The Impact of Fiction Novels on Grief Literacy:

Reader Engagement with Nonnormative Portrayals of Grief

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Abstract

Our culture is described as a grief illiterate culture, and a preoccupation with fixing and overcoming grief instead of tending to and living with grief is partly perpetuated by misrepresentations of grief in popular media. More realistic portrayals of grief can help normalize grief, expand understanding of grief and contribute to a more socially supported experience of grief.

Research has shown that reading narrative can evoke empathic and reflective responses in readers, which can help readers reflect on the reality of grief and empathize with grieving characters. There are also indications that readers engage differently with fictional and autobiographical narrative. Since fiction literature is a big part of our entertainment culture this thesis looks into what a new fictional narrative of grief in literature can look like and how readers engage with these.

This thesis demonstrates how both textual analysis and reader response research are needed to gain insight into how fiction novels can contribute to grief literacy, and follows Bartlett et al., who studied an autobiographical grief narrative, by looking into reader engagement with fictional grief narratives.

*Hamnet* by Maggie O’Farrell, *Like Family* by Paolo Giordano and *What We Lose* by Zinzi Clemmons are analyzed and to determine whether grief was portrayed realistically, four criteria are articulated, based on accounts of lived experiences of grief in recent books by grief literacy advocates.

Empathic and reflective responses depend on a reader’s transportation into the story, but an account of a lived experience of grief diverges in structure, progression, temporality and closure from the classical story arc. To investigate how an account of grief is accommodated in the narrative structure of the novels, they were analyzed for their structure and narrative elements. *Goodreads* reviews of the three novels were examined to see how readers engage with these grief narratives. Their engagement was measured by looking at whether they acknowledged the grief narrative in their reviews, as well as whether they further reflected on specific features of grief in more detail.

The data shows that the novel that met each criteria of realistic grief had the highest number of readers who engaged with the grief narrative and were able to reflect on it in detail in their reviews, compared to the novels that met fewer criteria. The results further suggested that most essential to detailed reflection on a grief narrative seem to be the portrayal of grief as long term and the portrayal of grief without closure as well as a portrayal that does not sentimentalize grief. A story in which grief is reflected on by the protagonist, helps readers also reflect on grief and what it means to the characters and to themselves.

The results show that a fictional narrative of grief can contribute to grief awareness and understanding in its readers, when grief is depicted in a certain way.

**Keywords**: grief literacy, reader response, (non)normative grief narratives, fiction novels

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# 1. Introduction

Shortly after *And Just Like That,* the sequel series to the popular, early 2000s HBO series *Sex and the City*, premiered in 2021, speculation emerged on social media and entertainment outlets that the character of Carrie was exhibiting signs of dementia in the episode “Little Black Dress” ([Fedirighi](https://vervetimes.com/author/craig-fedirighi/); Gissen; Pham; Schwartz). After her husband had suddenly died, shown in the previous episode, Carrie seemed forgetful and distracted in a conversation with a friend. Against a stream of articles and social media posts about the “heart wrenching” new storyline of Carrie’s dementia, there were only a few articles and social media posts that pointed out that Carrie was most probably exhibiting signs of grief (Feintuch). It seemed that many viewers could not conceive that the death of a loved one in one episode, would still affect the bereaved character in the next episode, or that grief can have the effects on cognition that Carrie experiences.

## 1.1 Grief literacy

Megan Devine refers to instances like this as grief illiteracy: “society’s emotional illiteracy around death” (xv, xvii, 32, 39). According to writer and grief advocate Hope Edelman “[a] terrible disconnect exists between what the average person thinks grief should look and feel like [...] and how grief [...] actually behaves” (xxii). We live in an era marked by discomfort with death and grief (Bartlett et al. 556; Bladek 936-7; Fowler 527; Gilbert qtd. in Prodromou 3). Amy-Katerini Prodromou, a scholar of life writing on loss and grief, calls today’s society a “death-denying society” (3, 24-5) and Philippe Ariès, a historian who examined death- attitudes and mourning culture through the ages noted that in the beginning of the 20th century in most Western countries and particularly the United States, the accepted attitude towards death had changed drastically and death and grief had become shameful and forbidden (85).

A cultural fixation on overcoming grief and quickly returning to happy and normal again prevents grief to be seen and treated as something to tend to or support over longer periods of time. Consequently our culture does not teach us how to bear witness to grief, or come to grief with the skills needed to be helpful (Devine xviii, 28).

Instead, our “overcoming” culture sees grief as an obstacle to happiness and often strategizes grief (Devine 30) and holds it against outdated and disputed[[1]](#footnote-1) stage models of grief, such as the Five Stages of grief model[[2]](#footnote-2) (Kübler-Ross) from 1969. Such models play into a cultural fixation on overcoming adversity and moving on, and offer people a sense of control over their grief. They are misleading and unhelpful by suggesting that grief behaves in a universal way, can be managed and solved, and has a linear pathway towards closure (Edelman 18-23; Prodromou 4; Weston 1). Though the medical and academic world has long moved on from such models in favor of theories of grief as enduring (Klass, Silverman, and Nickman), they still persist and shape public discourse about grief (Edelman 21), as evidenced by a recent CNN article called “The Five Stages of Grief and How to Get Through Them” (Rogers). Conversations about grief are often still directed towards “getting through” it and coming out on the other side, while more honest conversations about the enduring and complex reality of grief are avoided or suppressed (Edelman 9). Devine refers to this as “the gag order on pain” and points out that “trying to talk someone out of their grief is both hurtful and entirely different from helping them live with their grief” (34, 54, xviii).

### 1.1.1 Cultural avoidance of grief and normative grief

Cultural avoidance of grief does not only create and perpetuate ignorance about grief, it also creates social norms and behaviors around grief. Ariès notes a social rejection of public mourning as self-indulgent and a social admiration for people who hide their grief (92). This is also noted by Hope Edelman, who remembers of her own grief for her mother: “I discovered how easily silence and pretense are mistaken for dignity and how dignity inspires praise” (6). In the grief memoir *The Year of Magical Thinking,* Joan Didion contemplates how grieving is often seen as self-pity and “dwelling on it”, and as a “failure to manage the situation” (192-3), alluding to overcoming-culture. The societal avoidance of painful emotions is also reflected in what Devine calls the “cult of positivity” (34), also often referred to as “toxic positivity”: a dysfunctional approach to emotional management that rejects and dismisses natural emotions such as sadness and that is widespread in Western culture (Harrington). Expressions of sadness or depression are often deflected with phrases encouraging positive thinking, gratitude and strength and enduring. A consequence is that many people have limited social and emotional means to support grieving people, and are conditioned to offer misplaced advice, platitudes and positivisms. Anna Wagner investigated digital mourning practices and noted that individual expressions of grief on social media are often subject to restricting social norms, to such an extent that social media users may consider blocking or unfollowing someone who is seen to over-share their emotion, and grieving social media users may opt to altogether avoid posting grief-related content (qtd. in Giaxoglou and Döveling 2). Such norms further contribute to the isolation a grieving person may experience but also to the invisibility of (other people’s) grief in our daily lives and culture.

A society that does not acknowledge and understand grief, or even actively discourages the expression of grief, does not know how to support grieving people beyond the immediate scripted mourning rituals of the funeral. This leads to countless people dealing with their grief mostly by themselves, unable to adequately grieve their loss and express their feelings and struggles (Edelman xxviii). People may feel pressured into appearing to have moved on from their grief within days, weeks or months of their loss, while in reality they continue to feel and live with grief, which they learn to hide (Edelman xxviii). Edelman suggests that unexpressed grief may be one of the most overlooked health crises of our time (xxviii), while Devine calls it “an epidemic of unspoken grief” (54). Grieving people are at risk of stigmatization, isolation, physical illness and mental health struggles such as depression and anxiety (Devine xvi, 117-8, 133; Edelman xxvii; Koopman “Reading” 68; Stroebe, Schut, and Stroebe; Zisook and Shuchter).

### 1.1.2 Making space for grief

The emergence of spaces dedicated to grief and grieving, both on and off the internet, are born out of unmet needs around loss and grief, but are also intended to contribute to awareness and change. *Instagram*, for example, is home to countless accounts specifically dedicated to grief awareness and education, as well as to creating spaces for personal stories and expressions of grief. Many of these accounts follow each other and regularly repost each other’s posts and in this way have turned into something of an interconnected online community with a unified message[[3]](#footnote-3). The need for such a community is evident in the number of accounts and the many followers these accounts have. Megan Devine’s *Instagram* account @refugeingrief, for instance, has over 115 thousand followers. Some of the accounts extend into websites, books, podcasts, newsletters, resources, community calls and retreats. Yet these spaces, communities and conversations are still largely separate from - and obscure to larger society.

### 1.1.3 Depictions of grief in popular culture

The way loss and grief are depicted in entertainment culture plays a big part in how grief is thought and talked about, since the normative story of grief is a misrepresentation of it. Edelman believes that we have been conditioned by popular culture and mass media to expect a happy ending or to find the positive spin in things, even in bereavement (251). The stigmatization of difficult emotions, and the preoccupation with unrealistic happy and hopeful endings, and how they have become normative, is portrayed in *And Just Like That*, when Carrie, who is a writer of nonfiction books about relationships, writes a book about the death of her husband. After handing in the manuscript, her publisher comments on its raw honesty, but also calls this honesty “brutal” and “pretty dark” and a departure from her previous work (“Sex and the Widow” 1:59). Carrie has to remind her publisher that bereavement has changed her life and reality. She is nevertheless urged to go on a date, less than a year after her husband’s death, so that she can include “an element of hope, [...] the suggestion of a brighter future” to her account of her experience of loss and grief. The series itself resists the normative hopeful endnote of loss and grief by showing that Carrie tries to oblige her publisher by going on a date, but finds that she is not ready to date yet and accepts this.

Edelman explains how Western society loves stories of transformation, rebirth and metamorphosis and that there is an enormous cultural pressure to plot our personal stories in that direction (247). Devine believes that our entertainment culture with its fixation on redemption, transformation and happy endings contributes to our grief- illiterate culture (32): “[g]rieving people are met with impatience precisely because they are failing the cultural storyline of overcoming adversity” (34). Our popular movie storylines and book plots “glorify grief and loss as a way to grow as a person; to transcend loss is the biggest goal” (26). She notes the lack of stories that resist this cultural narrative. “We have no stories that tell us how to live in it. We have no stories of how to bear witness. [...] In telling better stories, we weave a culture that knows how to bear witness, to simply show up and be present to that which can never be transformed. In telling better stories, we learn to be better companions, to ourselves and to each other” (36). Devine believes that a new cultural narrative is essential for grief literacy (36).

If much of societal grief illiteracy is fed and perpetuated by grief narratives on TV and in books, it follows that this is also where the biggest need and potential for change lies. Realistic representations of grief in media, art and literature can contribute to such a new cultural narrative, and help humanize and normalize grief in wider society, create awareness, empathy and honest conversation about this topic, all of which can contribute to a change in how grief is thought and talked about in our society, and to a more socially supported experience of grief. Health website *The Mighty* has written multiple articles about the way that *And Just Like That* educates viewers on grief (Sudakov). This shows how important and impactful it can be to resist normative depictions of grief.

1.1.4 Normalizing grief through literature

Besides TV, literature is another widely consumed media form that can contribute to grief literacy and the normalization of grief. Bartlett et al. state that “literary representations of grief expand our understanding of bereavement” (557). Reader response scholars Raymond Mar and Keith Oatley explain that fiction literature offers more than just entertainment; that the function of (literary) fiction is the simulation of social experience, and facilitates the understanding of social information. Reading narrative can lead to reflection on the events and social experiences depicted, as well as to an increase in empathy for characters unlike the readers themselves, and for experiences that are different from their own (173).

Experiencing this kind of empathy, called narrative empathy, can be especially significant when it comes to emotions and empathy that are repressed or ignored in real life, such as emotions about loss and grief, and empathy towards grieving people. Dominick LaCapra sees narrative empathy as “[...] a counterforce to numbing, [which] may be understood in terms of attending to, even trying, in limited ways, to recapture the possibly split-off, affective dimension of the experience of others” (40). By reading about grief and feeling empathy for grieving characters, readers may be able to tend to, or reconnect to an emotional experience that has been numbed or cut off by the cultural and social denial of grief in real life.

### 1.1.5 A new narrative of grief

Grief narratives are well represented in the genre of autobiography and memoir, and even have their own subgenre: the grief memoir. While autobiography is a popular subgenre of nonfiction literature (Smailes), grief memoirs make up only a small part of it. Fiction, however, dominates the stories we consume in popular culture and this is also true for novels. Fiction novels have a far larger and broader readership than autobiographical novels (Curcic; Smailes), which suggests the influence that more truthful and realistic representations of grief in fiction novels could have on the cultural narrative of grief and on grief literacy.

In Devine’s earlier words, what would a “better story of grief” look like in a fiction novel? Can a fictional account of grief portray grief accurately if it is “made up” and not necessarily informed by lived experience, as with grief memoirs? For a reader to engage with the story and contemplate the social experiences depicted, they need to feel transported into the story (Koopman and Hakemulder 80, 88, 90). Can this be achieved when a realistic grief narrative diverges so sharply from our normative story arc and cultural narratives of loss and grief? How do readers engage with narratives that diverge in this way? These are the questions this thesis will address.

There is a growing awareness of the social impact dramatic portrayals in popular media have and how misrepresentation can perpetuate stereotypes, hurtful norms and ignorance. Research into this topic can shine a light on grief as a social issue that needs better and more responsible representation in literature and other media. Identifying how grief can be portrayed realistically, and in a way that readers engage with and see as appealing reading, can give insight into whether nonnormative grief narratives have a readership and a market. This is important as the publishing industry is profit-driven.

Research can help inform recommendations on how to responsibly address depictions of grief in fiction. This can be helpful not only for writers, who may gain awareness that the misrepresentation of grief in their novel or manuscript is not “only a story” but contributes to the perpetuation of a cultural narrative that isolates and stigmatizes grieving people, but it can also help create awareness and inspire a sense of responsibility among literary agents, publishers, editors, sensitivity readers, professional reviewers and even everyday readers who may take this into account when buying new books or reviewing novels with a grief narrative.

## 1.2 Focus, research question and structure

### 1.2.1 Focus

Different fields of study have paid attention to depictions of grief in literature, which has resulted in for instance studies that look at the literary language of grief and the intersection of literature and emotions, and how the “literary feeling” of grief is achieved, or at how writers “figure grief” (Hogan, “Affect”; Smythe). Only some studies that textually analyze grief narratives are concerned with whether the depiction of grief in those texts represents the reality of grief (Prodromou; Weston). Such studies draw from reports on the psychological effects of grief and from published memoirs to inform the researchers’ understanding of what grief is and looks like. Both Prodromou and Weston motivate their research by establishing that grief is misunderstood and misrepresented in e.g. literature, pop psychology and society. However, how readers would engage with the texts Weston and Prodromou study, and thus the impact these texts may have on society and its relationship with grief, is left unexplored in both studies.

In reader response studies, grief narratives have figured as the material that is used in studies that look at the effect of e.g. a text’s literariness or genre on empathic responses or on social and moral cognition (Wimmer et al.; Koopman, “Effects”, “Empathic”). What effect the portrayals of grief themselves have on the readers and how these impact their understanding of grief is not the focus of the studies, although Koopman does look at empathic understanding of grieving people in participants (“Empathic”). However, Koopman’s participants are university students and not representative of society, and they were asked to agree or disagree with statements about grief, which may be leading and with which they do not articulate their own understanding of grief (Koopman “Empathic” 69; Wimmer et al. 227).

Bartlett et al. remark in their 2022 research that textual analysis and narrative theory on the one hand, and reader response on the other are almost always researched independently (555). When they wished to address this gap in research by carrying out a textual analysis of a grief memoir as well as an analysis of readers’ responses, it also became the first study that looked at the way readers respond to a grief narrative. The study focused on whether readers chose and approached an autobiographical grief narrative with a drive for sense-making in the wake of a loss, but also found articulations of an expanding understanding of loss and grief, which leads Bartlett et al. to conclude that “autobiographical representations of grief have the power to broaden and alter public perceptions of loss and grief” (565). While Bartlett et al. are concerned to a degree with grief literacy, their study is motivated by a different research question than this thesis, and their interest is in the genre of memoir, which leaves reader engagement with fictional narratives of grief unexplored.

Since readers process fiction and nonfiction narratives differently (Altmann et al.; Keen, *Narrative* 155; Koopman and Hakemulder 79-80; Hogan, *Mind* 2-3; Oatley 440-3) and since this may influence their empathic and reflective responses (Koopman and Hakemulder 80, 87-8), research into reader engagement with fictional grief narratives can complement the existing research and expand this field of research.

### 1.2.2 Approach

In order to address the questions this thesis has raised so far, a dual approach similar to Bartlett et al. will be used. To answer the questions of whether a fictional account of grief can accurately portray the reality of grief, and what narrative structure can accommodate a realistic grief narrative, textual analysis is needed, and to investigate how readers engage with such a narrative, reader response-based research is needed.

For this thesis, an approach of using people’s own undirected statements about their experience will apply to both people’s experience of grief as well as readers’ experiences of reading a grief narrative. Grief is an experience that affects more than a griever’s emotional or mental state (Devine 117-48; Edelman xxix) but studies such as Weston’s or Prodromou’s look at only one aspect of an all-encompassing experience that can have cognitive, emotional, psychological, physical and social effects. To include the holistic experiences of grievers, books by the aforementioned *Instagram* grief community’s most influential voices, or advocates, will be used, as these represent first-hand and holistic accounts of experiences of grief and the books clearly articulate what grief in all its facets and complexity looks like. Quotes from these books have been posted, shared, re-shared and liked[[4]](#footnote-4) on *Instagram* by the hundred thousands. People usually post, like, or share posts that they identify or agree with, so it can be said that these books represent “the voice” of grieving people and their experiences.

Bartlett et al. emphasized the importance of using “real readers” or “nonprofessional readers” (555) to look at reader engagement as opposed to professional reviewers and -critics and they base this on Driscoll et al., who stated that their research was influenced by feminist standpoint theory[[5]](#footnote-5) and thus based on the position that readers’ own statements about their reading are worth paying attention to, as opposed to gathering information and data through question directed interviews, focus groups or surveys. Driscoll et al. found that more than an evaluative assessment of a book, the description of a reading experience is the most common feature of *Goodreads* reviews. For this reason reviews on *Goodreads* will be used to learn about how readers engage with fictional grief narratives.

The grief illiterate society or culture is rarely geographically defined by the people who comment on it, but Western culture is implied. *Goodreads* is an American social website and statistics show that 85% of its web traffic occurs in what are considered Western countries, such as the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Western Europe and Australia (“Geography”). Analyzing reviews on *Goodreads* can provide insight into how people who live in a grief illiterate culture engage with fictional grief narratives.

### 1.2.3 Research questions

Three recent fiction novels that include a narrative of grief will be analyzed, in order to see how that portrayal of grief relates to reported lived experiences of grief, and what adjustments to the classic Aristotelian structure of a narrative the authors have made to accommodate the account of grief. This thesis will also look at how this bears on devices or elements of storytelling needed to offer a story that draws readers in (transportation). After these analyses I will look at reader reviews to see whether and how readers relate to the depictions of grief and which narrative qualities of the text might have contributed to a reading experience that enabled reflection on grief.

The following questions will be addressed in the chapters of this thesis:

Q1. How is grief depicted in these novels and to what extent do these depictions approximate lived experiences of grief?

Q2. What narrative challenges do narratives of grief face and what strategies have the authors used to accommodate a realistic grief narrative in a novel?

Q3. How do readers of the novels react to the depictions of grief?

### 1.2.4 Structure, material and theory

In chapter 2, I will look at whether it is possible for a fictional depiction of grief that is not necessarily based on the author’s or someone else’s lived experience of grief, to approximate lived experiences of grief. These novels will be analyzed:

* *Hamnet* (2020) by Maggie O’Farrell
* *Like Family* (2014) by Paolo Giordano
* *What We Lose: a Novel* (2017) by Zinzi Clemmons.

These fiction novels were selected for their grief narrative, which for this thesis is defined as: a narrative featuring a loss or bereavement, and a significant portion of the novel dedicated to characters living with grief or reflecting on their loss. Other criteria were that the novels were preferably published in the last five years or as recently as possible, so that their publication and reception fall within the timeframe of the recent debate around grief literacy, and that the novels are set within the socio-cultural context of this debate, a Western society. The novels will be read in Western culture’s communal language, English. *Hamnet* and *What We Lose* are written in English and *Like Family* was read and analyzed in the English translation from the original Italian. The reviews collected from *Goodreads* will be of the English translation of *Like Family*.

The final selection represents diversity in subgenre, structure and form, the kind of loss it features (e.g. child-loss, parent-loss, sudden loss, anticipated loss), ethnicity and gender of protagonists as well as authors. Fiction as well as nonfiction grief narratives are overwhelmingly by - and feature white women, so including *Like Family*, which has a male author and protagonist, and *What We Lose,* which has an African -American Black author and protagonist, is important for the inclusive representation of grief.

The analyses of depictions of grief in the novels will be based on a set of criteria, which will be compiled from recent books advocating for grief literacy and based on the most important and most often repeated points made in these books about the reality of grief:

* *It’s OK That You’re Not OK: Meeting Grief and Loss in a Culture That Doesn’t Understand* (2017) by psychotherapist Megan Devine.
* *The Aftergrief: Finding Your Way Along the Long Arc of Loss* (2020) by Hope Edelman
* *Modern Loss: Candid Conversation about Grief. Beginners Welcome* (2018) by Rebecca Soffer and Gabrielle Birkner.

In chapter 3, the questions of what narrative challenges a grief narrative faces when it is held against the classical story arc and what strategies the authors have used to accommodate a realistic grief narrative in a classical structure will be investigated. The analysis of the narrative structure of the novels will be based on theory concerned with the intersection of narrative structure, narrative emotions and reader response (Hogan, *Mind*; Iser; Keen, *Narrative*; Koopman and Hakemulder), as well as on narrative structure and grief (Edelman; Gordon; Weston).

Reader engagement with the specific features of grief as established in chapter 2 can contribute to a reader’s awareness of what grief really looks like and to an (expanding) understanding of grief. Chapter 4 will look at how readers of the novels react to the depictions of grief in reviews on *Goodreads*. Indications of engagement with the grief narrative and acknowledgements of the features of realistic grief as discussed in chapter 2 will be collected and discussed.

# 2. How do fictional portrayals of grief relate to lived experiences of grief?

In this chapter the fictional depictions of grief in *Hamnet, Like Family* and *What We Lose* will be compared to “real grief” as described in *The Aftergrief* by Hope Edelman, *It’s OK That You’re Not Ok* by Megan Devine and *Modern Loss* by Rebecca Soffer and Gabrielle Birkner. These books will inform a set of criteria that will be used to analyze the fictional depictions of grief and grieving in the novels, and determine whether the fictional portrayals of grief in the novels hold up to lived experiences of grieving.

## 2.1 What does grief look like?

What is most often emphasized and repeated about grief in *The Aftergrief, It’s OK That You're Not OK* and *Modern Loss* is that grief is long term, often life-long, and cannot be fixed, transformed or redeemed. By depicting and detailing such experiences in fiction a narrative can portray grief more truthfully. Other important features of grief that are reported and emphasized most often are the different ways in which people grieve and the physical, psychological, cognitive and social effects of grief.

