

Top 10 children's books on death and bereavement

Introduction

From Michael Rosen's *Sad Book* to Patrick Ness's *A Monster Calls*, Holly Webb, author of [A Tiger Tale](#), shares the most touching books that help us talk and think about loss of a loved one

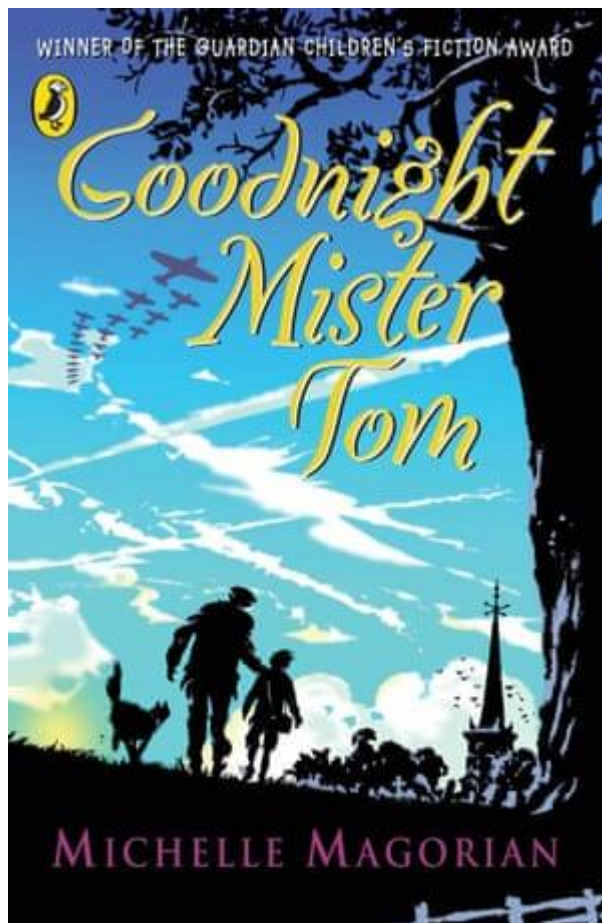


Illustration from Michael Rosen's *Sad Book*
Photograph: Illustration: Quentin Blake for the Guardian

These are such amazing books, and I feel so strongly about them all. Writing this list has made realise that what I love about these books is the way they talk about death as something that can be awful, and shocking, but in them the person who dies leaves

their family and friends changed, and remembering them with enormous amounts of love (but not afraid to feel anger, fear and all the other natural reactions to a death).

Holly Webb Photograph: Nigel Bird/PR



1. [Goodnight Mister Tom](#) by Michelle Magorian

This was a book I read and reread as a child (as well as *Back Home*, my favourite of Michelle Magorian's books). I read it again recently as I heard the author on the radio talking about the book, and I was fascinated to hear that she'd considered not including the death of one of the main characters. I remember being horrified, almost angry, when I first read the book – the death (not saying whose) seems so incredibly unfair after all that Will, the main character, has suffered. But as she said, the war was real, and it would have been cowardly not to show how horrific the losses were. My oldest son (Tom, and another of my sons is called William...) read *Goodnight Mr Tom* at school last year, and was equally shocked – he said it was the first book he'd read where a main character died, and he almost didn't believe that it could be right, I remember the same feelings so clearly. Will's grieving is described so realistically, as is the way he

carries on, trying to think like his friend, so that he's not forgotten.

2. [Bridge to Terabithia](#) by Katherine Paterson

I borrowed this from my school library, probably shortly after I read Goodnight Mr Tom – again Leslie's death (this one is impossible to talk about without spoilers, sorry!) is so shocking. But the amazing world she created carries on for Jesse and May Belle. This is one book where the film is almost as good!

3. [Goodbye Mog](#) by Judith Kerr

I bought this for my boys as they'd loved all the other Mog books, and I knew that they would find it difficult when our own elderly cat died. Although it's about a cat dying, Mog's tiredness and readiness to leave are beautifully expressed and would help a child struggling with any loss. Mog's continued love for her family, and the way she wants them to be happy after she's gone, are heartbreaking.

