changing seasons – and the ongoing threat of avoiding becoming Christmas dinner. Thanks to his eight-legged mentor Charlotte, Wilbur the pig comes to accept that death is part of life, and learns to understand and accept mortality.

[Skellig by David Almond](#)

This wonderfully imaginative young adult novel follows ten year old Michael and his family as they move to a ramshackle old house with a surprise addition living in the garage – a curmudgeonly, critter-eating, cramped up old creature called Skellig - who may or may not be an angel. With his new neighbour Mina, Michael befriends the peculiar being, nursing Skellig back to health with Chinese Takeaway before turning to him for support when his sick baby sister's condition becomes life-threatening. The delicate magic of David Almond's storytelling and wonderful characters will hook readers of all ages in.

[Ways to Live Forever by Sally Nicholls](#)

Sam is a boy of eleven who collects stories and loves fantastic facts. Sam also has leukaemia. Sam has a list of dreams, and a list of *Questions Nobody Will Answer*. Direct, honest, and full of unexpected laughs, *Ways To Live Forever* chronicles the almost-too-real questions and answers of a boy who is making

the most of a short life - a boy who is determined to live it by fulfilling his wishes. Sadly, while this Young Adult novel is fiction, learning to face terminal illness is a very real story for many of the families in our care.

[The Fault in Our Stars by John Green](#)

It's likely you may have already heard of or indeed read this world-wide bestseller (our advice is not to bother with the film). Those who rave about TFIOS often prescribe a box of tissues, and you may find yourself shedding more than a few tears over the fleetingly precious love story between central characters and self-proclaimed 'cancer kids' Hazel and Gus amidst their terminal diagnoses. John Green has penned something beyond love and death – this book also tackles the meaning of life, the impact you have on those around you, and the legacy you leave behind.

[Grief is the Thing With Feathers By Max Porter](#)

This one is definitely for the more mature bookworms - we recommend you read it first before giving it to your young adult. It's *very* different; tough going, but deserves a try. A grieving father and two sons are visited by an enormous crow, who appears one night after the loss of their mother and wife, and vows to remain until the family 'no longer needs him'. This bird is no Mary Poppins. *Grief is the Thing With Feathers* is the raw portrait of grief; witty, beautiful, heart-wrenching and full of oft-fractured prose, particularly from Crow. It's a memorable piece of art unlike anything we have ever read before.

[The Harry Potter Series by J.K. Rowling](#)

We've saved the best for last, so we've got a little more to say about this one. Chances are you or your child are already familiar with the worldwide phenomenon that is Harry Potter, but we'd encourage you to read them again and see if you notice anything new about them. It's difficult to pick just one of the seven books in the series – Harry is bereft before the story even begins. Each school year Harry grows and learns about love, friendship and family, and sadly, he also learns once more what it's like to feel the loss of important figures in his life, particularly those he sees as mentors. Even in a fictional wizarding world full of magical possibilities – and the legendary Deathly Hallows - author J.K. Rowling touchingly and sensitively handles the rule that 'you can't bring someone back from the dead'. Jo has often stated

that 'death is the most important theme' within the books.

"Perhaps two or three days after I had the idea for Harry, I disposed of his parents in quite a brutal way - it didn't read in a cruel way, but I mean it was very cut and dry, nothing lingering, no debate about how it had happened, and at that stage no real discussion of how painful that was going to be. Well of course, Mum died six months after I'd written my first attempt at an opening chapter. And that made an enormous difference because I was living it, I was living what I had just written.

The Mirror of Erised is absolutely entirely drawn from my own experience of losing a parent. "Five more minutes, just, please, God, give me five more minutes". It'll never be enough."

Hogwarts Headteacher Albus Dumbledore is one of many characters offering glimpses of wisdom that may seem mystical or cryptic, but gives some very real and profoundly comforting sentiments that wizards and muggles alike can carry with them. To finish, we'd like to share our favourite, from *The Prisoner of Azkaban*:

"Happiness can be found, even in the darkest of times, if one only remembers to turn on the light."

We'd love to hear your recommendations - get in touch with us on [Facebook](#) or [Twitter](#) to share yours!

We are **ellenor**, a charity funded by the generosity of our local community, offering the best care and support to families facing terminal illness in Kent. We are the **only** charity in the county that provides hospice care for people of all ages – babies, children and adults - and their families. This includes pain and symptom relief, end of life care, respite, bereavement support and emotional and spiritual care.

Our Children's Hospice Care, formerly known as chYps, is provided in the comfort of the family home and spans across North and West Kent and the London Borough of Bexley. Adults living in Gravesham, Dartford and Swanley, receive care in their place of choice, including their own homes, at our Hospice in Gravesend and in local care homes.

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