### 2.2.1. Grief is depicted as long term, even life-long

Grief lasts longer than the days, weeks or months after the funeral: it may last for the rest of someone’s life. Rebecca Soffer and Gabrielle Birkner explain that “[y]ou live with grief 24/7, forever, and endure endless triggers along the way” and that “[e]ven years after our losses, we still have moments of gut-wrenching sadness” (Soffer and Birkner xix, xxiii). Edelman explains that adjusting to loss is a lifelong process (xxxiii). The initial acute pain and despair caused by a bereavement may last for months or even years before it shifts into something that a griever learns to live with, but even then grief is not gone: it shifts and renews itself and comes to the surface when it is triggered (Krasner qtd. in Prodromou 3; Soffer and Birkner xix; Weston 2; Edelman xxix; Devine 29). This means that a truthful fictional depiction of grief shows the (life) long span of grief well beyond the weeks and months after the funeral.

### 2.2.2 Grief is depicted without an agenda towards resolve, closure or transformation

If grief is something that lasts in different forms and levels of intensity throughout someone’s life, it follows that grief has no end point. There is no progression towards closure, or transformation in grief. Instead of trying to fix grief or aim for closure, a kinder and more realistic way of approaching grief is to bear witness to it and aim for integration: loss and grief become part of someone’s life (Devine 12, 163 - 74, 198-202; te Winkel 15:30; 16:47; Weston 2; Edelman xxxiii, 160; Prodromou 5, 140). Prodromou explains that an author has the ability to resist or complicate “the traditional recovery paradigms involving movement from loss to renewal” and “the consolatory promise” of grief narratives by including an ending that is ambiguous, with questions left unanswered (Prodromou 5). In addition to an ambiguous ending, Devine suggests the ending of a loss narrative can also be neutral: “How do we end a book on loss if we don’t lean back on the expected happy ending? If we don’t search for a tacked-on transformation, or a promise that everything will work out in the end? [...] It’s neither up-note nor doom. It simply is” (229), pointing out the far broader reality of the vast middle ground between the imagined options of grief: either being “sad forever and never leaving the house or to put all this sadness behind you and go on to live a fabulous life” (232), a binary of thinking about grief that Prodromou has also noted (4).

This means that a realistic portrayal of the experience of grief is not concerned with a happy or consolatory ending, nor with closure or recovery. The ending will reflect the ambiguity and non-finiteness of grief. Grief will also not serve as a narrative device that leads a character to experience a life lesson or a transformation, nor will it be depicted as something that can be redeemed or used to lend poignancy to stories or scenes (Devine 32-6).

### 2.2.3 Grief is depicted as experienced and expressed differently by different people

Grief is universal in the sense that everyone will experience loss and grief one way or another at some point in their life, however, grief does not present itself in universal ways: different people grieve in different ways, sometimes in ways that are not apparent, or that other people may find hard to understand. Grieving is personal and there is no correct or incorrect way to grieve (Edelman xi, xxiii), which a portrayal of grief can pay attention to.

An often reported effect of loss and grieving is that it can cause tension within families or relationships, or change their dynamics. Patrick Hogan notes that our individual experiences often diverge sharply for the most personally consequential events. The grief one person experiences is rarely common to their spouses or friends (*Mind* 13) when they grieve the same loss. Devine comments how “death throws a monkey wrench into family dynamics” (79) and the essay “The Promise” in *Modern Loss* details the difficulty a couple encounters when they each grieve in very different ways for the death of their baby (109-13). A fictional grief narrative can pay attention to this often reported effect of loss and grief to make the narrative more true to lived experiences of loss and grief.

### 2.2.4 Grief is depicted as having emotional, cognitive, psychological and physical effects

 “We often think of grief as primarily emotional, but grief is a full body, full mind experience [...], your entire physiological system is reacting, too” (Devine 117). A grieving person can, for example, experience cognitive impairment, sleep disorders and anxiety. Grief has emotional, cognitive, behavioral and physical components (Devine 117-48; Edelman xxix) that are an integral part of the experience of grief.

## 2.3 Discussion of depictions of grief in *Hamnet*

*Hamnet* revolves around a family of five: the twins Hamnet and Judith, their older sister Susanna and their parents Agnes and a father who remains unnamed, who is however suggested to be William Shakespeare. *Hamnet* is set at the end of the 16th century, when there were outbreaks of the plague, and in the novel Judith becomes ill with the plague. While everyone is focused on warding off her death with medicine, superstition and care, no one notices that her brother Hamnet is also ill. While Judith recovers, Hamnet dies.

### 2.3.1 *Hamnet*: Grief is depicted as long term

After Hamnet dies, the time covered in the remainder of the book spans around four years, in which the focus is on how the family members deal with Hamnet’s death. The book hints at the impact of bereavement as lasting well beyond the four years described within the story, when phrases and words such as “for the rest of her life”, “forever” and “never” are used to describe Agnes’ grief, and references are made to the insignificance of one year of grieving against the loss they will feel for the rest of their lives.

At the beginning of the book Hamnet’s death is foreshadowed when Agnes is tending to her bees and feels a moment of unease, but ignores it: “Later, and *for the rest of her life*, she will think that if she had left there and then, [...] she might have changed what happened next” (O’Farrell 18). After Hamnet’s death Agnes is described as changed forever: “Agnes is not the person she used to be. She is utterly changed. She can recall being someone who felt sure of life and what it would hold for her [...]. This person is now lost to her for ever” (299). This passage simultaneously depicts how the impact of grief is life long, that a significant loss often incurs secondary losses, such as the loss of a former self, and that there is no going back to “normal”, to the life that was before the loss.

A year after Hamnet’s death Agnes and her husband have a conversation in which he tells her that he cannot help but constantly wonder where Hamnet has gone, that he tries to find him in other people’s faces in the crowd, everywhere he goes. He thinks he “may run mad with it. Even now, a year on”. Agnes answers: “A year is nothing, [...] It’s an hour or a day. We may *never* stop looking for him. I don’t think I would want to” (315). Agnes’ husband implies an expectation to have been less affected by the loss a year on than he is in reality. Agnes’ answer refers to how the passage of time bears no relation to what grief feels and behaves like, which is something Devine also emphasizes: to a griever “it just happened” could mean eight days ago as easily as eighty years. A few years in grief time is only a minute ago (29).

Judith experiences her grief as a hollow that will never be filled and does not have a definite shape: “She sings to herself [...] sings on and on, until the sound finds the hollow place within her, finds it and pours into it, filling it and filling, but of course it will *never* be full because it has no shape and no edge” (295). Her grief is described as limitless and infinite.

### 2.3.2 *Hamnet*: Grief is depicted without an agenda towards resolve, closure or transformation

During the last part of the book in which Hamnet is dead, there is little to no progression towards a goal of any kind. From the moment of Hamnet’s death, grief is shown as enduring throughout the following years. While time moves on and Judith and Susanna grow older and the family move to a new house, grief is present but has no movement, goal or progression.

The final scenes of the book revolve around Agnes finding out that her husband has written a play and named it *Hamlet*, after their son[[6]](#footnote-6), and traveling to London to track him down and confront him. This follows on a storyline in which they have grown distant from each other. The final scenes continue this line, with Agnes filled with intense emotions after hearing the news: “[w]hy would her husband have done it? [...] It pierces her heart, [...] it threatens to sever her from herself, from him, from everything they had, everything they were” (362-3). The long building estrangement and tension in their marriage now seems to come to a breaking point and their marriage and family may fall apart, with all hope gone:

She had thought that coming here, [...] might give her a glimpse into her husband’s heart. It might have offered her a way back to him. [...] she had thought that perhaps now she might understand his distance, his silence, since their son’s death. She has the sense now that there is nothing in her husband’s heart to understand. (363)

But later, while watching the play, Agnes begins to understand that the play is about her husband’s grief for Hamnet: “He has, Agnes sees, done what any father would wish to do, to exchange his child’s suffering for his own, to take his place, to offer himself up in his child’s stead so that the boy might live” (366). After the play ends Agnes and her husband find each other in the theater and talk. The final line of the book is a line of the ghost in *Hamlet*: “Remember me” (367).

While it had seemed throughout the story as if the husband had distanced himself from his grief, he has now immortalized Hamnet, and his love and grief for him, in a play that at that moment only the reader knows, will endure for centuries and become one of the most famous plays in the world. The end of *Hamnet* even suggests a new reading of *Hamlet*, in which the contents of the play are a direct reflection of Shakespeare’s personal life. Since very little is known about his personal life such a suggestion may add to the feeling of momentous realization in the reader.

The ending emphasizes that people experience and express their grief in different ways and that sometimes couples or family members struggle with a sense of estrangement from each other. While Agnes and her husband’s grief is not resolved, there is the sense that their estrangement seems to a degree resolved. They have an opportunity to speak freely about their feelings and share their grief. In this sense the ending features a reconciliation and can possibly offer a sense of closure to a reader. The ending also suggests grief as an exchange: of loss inspiring great art, and in this case this exchange is momentous: *Hamlet* is a world famous play by a world famous poet. Knowing that Hamnet lives on in *Hamlet* may also be consoling to both Agnes and her husband as to the reader.

The final scenes seem to aim at aesthetic emotion and momentous realization in the reader, rather than at narrative emotion. Aesthetic emotions are emotions such as surprise, admiration, awe, or appreciation for (elements of) the narrative, such as the characters or certain scenes. Narrative emotions are e.g. empathy, sympathy, or identification with characters (Koopman and Hakemulder 94). The final scenes in *Hamnet* suggest that closure or resolve is something that can be arrived at through more than plot and narrative closure; it can also be arrived at through the reader's emotions, which may result in a sort of emotional closure, instead of practical closure.

### 2.3.3 *Hamnet*: Grief is depicted as experienced and expressed differently by different people

Hamnet’s death is shown as having a deep and long lasting impact on each family member individually, but also on the family as a whole. The aftermath of Hamnet’s death shows each family member dealing with their grief in their own way.

Agnes’s husband leaves for London only days after Hamnet is buried and does not return for nearly a year. To Agnes it seems that her husband has abandoned his family to their grief while he is living a different life in London. Agnes had expected him to stay so that they could grieve Hamnet as a family: “[t]o her, it is simple. [...] There will be no leaving. There will be staying. There will be the closing of the doors, the four of them drawing together [...]” (284). Agnes wants to grieve together, as a family.

Her husband, instead, grieves by himself, away from his family and tries to lose himself in his work, a historical play instead of a tragedy, to avoid the triggers and pitfalls of grief: “[...] there is nothing that will ambush him, tie him up and drag him back to look on things he cannot think about [...] With histories and comedies he can carry on. Only with them can he forget who he is and what has happened” (303). He stays away from home as a means to survive: “But the magnitude, the depth of his wife’s grief for their son exerts a fatal pull [...], he must hold himself separate in order to survive. [...] If he keeps himself at the hub of this life in London, nothing can touch him” (305). This shows that even when it seems to Agnes that her husband is not grieving, inwardly he is experiencing intense grief and that while Agnes wants to grieve together, he wants to grieve alone.

Susanna, like her father, feels the need to put distance between herself and her mother and sister Judith. When Agnes and Judith first start sleeping restlessly after Hamnet’s death, Susanna begins to sleep next door in her grandparents’ house. “I cannot sleep here, she says, avoiding her mother’s eye. There’s too much shifting about” (289). Later on she moves there permanently: “Susanna finds it hard to be in the apartment”. There are too many things that are dedicated to Hamnet’s memory. She moves next door, to the house of her father’s family and “leaves her mother and sister to their grief” (299). Susanna is more practical and clings to the running of the household and the family’s finances after Hamnet’s death.

### 2.3.4 *Hamnet*: Grief is depicted as having emotional, cognitive, psychological and physical effects

Agnes and Judith show a fear of more loss, hypervigilance and sleep disorders. Shortly after Hamnet’s death Agnes is in bed with her daughters and stays awake most of the night to make sure nothing happens to them (289). Agnes suffers from insomnia from here on out and this does not seem to relent in the following years: “At night Agnes walks the corridors and stairs and chambers and passageways, her feet bare, listening out. [...] In the new house, Susanna locks her door against her mother’s nocturnal wanderings (327). Judith also does not sleep well, four years after her brother’s death: “ [...] she skims over the surface of sleep, waking often, never quite reaching the depths” (327).

Agnes loses weight in her grief and anxiety: “The gown she is wearing is loose on her this spring, her wrists narrow, her fingernails bitten down” (306). Agnes’ grief affects her appetite and weight for an extended period of time.

Agnes discovers about her husband’s emotions that “[...] there is also fear, a great deal of fear, [...] and beneath all this, behind it all, she finds something, a gap, a vacancy, an abyss, which is dark and whistling with emptiness” (317). Feelings of emptiness and anxiety are shown to be part of the husband’s grief.

## 2.4 Discussion of depictions of grief in *Like Family*

In *Like Family,* Mrs. A, a family’s nanny and housekeeper of eight years, is diagnosed with lung cancer. The story is narrated by the unnamed husband and father of the family, and shows how the family and Mrs. A handle the progression of her illness. During her year-long illness the roles reverse and the family starts taking care of Mrs. A. They struggle with the knowledge of her imminent death and the complicated relationship they have with her. They feel that they cannot claim a relationship with her beyond that of employer and employee, while simultaneously they start to realize just how big a part of their family she was and what an influence she had on their relationship, which during her illness is starting to feel unstable. This novel depicts anticipatory - and disenfranchised grief. Anticipatory grief is the grief that can be experienced before an impending loss, while someone is still alive. Disenfranchised grief will be explained further below. *Like Family* also shows how loss and grief can influence or even change family- and relationship dynamics.

### 2.4.1 *Like Family*: Grief is depicted as long term

*Like Family* follows Mrs. A’s illness for the majority of the novel and ends shortly after her death, and so the narrator and his family’s grief is only shown during her illness (anticipatory grief) and momentarily after her death, when they attend her funeral and visit her grave (Giordano 17-9, 144-6) and when a reference is made to their habit of having nightly conversations about Mrs. A in the months following her death (16), in which they ask each other what they miss about her. Mrs. A has left them her table, which they use as their dining table. When they eat at it for the first time, Nora asks her husband: “Don’t you feel like we’re eating with her?” (74), showing how they are looking for ways to hold on to her presence in their lives after her death. However, their loss or grief is not shown or suggested beyond these scenes, which span perhaps a couple of weeks after Mrs. A’s death.

### 2.4.2 *Like Family*: Grief is depicted without an agenda towards resolve, closure or transformation

*Like Family* follows Mrs. A’s illness and the family's anticipatory grief, but the narrative ends when she dies and does not depict the family’s loss beyond a few scenes after the funeral. The entire story is told by the narrator after Mrs. A has died, which speaks to the narrator’s grief and his attempt at trying to understand what her life and death means to him and his family, but his story and reflection stop short when his grieving has only just begun. The final scene is of the family visiting Mrs. A’s grave. Their son Emanuele climbs onto the grave and puts his ear to the stone to listen for her. Mrs. A’s real name, Anna, is revealed, for the first time in the book. Like in *Hamnet*, this is a revelation at the end of the book, that seems to aim at a realization in the reader about Mrs. A, and the scene itself seems to aim at poignancy. Attending a funeral and visiting a grave are mourning rituals, actions that give expression to grief, while grief is the internal experience of loss, of which a portrayal is not included in *Like Family*. The ending of *Like Family* misrepresents loss as lending poignancy and revelation to moments of mourning and grieving and also excludes the portrayal of grief from a story about loss, which perpetuates the way grief is often seen and handled in our society, as something that can be publicly expressed during funerals and at cemeteries, but which happens in private and is implied from then on.

The ending is ambiguous about the fate of the narrator’s marriage. Throughout the novel it becomes clear that his marriage is becoming unstable. The book begins and ends with the narrator's observations on the fragility of his marriage: “Mrs. A’s cancer [...] had called attention to our separateness. We were, in spite of our hopes, insoluble in one another” (135). However, the ending does not give any indication as to how their marriage will fare, steering clear of the story of personal transformation or renewed love through loss. Instead it leaves this couple indecisive and struggling and seems close to Devine’s idea of a neutral ending.

### 2.4.3 *Like Family*: Grief is depicted as experienced and expressed differently by different people

The narrator and his wife grieve in different ways and both the narrator and his wife feel isolated in their grief. “Among the countless things I’ve learned about my wife in ten years of marriage is her habit of isolating herself in times of grief. She suddenly becomes unreachable and won’t allow anyone to console her, forcing me to become a useless spectator to her suffering [...]” (2). This also furthers his own isolation in his grief. The narrator also believes that “the ultimate sorrow, [...] the gravest loss” would not be able to deter his wife’s vitality, while he himself feels that he is more prone to anxiety and depression (85), which makes him feel like they cannot blend, but stay separate, also in their grief.

### 2.4.4 *Like Family*: Grief is depicted as having emotional, cognitive, psychological and physical effects

The narrator experiences increased anxiety and insomnia during the period of Mrs. A’s illness, and sees a therapist for this. After Mrs. A resigns, the narrator admits his insomnia, and to feeling sadness and loss over her absence in their lives when he lies awake at night (33-4). On a plane flight to their holiday he reads a book about cancer. “Each paragraph holds up Mrs. A to the light and denies me one more milligram of hope for her. [...] I’d like to call my therapist to stem the anxiety that is rapidly taking hold of me [...]” (84).

### 2.4.5 Disenfranchised grief in *Like Family*

Disenfranchised grief is a term describing invalidated grief (by friends or family) or grief that is not acknowledged as legitimate by society. Such a loss may be seen as too small, or the relationship too distant to justify grieving. A consequence for people experiencing disenfranchised grief is that they will receive little understanding and social support and will most likely not be able to fully express their grief, if at all (Harris 25-7).

As Mrs. A’s employers, and not her family or close friends, the narrator and Nora struggle with a grief that is not recognized or understood by the people around them, or even by themselves. At Mrs. A’s funeral they feel out of place and sidelined: “We skipped the final farewells, since our presence could console no one and perhaps because we thought we ourselves had a right to be consoled” (18-9). They do not follow the coffin to the grave site because they believe that it is not their place:

There are situations that should be left to the intimacy of family and close friends, and who were we to Mrs. A? Employers, not much more than that. Death realigns roles according to a formal order of importance, instantly mending the sentimental rules that one allowed oneself to break in life, and it didn’t matter much that Emanuele was the closest thing to a grandson that Mrs. A had known or that she’d liked to consider us, Nora and me, her adoptive children. We were not. (19)

The mental health professional that the narrator turns to in his anxiety amidst Mrs. A‘s illness dismisses his (anticipatory) grief. When talking about Mrs. A, the therapist interrupts him: “Now let’s forget about the housekeeper. Let’s talk about your wife instead” (118). To the therapist Mrs. A is only some housekeeper and the relationship with his wife is the legitimate one that he believes the narrator should tend to. The narrator is taken aback by the therapist’s dismissal.

When Nora and he are discussing a dilemma about Mrs. A’s cancer treatment over dinner with friends and he becomes passionate about the topic, their friends “both hedge” when they sense he is more involved than he lets on (93). These scenes show his isolation as the people around him do not understand his relationship with Mrs. A and cannot support him in his anxiety and anticipatory grief.

## 2.5 Discussion of depictions of grief in *What We Lose*

In *What We Lose* Thandi is in high school when her mother is diagnosed with cancer and she and her father care for her until her death, when Thandi is in college. The novel follows Thandi while she navigates a new relationship, an unplanned pregnancy, a short marriage and single motherhood, all while grieving her mother. *What We Lose* shows the long lasting effects of grief and how it permeates all aspects of life, while also bringing attention to anticipatory grief and Black grief, which will be discussed further below.

### 2.5.1 *What We Lose*: Grief is depicted as long term

Thandi’s grief for her mother begins while her mother is still alive (anticipatory grief) and is ongoing long after her death. The story follows Thandi from high school through college, a job, a romantic courtship, pregnancy and a short marriage, so the timespan of the grief portrayed can be guessed to be around a decade, but can also be a few years shorter or longer. There are many moments in the story where the life-long lasting implications of her loss are suggested, of which an example takes place at the end of the book when Thandi reflects on grief as “a void that is her constant companion, which can be filled by nothing, and will never go away” (Clemmons 206-7).

### 2.5.2 *What We Lose*: Grief is depicted without an agenda towards resolve, closure or transformation

While time moves forward and Thandi falls in love, becomes pregnant, gets married, gives birth to a son and separates from her husband, the narrative continually comes back to - and explores her grief. At the end of *What We Lose* Thandi is a newly single mother and feels lonely and scared (204). There is no reunion or new relationship on the horizon, nor empowering happy singledom or a hopeful new beginning. The reader is left with a situation that has no outcome either way, other than that Thandi is now a single mother, still grieving her own mother. Her grief has been a constant throughout the story and also features in the final scene, when Thandi explains what she feels is the complete and irreversible reality of loss: “a progressing forgetting of her mother” (206). She is devastated by her fading and dwindling memories. She reflects on how well she has learned to live around her mother’s absence (206-7). This ending shows how grief is ongoing, even when a novel ends, and how it shifts and renews itself when for instance memories start to fade. It also shows how loss and grief become part of someone’s life.

### 2.5.3 *What We Lose*: Grief is depicted as experienced and expressed differently by different people

The relationship between Thandi and her father becomes tense when he enters into a new relationship a few years after her mother’s death. She feels like he is moving on from her mother and leaving her behind in her grief. He tells her he wants to be happy again, but she finds that she has trouble coming to terms with the kind of happiness he has chosen (164). This shows how loss and grief can complicate family relations and dynamics.

### 2.5.4 *What We Lose*: Grief is depicted as having emotional, cognitive, psychological and physical effects

Thandi becomes pregnant with Peter’s baby after dating him only briefly and decides to marry him. A therapist tells her later, after her divorce from Peter, that it is common for people who have recently experienced loss to rush into relationships (195). This shows what kind of influence loss and grief can have on a person and their state of mind, decisions, and even on the course of their life.

*What We Lose* contains depictions of a reaction to loss that can be taken as both an example of how everybody grieves in a different way, as well as an example of how effects of grief present in other ways than emotional. While still caring for her mother Thandi seeks distraction by engaging in a threesome with a couple she meets after she started to “troll online dating sites” (90). The threesome leaves her feeling many things, but “more important, my mind was empty [...]” (91). It is a way of finding distraction from her grief.

Thandi explains that she has a high sex drive directly after her mother’s death: “In the weeks after my mother died my sex drive was merciless. I was stuck in my bedroom while family and friends circulated in the apartment’s outer rooms and hallways [...]. I masturbated often, mostly at night, but sometimes in the day, while I could hear the voices of my parent’s friends muffled through my bedroom door. I cycled through relief, then shame and horror, desperate for release and powerless to stop the urge” (54). In different passages of the novel sex is associated with life and contrasted with death (52), e.g. “Sex is kicking death in the ass while singing” (68). Sex is shown as a distraction or coping mechanism during grief, as an immediate physiological and psychological reaction to her mother’s death and as a sort of defiance of death and loss in the years after her mother’s death.

In the collection of short essays written by grievers in the *Modern Loss* book, there are several personal stories about grief and sex. Alice Radosh writes about the taboo of talking about missing sex and intimacy with your partner who has died, which she calls “sexual bereavement” (Soffer and Birkner 103-7), and Emily Rapp Black writes about her heightened sex drive after the death of her three year old son: “After my son, Ronan, died, all I wanted to do was write and fuck” (Soffer and Birkner 87). “Sex [...] was the opposite of death. It was life. I needed life” (88). While sex as a reaction to grieving is not talked about often or at all, Thandi’s experience can be found in lived experiences of grievers, and shows that this is also what grief can look like.