4. [No Matter What](#), by Debi Gliori

I read this picture book long before I had children, and thought it was so beautiful that I made my husband read it – in Waterstones, where it made him cry... No Matter What is about love, going on forever, even after we're gone. As an adult, particularly if you have young children, do not read it in public if you don't want to be seen crying!

5. [The Velveteen Rabbit](#), by Margery Williams

When the Velveteen Rabbit's owner has scarlet fever, all his toys have to be destroyed for fear of infection. But the rabbit has been so well loved that he's made Real. Such a beautiful book, again not directly about death, but about being taken away from someone you love, and the way things change and carry on.

6. [Charlotte's Web](#), by EB White

Oh dear. So horribly sad, and Charlotte's death is so uncompromising, the way she's left behind in all the litter of the fair. But she carries on in her children (who have never met her) and the stories that Wilbur tells of her.

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

My youngest son and I came across this in the library a few years ago, and he was fascinated by the ghoulish-looking Death, who is drawn with a skull for a head. This book is so interesting, mostly because it doesn't give any answers. This is actually very helpful – lots of room for discussion. The story implies that Death is part of life, a close companion always. The writing (or rather, the translation, this book is translated from German) is beautiful. I particularly love that after Duck has died, Death strokes her crumpled feathers back into place.

8. [A Monster Calls](#), by Patrick Ness

One for older children – not because it's at all difficult to read, it's a complete page turner, but it's deeply emotional. Conor is desperately trying to cope with his mother's approaching death. An absolutely gut-wrenching description of the fury and guilt surrounding caring for a parent. Conor's anger makes you want to wade in and save him, somehow. I was practically grinding my teeth at the unfairness of it all. No easy answers in this one either, but that's the beauty of the book.

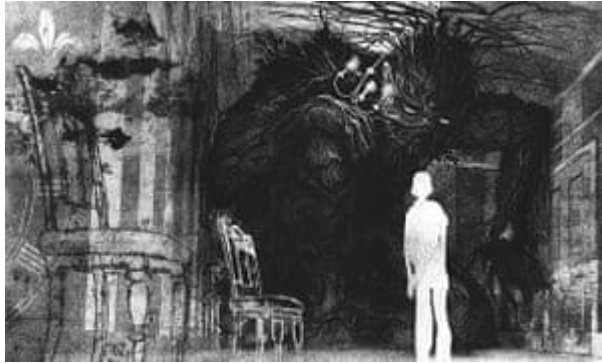


Illustration from *A Monster Calls* by Patrick Ness *The Guardian*/Illustration: Jim Kay
Photograph: Illustration: Jim Kay for the *Guardian*

9. Michael Rosen's Sad Book, by Michael Rosen

Like *A Monster Calls*, a wonderful book that says you're allowed to be sad, and everyone is sad sometimes (and angry and disbelieving and horrible to other people...) I usually think of Quentin Blake's illustrations as mad and bright and joyful, here they're brilliantly scratchy and dark.

10. The Secret Garden, by Frances Hodgson Burnett

Not an obvious one, and the one that doesn't immediately fit into my argument... But I'm working on a book inspired by *The Secret Garden* at the moment, and I've been reading it and thinking about it a lot. Death pervades this book – Mary's parents have died, so she's sent back from India to Misselthwaite. Colin's mother has also died, after an accident in her beloved garden, leaving his father grief-stricken, and his son abandoned and terrified that he will die too. It's not a book to give a child who's grieving, more an example of how crippling (literally, in Colin's case) grief can be. But then the garden itself comes back to life, bringing memories of Colin's mother, who created it, and healing both the children. Frances Hodgson Burnett had some interesting theories about what would probably now be called positive thinking, but her descriptions of spring reawakening the garden are beautiful.

List compiled by Holly Webb