### 2.5.5 Anticipatory grief in *What We Lose*

During her mother’s illness Thandi and her father, but also her mother herself, experience a sense of loss before her impending death. Thandi sees her mother change and diminish and become less the person and mother she used to be. Her mother loses bladder control (92), loses a lot of weight, starts sleeping more than she is awake, and needs support when walking (168-9), which is in stark contrast to the way she is described before falling ill.

Thandi also starts to realize her and her father’s future loss: “I was terrified of his pain- that of losing a lifelong partner, so many years tossed out the window. And I’m sure he feared the destabilization of my loss - how much of my life yet to live would be marred by this trauma” (89). In the hospice Thandi again realizes what the loss of her mother will mean: “I realized that this would be life; to figure out how to live without her hand on my back; her soft, accented English telling me *Everything will be all right, Thandi*. This was the paradox: How would I ever heal from losing the person who healed me? The question was so enormous that I could see only my entire life, everything I know, filling it” (95).

These scenes show that loss and grief can start before someone has died.

### 2.5.6 Black grief in *What We Lose*

*What We Lose* brings attention to Black grief. Black grief is described as the experience of loss, grief and bereavement that is unique to Black people in America, as it relates to the higher mortality rates and shorter lifespans for Black people, compared to for white people. This is not only due to racial violence or disparate poverty- and crime statistics for Black and white people, but also due to health and healthcare disparities. Because of this, Black Americans are likely experiencing grief more often, and earlier in life, making bereavement a health disparity of its own (Blue n.p.; Clemmons epigraph).

Thandi’s mother tells her that in her treatment center most patients are black and some of them are still young, in their thirties and forties (80-1). Later, when her best friend’s father dies, Thandi reflects on the mortal disadvantage she begins to notice for Black people. Despite her and her best friend Aminah’s families being financially well off, there is still a disparity between her middle class Black and white friends when it comes to losing parents and family members to diseases like cancer or heart failure. She realizes: “[...] the numbers are what they are [...] I begin to awaken to those statistics” (179). This makes Thandi’s fear of losing her father and son (2, 177) something that is rooted in both a common grief response (Edelman 231) as well as in a reality for Black people. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson note how some autobiographical narratives of grief and mourning address larger social, cultural, and political issues: “in such examples constructing memoir becomes an act of mourning not only personal loss but collective vulnerability and communal loss” (139). Though Smith and Watson are talking about memoir, Zinzi Clemmons, the author of *What We Lose*, has addressed the collective vulnerability and communal loss of Black people by including it in Thandi’s story and has also placed a quote addressing this topic in the epigraph of the novel.

## 2.6 Chapter conclusion

In this chapter the novels *Hamnet*, *Like Family* and *What We Lose* were analyzed in order to see to what extent the fictional portrayals of grief in them approximate lived experiences of grief. The analysis consisted of assessing whether the novels depict the following 4 features of grief:

F1 Grief is depicted as long term

F2 Grief is depicted without an agenda towards resolve, closure or transformation

F3 Grief is depicted as experienced and expressed differently by different people

F4 Grief is depicted as having emotional, cognitive, psychological and physical effects

*What We Lose* meets all criteria; it depicts all 4 features of grief, in addition to anticipatory - and Black grief.

*Hamnet* depicts F1, F3 and F4. The later part of the story that portrays the family grieving shows no agenda towards resolving their grief, thereby meeting F2, however, the ending of *Hamnet* does not meet F2.

*Like Family* only depicts anticipatory grief, and therefore does not meet F1. In its depiction of (anticipatory) grief there is no agenda towards resolve, thereby meeting F2, however, the ending of *Like Family* also does not meet F2. *Like Family* only meets F3 and F4. *Like Family* pays attention to disenfranchised grief.

# 3. Narrative structure and the experience of grief

Whether readers engage with a story and its characters depends on whether they feel transported into the story. Whether a story is compelling usually depends on narrative elements such as structure, suspense, plot and characterization. Transportation is seen as a pre-condition for readers to be able to experience empathic and reflective responses (Keen, *Narrative* 153, Koopman and Hakemulder). However, experiences of loss and grief pose challenges to narrative structure and to the use of narrative elements that are essential to creating an absorbing narrative.

## 3.1 The challenges of including an experience of grief in a narrative: an inventory

If readers do not feel transported and do not fully engage with a narrative, its characters and events, they are less likely to experience reflective responses or empathic feelings (Koopman and Hakemulder 90). Furthermore a lack of transportation will prevent a reader to fully take in the experience of grief depicted in the novel, or from even finishing the book.

Weston says that the narrative line of grieving “wanders, halts, regresses, and makes sudden unexpected leaps. [...] It defies our hopeful belief that [...] in time, we will reach a state of completed mourning” (2), addressing grief’s non-linearity and the absence of closure. The nature of grief “challenges narrative capacity, eliciting experiments with narrative form” (3). How does an experience without progression towards closure translate to a readable fictional narrative that captures and transports the reader? Narrative often depends on narrative tools and literary elements such as a driving conflict, plot development, a dramatic highpoint and narrative closure, which an experience of grief, by its nature, cannot provide a narrative with, as became clear in the previous chapter. The following paragraphs will explore the challenges of accommodating an experience of grief in narrative, before going on to analyses of the narrative structure and narrative elements of *Hamnet, Like Family* and *What We Lose*.

### 3.1.1 The Aristotelian story arc versus the before-and-after structure of storied grief

The conventional or Aristotelian story arc, in its most basic form, consists of a beginning, a middle, or the “development” or “progression”, and an ending, which is also called the “resolution” (Edelman 172-3). The inciting incident in the beginning sets the story’s action in motion, and the conflict drives the plot or narrative through the middle part. Near the end of the story a dramatic high point is reached, which resolves the conflict, after which a story usually ends in narrative closure (Hogan, “Affect”; Edelman 172-3). An inciting incident that sets the plot in motion and a middle part in which it unfolds contribute to a reader experiencing narrative emotions, such as curiosity, surprise, or suspense. These emotions are needed to motivate a reader to read on (Keen, *Narrative* 153). The structure of a narrative is thus important to a reader’s engagement with it.

A death is often either the inciting incident of a fiction novel, which creates the conflict but sidelines grief, or is the dramatic high point that a story has been building up to, ending the story in tragedy and aiming at devastation in a reader. In stories of lived experiences of grief, however, a single story of loss relies on two separate narratives: a loss usually splits someone’s life story in a before-and-after narrative, where the loss, the death, is both the inciting incident and the dramatic high point, which collapse into the same moment that takes place in the middle, thereby erasing the middle part, or the progression, of the story. Progression towards a goal or ending depends on a middle part (Edelman 252, 175). An author will face multiple challenges when trying to reconcile the typical structure of an experience of grief with the structure of a narrative that is needed to create suspense and progression.

### 3.1.2 The a-temporality of grief versus narrative goals and progression

In addition to having no middle part, the after-story of a before-and-after-story of grief also lacks temporality, goal pursuit and progression. Grief is an experience of a- temporality in which a sense of futurity is absent (Gordon), while narrative relies on an arrangement of narrated events in such a way that suggests temporality (Keen, *Narrative* 153). Noël Carroll states that a requirement of narratives is that they are “globally forward looking” (qtd. in Feagin 22), which is usually achieved by introducing a goal or conflict. Hogan emphasizes the great importance of overarching goal pursuit in narrative and how suspense and anxiety involve a temporal dimension, as anxiety is usually felt about (goals in) the future, not the past (*Mind* 8-9). Especially when intent on bearing witness to grief and portraying it truthfully, the reality of the after-story of grief would be challenging to fit into a compelling narrative structure that involves goal pursuit and progression.

### 3.1.3 Making absence present

Another challenge is that bereavement is an experience of absence, which presents an author with the paradoxical effort of making absence present and felt (Weston 4). Grief advocate Babet te Winkel explains how loss is not only death, but is always both life and death together. Death only gets its meaning through life (55.57). This is echoed by Edelman: “[e]mbedded in every story of a loss is also the story of a life [...]” (221). The meaning and weight of a loss is conveyed through the story of someone’s life. This contrast is captured in a griever’s before- and- after story of their loss, which is in essence a story of life and presence vs loss and absence. However, if the before- and- after structure is adjusted for a novel, someone’s absence, and what that absence means to the griever, will have to be conveyed, made present, in another way.

### 3.1.4 Narrative closure

Narrative closure takes place when and to the extent that the questions raised by the narrative are answered and narrative strands are tied up (Carroll 119). This too might pose a challenge for an author when trying to convey the reality of an experience of grief, which will not end in closure. An ambiguous or neutral ending instead of one that provides closure might not be satisfactory to readers (Feagin 20, 22). Yet, while ambiguity may cause frustration in readers, it is also possible that it heightens participation and engagement: it demands that a reader continues to consider the narrative after the final scene is read (Fuller). While narrative closure projects into the future (they lived happily ever after), an ambiguous or neutral ending projects back onto the narrative and invites reflection. Gaps and ambiguities in the text stimulate the reader’s creative participation and reflection, as readers will have to make inferences about the story, events and characters (Iser 280, Koopman and Hakemulder 79, 89). Narrative closure or ambiguous closure overlaps with the criteria of grief that asks that grief is depicted without an agenda towards resolve, closure or transformation (F2), so the discussion of narrative closure will overlap with the discussions of F2 in chapter 2.

### 3.1.5 Point of view: the reader as spectator or as identifying with the character

An author can choose to tell a story from the perspective of one or multiple characters, and in first-person or third- person point of view. In first-person point of view a character is the narrator of the story, while with a third-person point of view, an author who is outside of the narrative is implied, who narrates the character’s thoughts and actions, instead of the character themselves. According to Oatley the use of point of view can influence whether a reader takes on more of an spectating stance while reading, or an identification stance. Third-person point of view favors spectating, while a first-person narrative favors identification (445). According to Oatley “identification is a species of empathy, in which we do not merely sympathize with a person, we become that person” (446). While different perspectives can be used to show a reader how different characters in a grief narrative experience and handle grief, the point of view from which a story is narrated can be important to the way a reader relates to the characters and their emotions and experiences.

## 3.2 Analyses of narrative structure and - elements of *Hamnet, Like Family* and *What We Lose*

*Hamnet, Like Family* and *What We Lose* will be analyzed for their narrative structure and - elements, in order to see how the authors have addressed the challenges and paradoxes of trying to accommodate an experience of grief in a novel.

### 3.2.1 Analysis of narrative structure and - elements of *Hamnet*

*Hamnet* has the narrative structure of a before-and-after story, with Hamnet’s death splitting the story in two at two thirds of the book. The first part of the book follows two storylines: scenes in which Judith and Hamnet fall ill, which progress to Hamnet’s death, alternated with scenes on how Hamnet’s family was created.

The focus on Hamnet and the genesis of his family in the first part of the book contributes to making his absence felt in the second part of the book, the after-story. Hamlet’s place in the family is established through a series of origin stories: the story of Agnes’ youth and the story of the husband’s family situation, the story of how they meet, their marriage, their children, Agnes encouraging her husband to move to London on his own to pursue work, and him becoming a successful playwright, which, although he is never named, is the (imagined) origin story of William Shakespeare. There is also an origin story for Hamnet and Judith’s contamination with the plague, traced back to a flea that ends up on a merchant ship to England. These substories place Hamnet’s life story in the larger context of his family, of Shakespeare’s life, Elizabethan England and the plague pandemic, as well as the aftermath of the Reformation, which may all contribute to building a rich and realistic historical world into which a reader can easily be transported while reading.

*Hamnet* is told through free indirect speech, a style of third-person narration which uses characteristics of third-person along with the essence of first-person direct speech. In this type of narration the voice of the author or an extra-narrative narrator and the character are merged (Stevenson 32).The narrator is not one of the characters but exists outside of the narrative, yet the experience is close to that of first person narration, of being in the minds of the characters. Free indirect speech allows O’Farrell to tell *Hamnet* from the different perspectives of the members of the family, including Hamnet’s, and later on allows her to show each family member’s unique grief for Hamnet from their perspective. By including Hamnet’s perspective in the before- story, an opportunity is created for the reader to not only learn about Hamnet through others, but also through his own thoughts and emotions. An example of this is his mounting worry and helplessness when he tries, but cannot find help for his ill sister and the moment when his grandfather hits him and Hamnet cries out of shock and pain (61, 14). This may contribute to readers feeling invested in the character of Hamnet, which can also contribute to an increased engagement with his absence, and with other characters grieving him, in the after-story part of the novel.

The story of how their family was created has an obvious progression, which might be enough to absorb readers, but a life changing event is foreshadowed throughout the beginning of the story. The book opens with Hamnet urgently looking for a grown up person or a doctor who can help his sister, who has fallen ill, but his house is empty and the physician unavailable (3-27). His mother Agnes, who is away from home tending to her bees, is described as having a feeling of sudden unease, which she does not heed, and it is disclosed that she later will wonder if she could have changed what happened next, if she had gone home (17-8). The impending event that she had wanted to change is not explained at that point, creating foreboding and suspense. After this the narrative moves back in time and the reader learns that Agnes, who in this scene is pregnant for the second time, has seen the moment of her death and has seen two children at her deathbed. The reader, however, has already been told that Agnes will have three children, and will probably conclude from this that something will happen to one of the children. This kind of foreshadowing creates curiosity, anticipation and suspense.

The before- story has its own complete story arc with its own goals. Its inciting incident is Judith falling ill, from which Hamlet’s search for help and the later tending to Judith’s illness follows, and its dramatic highpoint is when Hamnet “switches places” with Judith to trick death into taking him instead of her, after which he dies. His death becomes the event that the before- part of the book builds up to. Despite structuring the whole of the novel as a before-and-after narrative, the author has created an arc in the before-part of the book that makes use of literary elements and devices that create progression and suspense. This structure, however, makes Hamnet’s death the big event of the story, after which the last third of the story quite suddenly has almost no progression or arc. The after-story features no memories or flashbacks, so that Hamnet’s absence feels quite absolute.

After Hamnet’s death there is little plot development in the second part of the story, the after-story. The focus is on how his family members deal with Hamnet’s death in their own ways, over the course of the following years. The passage of time is contrasted to the a-temporality of grief. As time moves on, Agnes’ daughters grow into young women and the family moves house a few years after Hamnet’s death, but grief remains unchanged. In the new house Agnes is still unable to sleep at night, and wanders around (327), just like she did in the old house, and Judith is still “looking” for Hamnet, like she did before (336-9).

What gives this part of the story a faint hint of conflict is the estrangement between Agnes and her husband. Her husband only comes home two or three times a year, which makes it hard for them to support each other and share their grief. Agnes also discovers that her husband is often unfaithful to her while in London and this causes tension between them. However, it seems that Agnes is grudgingly accepting of this, which diffuses the conflict. The moment Agnes hears of her husband’s play and travels to London to confront him has not really been built up to through a storyline or through conflict or suspense. This arc-less after-story mimics the experience of grief in that it has little to no progression, until the final scenes when Agnes travels to London and tracks down her husband. This part almost reads like a chase or a small quest, in which it is uncertain whether she will find him and what their confrontation will be like. This creates suspense, which is then followed by the highly emotional final scenes that were discussed in paragraph 2.3.2. The ending does not necessarily create narrative closure, as the state of their marriage and their relationship remains unclear, however a degree of reconciliation is suggested, and a drive at aesthetic closure is made.

### 3.2.2 Analysis of narrative structure and - elements of *Like Family*

*Like Family* has a classic narrative structure, narrated by the husband and father of the family, who looks back after Mrs. A’s death, and narrates how Mrs. A came into his life, took care of his family, and her later illness. The book begins by announcing Mrs. A’s death, with which it positions the narrative that follows in the past and allows the narrator to go back and forth in time and between memories. This structure mimics a grieving person “storying” their experience of loss. Storytelling is part of human nature and is often also part of grieving (Devine 70). Storying an experience of loss, in the mind, in conversation, in a diary, is a way for a bereaved person to make meaning of a new reality (Edelman 142), and a way to rework their life story to integrate the new reality of absence by for instance weaving together past and presence (Weston 1), or by reflecting on the past from a position in the present (Edelman 244-52). The fact that *Like Family* is told entirely from the perspective of the husband, in first- person point of view, suggests or mimics an autobiographical account, and adds to the portrayal of a storytelling narrator. This may contribute to a reader identifying with the character.

*Like Family* alternates before-diagnosis and after-diagnosis scenes, with which the author has posed scenes of Mrs. A’s stabilizing and affirmative presence in their daily lives, before her diagnosis, in contrast to scenes that take place after her diagnosis, in which she no longer works for them, and in which the narrator and his wife struggle with her absence. This results in a storyline that continually jumps back and forth between the time before and after Mrs. A’s diagnosis, and helps make the importance of Mrs. A’s presence in their lives, and therefore also her absence, felt. Jumping back and forth in time and between memories also adds to the storytelling nature of the novel, in which the narrator weaves past and present, and presence and absence together in an attempt at meaning making.

Making use of a narrator who looks back after the loss has already occurred, allows grief to be felt throughout the novel instead of for only the part of the novel after someone’s death. A character’s grief can be shown from as early as the first scenes, as is the case in *Like Family*, which opens with scenes of the narrator announcing Mrs. A’s death and his family attending her funeral. Structuring a grief narrative in this way circumvents the issue of a missing middle part of a before-and- after story, or the sudden atemporality of an after-story.

After opening the novel by announcing Mrs. A’s death and attending her funeral, the narrator starts looking back to the moment her illness began. Mrs. A’s resignation ahead of her lung cancer diagnosis serves as the inciting incident in his story, the moment the narrator and his family slowly begin to lose her. From there the story splits into two timelines, when the narrator looks both further into the past as well as into what was still to come at that moment, when he starts to tell the story of how Mrs. A became part of the narrator’s everyday life and what she came to mean to the family which is told against an overarching arc of the progression of Mrs. A’s illness towards her death, which happens at the end of the book. Telling the story of Mrs. A, is also telling the story of the narrator’s complicated relationship with his wife Nora, as these turn out to be inextricably linked. It becomes clear that his marriage is in danger of disintegrating now that Mrs. A is not there anymore to function as the glue in their relationship. The dramatic highpoint of the story is the moment when Nora’s period is late and she doubts whether she wants to have another baby, which leads the narrator to the realization that without Mrs. A by their side his wife does not have enough faith in him, and that they might be fundamentally mismatched. Both the storyline of Mrs. A’s illness and the storyline of the disintegrating marriage carries progression and suspense. The ending is ambiguous in that it offers no clue as to what will happen to their marriage and in this way offers no narrative closure.

### 3.2.3 Analysis of narrative structure and - elements of *What We Lose*

In *What We Lose* two arcs overlap. Like in *Like Family,* the structure mimics a grieving person looking back to the past from a point in the present. One story line follows Thandi in the present time, years after her mother’s death, from the first scene of the book, in which there is the first hint of her pregnancy, to the last scene in which she is a newly single mother after a short marriage to Peter. The other arc is less an arc than a collection of disjointed moments of Thandi reflecting on the past. While disjointed, these memories follow a rough overarching progression from her high school days to her mother’s cancer diagnosis, to her illness and death. The storyline of her memories merges with the present time story line of Thandi’s attempt at building a family with Peter. The merged storyline follows the natural progression of her pregnancy and the birth of her son, as well as that of her marriage and divorce.

Anticipation and curiosity are created by several pieces of information the reader receives in the first scene of the book. Thandi announces to her father that she is in love with Peter, implying a new relationship, her pregnancy is hinted at when she throws up after smelling her food and the reader learns that her mother is dead, but also what a loss this is to the remaining family members (3), which gives the narrative its “goals” and the reader motivation to read on. However, after this first scene the story continues with some scenes that seem unrelated to the first scene of the story, as well as to each other, which could complicate a reader's transportation into the story.

*What We Lose* is told entirely from Thandi’s perspective and narrated in first-person point of view. This mimics an autobiographical account, which is reinforced by the journal-like form of the narrative. All scenes are short and vignette-like, resembling short diary entries interspersed with clippings from articles and newspapers, an email, graphs and drawings on loss and grief, and mini essays on a range of topics. There are also “entries” about the many ways and moments in which she misses her mother, or that are dedicated to dreams she has about her mother. These entries, together with her musings and clippings and essays, are not anchored in time or to a moment in Thandi’s life, and they are separate from any storyline.

While Weston suggests that grief needs an experimental narrative structure to accommodate it, the form and structure of *What We Lose* are quite complicated. Together with the storyline that goes back and forth in time and merges with itself, and the at-random diary entries, the reader may find this confusing or disruptive. At the same time it is also possible that a structure like this causes readers to stop expecting linearity, and accept each vignette at face value. The non-linearity of the novel resists the expectation of a solid storyline and of progression and cohesion, mimicking the reality of grief, while the back and forth in time mimics a grieving person trying to weave together the old reality before loss and the new reality after loss. Grief is reflected on in many or even most of the vignettes and has a consistent presence throughout the novel.

The narrative has not introduced any questions that the ending leaves unanswered, so in that way offers narrative closure, but does resist any hope or expectation a reader might have for a more hopeful ending, or one that projects into Thandi’s future. Thandi is a newly single mother who is lonely and scared and misses her own mother and the book leaves it at that.

# 4. Reader reviews of *Hamnet, Like Family* and *What We Lose*

Now that the portrayal of grief and the way it is accommodated into the narrative of *Hamnet, Like Family* and *What We Lose* have been examined, reader reviews will be looked at to see if and how readers respond to the portrayals of grief and whether they react more strongly to a particular portrayal of grief.

Reviews will be collected from *Goodreads* and will be read for acknowledgements of the grief narrative as well as for further acknowledgements of the features (criteria) of grief as discussed in chapter 2. To avoid confusion between “acknowledgement of grief” and “acknowledgement of features of grief”, the word *feature/s* will be italicized from now on.

To see whether there is a relationship between a reader’s transportation into the story and acknowledgements of (*features* of) grief, the reviews will also be examined in terms of whether the review is positive or negative, and the particular textual or narrative characteristics or qualities of the novel that readers report as contributing to their reading experience.

## 4.1 Selection and inventory of reviews

Reviews of a book on *Goodreads* can be displayed in three different orderings through a filter: most popular, oldest first, and newest first. The first 10 reviews of each ordering will be collected, to cover reviews written shortly after the novel was published as well as more recently written reviews, and the selection of the most popular reviews include reviews posted in between oldest and most recent. Popular reviews are both positive and negative reviews, so there seems to be no bias towards either. This will yield 30 reviews per book and 90 reviews in total.

Reviews will be collected regardless of whether or not they comment on the grief narrative. If, in the interest of grief literacy, we want to know whether and how readers engage with realistic grief narratives, it is also important to know when and why readers do not engage with grief narratives. A significant lack of reader engagement with one or more of the grief narratives will also provide information about what kind of narratives lead readers to reflect on grief.

Reviews that consist of only a number rating or a few words (e.g. “Great book!”) will be considered a rating and not a review and will not be collected. In those cases the count will continue from the next review.

The reviews will be inventoried in a table, which will also indicate whether the review is favorable or not and what narrative qualities the reader quoted as contributing to their experience. The table will also show whether a reader acknowledged grief and further acknowledged one or more *features* of grief. The table with the inventories of the reviews can be found in Appendix A.

### 4.1.1 Acknowledging grief and *features* of grief

If a reader mentions the death or loss of a character they acknowledge an event, but not the experience of grief. When a reader mentions e.g. that the book covers the topic of grief or mentions the impact that the loss has on the characters, they have acknowledged grief, or the grief narrative. A deeper engagement with the grief narrative and especially with the reality of grief occurs when a reader acknowledges and reflects on one or more of the *features* (criteria) of grief that were discussed in chapter 1. Differentiating between acknowledgements of grief and *features* of grief and collecting both can show us not only whether readers engage with the grief narrative at all, but also to what extent. For example, it is useful to know whether a reader does or does not acknowledge the grief narrative, and when they do whether they then further engage with one or more *features* of grief, but is also useful to know when a reader acknowledges grief, but then does not reflect on it any further.

Acknowledgements of grief and *features* of grief will be marked in the transcripts of the reviews. URLs to reviews, dates of review and full transcripts of reviews are provided in Appendix B. In the discussion reviews will be referenced in brackets with an initialism of the book and the number the review has been given in Appendix B.

## 4.2 Results and discussion

### 4.2.1 Acknowledgements of grief and *features* of grief in reviews

Out of the 90 reviews, 68 are favorable and 22 are unfavorable or mixed. Of 90 reviews, 33 acknowledge the grief narrative. Acknowledgements of grief occur exclusively in favorable reviews. Of the 33 reviews that acknowledge the grief narrative, 18 reviews further acknowledge *features* of grief. Acknowledgements of grief are usually one sentence statements, such as “an emotionally-charged novel about grief after the death of a child” (H9), while acknowledgements of *features* of grief are more elaborate descriptions or observations.

Table A: Acknowledgements of grief and *features* of grief per book

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  | Acknowledgements of grief narrative | Acknowledgements of *features* of grief |
| *What We Lose* | Favorable 18 | 13 | 10 |
|  | Unfavorable\* 12 | - | - |
| *Hamnet* | Favorable 23 | 13 | 3 |
|  | Unfavorable 7 | - | - |
| *Like Family* | Favorable 26 | 7 | 3 |
|  | Unfavorable 4 | - | - |

\* includes mixed reviews as well for all three books

Table B: Acknowledgements of specific *features* of grief per book

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Reviews that acknowledged *features* of grief\* | F1 | F2 | F3 | F4 | BG | AG | DG |
| *What We Lose* | 10 | 5 | 6 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 1 | n.a. |
| *Hamnet* | 3 | - | - | 3 | - | n.a. | n.a. | n.a. |
| *Like Family* | 3 | - | - | 2 | - | n.a. | 1 | - |

\*One review can acknowledge one or more *features* of grief.

### The criteria or features of realistic grief

1. grief is long-term
2. grief is without progression towards resolve, closure or transformation
3. grief is experienced and expressed differently by different people
4. grief has physical, psychological, and cognitive effects

 BG. Black grief

 AG. Anticipatory grief

 DG. Disenfranchised grief

The data from table A and B suggests that the more a narrative meets the criteria of realistic grief portrayal, the more readers engage with the grief narrative and are able to reflect on it in detail in their reviews, both in number of readers and in the number of *features* of grief they identified within a review.

*What We Lose* met all realistic grief criteria as it depicted all four features of grief, and saw 43%, almost half of its readers, acknowledge the grief narrative, and over a third of its readers, 33%, reflect on the experience of grief depicted in the novel in more detail and acknowledge *features* of grief in the process. For *What We Lose* every *feature* of grief was acknowledged, including anticipatory- and Black grief. *What We Lose* has the most acknowledgements of *features* of grief, but some of its readers also managed to acknowledge 2 or more *features* of grief per review, resulting in 20 acknowledgements of *features* of grief in 10 reviews, which indicates high engagement and detailed reflection.

*Like Family* failed to depict two features of grief (F1: grief as long term and F2: grief is without progression towards closure) and has the least acknowledgements of grief as well as of *features* of grief. 23% of its readers acknowledged that the novel touched on the topic of grief, with only 10% reflecting in more detail on the experiences of grief depicted in the novel.

However, *Hamnet* met all criteria except F2 for its ending, yet has the same number of readers who acknowledge the grief narrative as *What We Lose* (43%), which then drastically drops to the same number of acknowledgements of *features* of grief as *Like Family* (10%). This is interesting as these readers initially acknowledge the grief narrative but almost none of them elaborate or reflect any further on it.

 The results also show that readers of all three novels acknowledged F3 (grief is experienced and expressed differently by different people), while only readers of *What We Lose* (10%) reflected on F4 (grief has physical, psychological, and cognitive effects), even though this criterion was met by all three books.

Perhaps meeting F1, as *Hamnet* and *What We Lose* do but *Like Family* does not, initially engages readers with the grief narrative, but failing F2, as both *Hamnet* and *Like Family* do, hinders deeper engagement with *features* of grief, and perhaps even correlates to (dis)engagement with specific *features* of grief, such as with F4. This is something that future research may look into. For now, further investigation of reviewers’ reading experiences from paragraph 4.3 onwards may give insight into the relationship between reading experiences and engagement with and reflection on grief narratives.

### 4.2.2 The de-centered grief narrative in *Like Family*

Table A shows that while acknowledgements of grief occur only in favorable reviews, it is not the book with the most favorable reviews that yields the most acknowledgements of the grief narrative. While *Like Family* has the most favorable reviews, it has the lowest engagement with the grief narrative. The reviews show that many readers see *Like Family* as a story about the narrator’s marriage, rather than about his grief for Mrs. A, which the lack of depiction of F1 (grief as long term), likely contributed to. Still, there is a big element of grief and loss motivating the narrator to look back and tell his story, that seems to go unnoticed by most readers. One reader describes how the author “captures a young family struggling to function. [...] we learn of the significant role Mrs. A plays in the marriage. Anyone who is married will see themselves in the complexities that ALL marriages go through” (LF7), leaving out any mention of loss or grief and centering the relationship, while another reader describes the plot similarly: “The novel looks at the dissolution of the family without Mrs. A. at its center. I thought of it like an implosion. Without Mrs. A. to guide them, the family loses its way” (LF8).

### 4.2.3 The structure and form of *What We Lose*

*What We Lose* has the least favorable reviews, but has the most acknowledgements of *features* of grief. This is in line with the conclusions made in chapter 2 and 3, in which it was determined that the grief narrative in *What We Lose* met all four realistic grief criteria, while the analysis of its narrative structure revealed a rather complicated structure and unusual form (vignettes), which might hinder readers in their transportation.

One reader found the book confusing, describing it as “more like a summary much of the time, an overview, rather than a series of events that come together for an actual story” (WWL4), while another reader found the writing lovely, “but the story is poorly organized, or at the very least, not cohesive” (WWL14). A reader explained that they found the story “hard to follow— [...] this book was written in a way that cut up and off the flow. I appreciate the different themes and topics this book tried to cover but the storyline just wasn’t there” (WWL11).

It seems that most of the reviewers who were not deterred by its form and structure were able to reflect on the grief narrative and most of those were able to identify *features* of grief. One reader dismisses complaints that the structure is confusing: “I can see readers being confused by the numerous times Zinzi Clemmons skips from one subject to another, or by the disjointed narration and the multiples jumps in time: I wasn't. The construction is solid in my opinion and I was interested in her slices of life [...]” before going on to declare how *What We Lose* “shows us that there's no such thing as *one* way to deal with loss, and for that I'm grateful” (WWL3), acknowledging F3. Another reader thought that the form of the narrative was a reflection of how someone grieves: “a person grieving will experience a period of reflecting [...] trying to reconcile all of the loose threads, trying to make sense out of all the disparate pieces [...]” (WWL8), and for another reader “the vignettes piqued my interest” (WWL7). This reader further comments on Thandi’s mother’s cancer that “[Thandi] noted the disease as one where one's privilege determined treatment and survival”, acknowledging Black grief, as well as noting that Thandi’s grief journey “never feels like a destination. Her journey continued, even when I finished the story”, acknowledging F2.

### 4.2.4 Indirect comments on the grief narrative

While none of the unfavorable or mixed reviews for any of the books mention grief directly as contributing to their negative or mixed reading experience, some of them seem to indirectly comment on the grief narrative, or on its structure. Some readers of *Hamnet* commented unfavorably on the atemporality of the after-story but failed to relate it to grief. One reader said that “[t]he first three-quarters of this novel completely captivated me – the atmosphere, the pacing, the shadow hovering overhead” (H8) and then continues to explain how this changed in the third part which failed to captivate them, which is the part in which Hamnet is dead and the narrative has barely any plot or progression, because it depicts the family’s experience of grief. Another reader of *Hamnet* notes that the story starts to lose fizz as the different timelines meet and the structure collapses and “we get an endless rather rambling chapter which continues for dozens of pages until the end of the book” (H10), seemingly without realizing that they describe the moment Hamnet dies and the family dealing with their grief from then on out. While they are indirectly commenting on the grief narrative, they are directly commenting on the lack of transportation they felt while reading the after-story of grief, which lacks futurity and progression. While the depiction of grief as having no plot and progression in *Hamnet* is a realistic portrayal of grief, and around a third of the novel is almost exclusively dedicated to the portrayal of grief, this seems to not have contributed to reflection on grief and acknowledgements of *features* of grief. Whether the structurally unadjusted after- story of grief and its lack of progression and goals in *Hamnet* influences reader engagement with the grief narrative (e.g. through lack of transportation) is hard to determine based on these few reviews and could be further explored in future research.

### 4.2.5 A story about sadness is seen as depressing

Some readers have commented on the novels as “depressing”, while not addressing the topic of loss or grief directly. A reader found *Like Family “*sad, like the depressing kind of sad” (LF15), while other readers commented that *What We Lose* “concluded on a very depressing note” after expecting a more hopeful story from its blurb (WWL12), or that “the way the author unpacks her identity is…a bit depressing and a bit boring” (WWL18). One reader said they found *Hamnet* “extremely sad and disturbing. Many of the familial relationships were dysfunctional. Many questions within the story remain unanswered. There was no satisfactory resolution at the end” (H27), without reflecting on the role that grief might have played in this. These were only a few out of 90 reviews, but for the total of thousands upon thousands of reviews for these three novels on *Goodreads* there might be many more.

These unconscious comments on the grief narrative and the comments on the “depressing” nature of the stories shows how a portion of readers react to a story that resists both the normative depiction of grief and the happy or hopeful ending, and seems to confirm Megan Devine and Hope Edelman’s observations discussed in chapter 1.1.3, that a large group of people still tend to avoid negative emotion and expect and prefer stories with a happy or hopeful ending, or one that offers some kind of closure. This can also be seen in the way that readers engage with the endings of *Hamnet* and *Like Family*, which both do not fully resist the culturally preferred ending of hope and closure. Readers described these hopeful endings as “very very moving” (LF11) or commented that the story is “beautifully written, especially the end” (LF12). A reader of *Hamnet* commented on “the transformative power of […] grief” (H12), which is suggested in its ending. Both the rejection of the depiction of sadness as depressing and the praise of moving, hopeful and transformative endings while talking about a narrative that depicts grief shows how readers are conditioned to expect and want even stories of bereavement and grief to provide uplifting and poignant narratives and endings.

## 4.3 Narrative qualities contributing to readers’ reading experiences

Tables D.1 and D.2 show what textual or narrative characteristics or qualities of the novels, such as its writing, structure or characterization, readers mentioned in their reviews as contributing to their reading experience. The qualities that were most often quoted in the reviews were:

1. writing

the author’s writing style, the way they use language

1. reflection

the text/character itself is meditative/ reflective or invites reflection in the reader

1. characterization

a character’s personality, thoughts, behavior

1. structure and form

narrative structure, plot, form

 7. emotion

reports of emotion

Table D.1 Qualities contributing to 68 favorable reviews

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Total | *What We Lose* | *Hamnet* | *Like Family* |
| 1. writing  | 36 | 7 | 12 | 17 |
| 7. emotion | 32 | 6 | 10 | 16 |
| 4. characterization  | 13 | - | 5 | 7 |
| 5. structure and form | 8 | 7 | - | 1 |
| 2. reflection | 14 | 6 | - | 8 |

Table D.2 Qualities contributing to 22 unfavorable reviews

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Total | *What We Lose* | *Hamnet* | *Like Family* |
| 5. structure and form | 13 | 9 | 2 | 1 |
| 4. characterization | 10 | 4 | 3 | 2 |
| 1. writing | 7 | 2 | 3 | 3 |

### 4.3.1 *Writing*, *structure* and *characterization* as pre-conditions for transportation

Some of the qualities that were most often mentioned as contributing to a favorable review, like *emotion* and *reflection,* were mentioned hardly or not at all in unfavorable reviews. While favorable reviewers elaborated on a broad array of qualities that contributed to their positive reading experience, only the same three qualities mainly contributed to an unfavorable review; *writing*, *structure and form* and *characterization*. These qualities were quoted as hindering readers[[7]](#footnote-7) from being transported into the narrative, like for example a reader who remarked of the *writing* in *Like Family* that “the narrative has a cold rationality that I found almost impossible to connect with. [...] I believe that others can appreciate this author's work but he is just not for me” (LF8), or a reviewer of *Hamnet* who found the novel unengaging and flat and commented on the *characterization* of Agnes: “especially hated the portrayal of Agnes as one of those almost witchy 'wise women' who abound in historical fiction [...] A book which is not for me, then [...]” (H3). A reader of *What We Lose* described the *writing* and *structure* hindering their transportation into the story as “there is something about the way that the internal aspects of the story are presented that don't welcome you, rather they leave you wanting to turn away” (WWL4).

Likely, *writing*, *structure and form* and *characterization* are most important to a reader's initial transportation into the story and function as a precondition to experience additional qualities of a text. It is thought that the degree of being transported into a narrative indicates the extent to which a reader simulates the social experiences depicted and their empathic responses (Johnson; Bal and Veltkamp). This would mean that the lack of transportation for these readers resulted in decreased simulation of the experience of grief depicted in the novel. This is then likely why none of the unfavorable reviews acknowledged the grief narrative. One reader connects transportation to simulation in their review: “The problem for me is the way the book it's written, it didn't catch me. [...] the reader is supposed to connect with the characters, to feel like one of them, but I couldn't” (LF18).

### 4.3.2 Narrative qualities and acknowledgements of grief and its *features*

 Table E shows which qualities are quoted most often in favorable reviews, in reviews that acknowledge grief, and in reviews that further acknowledge *features* of grief.

The discussion will focus mostly on trying to see in which ways the reading experiences of readers of *What We Lose* and *Hamnet* differ. The focus will be on reviews of these two novels because they start out with the same number of acknowledgements of the grief narrative, but then have drastically different numbers for acknowledgements of *features* of grief. Comparing and discussing what qualities readers have quoted for each book can give insight into how these qualities may relate to a higher or lower engagement with the grief narrative.

Table E

Qualities quoted in favorable reviews, in reviews that acknowledge grief, and in reviews that acknowledge *features* of grief

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Favorable (68)** | *WWL*(18) | *H*(23) | *LF*(26) | **Grief** **(33)** | *WWL**(13)* | *H**(13)* | *LF**(7)* | ***Features*** **(16)** | *WWL**(10)* | *H**(3)* | *LF**(3)* |
| 1. writing  | **36** | 7 | 12 | 17 | **19** | 7 | 7 | 5 | **9** | 5 | 2 | 2 |
| 7. emotion | **30****a: 14****b: 16** | 6a: 3b: 3 | 10a: 5b: 5 | 14a: 6b: 8 | **15****a: 6****b: 9** | 5a: 3b: 2 | 6a: 1b: 5 | 4a: 2b: 2 | **9****a: 3****b: 6** | 5a: 3b: 2 | 2a: -b: 2 | 2a: -b: 2 |
| 2. reflection | **14** | 6 | - | 8 | **11** | 6 | - | 5 | **7** | 6 | - | 1 |
| 5. structure | **8** | 7 | - | 1 | **7** | 7 | - | - | **6**  | 6 | - | - |
| 4. characterization | **13** | - | 5 | 7 | **3** | - | 3 | - | **2** | - | 2 | - |

## 4.4 Reports of *emotion* in reviews of *Hamnet* and *What We Lose*

### 4.4.1 Empathy versus emotion contagion

Initially, *emotion* is quoted most often for *Like Family* and *Hamlet*, and least for *What We Lose,* but these numbers first even out for reviews that acknowledge grief and then reverse for reviews that acknowledge *features* of grief, when *emotion* is quoted more in reviews of *What We Lose*. Table E shows a distinction between *emotion a* and *emotion b*. *Emotion* *a* refers to reports of *emotion* in which the reader’s emotions are central, e.g. when a reader reports to feel heartbroken, and *emotion b* refers to reports of emotion in which a character’s emotions are made central, or the way that emotion is depicted by the author. This distinction may provide a possible explanation for *Hamnet*’s low number of acknowledgements of *features* of grief. While both *emotion a* and *b* are quoted in reviews of *Hamnet*, the few reviews for *Hamnet* (and *Like Family*) that acknowledge grief and *features* of grief all but one quote *emotion b*, which suggests that *emotion a* might not be inducive to empathic and reflective responses to a grief narrative.

Experiencing intense emotions such as heartbreak while reading does not necessarily indicate narrative emotions such as empathy, or the increased engagement with characters that is needed for the kind of significant reflection on their circumstances that might lead to acknowledgements of *features* of grief. It may actually indicate decreased empathy or point to a lower involvement with characters, which can hinder reflective processes (Vorderer qtd. in Koopman and Hakemulder 95). A distinction can be made between emotion contagion and empathy, where emotion contagion is the egocentric experience of someone else’s emotion, and empathy is the allocentric experience of someone else’s emotion (Hogan, *Mind* 12). *Emotion a* is comparable to emotion contagion and *emotion b* can be seen as the basis for narrative empathy. In addition to this it is also important to point out that feeling sorry for a character (pity or sympathy) is not the same as empathy (Kearney 51; Koopman and Hakemulder 83). Many readers who quote *emotion a* mention having cried or come close to tears (LF2; LF4; H4; WWL7) or finding the novel devastating (H2), or heartbreaking (H4; H19). Instead of commenting or reflecting on the characters and their emotions and experiences (WWL6; WWL8; H5) the readers commented on their own emotions, i.e. emotion contagion, or the egocentric experience of someone else’s emotion, which points away from empathy.

### 4.4.2 Emotion, catharsis and closure

Feeling intensely moved can point to catharsis. When experiencing catharsis, a reader experiences an extreme emotion during reading, which then gets purged (“Catharsis”). Arthur Berndtson explains that catharsis “concludes on a note of freedom [from] the emotion” (235), by which it becomes clear that catharsis is a process that enables readers to feel a degree of resolve or closure. This may interfere with a reader’s opportunity to stay with the story and reflect on it. *Hamnet* especially is a story that at several moments (e.g. Hamnet offering to die to spare Judith (200-1), Hamnet’s death scene (252), the momentous revelation in the final scenes (359-67)) seems to aim at eliciting emotion in the reader through highly emotional scenes. Some readers commented on the author’s attempts at this. One reader called the ending “fancifully sentimental” and notes that “Agnes' emotions began to baffle me. [...] It becomes apparent that this is a necessary plot device for the denouement of the novel's theme of bereavement to work” (H10), an observation that is echoed by another reader who called the writing in *Hamnet* melodramatic and thought the climax hinged “on weak and tenuous connections and completely out-of-character observations by Agnes, and existed because it was supposed to, regardless of whether it felt organic to the story” (H1). Another reader thought the author was “maximizing the tear factor” (H7). These readers describe a sense of manipulation of the narrative for emotional effect. Death, loss and grief are used to elicit big emotions in readers, and become a narrative tool rather than an experience that readers can simulate and engage with.

### 4.4.3 The absence of melodrama in *What We Lose*

In contrast, some readers explicitly expressed their appreciation for the absence of pathos or melodrama in *What We Lose* and *Like Family* (WWL3, LF9, LF19). One reader commented on What *We Lose*: “[t]he way Zinzi Clemmons depicts grief is not spectacular, and it made me so, so happy. I don't know why most authors handle this subject with loud bangs, forever dramatic [...] (WWL3) and a reader of *Like Family* appreciated “the emotional honesty and lack of gratuitous melodrama” (LF9). This shows that even though grief is an intensely emotional experience, using grief as a device to elicit big emotion in readers does not necessarily do justice to the portrayal of grief, nor elicits empathic and reflective responses. One reader[[8]](#footnote-8) articulated the effect that the absence of a drive at big emotions in *What We Lose* had on their reading experience: “There was no elaborate plot, no rush or thrill. […] I never felt compelled to sympathy-- it is written, instead, in a manner that allows the reader to stare loss and despair in the face and understand the honesty of it” (WWL31). This reader implies that not being compelled to sympathy by the story enabled them to engage with the reality of grief depicted in the novel.

In the few reviews of *What We Lose* that acknowledge *features* of grief even though readers reported *emotion a* instead of *b* (WWL1, WWL3, WWL7), they also all comment on the reflective nature of the narrative, and continue to reflect on grief in detail themselves. Oatley notes that to derive insights from a story a reader should ideally both experience an emotion and reflect on it thoughtfully (451), for which *What We Lose* seems to offer its readers more optimal conditions than *Hamnet*. The fact that *reflection* was not quoted for any of the 30 reviews for *Hamnet* contributes to the idea that perhaps many readers respond to *Hamnet* in a way that leaves less room for narrative empathy and reflective responses while reading.

## 4.5 *Structure* and *reflection* in *What We Lose*

Thetwo qualities that are quoted in reviews that acknowledge *features* of grief for *What We Lose* that are absent for *Hamnet* are *structure and form* and *reflection*, suggesting that the unconventional form and structure of *What We Lose* and its reflective nature may have contributed to its readers identifying more *features* of grief than the readers of *Hamnet*.

### 4.5.1 Thandi’s reflection and meaning-making in *What We Lose*

Form and reflection seem to go hand in hand in *What We Lose*, as Clemmons uses many of the vignettes to display Thandi’s detailed and extensive thoughts, observations on and examinations of different topics and themes, including grief. Some of the *features* of grief acknowledging readers of *What We Lose* mention the exploration of these different themes in their reviews (WWL1, WWL7, WWL 23, WWL 26), while all of the *features* of grief acknowledging readers note the pensive nature of Clemmons’ writing. The themes seem to speak to these readers, and they in turn seem to reflect on these themes in long detailed reviews. One *features* of grief acknowledging reader quotes one of the many passages in which Thandi reflects on the nature of grief in their review (WWL3), while another reader observes that “[t]he effect of filling a novel about grief with so many important themes - as [...] race, marriage, apartheid, etc. - is the realization of grief's all-encompassing nature. Not only is it forever in the background of Thandi's personal life; it is forever in the background of everything” (WWL1). *What We Lose* has a protagonist who observes and reflects on her own thoughts, emotions and behavior as well as on the meaning of the events in her life. In paragraph 3.2.2, the important role of meaning- making in the experience of loss and grieving was discussed. Meaning- making is “a process of constant engagement (and reengagement) with the facts” (Edelman 207) through for example storying loss, which is something that Thandi does throughout the story, and she takes the readers along in her meaning-making by which readers simulate meaning- making of grief with her.

### 4.5.2 The reflective protagonist and identifying reader

Something that contributes to the reflective and meaning-making nature of *What We Lose,* and without which the journal- or diary like form could not have been achieved, is the first person point of view of the narrative, which is another significant difference with *Hamnet*. Even though the use of free indirect speech made it possible to show the experience of grief from the different perspectives of the characters in *Hamnet*, and even though the immediacy of first-person point of view is suggested in free indirect speech*,* it remains a form of third person narration that implies that there is someone outside the narrative, who is telling the story and relayingcharacters’ interiority and reflection to readers instead of the characters themselves. One reader of *Hamnet* commented on the distance this created for them in their review: “I found this unengaging and flat. There's too much indirect speech and the whole story feels very distanced rather than immediate” (H3). This reader was not transported at all and wrote an unfavorable review, but another reader who acknowledged the grief narrative but not *features* of grief, missed “a complete connection to [O’Farrell’s] words” and wondered whether it was because of the third person point of view (H8).

It is possible that in addition to the protagonist of *What We Lose* being more reflective on the experience of grief than the protagonist of *Hamnet*, and thus more inviting of reflection in readers as well, the point of view from which the novels are told further influence the way in which the readers interact and engage with the characters and events in the novels. Oatley’s idea of point of view influencing whether a reader takes on a spectator or identifying stance, has been discussed in 3.1.5. It is possible that through the third person point of view narration readers of *Hamnet* took on more of an observing or spectating role while reading, which is linked to experiencing sympathy rather than empathy, while the first-person point of view of *What We Lose* helped readers to identify with Thandi. Oatley calls identification “a species of empathy” (446). This possibly (co-) contributed to readers of *Hamnet* feeling emotions, but not necessarily empathy.

# Conclusion

In investigating what a fictional narrative of grief that diverges from normative cultural narratives of grief may look like and how readers engage with more realistic portrayals of grief, three fiction novels were analyzed to find out to what extent the fictional accounts of grief portray realistic experiences of grief, and how a narrative that portrays grief realistically bears on the classic narrative structure of a novel. *Goodreads* reviews of the three novels were examined to see how readers engage with these grief narratives. Their engagement was measured by looking at whether they acknowledged the grief narrative in their reviews, as well as whether they further reflected on specific *features* of grief in more detail.

To determine whether grief was portrayed realistically, four criteria were articulated, based on descriptions of what lived grief looks like in recent books by grief literacy advocates. The criteria stipulate that a realistic portrayal of grief shows grief as long-term (F1), without progression towards resolve, closure or transformation (F2), as experienced and expressed differently by different people (F3) and as having physical, psychological, and cognitive effects (F4). From analyses of the depictions of grief in the novels it became clear that the novels depict grief realistically to varying degrees, with the novel *Like Family* only depicting anticipatory grief and disenfranchised grief, but not (long term) grief after death (F1), and the novel *Hamnet*, as well as *Like Family* to a degree, having a redeeming ending, which does not align with grief as it is experienced in real life. The novel *What We Lose* was found to meet each of the criteria of realistic grief, as well as portraying anticipatory grief and Black grief.

An account of a lived experience of grief diverges in structure, progression, temporality and closure from the classical story arc, yet to simulate the social experiences depicted in a narrative and to trigger empathic and reflective responses, a reader needs to feel transported. To look at whether and how a compelling narrative can be created from two diverging narrative structures, the novels were analyzed to see how an account of grief is accommodated in its narrative structure, and the novels were further analyzed for their narrative elements. The analyses show that all three novels are set within the context of both a marriage and a family, and that the developments of - and dynamics in those relationships together with creative use of timelines give the story goals and progression, and to a degree suspense. The creative use of timelines also made it possible to circumvent the typical a-temporality of grief in *Like Family* and *What We Lose,* and interweave presence and absence to make the absence of the person who has died felt, while *Hamnet* portrayed grief in its a- temporality, without any adjustments, for a large part of the book.

To see how readers engaged with the narratives of grief, reviews on *Goodreads* were analyzed. Acknowledgements of the grief narrative and of *features* (criteria) of grief were collected, as well as what readers reported as contributing to or detracting from their reading experience. The data shows that acknowledgements of the grief narrative and of *features* of grief occur exclusively in favorable reviews, confirming the importance of a compelling story that transports readers. The data further shows that *What We Lose*, the novel that met all criteria of realistic grief, had the most reviews that acknowledged the grief narrative and *features* of grief, and that the less criteria a novel meets, the further the number of reviews that acknowledge the grief narrative and *features* of grief drops. *Like Family* meets the least criteria of realistic grief and had the lowest number of acknowledgements of the grief narrative and of *features* of grief. Initially the same number of readers of *Hamnet* acknowledged the grief narrative as those of *What We Lose*, despite *Hamnet* not meeting all of the criteria, but this number dropped drastically for the acknowledgements of *features* of grief, which was as low as those of *Like Family*. The data suggests that of the four features, the ones that are most essential to engagement with a grief narrative, or may even be pre-requisite to it, are F1 and F2.

These results were further explored by looking at what narrative qualities each reader quoted as contributing to or detracting from their reading experience, to see if other than a narrative portraying all four features of grief there were other characteristics or qualities of a reading experience that influences a reader’s engagement with a grief narrative. Overall, the results show that an author’s writing, the story’s structure or form and the characterization of the protagonists serve as the qualities that determine a reader’s transportation into a story, and that when one or more of these hinder a reader’s transportation, this reader generally does not further engage with or reflect on any aspect of the story in a meaningful way. This is thought to be the reason acknowledgements of the grief narrative occur exclusively in favorable reviews and shows why trying to find out how a grief narrative is best accommodated in a novel without detracting from a compelling reading experience is important when we talk about how novels can contribute to grief literacy.

The results further show that the highly emotional account of loss and grief in *Hamnet* triggered highly emotional responses in readers, but this did not result in acknowledgements of (*features*) of grief in their reviews, which may mean that the sentimentalization of grief invites emotional responses, but not necessarily reflective and empathic responses towards grief. Some readers of *What We Lose* praised the absence of pathos and melodrama in the novel, and as every reviewer who acknowledged *features* of grief quoted the pensive and reflective nature of *What We Lose*, the combination of reflection and absence of melodrama seems to have contributed to a reading experience that enabled more readers to reflect more elaborately on grief than readers of *Hamnet*. Reflection was not quoted in any review of *Hamnet*. A story in which grief is reflected on by the protagonist, the way it is in *What We Lose,* and in which grief does not function as a narrative device, may help readers also reflect on grief, and on what grief means to the characters and to themselves. This further suggests that the criterion of realistic portrayal of grief that states that a grief narrative will resist closure and resolve for its characters (F2) extends to its readers as well. A drive at emotional resolve or emotion contagion (e.g. catharsis, pathos, melodrama) in the reader should also be avoided in order to convey the reality of grief and encourage empathic and reflective responses.

Bartlett et al. found that readers of an autobiographical grief narrative reported an expanded understanding of grief after reading. This thesis shows that a fictional narrative of grief can also contribute to grief awareness and understanding in its readers, provided it depicts grief in a certain way. A narrative meeting the four criteria of realistic grief, especially the depiction of grief as long term and without a drive to closure, increases the opportunity for readers to engage with and reflect on the depicted experience of grief as well as on grief in a more general sense.

This thesis also demonstrates how both textual analysis and reader response research are needed to gain insights into how fiction novels can contribute to grief literacy, and follows Bartlett et al. by addressing a gap in research that focusses on either approach but rarely to never on both. Further research could look into whether indeed F1 and F2 function as pre-requisites to reader engagement with a grief narrative, and further explore the influence of (non)sentimentalization of grief and a reflective protagonist. It could also be of interest to know to what extent criteria of grief and narrative qualities interact with each other and what influence a depiction of grief that is not structurally adjusted to give it temporality, progression or goals, like in *Hamnet,* has on reader engagement with a grief narrative*.*

Even though the sample of 30 reviews per book and 90 reviews in total is small, the data collected shows a correlation between the extent to which the depiction of fictional grief follows the criteria of realistic grief and the degree and extent of reader engagement with it. This can begin to give insight into what kind of fictional stories can contribute to grief literacy, which can be continued and elaborated on in future research. Insights from such research can, in addition to existing literature on grief literacy, inform recommendations for authors, literary agents, editors, publishers and readers on how to avoid the misrepresentation of grief or grieving in fiction and how to instead address the social issue of grief more responsibly, without detracting from an attractive story that transports readers. It also shows that publishers need not be discouraged from taking on non-normative fictional grief stories as they can be successful and have a readership.

# **Appendix A**

Inventory of acknowledgements and qualities from reviews:

1. writing

2. reflective

4. characterization

5. structure, form, plot, story

7a. emotion: reader's feelings

7b. emotion: character's feelings/ portrayal of emotion

If a review is favorable or mixed but a quality is quoted negatively, "neg" is added. If a review is unfavorable or mixed but a quality is quoted positively, "pos" is added.



# **Appendix B:** *Goodreads* Reviews

All reviews collected from *Goodreads*. Reviews accessed and collected between 3 and 11 September 2022. The username of each reviewer contains a hyperlink to the review on *Goodreads*.

The rating scale is 1-5 stars with 5 stars being the highest rating.

The 30 reviews for each book are displayed in the order of ten reviews from the “Popular Reviews” ordering first, then ten reviews from the “Oldest First” ordering, then ten reviews from the “Newest First” ordering, except for *What We Lose* reviews, for which the last two have inadvertently been switched. This has no bearing on analysis or results.

[Reviews of *Hamnet* by Maggie O’Farrell 5](#_Toc125330212)

[H1 5](#_Toc125330213)

[H2 8](#_Toc125330214)

[H3 9](#_Toc125330215)

[H4 10](#_Toc125330216)

[H5 10](#_Toc125330217)

[H6 11](#_Toc125330218)

[H7 11](#_Toc125330219)

[H8 12](#_Toc125330220)

[H9 14](#_Toc125330221)

[H10 14](#_Toc125330222)

[H11 15](#_Toc125330223)

[H12 15](#_Toc125330224)

[H13 16](#_Toc125330225)

[H14 16](#_Toc125330226)

[H15 16](#_Toc125330227)

[H16 17](#_Toc125330228)

[H17 17](#_Toc125330229)

[H18 17](#_Toc125330230)

[H19 18](#_Toc125330231)

[H20 19](#_Toc125330232)

[H21 19](#_Toc125330233)

[H22 19](#_Toc125330234)

[H23 19](#_Toc125330235)

[H24 19](#_Toc125330236)

[H25 20](#_Toc125330237)

[H26 20](#_Toc125330238)

[H27 20](#_Toc125330239)

[H28 21](#_Toc125330240)

[H29 21](#_Toc125330241)

[H30 21](#_Toc125330242)

[Reviews of *Like Family* by Paolo Giordano 22](#_Toc125330243)

[LF1 22](#_Toc125330244)

[LF2 23](#_Toc125330245)

[LF3 23](#_Toc125330246)

[LF4 24](#_Toc125330247)

[LF5 25](#_Toc125330248)

[LF6 25](#_Toc125330249)

[LF7 26](#_Toc125330250)

[LF8 27](#_Toc125330251)

[LF9 27](#_Toc125330252)

[LF10 28](#_Toc125330253)

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## Reviews of *Hamnet* by Maggie O’Farrell

<https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/43890641>

### H1 [Review](https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/3491613370)

2 stars

February 20, 2022

So apparently being critically acclaimed and award winning still doesn’t make a good book, even when it tries this hard.

“Every life has its kernel, its hub, its epicentre, from which everything flows out, to which everything returns.”

Since this overwritten and overwrought book has not yet met an adjective or a metaphor that it didn’t like and immediately adopt *(usually in neat sets of threes)* to add to the neverending list of descriptors purpling its melodramatic prose, I’ll throw out a few, just to give you a taste. Overwritten, overwrought and melodramatic I already used. There are, however, still all of these: superfluous, ornate, overly lyrical, flowery, meandering, long-winded, cliche-laden, monotone, repetitive, sentimental, pretentious, and simply overdone. When one word would suffice, twelve will be used.

“The moment she has feared most, the event she has thought about, mulled over, turned this way and that, rehearsed and re-rehearsed in her mind, during the dark of sleepless nights, at moments of idleness, when she is alone.”

The prose is so purple that even Prince at the peak of his career would have stayed away from it.

“She grows up with a hidden, private flame inside her: it licks at her, warms her, warns her.”

When it comes to the meat of the story, it’s certainly a vegetarian option. See, I can do a metaphor, too!\*

*\*(No offense meant to my vegetarian brethren. I blame the metaphor.)*

In a strange and grating affectation, O’Farrell chooses to keep William Shakespeare unnamed, referring to him only as a Latin tutor, husband, father, son, but never even allowing him to have a first name. It’s not done for any big reveals as his identity would have been clear a few pages in regardless, even without all the marketing and even the title pointing right to him. If that’s a way to bring him down a peg so that his mostly unknown wife gets a spotlight, then it’s strange and offputting. You don’t give the voice to the voiceless by shutting up others. It’s just dismissive.

“They beg her to stop, not to touch people’s hands, to hide this odd gift. No good will come of it, her father says, standing over Agnes as she crouches by the fire, no good at all. When she reaches up to take his hand, he snatches it away. She grows up feeling wrong, out of place, too dark, too tall, too unruly, too opinionated, too silent, too strange. She grows up with the awareness that she is merely tolerated, an irritant, useless, that she does not deserve love, that she will need to change herself substantially, crush herself down if she is to be married. She grows up, too, with the memory of what it meant to be properly loved, for what you are, not what you ought to be.”

This is a novel about Anne - or Agnes - Hathaway, William Shakespeare’s wife, who remained behind in Stratford-upon-Avon while her husband changed the course of English literature in London. We know she was a few years older than William, had three children, lived apart from Shakespeare for years, and was eventually bequeathed his second-best bed in the Bard’s will. This book had enough artistic license to breathe life into her — and yet it chose to go with a cliche upon cliche. O’Farrell chooses to make Agnes a wild spirit, possible part-dryad, eccentric and in touch with nature, a healer and a herbalist, possessing almost unerring precognition. She’s special and intuitive and quirky in that force-of-nature new strong-woman feminine stereotype that does her no favors.

“She is rarely wrong. About anything. It's a gift or a curse, depending on who you ask.'

The rest of the characters remain flat and underdeveloped, existing as merely a background. Even our titular character, the unfortunate Hamnet, is barely a sketch of a boy, making it hard to care for him and his ultimate fate. Instead of character development, we blunder through bogs and thickets of excessive metaphors and descriptions\* that slow down the paper-thin plot to glacial pace — *ooooh, what a pretty metaphor! Shiny!* - interrupted incongruously by a chapter that, for reasons unknown, decides to chart a course of bubonic plague fleas to the shores of England — unless the whole point was for a discerning reader to appreciatively chuckle at the presence of a merchant from Venice in that chapter. (Seriously, plague outbreaks were a common occurrence at that time. Who cares how that particular one got there? It wasn’t the first one or an unusual one. At least the chapter woke me up from snoozing over this book monotony - but still unnecessary.)

*\* Almost every page is like this:*

“Several streets away, the owl leaves its perch, surrendering itself to a cool draught, its wings silently breasting the air, its eyes alert. To it, the town appears as a series of rooftops, with gullies of streets in between, a place to be navigated. The massed leaves of trees present themselves as it flies, the stray wisps of smoke from idle fires. It sees the progress of the fox, a man, sleeping in the doorway of a tavern, scratching at a fleabite on his shin; it sees coneys in a cage at the back of someone’s house; horses standing in a paddock near the inn; and it sees Judith, stepping into the street.”

And all that poor characterization and tired archetypes, combined with overwritten ornamental prose, put a wall between the characters and me, a reader. I just could not connect with them. It made me feel detached from them, always observing from a distance but never feeling or caring on a deeper level.

And now it’s as good of a time as any for a quick sample of ridiculous plot points that, in this bogged down and poorly paced narrative, literally went nowhere.

- What’s the point of Agnes’ precognition and strange dryad-ish origins? I like my magical realism as much, or actually probably more, than the next person, but what was the point of incorporating this here?

‘Someone who knows everything about you, before you even know it yourself. Someone who can just look at you and divine your deepest secrets, just with a glance. Someone who can tell what you are about to say – and what you might not – before you say it. It is,’ he says, ‘both a joy and a curse.’

- What with the insistent hints at illegal sheep skins dealings of Shakespeare’s father and involving Agnes’ brother in shady dealings as a precondition for marriage consent that were never followed up and just petered out?

- Why all the fretting about Agnes not realizing that it’s Hamnet and not Judith who would die? It’s not like she had power to do anything about it, not that timely attention would have helped.

- Why write about that damn kestrel anyway if we never hear anything about it after the wedding? Was it fulfilling the witch’s familiar part until O’Farrell lost her interest in that storyline?

- Why switch the focus from abusive father to the jealous mother-in-law just to have all these storylines fizzle out? Also, what was the point of mentioning Hamnet having been hit by his grandfather when Judith fell ill, all the references to the cut above his eyebrow, and no payoff? I was half-waiting for the damn cut to get infected and kill him (instead of a plague).

- Why oh why were we treated to *“this house is shaped like a letter “A”* eyeroll-worthy bit of dialogue???

- Why would Agnes freak out that her husband would use their dead son’s name in a play? Why see it as an offense and not a loving tribute?

- Why are those fraternal twins written as identical?

- And finally, my most burning question. What happened to all those apples that needed to be stored properly but were all disturbed during that cringeworthy barn sex scene? Did they all spoil? And if they didn’t, why was I subjected to reading about them bouncing around like there was a small earthquake from the steamy sex????

The climax of this story, as you’d predict, hinges upon Shakespeare writing “Hamlet” a few years after his son Hamnet dies. It’s right there in the book blurb, making sure we don’t fail to spot the blatant similarity in the names. And that climax was as underwhelming as one could only imagine, hinging on weak and tenuous connections and completely out-of-character observations by Agnes, and existed because it was supposed to, regardless of whether it felt organic to the story.

“He has, Agnes sees, done what any father would wish to do, to exchange his child’s suffering for his own, to take his place, to offer himself up in his child’s stead so that the boy might live. She will say all this to her husband, later, after the play has ended, after the final silence has fallen, after the dead have sprung up to take their places in the line of players at the edge of the stage.”

At the beginning, I thought that its prose was an interestingly styled introduction into meandering and a bit feverish mind of Hamnet, but as the narrative plodded on, I noted more irritation, eventually sliding into impatience and finally settling into that reading curse — a tired boredom. I no longer cared what would happen, only how long it would take me to reach the end of the book. And that comes from someone with a decent tolerance for overwriting, given my general love for Valente, Mieville or This Is How You Lose the Time War.

2 stars. Overwritten, overwrought, overhyped.

### H2 [Review](https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/3242267151)

5 stars

January 12, 2021

2020 Best Books of the Year [#02 of 11]

Quite often, the Women's Prize for Fiction longlist contains one book more fanciful than the rest. The rogue book in the lineup usually has unique qualities that manifest either as robust lyricism or as strange yet scintillating content. Occasionally, the longlist offers a book with both qualities (think 2017 Women's Prize longlist nominee, The Lonely Hearts Hotel by Heather O'Neill).

It's quite possible *Hamnet* by Maggie O'Farrell is this year's rogue contender. O'Farrell's writing style is a lyrical dreamscape. Where the average author mentions the presence of kittens, O'Farrell writes of kittens "*with faces like pansies and soft pads on their paws.*" Some authors would stop at saying a character collected honey, O'Farrell describes the honey flowing "*slow as sap, orange-gold, scented with the sharp tang of thyme and the floral sweetness of lavender.*" Your average author notes a plum orchard, but O'Farrell invites readers to see plums with "*red-gold jackets near to bursting with sweetness.*" *Hamnet* is a feast for the senses; a seven-course meal for readers hungry for books written with skillful embellishment.

Unfortunately, the rogue book filled with lyricism rarely makes the shortlist. And this year's judges have already stated they're looking for a winner that's relevant and timely, so *Hamnet* - which ventures to convey the perilous days during which William Shakespeare's young children struggle to survive the Black Death - at first seemed like it wasn't a contender for the shortlist, having no relevance to the modern day. That's no longer the case.

Verdict: *Hamnet* is a devastating book, as upsetting and vivid as the current global pandemic. An absolute must read.

It is to him she speaks in her disordered mind, not the trees, not the magic cross, not the patterns and markings of lichen, not even to her mother, who died while trying to give birth to a child. Please, she says to him, inside the chamber of her skull, please come back. I need you. Please. I should never have schemed to send you away. Make sure this child has safe passage; make sure it lives; make sure I survive to care for it. Let us both come through this. Please. Let me not die. Let me not end up cold and stiff in a bloodied bed.

### H3 [Review](https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/3180545896)

2 stars

April 29, 2020

I'm clearly in a minority here (again!) but I found this unengaging and flat. There's too much indirect speech and the whole story feels very distanced rather than immediate. O'Farrell talks in the foreword about how she's wanted to write this book for decades, and the result is that it feels laboured, weighted down with expectation that doesn't come to fruition for me.

I especially hated the portrayal of Agnes as one of those almost witchy 'wise women' who abound in historical fiction: fey, with preternatural senses, a herbalist as a code for 'female' power... it's very predictable, very common, very Philippa Gregory!

The vaunted connection to Shakespeare is tangential at best, and the idea that the death of Hamnet illuminates the writing of 'Hamlet' is sparse. The claim made in the novel that Shakespeare was so traumatised that he never wrote about plague is not quite true: 'Thou art a boil, a plague sore, an embossed carbuncle in my corrupted blood' (King Lear); 'A plague on both your houses' (Romeo & Juliet) are just a couple of examples. It is the case that censors at the time wouldn't let naturalistic representations of the plague pass (playhouses were one of the first public spaces to be closed when outbreaks occurred) but that applies to all Elizabethan/Jacobean dramatists and is a structural limitation rather than an indication of personal grief.

A book which is not for me, then, but clearly other reviewers have loved it.

### H4 [Review](https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/3090972014)

5 stars

July 30, 2020

Hamnet was wonderful. My favorite Maggie O’Farrell novel, so far!

It grabbed me from the start....and I wasn’t expecting it to.

I really enjoyed it — I can’t imagine any reader who wouldn’t like it.

Not to worry if you’re Shakespeare-challenged. I mean ‘really’ don’t worry. (I did).... needlessly.

The title seems a little misleading- but for those who haven’t read this yet....I’ll say no more.

Great book to go in blind.

Not only does it not disappoint— it’s SURPRISINGLY MAGNIFICENT.....

The writing is gorgeous....the ‘story’ - family - situations - are raw, intense, and intimate.

The story is sad....( I was so close to bawling in one part), filled with loss and grief...but sooo heartfelt —staggering impressive - clever- and simply brilliant.

This book deserves all the praise it’s getting...

And I repeat....NOTHING TO BE WORRIED ABOUT ( I’m so happy that Maggie wrote this book - for EVERY TYPE OF READER.

### H5 [Review](https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/3058114363)

5 stars

June 30, 2020

I have to admit that I was a little nervous going into this one for two reasons. I sometimes have a hard time with fictionalized accounts of real people. I’m always questioning how realistic they are and at the same time having to keep reminding myself that they’re fiction. Perhaps because not much is known about Shakespeare’s wife Anne or Agnes, her birth name, as she is called in the novel, that I found the imagining to be so captivating. Even though I still wondered how much might be true, O’Farrell’s beautiful rendition stands as brilliant story telling. The other thing that worried me is that this novel just seemed so different from the other novels by Maggie O’Farrell. She’s one of my favorite writers and I didn’t want to be disappointed. I wasn’t in the least and after thinking about this for a bit, I had to up my original four stars to five. While it’s a different kind of story than what she has written before, I found the same beautiful writing and stunning depiction of emotion that I loved in all her other novels.

The bard himself is not the main character on this stage. His name is not mentioned once . He is the son of John and Mary, the husband of Agnes, the father of Susanna and twins Hamnet and Judith, but never called by name. The focus is not on his plays, except for one, titled after his son Hamnet, who in the book dies at eleven of the plague. How we see the play in the end through Agnes’s eyes and heart was one of the most moving scenes of the novel. This felt from the beginning for me like Agnes’s story. Her story begins in an is almost fairy tale like way, as a girl belonging to a forest, remembering her mother, learning the power of plants and the meaning of her premonitions . She meets the Latin tutor, son of the glove maker and when they marry, she moves to Henley Street in Stratford with him.

The narrative alternatives from 1596 just before Hamnet dies and with Agnes’s early life, the time of their marriage and the years in between. Life in these times and in this place feels historically accurate, even if we really never will know the details of their family life, the death of their son. The most realistic thing of all was the stunning portrayal of a family’s grief, especially a mother’s grief. As Agnes prepares for Hamnet’s burial, when she goes to his grave or can’t bear to part with his clothes, I felt the depth of her grief.

I loved reading about Stratford, the family house and Agnes’s birthplace. Although I don’t remember details, I was there on Henley Street around thirty years ago at Shakespeare’s birthplace house and Anne (Agnes) Hathway’s house which is on the property there as well. I felt a warm connection knowing that I had been there once . I recommend this to lovers of historical fiction and most definitely to fans of Maggie O’Farrell.

I received an advanced copy of this book from Knopf (Random House) through Edelweiss.

### H6 [Review](https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/4502205069)

“read” (no star rating)

January 25, 2022

If you’re a Shakespeare fan, you’ll love this moving novel about how his personal life might’ve influenced the writing of one of his most famous plays. O’Farrell has built her story on two facts we know to be true about “The Bard”: his son Hamnet died at the age of 11, and a couple years later, Shakespeare wrote a tragedy called Hamlet. I especially enjoyed reading about his wife, Anne, who is imagined here as an almost supernatural figure.

### H7 [Review](https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/3479322395)

3 stars

August 7, 2020

Unpopular opinion ahead

I had no desire to read *Hamnet* when I first heard of it. Shakespeare gets married, they have kids, one dies, he writes "Hamlet".

Nope, not interested. Then several of my friends wrote amazing reviews and reeled me in. I was still hesitant but thought, Why not? Just give it a try and DNF if it's not interesting.

Let me tell you. In the beginning I was mesmerized by Maggie O'Farrell's writing. The descriptions made everything so vivid, the setting and characters leapt off the page. Wow, I thought, I can see why everyone loves this so much!

Unfortunately, as quickly as I fell in love with Ms. O'Farrell's writing, I just as quickly fell back out of love. Partly this was due to the story itself failing to interest me as it progressed. I was thinking of DNF'ing but then came the flea!

Who'd have thought a *flea* could be so interesting! I couldn't get enough of that little bugger, as it made its way from Alexandria, Egypt to Stratford, England. So intent on surviving and sucking blood and unwittingly spreading pestilence.

I gotta give Maggie O'Farrell credit for that, for turning a tiny, nasty, virus-carrying flea into an interesting character. That takes talent.

Sadly, I wasn't as taken in by all of the story. There were places I was immersed but then I'd go pages and pages wishing the book would just end already. Maybe I'm cold but I have little patience for books intent on maximizing the tear factor.

If you have more of a heart than I apparently do, and if you're a fan of historical fiction, you will probably love this book. It's written beautifully and descriptively. It tells not so much about Shakespeare (who is never mentioned by name) but about his wife and children. Not much is known about any of them yet Maggie O'Farrell brings them to life with her vivid imagination and meticulous writing.

It probably deserves the 4 and 5 stars I've seen everyone else give it, but I was bored through too much of it to grant it any more than 3.

### H8 [Review](https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/3385786801)

4 stars

August 26, 2020

*“What is given may be taken away, at any time. Cruelty and devastation wait for you around corners, inside coffers, behind doors: they can leap out at you at any moment, like a thief or brigand.”*

Without a doubt, this is a brilliantly imagined novel written by one who is quickly becoming a favorite author. I’m afraid I’ll have to explain myself for not singing its praises as effusively as I would have liked, but I’ll get to that later. There are a lot more positives to this than there are negatives, after all. I did just profess that O’Farrell is edging her way to the top of my list after just two books!

*“She, like all mothers, constantly casts out her thoughts, like fishing lines, towards her children, reminding herself of where they are, what they are doing, how they fare.”*

Anne Hathaway, called Agnes here, was wed to William Shakespeare. Above all, this is her book, not Shakespeare’s and not Hamnet’s, despite the title. In fact, O’Farrell never utters Shakespeare’s name directly; he is always called ‘husband’ or ‘father’. Agnes, however, is front and center, and what absorbed me fully was the theme of motherhood – the joys, the doubts, the fears, the sorrows. A mother constantly questions whether she is doing enough for her children. There looms a certainty that surely you could do more if you only tried harder. With little knowledge to build on, O’Farrell has shaped one of the most fascinating mothers in the literary world. Agnes is of another realm entirely, it seems. She reminded me of a sprite, so ethereal in nature. Starved for love as a child after her mother’s death, Agnes makes friends with nature – the animals and the forest become her companions. She learns to divine truths about the essence of others based on what she can glean from their hands.

*“If asked, the girl – a woman, now – would remove the falconer’s glove and hold your hand, just for a moment, pressing the flesh between thumb and forefinger where all your hand’s strength lay, and tell you what she felt. The sensation, some said, was dizzying, draining, as if she was drawing all the strength out of you; others said it was invigorating, enlivening, like a shower of rain.”*

The plot alternates between Agnes’s youth, courtship and pregnancies with the time when tragedy strikes in 1596. A parent’s greatest fear is finally realized. I remember when my children were young and some illness or another would strike. I couldn’t sleep, remaining constantly alert to any cries in the night, any change in breathing. Surely, I thought, I could be doing more to relieve their suffering.

*“The trick is never to let down your guard. Never think you are safe. Never take for granted that your children’s hearts beat, that they sup milk, that they draw breath, that they walk and speak and smile and argue and play.”*

The first three-quarters of this novel completely captivated me – the atmosphere, the pacing, the shadow hovering overhead. *“There is a sensation of change, an agitation of air, as if a bird has passed silently overhead.”* The exploration of both a mother and a father’s grief is handled with the care and knowledge of what I am certain comes from O’Farrell’s own experiences. I have read her memoir, *I Am, I Am, I Am: Seventeen Brushes with Death*. She understands foreboding, fear, and heartache. She writes what she knows with clarity. What I missed, however, was a complete connection to her words. I’ve been trying to pinpoint what exactly lacked for me here. I have certainly been a blubbering fool over the last few novels I’ve read, but not this one! I should have been weeping buckets! Perhaps it is the third person point of view in this one, compared with her memoir which wholly succeeded in baring O’Farrell’s heart and soul to the reader. I went into this one expecting the same. Had I not read the other first, I suspect I would have had a bigger soft spot for *Hamnet*. But don’t let that stop you from picking this up. It’s worthy of your time and a very fine work of historical fiction – never trite and altogether unique.

*“Every life has its kernel, its hub, its epicenter, from which everything flows out, to which everything returns.”*

### H9 [Review](https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/3355927978)

5 stars

June 1, 2020

An emotionally-charged novel about grief after the death of a child. It takes a master author to create a story with scant background documents that goes deep, deep into a reader's heart. I admire the worlds Ms O'Farrell created of Agnes, of her childhood, life with her husband, and of motherly love and pain...

Some scenes were so moving that I felt physical sensation while reading them. For a reader to experience a novel in this way is a gift from the author.

### H10 [Review](https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/3562517758)

3 stars

September 25, 2020

There's an incredibly powerful and poignant moment in Hilary Mantel's Wolf Hall when Cromwell's two young daughters die suddenly of the plague. You sense that scene might have had a profound influence on the birth of this novel. Its central event is a plague death. Like Mantel's novels, it's written in the present tense, it's rich with detailed description and it takes a famous figure from history as its protagonist. Where Mantel was daring and adventurous with her imaginative identification with Cromwell, O'Farrell is decidedly timid with her identification with Shakespeare - she even backs off from ever naming him - not surprising since it would be a colossal act of hubris to believe you can rummage through the mind of one of humankind's foremost geniuses. So it's not so much William she seeks to portray as his wife Agnes. Agnes is outrageously idealised. A 21st century composite of the women with knowledge of the healing properties of plants as a kind of fantasy super hero. O'Farrell grants her fairy story powers of divination. She does handle the otherworldly tone quite well so I didn't have a problem suspending disbelief though I can imagine some will. That said, this 21st century habit of granting women powers of magical thinking in periods of history when women had so little other power irritates me unless the tone is mischievous which it isn't here.

A fascinating conundrum this narrative throws up is how petty, especially with hindsight, personal feeling appears in the light of artistic achievement. How really can we sympathise with Agnes' feelings of abandonment when we know what her husband was achieving as a consequence of distancing himself from her? In fact, it's hard not to get irritated with her. For me, the author didn't quite have a hold on this conundrum which is why the final stretch of this novel failed to live up to its early promise. We do sympathise with Agnes, but only up to a point. Because ultimately we're inestimably more happy that Shakespeare produced his plays than bothered about whose feelings he might have hurt to accomplish this achievement. Sometimes when a novel begins to lose fizz you can find the explanation in math. For most of the novel we get similarly sized chapters of alternate timelines. When the timelines meet this structure collapses and we get an endless rather rambling chapter which continues for dozens of pages until the end of the book. Agnes' emotions began to baffle me. She seemed to barely know her husband. It becomes apparent that this is a necessary plot device for the denouement of the novel's theme of bereavement to work. The ending though was fancifully sentimental. I'm no Shakespeare expert but surely one of the great enigmas about him is how conclusively he erased his personality from his work. There's something forced and self-indulgently blinkered about O'Farrell's attempt to find him in Hamlet. Essentially, you'll learn nothing much about Shakespeare here that you won't find on Wikipedia. Except this one insight O'Farrell believes she has about the effect the death of his child had on him and how this can be read into the pages of Hamlet. I'm afraid I didn't buy it at all. Overall, Hamnet provided me with some enjoyable light entertainment while grappling with the enigma codes of Proust and Pynchon but it's a long way from rivalling Hilary Mantel in shedding light on a pivotal man of history.

### H11 [Review](https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/2965930814)

5 stars

September 19, 2019

I don’t know where Maggie O’Farrell found the courage to take on such a daunting subject, but I’m so glad she did. This book feels intimate and true and is absolutely beautiful.

### H12 [Review](https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/3011401752)

5 stars

October 20, 2019

Inspired by a fascinating historical footnote; the death of a playwright’s son & his famous tragedy of the same name. Hamnet is told with O’Farrell’s usual emotional acuity & filled with unspoken truths. This is an gorgeous novel, atmospheric, honest & grounded. A quiet, intimate tale about a marriage, the loss of a child & the transformative power of connection & grief. Beautiful.

### H13 [Review](https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/3114261198)

5 stars

January 1, 2020

Extraordinary. Already predicting this will be one of my favorites of 2020.

### H14 [Review](https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/3085117924)

5 stars

January 10, 2020

There are so many risks picking up a beloved author’s ‘departure’ into a new genre. I felt it going into I Am, I Am, I Am and was blown away. I felt it coming into Hamnet and now I’m convinced that historical fiction is Maggie O’Farrell’s wheelhouse. Is there anything she can’t do?

William Shakespeare, usually the star of every story he appears in, takes a backseat to his magical, empathetic and vivid wife Agnes. O’Farrell’s ability to take the few facts we have about Agnes Hathaway and weave such a magnificent tale is astounding. I will hold Agnes close to my heart forever more, snuggled between Patroclus and Josephine Bonaparte on my shelf of fictionalized favorites. Do yourself a favor and put this at the top of your TBR, you can thank me later.

### H15 [Review](https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/3138042069)

5 stars

January 22, 2020

I really enjoyed reading Hamnet: I found it incredibly compelling, the writing is a delight, and the characterisation feels very natural and familiar. It must be said, this is a novel about the death of a child, so please be prepared for that. I'm still musing over the use of Shakespeare, as much of this story has necessarily been invented (given how very little we know of Shakespeare's personal life), so could have been about a fictional family. I suppose the key is how Hamnet, the son, relates to Hamlet, the play. O'Farrell does seem to - from the start - build Shakespeare with this connection in mind; how he relates to others; how he deals with moments of discomfort and trauma.

Whether you're into historical fiction or not. The observations and atmospheric details woven in from the historical period are really well researched and incorporated, but at the core this is a fascinating, relatable and touching story about a family dealing with tragedy. This is strongly recommended.

### H16 [Review](https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/3127830714)

5 stars

January 22, 2020

I love to read anything that is Shakespeare related and this didn't disappoint. Maggie O'Farrell has produced an intimate portrait of "what might have happened" Surrounding the death of Shakespeare's only son, Hamnet. We all know Anne Hathaway as Anne, but she is Agnes in this story. I was interested as to why she was called Agnes and after looking around on the internet, I found that she was named Agnes in her father's will.

Anyway, the book begins with Hamnet searching through the house for members of his family, his twin sister Judith is very ill and Hamnet is especially trying to find his mother. The story is told from many perspectives and from more than one timeline, such as the relationship of Agnes and Shakespeare and how they met as well as the state of their marriage.

Agnes is a bit of a wise woman/child of nature with her ability to sense things and make ointments for the sick. However, this she did not see coming. Judith has the dreaded plague. There is a chapter that is an account of the journey of that one plague flea and how it's journey turned the fate of many. Shakespeare is not cast in the best of lights but what can you say about the brilliant playwright who abandoned his family to head for the bright lights of London and rarely came back to visit.

It took me a couple of chapters to get into the style of writing but I really did enjoy the book. It had the feel of what might have been at the same time wrapped up in the rich imagination of the author. The mother's grief at the loss of her child is fully explored as she runs through the gamut of emotions of what has to be one of the worst things that could happen, the loss of a child.

### H17 [Review](https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/3148802643)

5 stars

March 30, 2020

Just wonderful. It’s a blanket of words. I adored it, I loved it, buy it!

### H18 [Review](https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/3162143363)

5 stars

April 13, 2020

I was lucky enough to read an ARC. Maggie O'Farrell is on my "will read anything by" list, and she didn't let me down with this one. I don't know how you can be lyrical while describing how the plague arrives in your town, but she did it. This is an inventive and deeply felt novel; one I couldn't put down.

### H19 [Review](https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/3143473460)

5 stars

January 31, 2020

Hamnet was Shakespeare's son, who tragically died at the age of 11. The coincidence of the name's similarity to one of his tragedies was not lost on Maggie O'Farrell and this was the inspiration for this wonderful novel. The names Hamnet and Hamlet were virtually interchangeable at the time and once you know that the idea that the death of his child is somehow connected to the play seems obvious. Although you don't need to know anything about either Shakespeare or his plays to read this - that's not what it's about. Rather, it is a fictionalised imagining of his family back in Stratford while he is making a name for himself in London.

Not much is known about Shakespeare's personal life, his children or his wife Anne Hathaway, beyond that they were married in 1852 when he was only 18 and she was 26. In fact, it is probable that we have had her name wrong all these years - her father's will named her as Agnes and she is so-named here.

This is fertile ground for a novelist this talented and true to form, Maggie O'Farrell weaves a spellbinding story. She tells her tale in two strands, the first starting not long before Hamnet dies and the second from when Will and Agnes first meet. The unfolding of their mutual attraction and courtship starts from Shakespeare's point of view, but soon it all becomes about Agnes and cleverly Shakespeare quickly becomes a bit player in his own story. Behind every successful man...

The lyrical prose brings Elizabethan England vibrantly to life. Agnes herself is a strong character - she is a herbalist, regularly helping the sick with her brews and dried herbs and is often found out in muddy boots gathering plants. But when Hamnet dies, she is powerless to help him and the depiction of grief at the loss of a child, even at a time when infant mortality was high is utterly heartbreaking.

Absolutely fantastic stuff - Maggie O'Farrell is undoubtedly one of our finest novelists.

I was extremely lucky to be given a proof copy to read and review.

### H20 [Review](https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/3186574995)

2 stars

February 13, 2020

Controversial opinion ahead: O’Farrell does not have the writing chops to pull this off. It’s overwrought and overwritten historical fiction. Shakespeare had a son named Hamnet who died four years before Shakespeare would write Hamlet. Both names, Hamnet and Hamlet, were completely interchangeable in the late 16th and early 17th centuries. Such ripe material that is never fully realised in O’Farrell’s hands. I don’t want to tear it apart so won’t go into all my issues with it and I’d be fascinated to hear from prolific historical fiction readers about what they think. I’ve never been a huge fan of O’Farrell’s writing style but I saw this as a departure for her and thought she might be taking some interesting risks. But alas no. This will be a minority opinion I’m sure.

### H21 [Review](https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/4824269311)

4 stars

September 10, 2022

Really interesting to read this alongside Joan Didion’s “The Year of Magical Thinking” — I could write an entire essay comparing the ways in which grief manifests in these two works (but I won’t)

### H22 [Review](https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/4900287345)

5 stars

September 10, 2022

I can't stand childs' or animals' death.

### H23 [Review](https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/3892690796)

5 stars

September 10, 2022

Gripping and beautifully written, but hard to read. Friends of mine lost a child this summer, and I thought of them and their loss constantly.

### H24 [Review](https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/3761391227)

5 stars

September 10, 2022

It is quite the reimagining of Agnes, Shakespeare's wife - or perhaps an extremely original imagining is a more apt description? - and how the death of their only son impacts their lives.

### H25 [Review](https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/4849079891)

4 stars

September 10, 2022

4.5!

I enjoyed this book more than I expected than I would have (when I started to read), and it had the most touching ending that I actually didn't expect. A brautiful story of morning and coming to terms (or at least, trying to keep on going) with the death of one's child. I loved how much the story focused on the perspective of those left behind in Startford, rather than on the Latin tutor (wink wink). He stayed unnamed the whole story, and instead we got to know all the other characters, which was such a refreshing way of presenting fiction and some historical events from their lives.

I also loved the language, lavish descriptions and the minute details to reality of the end of 16th century in Warwickshire and London.

I don't think though it is a life changing book, hence just 5 but it was such a pleasure to read that I will definitely come back to O'Farrells stories.

### H26 [Review](https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/4945790071)

3 stars

September 10, 2022

Beautifully written, a wonderful, heartbreaking tale. Maggie O' Farrell brought to life the speculative history of the famous playwrights son. This is not normally the type of novel I read, but I enjoyed it.

### H27 [Review](https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/4820346445)

4 stars

September 10, 2022

I found it a very interesting read, however extremely sad and disturbing. Many of the familial relationships were disfunctional. Many questions within the story remain unanswered. There was no satisfactory resolution at the end. I enjoy Maggie O’Farrell’s writing and the story of Hamnet is no exception.

### H28 [Review](https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/4875434011)

4 stars

September 10, 2022

3.5-4 Bookclub. Generally I wonder about the need to latch a fiction to a well-known historical person. Why not just write the story? This book, though, is a meditation on grief as refracted through two isolated facts: the death of Shakespeare's son Hamnet, and the writing a few years later of the play Hamlet. The story is told from multiple points of view (including an unnamed William Shakespeare) and in the present tense. The focus is on Agnes, wife and mother, made (perhaps predictably) into a woman with powers of vision and healing. It's a strong read, well-written, but without depth enough to warrant a second reading.

### H29 [Review](https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/4012353279)

5 stars

September 10, 2022

This book was a reimagining of the events of William Shakespeare's wife and son, who died young. WS is certainly a main character in the story (although he is never named) but the perspective is that of Agnes (Ann), his wife. By referring to him as "the tutor" or "Agnes' husband'" the focus of the story is not biased by his fame. I generally like historical fiction that provides a "what if..." scenario to a familiar story. Enjoyed this book.

### H30 [Review](https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/4852115544)

2 stars

September 9, 2022

Made it only to page 96. Could’ve been a great book, we’re it not so chock full of trivial chatter and over the top descriptions. It’s beyond me how this exceedingly boring book could be a National Best Seller.

boring

## Reviews of *Like Family* by Paolo Giordano

https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/25361884

### LF1 [Review](https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/3208418356)

4 stars

February 27, 2020

I enjoyed this book. It reminded me a lot of The Perfect Nanny by Leila Slimani, although without the tragic, violent ending. In both novels, a woman who is a nanny, maid and cook is wonderful in every way. The nanny makes herself indispensable to a busy two-career young couple. And because the nanny herself has no children or close family connections her employers’ child and their way of life becomes indispensable to her life.

The nanny in Like Family is a 68-year old widow. The husband and wife have contrasting personalities: she an artist and he’s a physicist and the author plays with the stereotypes that go along with those careers. The story, set in Italy, is told by the husband.

We learn at the beginning of the story that the nanny will become seriously ill (cancer) and have to give up her role. Much of the story focuses on the impact of that loss to the husband, wife and child. Coincidentally or not, when the nanny has to quit her position their marriage starts to sour and the narrator, the husband, uses cancer as a metaphor for the possible disintegration of their relationship. “In the long run, every love needs someone to witness and acknowledge it, to validate it, or it may turn out to be just a mirage. Without her gaze [the nanny] we felt at risk.”

As the nanny’s disease progresses, their roles switch and the couple visits her frequently. The novel talks about the nanny’s impact on the child but the wife is particularly impacted when the nanny becomes ill because she was bedridden for much of her pregnancy and for months, the nanny was essentially her nurse and constant companion.

There is good writing:

“Among the countless things I’ve learned about my wife in ten years of marriage is her habit of isolating herself in times of grief. She suddenly becomes unreachable and won’t allow anyone to console her, forcing me to remain a useless spectator to her suffering – a rejection that I sometimes interpreted as a lack of generosity.”

[the Nanny] “…always described them [her cousins] as envious and spiteful and kept away from them even though she was alone, but the cancer seems to have weakened her immune system against her family as well, defenses that she’d spent half a lifetime building up.”

It’s a short book and a quick read, essentially a novella. I also enjoyed and reviewed another book by this author (b. 1982), The Solitude of Prime Numbers. That book won Italy’s highest literary honor, the Strega Prize, in 2008.

Top photo Italian street scene from i.etsystatic.com

The author from hayfestival.com

### LF2 [Review](https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/1755235675)

4 stars

September 15, 2020

It's only right to be extra strict upon these tight little novellas that must, above all, pack a significant wallop in such a small, tidy package. If not... why do they EVEN exist, am I right?

& I tried to resist the smallness & frailness of this one. This... novelette. But it brought about stuff that had been stuck in the undertow of feeling, it made me truly meditate on the life and death of loved ones and the toll it takes on a single person. It's very personal (again, the protagonist is a wealthy member of society that can see stuff at an elevated plane, but can describe feelings beautifully) & it's very small (a woeful tale of death, cancer), yet it will make you THINK. It hits the correct points to activate a feeling of a nostalgia which comes perilously close to tears.

### LF3 [Review](https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/1447901716)

4 stars (specified in review to be 3,5 stars)

January 15, 2016

3.5 They called her Mrs. A or Babette, never her real first name. She came into their lives when she was really needed, a widow that took care of his wife when she was confined to bed rest with their first child. She stayed and became nanny, cook, confidante and managed their lives with supreme efficiency. After eight years she came down with a serious illness and could no longer work.

A quiet, simple novel about a woman who becomes indispensable in the lives of this family. a woman who became a friend, part of the family to the extent that she left a gaping hole in their lives, when she was no longer there. Not only did their son miss her terribly, but their lives no longer went as smoothly, not even their marriage.

What was unusual was that this was narrated by the husband who is a physicist, a man of science. It is told in a rather dispassionate manner, as if the husband is dissecting not only Mrs. A's effect on their loves but her personal life with the husband who had died many years preciously. It also made me think how often people are identified by the illnesses they have. Also the many different people that can make up a family. I loved the ending of this novel, simple but effective.

Arc from publisher.

### LF4 [Review](https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/1473715006)

4 stars

December 2, 2016

"Of the three of us, Emmanuel is the only one who has not yet learned that nothing

lasts forever when it comes to human relationships".

Mrs. A had been working for a young couple and their only child, for eight years, when one day she calls and quits -says she is exhausted.

Emmanuel, their son, doesn't understand. He wants to know when his 'Babette' is coming back. Nora and her physicist husband ( the nameless narrator), are also coming unplugged - worried - anxious-flustered -- they call Mrs. A trying to get her back. Mrs. A held their family together - she was the person who 'encouraged' everyone. She not only cooked grand fancy delicious meals, cleaned, and was a nanny to Emmanuel, she represented strength, security, and context for the entire family's daily living.

"Every love needs someone to witness and acknowledge it, validate it, or it may turn out to be just a mirage. Without her gaze we felt at risk." Mrs. A was 'that' person -a temporary gift.

Mrs. A said she could no longer work for this family because she was tired - but the real reason is that she had terminal cancer.

At the beginning of this novella - we learn Mrs. A has died. The storytelling is looking back --- but what especially moved me to almost tears - ( each time I read it) - is what the author wrote in the beginning---before he started his story:

"There really was a Mrs. A in my life. She stayed in my house, shared life with my family for a few years, then had to leave us".

I, too, had a Mrs. A for a few years - after my father died ( her name was Carol --Carol who took me on a trip once - just she and I to visit her family in Oregon).

I understand - in real life -- the author's father died when he was a child also.

I had been wanting to read this book since I first learned about it almost 2 years ago - when I was declined the opportunity to read an 'advance' copy. I finally bought the book for myself. It's lovely ....and sad.

Deeper beneath the seams - problems were not getting addressed. Mrs. A's defection was soon visible not only in the household but in the couple's relationship.

"Outwardly our married life went along unchanged, structure around a sequence of commitments, yet as if it's heart had been drained. I had seen Nora sad, upset, angry,

but never listless or indifferent. Without the intercession of her exuberance, the world went back to being the cold shell that I had inhabited before I met her. Even Emmanuel, at times, appeared alien to me".

The writing is lyrical-- so lovely --sad --yet a beautiful tribute to Mrs. A. Her name was Anna.

### LF5 [Review](https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/1501949491)

4 stars

January 10, 2016

I get the impression that both books I've read by Paolo Giordano are deeply linked to the author's actual life. The Solitude of Prime Numbers has two characters that bond because of their love for math, and in this novel the husband/father central character is a physicist, just as the author is. I think that made this novel feel quite small, as if maybe it was too close to home, and couldn't be extended easily beyond that world.

At the same time, small can really work, and I would encourage anyone who starts this to push past the first third. A novel that seems like the story of a family's housekeeper and nanny becomes more about family, and relationships, and the small things that make or break them. The thread of cancer was particularly close to my own family's experience and I found the whole book to be touching. Not as good as the previous one, but worth a quick read. I also find the writing (and perhaps the translation) to be quite beautiful, and if it were not a review copy I would give you a few examples. A few paraphrases - falling in love akin to being flushed out, a child described as an "extraordinary seismograph," and the parallel between cancer and what happens in relationships when a married couple starts to grow apart.

*This book was provided by the publisher through NetGalley in exchange for an honest review.*

### LF6 [Review](https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/1385935514)

4 stars

September 9, 2015

Paolo Giordano – a 32-year-old Italian physicist – creates portraits of wounded individuals who yearn to bond through companionship yet often find solitude more comforting. I was haunted by them and eager to read his third book, Like Family. I was not disappointed.

When read quickly – and at 146 pages, it can easily be read in one sitting – Like Family at first appears like any other cancer story. A young couple – an unnamed narrator, a physicist who may or may not be partially based on the author himself, and his wife Nora hire a widowed housekeeper, referred to only as Mrs. A. Gradually, her importance in the household increases as she takes over the role as nanny to their son Emanuele, who is not extraordinary enough for his father.

Mrs. A, though, has cancer. As her cancer progresses in its inevitable and programmed way, it also becomes a metaphor for the couple’s own lives (“A young couple can also fall ill, from insecurity, from routine, from isolation.”) In losing her – a woman who is like family – they also begin to lose themselves.

It’s a simple story, really, and one that has been created before. But Paolo Giordano raises this question: All these cancer stories are the same, yes, but does that mean that all lives aren’t unique, deserving of their own story? Can one person become a shield for a young family that’s “a nebula of self-centeredness in danger of imploding” and if so, what happens when that person removes herself from the equation? And perhaps most importantly, what does it mean to love somebody?

As in his other books, Paolo Giordano writes profoundly and elegantly, capturing the pathos of life in a few well-chosen words. His genius comes from his ability to mine the interior thoughts of characters who – by choice or compulsion – cannot break through to nurture themselves or each other. In many important ways, Like Family is a meditation on life, death and most of all, love.

### LF7 [Review](https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/1498381049)

4 stars (specified in review to be 3,5 stars)

January 6, 2016

3.5 stars: Paolo Giordano is a fabulous writer. In this, very short novel, he captures a young family struggling to function. Giordano’s gift is illuminating character’s feelings: their unsaid thoughts.

At the opening of the story, the reader learns that Mrs. A, the housekeeper/nanny dies of cancer. The narrator (husband) reminisces the family’s life with Mrs. A. In a short (146 pages) story, we learn of the significant role Mrs. A plays in the marriage. Anyone who is married will see themselves in the complexities that ALL marriages go through. What makes the novel wonderful is how realistic the marriage and husband and wife are.

Mrs. A is hired by the young couple due to pregnancy problems the wife, Nora, is experiencing. Nora needs to be bedridden early in her pregnancy. The marriage is still forming when Mrs. A is hired. There are marital issues still needing definitions and resolutions. In this, Mrs. A becomes part of the mortar of the marriage, and continues as the child’s nanny.

The book cover claims the novel is “Elegiac, heartrending, and deeply personal, this is a jewel of a novel—short, intense, and unforgettable.” I cannot reiterate that any better. I highly recommend this novel. All characters are realistic, human, and flawed. It’s a true portrait of a young marriage.

### LF8 [Review](https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/1450328786)

2 stars

November 24, 2015

I was first introduced to the writing of Palo Giordano when I read 'The Solitude of Prime Numbers'. Though I enjoyed it, I felt it rather cold and disconnected from its emotional core. After reading 'Like Family' I have to think that this is a style or perhaps a thematic element of the author's writing.

'Like Family' is a very short book, almost a novella, that is about a woman who comes into the lives of young couple to help the wife out through a difficult pregnancy. The woman who comes to help is known as Mrs. A. or Babette. Mrs. A. stays on as a nanny for the newborn and then works for the couple for another eight years. One day she calls up and states she is tired and will work for them no longer. It seems she has lung cancer and is dying.

The novel looks at the dissolution of the family without Mrs. A. at its center. I thought of it like an implosion. Without Mrs. A. to guide them, the family loses its way.

The author is trained as a physicist and the narrative has a cold rationality that I found it almost impossible to connect with. It was a text about the book, rather than the book itself. The characters seemed pretentious and while the author is descriptive to some degree, there is no life in any of the protagonists. I believe that others can appreciate this author's work but he is just not for me.

### LF9 [Review](https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/1423308436)

4 stars

[October 25, 2015](https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/1423308436)

Like Family is a beautifully written, complex but uncomplicated, story of a family and their beloved nanny. We understand from the outset that Mrs. A has died of cancer. The focus of this book is not a long, drawn-out account of her death, but rather the story of how her life has influenced the family she cared for. The characters are realistically drawn, well-developed, and all likable even in their eccentricities . I appreciated the emotional honesty and lack of gratuitous melodrama.

Thank to Penguin Viking for providing me with a free ARC of this book in exchange for an honest review.

### LF10 [Review](https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/1441100560)

5 stars

November 22, 2015

Originally reviewed @http://readaholicpeace.blogspot.com

This author wrote an exquisitely beautiful book on love and family thereupon demonstrating throughout that random people who come into your life can become family. Likewise, exhibiting how love can change a person's feelings and behavior. Written from the viewpoint of Giordano inspired by his own personal experiences with his own Mrs. A despite the fact this book is considered a work of fiction. Mrs. A came into this family's lives when Dora, the wife, was on bedrest due to complications with her pregnancy to help around the house, she fit in so well she stayed with them after Emanuele was born becoming a part of the family. A loving part of the family but preferred this were done her way:

“Then let me into the kitchen to explain what does you should cook for dinner, how to reheat them so they wouldn't dry out and where to put the dirty pots and pans after work. “don't bother washing them I'll do it tomorrow” she's always had at the beginning I disobeyed her, but when I saw that in the morning she redid the dishes I’d washed anyway I gave into her command.”

Even though this is not a very long read it is abundant with pertinent knowledge for life. Such as, knowing when to change a behavior that is holding you back in a relationship from someone you love, letting go of traditions that do not make you happy and starting new ones that do, fighting for a person you love but also knowing when you need to let them go. I learned an abundance regarding love, family, and loss from this book. I know for a fact that I will be rereading Like Family over again many times. I hope you will read this book too. Another quote to finish my review. This takes place after a wig is specially made for Mrs. A:

“In the frenzy we forgot to take the wooden dummy. I go back to retrieve it a few days later, by myself. I tell the same girl, “excuse me, but the lady lost her head.” She, however, does not smile perhaps the joke is in bad taste... One afternoon I offer a young colleague a ride home. He gets into the car, he looks up, puzzle. “And just what we are doing with this?” he asks. Then, giving me no time to explain, he bows to kiss her lipless face.”

I would like to thank “Pamela Dorman Books” for letting me give an honest review

### LF11 [Review](https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/1082528223)

4 stars

October 17, 2014

After finishing it, I could only sigh how beautiful this book is. The end is very, very moving, the style of writing painfully beautiful. Giordano describes perfectly the emptiness that befalls you after losing someone or something so dear and took for granted so easily. It left me in complete silence...

### LF12 [Review](https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/1090279892)

3 stars

October 28, 2014

Beautifully written, especially the end. Still, not as wonderful as I expected it to be.

### LF13 [Review](https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/1157168981)

4 stars

September 23, 2018

Just read one third of the book until I logged in at Goodreads and realized I’ve read this book already - 3.5 yrs ago. I actually must say I like the story and I guessed it felt familiar because I had read other books from the same author. Saying that, the last time I read this book in Dutch and it has a completely different title. Just to excuse how I tricked myself into reading the same book twice.

### LF14 [Review](https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/1227113948)

2 stars

June 7, 2017

This book is really well-written. It makes you happy and sad. It has a spirit of self-reflection.

### [LF15](https://www.goodreads.com/user/show/32145402-marina) [Review](https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/1258841527)

2 stars

April 21, 2015

Not nearly as good as his other two books. This reads like some random musings about private memories that don't really make it into a plot or any kind of relatable story. It's also very sad, like the depressing kind of sad. The idea is fairly good, but seems like the author forgot to work his diary into a novel.

### LF16 [Review](https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/1283598380)

3 stars

May 19, 2015

Giordano's third book is a very difficult one to review. I'm inclined to give the book four stars, but then I wonder whether the story will actually stay with me for a longer period of time. It probably will not, although that says more about the length of the story than the actual quality of it. 'Il nero e l'argento' is one of those typically Italian books, written in a style of calm warm detachment with a hint of relativism.

In 160 pages, Giordano portrays a very normal young family, which consists of credible and psychologically complex characters that interact in a thoroughly realistic way. This, in itself, is quite the achievement. Giordano shows himself to be a very good observer, and unveils the hidden dynamics and psychological differences within the family. The story revolves around the nanny of the family, a Signora A., who is diagnosed with cancer. This event triggers a great amount of micro-events, which show the central position of Signora A. within the functioning of the young household. As an expert seismographer, Signora A. manages to balance out the young lovers and shelter their young kid Emanuele from the outside world.

I should not say more about the general plot at this point. For me, the most beautiful thing about this book was how Giordano constructed the relationship between the married couple. Wise, fair, but never sentimental, he manages to build up his story slowly and effectively. I'd truly recommend reading the book slowly - its flaw lies in its shortness, a flaw which can easily done away with by taking your time when reading. This way, you'll also get to savour the many brilliant observations that make this book what it is.

I'm becoming increasingly incertain about my three star rating, but I will leave it that way. In the end, 'Il nero e l'argento' is a literary snack, in a way, but a very tasty one at that. It strengthens me in my believe that one day, Giordano will write an absolute masterpiece. He has come close, but one fine day ... Do read this book though, in the mean time. It's a daisy.

### LF17 [Review](https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/1302091570)

5 stars

75 reviews

June 11, 2015

Not a long story. Not a great story, but the way it's told is simply brilliant.

### LF18 [Review](https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/1312282789)

1 star

June 23, 2015

The story was okay, simple though, and I understood (or I'd like to think I did) what he was trying to trasmit. The problem for me is the way the book it's written, it didn't catch me. In this kind of books the reader is supposed to connect with the characters, to feel like one of them, but I couldn't.

### LF19 [Review](https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/1321437745)

4 stars

June 30, 2015

Giordano uses a very factual language to describe two very emotional subjects - a marriage and relationship falling apart and a person dieing of cancer. I like the absence of pathos in his writing, he is a master of conveying sadness. Most of the characters in his books are scarred by loss, melancholy, search for meaning in life - that is what makes this not an easy read but a meaningful one.

### LF20 [Review](https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/1388275226)

5 stars

February 8, 2016

Giordano's writing is fantastic.

These characters are wonderfully crafted in their complexity.

Quotes

“She wept quietly, her right hand clamped over her mouth and nose. Among the countless things I’ve learned about my wife in ten years of marriage is her habit of isolating herself in times of grief. She suddenly becomes unreachable and won’t allow anyone to console her, forcing me to remain a useless spectator to her suffering - a rejection that I sometimes interpreted as a lack of generosity.” (2)

“Death realigns roles according to a formal order of importance, instantly mending the sentimental rules that one allowed oneself to break in life, and it didn’t matter much that Emanuele was the closest thing to a grandson that Mrs. A had known or that she’d liked to consider us, Nora and me, her adoptive children. We were not.” (19)

“In the end we are almost never happy or unhappy because of what happens to us; we are one or the other depending on the humor that flows inside us, and her is molten silver: the whitest of metals, the best conductor and the most merciless reflector.” (85)

“We live in anticipation, constantly waiting for something that will free us from the burdens of the present, without taking into account new ones that will arise. If these really are our best years, I’m not satisfied with how we’re using them.” (88)

"People who take care of us are almost never able to do things the way we'd like, but we have to make do: they've already done enough." (112)

"Sometimes life narrows like a funnel...." (134)

### LF21 [Review](https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/4835747736)

3 stars

July 20, 2022

Not knowing what was waiting for me inside this book when I started, it actually turns out to be good.

### LF22 [Review](https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/4755124357)

4 stars

June 5, 2022

A short story, but long enough to capture the emotions of the characters. If it was any longer it might have become boring.

### LF23 [Review](https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/4540392657)

4 stars

March 3, 2022

This book is an incredibly realistic, bittersweet portrayal of death and the feelings around it. It simultaneously broaches what happens before, during, and after loss, in a way that is saddening but hopeful.

Of the Giordano books I’ve read, I feel Heaven and Earth is a stronger book. However, the author explains that this is loosely based in truth to his life, so of course it is more raw and less of a true story. That’s very beautiful to me.

### LF24 [Review](https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/4358852018)

4 stars

November 27, 2021

A confessional of-sorts as a husband explores his family dynamics after hiring a woman, Mrs. A, to help his wife, Nora, while she is in bed with a difficult pregnancy. Mrs. A becomes 'like family' and stays on to be a nanny for their son but leaves when she receives a cancer diagnosis. The husband looks back to determine the meaning of their dependency.

### LF25 [Review](https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/4258457325)

4 stars

September 26, 2021

Well, you don't read Giordano hoping for a happy, light tale.

Here, he beautifully connects the fragility of human life with the fragility of our relationships. The shortness of the book does nothing to diminish the power of his writing. The translation is entirely transparent.

### LF26 [Review](https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/3848510736)

5 stars

February 22, 2021

I believe I’ve found my new favorite author. I think this little book is exquisite. It’s simple and yet full of deep feeling, raw moments, melancholy, and love. A New York Times review describes it as a “spare, elegant book,” and I can think of no better words. Giordano is a master in capturing the complexities of true human emotion with an economy of beautiful words. Since this was originally written in Italian, much credit is also due to the translator, Anne Milano Appel.

### LF27 [Review](https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/3798769618)

4 stars

January 29, 2021

When death knocks at the door of an older au pair, an Italian couple who employed her for many years see their relationship slowly fall apart. A moving tale of loneliness, devotion and love.

### LF28 [Review](https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/3507738270)

3 stars

September 26, 2020

I always struggle with ratings lol but this was actually a pretty good book though not the usual type I read. I disliked how some sentences were made, too long and confusing and they caused me to re-read them a few times to get what the author wanted to say. How coinicidental that I've read two nanny/house helper becomes important part of a young struggling family's life type of books this year.

### LF29 [Review](https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/1494140214)

4 stars

September 14, 2020

Melancholy. Beautifully written and translated. I liked watching the push and pull of relationships within a family built by circumstances and stretched to the limit by death. Why don’t we appreciate the important people in our lives more?

### LF30 [Review](https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/3502800798)

4 stars

August 18, 2020

A poignant little novella. Nice writing, clean characters, solid emotional core. A well structured piece, but I could have stayed in the world a little longer.

## Reviews of *What We Lose: A Novel* by Zinzi Clemmons

<https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/33280160>

### WWL1 [Review](https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/2101596929?book_show_action=true&from_review_page=1)

4 stars

September 23, 2017

I’ve often thought that being a light-skinned black woman is like being a well-dressed person who is also homeless. You may be able to pass in mainstream society, appearing acceptable to others, even desired. But in reality you have nowhere to rest, nowhere to feel safe. Even while you’re out in public, feeling fine and free, inside you cannot shake the feeling of rootlessness. Others may envy you, but this masks the fact that at night, there is nowhere safe for you, no place to call your own.

This is a tiny book - I don't know the word count, but it is surely barely more than a novella - and it contains short, punchy chapters that cover a broad range of issues, disjointed narration, and strange jumps in time. But, despite its size, it hit me really hard.

It's difficult to know which aspect to start with. Clemmons covers so many themes, including but not limited to love, marriage, race (particularly being mixed race), motherhood, apartheid in South Africa, modern day Johannesburg, and abortion. Thandi leads us through all these things, both with her personal experiences and secondhand observations.

What We Lose is the complete opposite of a slow, gradual book that leads up to a bigger picture. Every chapter hits fast and hard, leaving a lasting impression. The writing is succinct and powerful, offering tidbits filled with truth on human nature in almost every sentence.

But I have not talked about the main story, really, behind everything else I've mentioned. At its heart, this novel is about the kind of deep grief that pervades every part of your life. Thandi is so lost without her mother that her grief becomes a part of everything. The effect of filling a novel about grief with so many important themes - as noted: race, marriage, apartheid, etc. - is the realisation of grief's all-encompassing nature. Not only is it forever in the background of Thandi's personal life; it is forever in the background of everything.

I especially love this quote:

“Oftentimes I find myself, when we are fighting over the bills, or when he chews his food too loudly or laughs at the wrong time during a film, asking not whether I am happy, but whether my mother would approve of him.”

What We Lose broke my heart several times. It's a powerful book about many important things but, of course, what affected me most was the loss of someone who is so vital to a person's life. How do you go on when your anchor, your constant, isn't there anymore? I don't know. I dread the day when I find out.

### WWL2 [Review](https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/2088231419?book_show_action=true&from_review_page=1)

3 stars

January 17, 2018

Sometimes there is no reason to write a review.....( so it feels) - to me.

I mean if you finished a book - that you are somewhat neutral about - appreciate it - aware it’s thought provoking - has depth - deals with loss of a mother - and a father who emotionally distances himself - add struggling with racial/ cultural identity for a young African-American.....

AND....

you notice over 500 people on Goodreads have ‘already’ written a review —

AND.....

You look.....

.....at a few reviews and discover...... GREAT - varied - REVIEWS FROM MANY OTHER MEMBERS.....so why spin the wheel?

ESPECIALLY.....

.....when one person wrote a couple of lines that fits YOUR experience?/!

Jenny (Reading Envy).....wrote a couple sentences in her review that speaks to how I felt. She said:

“But I felt like an outsider the entire time. There is something about the way the internal aspects of the story are presented that don’t welcome you, rather they leave you wanting to turn away”.

Thank You for that quote Jenny!!! I borrowed it without asking.

### WWL3 [Review](https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/2055936179?book_show_action=true&from_review_page=1)

4 stars

February 15, 2021

Albeit smart, intimate and well-written, these qualities aren't why I'll remember this novel : no, I'll remember What We Lose for its relatable depiction of grief, no matter how often I've wanted to stop reading. In this area of essays and important novels, when the representation of minorities in fiction is still so criminally *inexistent*, I love that this book exists, but looking back, that's not what I'll recall. The intense sense of dread I feel when I read about the loss of a parent, that I will.

*"Yes, there is that dark, terrifying loneliness that scares me, but I am acquainted with fear. If I stay inside long enough, root my heels in deeper, it doesn't feel scary anymore. It feels like home."*

See, I can see readers being confused by the numerous times Zinzi Clemmons skips from one subject to another, or by the disjointed narration and the multiples jumps in time : I wasn't. The construction is solid in my opinion and I was interested in her slices of life, both in South Africa and in the United States, on what it means to be a black woman in nowadays America ; on the everyday racism, that does not need to wear a white robe to be insufferable and unacceptable, this racism that tells black girls that they should straighten their hair, accept what they have and stop resisting. The denunciation of that racism is needed, and welcomed.

Yet I don't know how What We Lose is marketed, but it's very much a *coming-of-age, getting past a loss* novel, above everything else. It reads like a memoir, a memoir in which I could see me.

The way Zinzi Clemmons depicts grief is not spectacular, and it made me so, so happy. I don't know why most authors handles this subject with loud bangs, forever dramatic, and forget that the worst thing about grief is the intrinsic, hollow boredom we feel when the funerals are over. Everyone can go on with their lives, and here we are, *stopped*. Everything in this novels feels so accurate.

*"Lose is a straightforward equation : 2 - 1 = 1. A person is there, then she is not. But a loss is beyond numbers, as well as sadness, and depression, and guilt, and ecstasy, and hope, and nostalgia - all those emotions that expert tell us come along with death. Minus one person equals all of these, in unpredictable combinations. It is a sunny day that feels completely gray, and laughter in the midst of sadness. It is utter confusion. It makes no sense."*

The thing is, when you lose your mum or your dad, everyone on Earth expects you to follow a certain pattern of behavior, and when you don't, you feel lesser than dirt. My dad died four years ago, and no, I don't remember his voice. My dad died four years ago, and no, I don't believe in heaven ; I don't think he's looking after me ; I don't talk to him ; I don't go on his grave because I don't think he's there ; My dad died four years ago and I think he's *nowhere.* I miss him so much, but I think he's nowhere. Even now, I want to hit something when people tells me that he's somewhere, smiling in the sky, and - as Zinzi Clemmons perfectly summed it up - that I need to acknowledge him, like this cliché of the persistent orphan who's really living her life to make her lost parent proud. I refuse. God, knowing my dad, he would have laughed out loud at these antics. Most "orphan novels" rely on this pattern, and every time, it makes me feel so, so inexistent. What We Lose does, too, but contrary to most novels, it doesn't stop there. It shows us that there's no such thing as *one* way to deal with loss, and for that I'm grateful.

I also liked Zinzi Clemmons's reflection about motherhood and the way our society puts maternity above everything else. As a woman who probably won't have any children, and whose work revolves around giving children more chances, I appreciated her nuanced take on this subject, and the doubts she expressed :

*"I do not see the mother with a child as either more morally credible or more morally capable than any other woman. A child can be used as a symbolic credential, a sentimental object, a badge of self-righteousness. I question the implicit belief that only "mothers" with "children of their own" have a real stake in the future of humanity."*

What We Lose's ultimate simplicity is probably going to cause it to lose some readers, but that's what kept me. Many readers won't understand *what's the point,* and that's okay. Even if I'll never reread it, I'm glad it exists somewhere. I'm glad, and it's as simple as that.

*"... and I think, 'I have to call Mama to say hello.'"*

*I realized that that was how heartbreak occurred. Your heart wants something, but reality resists it. Death is inert and heavy, and it has no relation to your heart's desires."*

### WWL4 [Review](https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/1869827801?book_show_action=true&from_review_page=1)

3 stars

September 12, 2017

I jumped on this one for a buddy read in the Newest Literary Fiction group.

This was a quick read but a confusing one. I feel like the description led me to expect a pretty straight forward novel about a South African childhood and loss. Instead it reads like a braided essay in longform, a memoir of sorts, with attempts to pull in other information. But it also feels unfinished, with several more revisions needed to really make the transitions work, to bring the emotion in balance with the events, to flesh out a better level of detail of the actual events making up the "novel." It reads more like a summary much of the time, an overview, rather than a series of events that come together for an actual story.

I respond to emotion in writing, when it is presented in a way that brings me into the story. I expected this to have incredible resonance since I recently lost a parent to cancer. But I felt like an outsider the entire time. There is something about the way that the internal aspects of the story are presented that don't welcome you, rather they leave you wanting to turn away.

I think if you are looking for a narrative to explain a South African childhood, I can better recommend [Born a Crime: Stories From a South African Childhood](https://goodreads.com/book/show/29780253.Born_a_Crime_Stories_From_a_South_African_Childhood). *This was provided by the publisher through NetGalley in exchange for an honest review.*

### WWL5 [Review](https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/2115601922?book_show_action=true&from_review_page=1)

2 stars

September 8, 2017

When I read something like this my first thought is that it’s trying way too hard. Some chapters were a single line. Some were a picture or a chart. Some chapters were news articles of actual events in South Africa. Some were beautiful, some were bizarre, and some were just deliberately crude. I’m not saying that these things in themselves aren’t interesting or valuable, I’m just saying that they don’t belong together within a single 200-page book, let alone one with the word “NOVEL” printed boldly on the cover. Clemmons can surely write, and I know she has experience and insight to share, but her delivery left me frustrated.

I didn’t feel that I knew Thandi any better by the end of the book than in the beginning. Of course, how could I when it’s clear she doesn’t even know herself any better? I wanted to understand her feelings on losing her mother in such a tragically painful way, how she coped in the years after this loss, but it becomes clear that such an un-self aware character would have little of that to share. The result is that there is very little obvious growth in her character at all.

And I realize I am raking this one over the coals a bit, so I’m going to share some passages that I did find to be beautiful and enlightening. These are the reason that I know Clemmons has talent.

*“I’ve often thought that beng a light-skinned black woman is like being a well-dressed person who is also homeless. You may be able to pass in mainstream society, appearing acceptable to others, even desired. But in reality you have nowhere to rest, nowhere to feel safe.”*

*“Every time I touch him I think, how can something be this soft? It is impossible, this feeling of his newness against my coarse fingers. His every bone and skin cell is in a state of formation. He is coming into being before my eyes.”*

*“She’s gone.*

*But she’s here, I can feel her. I can see her that day they told us that everything was going to be all right.*

*But she’s not here.*

*But I can feel her arms around me. It feels like the breeze coming off the river. It enwraps me with its warmth. It comforts me. It smells like her breath.*

*But she’s long gone.”*

Another reviewer said it very well, by pointing out that it is not enough to have these deep and insightful thoughts, an author should also be able to organize them better than this. Put them together in a meaningful way to maximize their impact.

### WWL6 [Review](https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/1863599779?book_show_action=true&from_review_page=1)

4 stars

July 11, 2017

!!! Book blog review: [https://africanbookaddict.com/2017/07...](https://africanbookaddict.com/2017/07/11/what-we-lose-a-novel-by-zinzi-clemmons/)

Laden with meditative, intimate and at times unsettling vignettes, What We Lose will leave you in a pensive state. Thandi – the heroine of this novel, is the only child of her mother (a coloured South African) and father (a light skinned African American) who is very aware of her privileges & multicultural background. Readers follow Thandi on her journey from childhood to adulthood as she navigates what it means to be a black woman in America and South Africa, dealing with the loss of a loved one, motherhood and love.

What We Lose is based on Zinzi Clemmons’s life, BUT it isn’t her life. If you’ve been following Clemmons’s work online, especially her 2013 piece – A Geography of Hurt, you’d find the subject matter in this novel familiar. While there isn’t a clear-cut plot to this novel, Clemmons successfully portrays Thandi’s life through short vignettes. The vignettes reflect Thandi’s complex thoughts – private, absorbing and heartfelt thoughts, that one probably wouldn’t even share with their closest partner. Some bits of the text feel philosophical which was confusing at times, but appreciated. I love how pictures and graphs and random news articles are scattered throughout the book, as it gave the storytelling an unconventional feel.

Johannesburg, South Africa plays a vital role in this novel. The world is so absorbed in American politics (aka: Trump) that we forget about the intense and ever present racism in post-apartheid South Africa. Thandi and her family are coloureds and wealthy, so readers experience a different account of racial dynamics in South Africa through their lens, which is refreshing. It was intriguing to see how American racial relations and South African racial relations were juxtaposed and how they impacted Thandi’s life and even play a role in her grieving process and the important decisions she makes in her life.

Anyone whose lost a parent will deeply resonate with this novel. I initially thought this novel would be morbid and sorrowful, but I was glad to find that it reads more as a visceral novel – deep feelings and black psyche are articulated so aptly!

I’m not sure how this book is being marketed to the public; but for me, What We Lose tackles so much more than the issue of race. This coming-of-age novel reminds you that we are all human. We are all dealing with our personal struggles. We are all trying to thrive and heal and survive. Illness, love, race, mental health, motherhood, sisterhood and social class dynamics are wonderfully weaved into the overall themes of grief and the quest to belong. Read full review + quotes on: africanbookaddict.com

### WWL7 [Review](https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/2035558054?book_show_action=true&from_review_page=1)

4 stars

July 16, 2017

Throughout my life, coming-of-age novels peppered themselves onto bookshelves whenever I ventured. In these novels, heartbreak, love, loss, and joys scattered their footprints, asking me to grasp the main character's journey by finding similarity.

Most of the time, they failed as they offered two hundred and more pages of a life I witnessed on television and movie matinees. Bottled in blonde ponytails and bouncy curl drenched in Prell shampoo, any hardships described on the page felt sweeter than my actual life. Their attempts at connection rang hollow, because as a black girl (woman), what should have united us (e.g. girlhood, womanhood) ignored vital intersections that rendered their stories "cute" and not to be taken seriously. No, Becky with the good hair, we could be friends, but you'll never understand me, even if you tried.

Via intimate, unsettling, and pining vignettes, Zinzi Clemmons' What We Lose gifted me one of the few options of a coming-of-age novel that rang more true than I anticipated. Race, family, loss, sex, and identity cultivated this novel. Despite the fifteen years or so, separating me from the author, her heroine, Thandi, the daughter of a South African "colored" woman and a light-skinned black American man, mirrored experiences founding my life's walls. Born and raised in Philadelphia, she navigated her life with privileges her multicultural background granted, while trying to interpret her carbon footprint in society. When not pulled between worlds - black and white, American and South African, she hashes rich and middle-class by realizing the gumbo her life created and how those outside do not benefit.

“But when I call myself black, my cousins look at me askance. They are what is called coloured in South Africa—mixed race—and my father is light-skinned black. I looked just like my relatives, but calling myself black was wrong to them…. American blacks were my precarious homeland—because of my light skin and foreign roots, I was never fully accepted by any face.”

She's in, but she's not. She's a "strange in-betweener", cognizant of her need to belong, but, with her family and friends as anchors, she's not the tragic mulatto, as in Nella Larson's stories, which sweetened the pot. Strangely, this novel read as a memoir, which Clemmons' denied. Believing the author's hard, after reading her background. Each vignette felt like a private and provocative diary passage, except time's chartered, not in actual dates, but in Thandi's external actions. She fell and rose, fell and rose, until she settled her feet on the rocky pavement by story's end.

As mentioned before, family played a major role. Her mother - the rock of her small family (She had no siblings) - taught her key elements of living in her body and how to strengthen her mind, body, and soul, in a society not welcoming. Johannesburg, her mother's birthplace, received contemplative moments. Its class and racial system. Her family's belief system. Its violence. They shaped her mother. They shaped her.

Unfortunately, her mother's diagnosed with cancer, providing her another basis for identity. She noted the disease as one where one's privilege determined treatment and survival. Upon her mother's passing, a void's unleashed, and throughout her grief cycle, what's unleashed afterwards defined the marker her continuous journey finds her. Anyone who lost a parent will understand her descriptions of grief and bereavement. Her discussion felt real and complex, never shallow. Having lost an aunt to cancer, I cried, purging some feelings I hid to preserve my sanity.

Furthermore, I loved following Thandi on her journey, which never feels like a destination. Her journey continued, even when I finished the story. While not a free spirit or wanderer, she'll never fit in a societal box and she finds comfort in that notion. Also, I enjoyed the in-depth look at South Africa. I knew some things, but she offered me morsels that filled my curiosity.

The vignettes piqued my interest. At times, I yearned for longer chapters. But, feeling as though I knew Thandi, she gave me what she thought I deserved, not what I wanted. Her examination of another corner of the diverse black psyche paved honesty, creativity, and the discomfort we, as readers, required.

Bring tissues and a cup (pot, actually) of tea for her soul cleansing.

*Verdict* : 4/5 Trips to Philly (I loved the snippets of my hometown described. I traveled with her, remarking each site with clarity and fondness)

### WWL8 [Review](https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/2067774856?book_show_action=true&from_review_page=1)

5 stars

January 25, 2019

In short: this is a phenomenal debut novel!

The author has created an intensely emotional account of a young woman's process of coping with the death of her mother, who suffered with cancer. The novel reads like a memoir or a diary; the chapters are often short, fragmented sketches, arranged in no particular order, and concern themselves with various experiences of the narrator, Thandi, around the time before and after her mother dies. There are moments when there are only two or three lines on a page, which I thought was beautiful: a person grieving will experience a period of reflecting on things that happen around the time of their loss, trying to reconcile all of the loose threads, trying to make sense out of all the disparate pieces that one feels they are broken into after experiencing such a difficult event.

The writing is economical: the sentences sharp, direct, and to the point, which really creates an atmosphere charged with raw emotion. I found myself dog-earing so many pages because in the midst of a very frankly written passage, I would come to a sentence so beautiful and poignant, stopping to marvel at the author's amazing ability to turn a phrase.

Her ability to capture the feeling of loss is fantastic: *"There is that dark, terrifying loneliness that scares me, but I am acquainted with fear. If I stay inside it long enough, root my heels in deeper, it doesn't feel scary anymore. It feels like home."*

And again in this moment: *"We are like bricks in a wall, and a new one cannot fit unless another is taken away. It comforts me to peace...this harmony, the idea that for every suffering there is equal and opposite joy. In practice, it is so simple, yet so mystical and infinite."*

I was blown away, and I cannot wait to read more from this fabulous talent.

### WWL9 [Review](https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/2084009728?book_show_action=true&from_review_page=1)

4 stars

August 12, 2017

A very contemporary feeling book that tackles modern day themes but also about the past and how both have a habit of interesecting each other.

Thandi tries to break the mould of living and honouring the past of her South African background and paving a new future. This book tackles race, tradition and it's implications in melding it with her life in America. Sometimes she is torn between the two worlds. I feel like the main issues that are tackled here are concerning race and grieving and she tries to blend this together bringing a unique point of view which is startling at times but also powerful in its understatedness.

This is raw confronting and powerful sock it to you writing, it's tough and gentle at the same time. So realistic it took my breath away at times. It explores the senselessness of death the numbing pain it causes, the utter devastation, isolation, loneliness and often the only way to brave it, is by lashing out to fill a certain void that's left, a void that can never be properly filled as Thandi discovers. This was an interesting take on the theme, essay style writing that seems to be very popular at the moment. There is so much more offered here, it has it's flaws but I think this is only a taste of what this author has to offer.

### WWL10 [Review](https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/2100839387?book_show_action=true&from_review_page=1)

2 stars

January 30, 2019

This novel felt uneven and thin and overwrought to me, all at once. I found myself resenting the novel for trying to make me feel things that the prose couldn't deliver. The story followed predictable patterns--there was no surprise. The writing in some parts had the feel of a kludgy autobiography--for instance the careful way the author explains what "colored" means in South Africa. The author's tendency to over-explain at times felt like an annoying slip in diction, from intimate to formal and back again. I didn't like the blank spaces in the text. They felt like a portentous attempt to fall toward silence that was unearned and maybe also a little lazy. The blank spaces should have been filled with more story, more depth, more.

I would have been more forgiving if it had been marketed as memoir. As literature it didn't make it.

### WWL11 [Review](https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/4932294826?book_show_action=false)

2 stars

September 5, 2022

Was hard to follow— I love a good narration and solid story and honestly this book was written in a way that cut up and off the flow. I appreciate the different themes and topics this book tried to cover but the storyline just wasn’t there. I wasn’t sure if it was non fiction, a memoir, a fictional book (if it was the book had zero developed and intriguing characters).

### WWL12 [Review](https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/4958990900)

4 stars

September 1, 2022

This was a fascinating yet quick read about the author’s life. I really appreciated the level of intimacy between her and the readers. She spoke her vulnerable truth throughout the entire book which offered readers a sense of connection with someone they’ve never met. Enjoyed the entire book until the end. It concluded on a very depressing note. I’m not against a depressing riding, but the summary included on the cover expressed a sense of hope, which I did not find in much of her story.

### WWL13 [Review](https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/2693745784)

2 stars

August 15, 2022

One of the challenges with buying books on Kindle having never seen the book IRL is that you can't tell how it is written. Whilst normally not an issue, I'd have found it handy with this book, however, it's my own fault for not reading the reviews and finding out it was written entirely in vignettes which, as it turns out, is really not my preferred reading style. There were a few interesting bits about Philadelphia and Joburg/South Africa, both of which I've lived in, but I really couldn't warm to the main character and how she treated others around her.

### WWL14 [Review](https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/4909853696)

2 stars

August 10, 2022

Lovely writing but the story is poorly organized, or at the very least, not cohesive.

### WWL15 [Review](https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/4899949669)

2 stars

August 6, 2022

Quick read, like 2 hours. Engaging but zero plot. More a collection of brief reflections. I don't get the hype.

### WWL16 [Review](https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/4831417766)

4 stars

August 2, 2022

A coming of age story against a backdrop of culture, race, loss, and family. If you like Brit Bennett you'd probably like this because it's similar in style and feel. Thoughtful debut novel.

### WWL17 [Review](https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/4801179013)

4 stars

August 2, 2022

Very heartfelt look into the life of a woman grappling with grief and identity. It's fiction, but it very much reminded me of Crying in H Mart.

### WWL18 [Review](https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/4611401348)

2 stars

July 25, 2022

I thought I would like this because it’s written from the perspective of a mixed race and mixed culture person, but the way the author unpacks her identity is…a bit depressing and a bit boring.

### WWL19 [Review](https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/4864094724)

3 stars

July 23, 2022

There were really beautiful moments in this book. Overall, I struggled with the anti-fat bias and found a lot of the writing flat.

### WWL20 [Review](https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/4865323173)

5 stars

July 22, 2022

It was a quick read. But I found it was quick not because how short this book but because it captivated me. I found many of the subjects she touches upon relatable. Her writing about losing a parent is so perfectly done. It put my feelings and experiences of the loss of my own mother into words. Bravo to this author!

### WWL21 [Review](https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/1870628302)

3 stars

December 26, 2017

I enjoyed reading this but I do wish it was more fleshed out. There just isn't enough book here to push it to 4 stars, though it was heading that way.

### WWL22 [Review](https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/1897032179)

3 stars

December 16, 2017

This started off really interesting and then midway I kind of got a little bored. It's a novel that reads a lot like a memoir with sprinkled essays mixed in. I found the essays bit the most interesting. She talks about South Africa quite a bit in this book and it makes me interested in reading more about South Africa, in fiction and non-fiction. The book is written in an interesting, almost scrapbook, style and it was one of the things (along with the short length) that got me finishing it despite not liking it as much toward the end. So, it's a solid 3 stars for me, which means good but not great.

### WWL23 [Review](https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/1906107685)

5 stars

January 3, 2018

grief and identity live uncomfortably close together in this memoir-like account of thandi's south african mother's death and the emotional residuum that follows. marked by reflection, sparse prose, and plenty of blank space, it twirls together motherhood, grievance, and racial identity in the insurmountable face of loss. reading this made me recall so much of my own mother, the death of her mother, and the cratering impact that left on her life and, by extension, my own. written with a resounding reticence, some pages only last for a few sentences or a few paragraphs at most; the compactness of her story is almost necessary for its consumption.

### WWL24 [Review](https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/1957774710)

4 stars

March 31, 2017

What We Lose felt more like a memoir than a novel and the title says it all. The loss of Thandi's mother permeates the bulk of this story as does her grieving process. Interestingly put together with some real news from South Africa and photographs adds to the "real" effect of the story.

### WWL25 [Review](https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/1959881566)

4 stars

April 4, 2017

This is an absolutely gorgeous book. The language is sparse but effective - small vignettes that say so much. Clemmons communicates the complexities of love and loss and identity. The narration is interspersed with journalistic reporting on South African history, which add a more macro view to Thandi's story.

### WWL26 [Review](https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/1892708464)

5 stars

May 13, 2017

Just finished reading a galley of this lovely book while traveling, which feels surprisingly apt. This is a book about interstitial spaces and identities, about the things that confound tidy categorization and meaning-making. Zinzi has done an excellent job of honing in on the small inconsistencies, surprises and ruptures that come to form the fabric of our lives. Particularly "the hairline fractures" of loss. The ways that absence, or its potential, can shape our choices and movements. In the background of these themes are concerns of class and race, with a global perspective (deeply intertwined with the author's dueling national inheritances), and these are negotiated deftly and with an attention to the dissonance between how they act upon us and how we try to make sense of them in real time. The progression of the novel is in broad strokes linear. But most of its individual prose morsels flit between past, present and future. And this feels effective in communicating the experience of being embodied in the world. Of trying to make choices. Choices we come to contemplate, often with regret; constantly renegotiating. Comparisons to Jenny Offill's The Dept. of Speculation seem inevitable and so be it, though this book is decidedly idiosyncratic; its concerns are its own. This signals the emergence of a great new voice for literature of the black experience and, in particular, of the black avant garde. I look forward to being pulled out of common inertia by Ms. Clemons in the future. It is clear that she has a keen eye and a fine mind; we need more work like this. That challenges us to question our most basic concerns: what are we doing here, on this contested earth, and why?

### WWL27 [Review](https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/2001082874)

“read” (no star rating)

June 28, 2017

This is a thoughtful and emotional rendition that deals with loss and identity. I was struck by this story/memoir as well as learning more about South Africa.

### WWL28 [Review](https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/2007633825)

5 stars

May 23, 2017

I won this book as a Goodreads Giveaway.

In What we lose, Clemmons is lyrical, honest, and impossible to put down. If this is her debut, I can't wait for the encore!

### WWL29 [Review](https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/2008360063)

4 stars

May 24, 2017

Very candid look inside the life of Zinzi Clemons and the loss of her Mother.

### WWL30 [Review](https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/2007394791)

4 stars

May 26, 2017

What We Lose by Zinzi Clemmons, July 2017

Clemmons debut novel reads as a memoir; an exposition of grief. The protagonist of this slim work is Thandi, a young African-American woman who lives between two worlds: South Africa and Philadelphia. Her cherished and vivacious mother (a head nurse at a university hospital) has her roots in a wealthy South African family, while her father is a mathematics department head at a local college. When Thandi’s mother passes away, after a long, painful, and protracted illness, she loses herself in despair as the grief swallows her up. “This is the sad truth. I wish, sometimes, for even a bad dream of her that I used to have. It would be preferable to this absence. I will always be motherless.” Clemmons presents an intimate portrait of Thandi’s struggle to find her place in the world: “I’ve often thought that being a light-skinned black woman is like being a well-dressed person who is also homeless. You may be able to pass in mainstream society, appearing acceptable to others, even desired. But in reality, you have nowhere to rest, nowhere to feel safe.” Clemmons offers a fresh perspective on how race and class compare in the U.S. and in post-Apartheid South Africa. Anyone who has lost someone precious can identify with Clemmons’ honest and truthful description of life-altering grief and the questionable decisions which often compel the bereaved.

Highly recommended for readers of both fiction and memoir.

This review was not part of the sample, but is quoted in the thesis:

### WWL31 [Review](https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/2037609737)

June 23, 2017

I won this book in a Goodreads Giveaway.

Upon finishing this book, I felt satisfaction. There was no elaborate plot, no rush or thrill. However, the story of an individual person is built, fulfilled, and completed.

This novel describes the many losses of our main character, as well as those most closely linked to her. While the novel chronicles these losses (loss of identity, love, stability, etc.) the most intrinsic loss she experiences is that of her South African mother. She uses this loss to create a picture of the South African nation, as well as the significance of that in her own life. I never felt compelled to sympathy-- it is written, instead, in a manner that allows the reader to stare loss and despair in the face and understand the honesty of it.

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1. (Bonanno; O’Connor; Stroebe, Schut and Boerner) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Elisabeth Kübler- Ross’ Five Stages of Grief model is popularly known or interpreted as a model that describes a series of emotional stages grieving people pass through to arrive at acceptance of their loss. In actuality, the model was based on the emotional stages terminally ill and dying people go through (Doka 6). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Examples of *Instagram* grief accounts are @modernloss with almost 40 thousand followers, @lifedeathwhat with 57 thousand followers, @thegriefcast with 22 thousand followers, and @whatsyourgrief with 60 thousand followers. These accounts also all follow each other. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. e.g. *Instagram* hashtags on posts that quote Megan Devine and her book alone account for tens of thousands of tags (#megandevine, #refugeingrief, and #itsokthatyourenotok) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Sociologist Dorothy Smith said that “analyzing women’s conditions from the standpoint of women validates their experiential reality” (qtd. in Driscoll et al. 249). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Hamnet and Hamlet were interchangeable spellings of the same name in the sixteenth and seventeenth century Stratford records (Greenblatt). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Qualities that were quoted as contributing to a negative reading experience were also quoted as contributing to positive reading experiences in different reviews for the same book, which shows how personal reading experiences and preferences are and that what transports one reader may not transport another reader. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. This reader fell outside of the sample out of which data was collected. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)