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'Loss': A book for grieving children by two Staten Islanders

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An illustration by Diane Matyas for the book

"Loss," written by Patricia Murphy.

STATEN ISLAND, N.Y. -- Patricia Hortense Murphy sat down at her computer one day two years ago to work on a project on her to-do list. However, when she typed the sentence that came to her, she began a book that she had not planned on writing.

“Someone who loved you has died,” she wrote, and it became the first line of a children’s book in which a child who is dealing with death is addressed.

She wrote until she was finished. It would have stayed on her computer, she said, except that she brought it to her writing group, Scribbling Women, where she received encouragement and feedback. Most importantly, one of the members, Diane Matyas, became a collaborator and illustrator.

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The final product is a book titled “Loss,” which will be presented at a reading and workshop on Sunday at the Staten Island Children’s Museum at 1 p.m.

OPENING TO TALK

The book is informed by both the author’s and illustrator’s experiences — Ms. Murphy’s as a 4-year-old when she lost her parents and brother in the Hartford Circus fire 68 years ago and Ms. Matya’s as a wife and mother whose husband died four years ago. However, the story is not a memoir. It is a guide to a child’s inner landscape, one that has been changed drastically by the absence of someone gone forever.

But you can't.
All you can do is look fierce,
or like you don't care.



The simple and direct text and illustration in the book "Loss" are meant to affirm a grieving child's feelings and help start a conversation with a parent, caregiver, teacher or counselor. **Photo Courtesy of Diane Matyas**

“The book is a gentle tool to help children understand the finality of death,” said Karen Goldman, director of Camp Good Grief, where children learn to cope with grief through therapeutic and fun activities. “Children are often overlooked in the chaos when a family is grieving. It’s important for them to feel included and to help them express what they are really feeling.”

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“Loss” is meant to help parents and caregivers begin a conversation, share memories, and help the child feel connected. For teachers, counselors, and mental health providers, it can provide an opportunity to help a child understand what is going on inside of them.

“A well-written book is a good tool to encourage kids to open up and ask questions. It can help draw out what they are asking, what they are feeling,” said Ms. Goldman, who is also a bereavement coordinator with University Hospice at Staten Island University Hospital.

SIMPLE AND DIRECT

The language is simple and direct, acknowledging the confusing swirl of feelings — anger, sadness, happiness, the frustration of being misunderstood.

“I also wanted to illuminate the false comfort that people try to give,” said Ms. Murphy.

The soft black-and-white drawings with a hint of color reinforce the words in a way that says, “Someone really does know how you feel.” There are familiar objects and children with whom kids of all backgrounds can identify.

The images are visceral — a page of scribble, a shouted word — and evocative — a child walking alone, reaching for a hug, playing, staring into the mirror.

“When I think of a picture, I close my eyes; see it in my head. Then I draw it,” said Ms. Matyas. It is an intimate exercise the reader is invited to do.



Diane Matyas whose children's book "Loss," provides a way for children and families to confront death.

Author Patricia Hortense Murphy and illustrator

Photo

courtesy of Willie Chu

The style may be most appealing to children ages 4 to 12; however it is hardly limited to that. Adults who were given a preview have responded with their own tales of grief.

FROM EXPERIENCE

A mother and grandmother, Ms. Murphy worked as the city's director of the city's long-term care ombudsman program, training volunteers to advocate for people in nursing homes. Ms. Matyas, the mother of two is the director of exhibitions and programs at the Staten Island Museum and a visual artist. Their own experiences gave them a sense of what is needed and the conviction for how to present it.

Ms. Murphy was nearly five years old on July 6, 1944 when she went to the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus with her father, Walter; mother, Hortense, and brother, Charles, 3. A younger brother, James, 8 months old at the time, was not with them. A fire broke out and engulfed the Big Top canvas that was soaked with gasoline and paraffin, a waterproofing measure at the time.

"Loss:" a debut reading

An illustrated reading, a family art workshop and discussion about bereavement.

When

Sunday, Nov. 18 from 1 to 3 p.m.

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Where

Staten Island Children's Museum at Snug Harbor Cultural Center, 1000 Richmond Terrace, Livingston.

Admission

Free to event; \$6 to visit museum; purchase "Loss" for \$14.99

Other resources

- Children's Bereavement Day: childrensgriefawarenessday.org
- Staten Island grief support group: Contact Karen Goldman, University Hospice, 718-226-6450.

She and her mother escaped. Her father and brother died, trapped in the tent. Her mother died two days later. Young Patricia was hospitalized for nine months, but was given various explanations about the whereabouts of her family.

The death toll is put at 168 with 550 injured. The tragedy led to law suits and reforms, but says Ms. Murphy, "The fact that everyone in the world knows about your tragedy does not mean you are being taken care of." An insight that makes

her particularly sensitive to children and their families whose loved one died in the attacks on Sept. 11, 2001.

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She lived with her maternal grandparents, stoic New Englanders. “If a child will just behave and go with the program, people don’t go deeper. Children learn quickly. The way to be left alone or get approval is to be brave,” she said.

Ms. Matyas husband Ben, a storyteller and beloved figure in the arts community, died in 2008. While tending to her own grief, she is anxious about her children’s.

“Kids still want to play, do things and this [death] is in the way,” said Ms. Matyas of the grief children deal with.

She enrolled her son and daughter in Camp Good Grief’s first session in 2010. And all three attend the grief support group run by Ms. Goldman at St. Andrews Church in Richmond.

“You can’t tell your family this stuff you’re feeling, and there is the comfort of knowing you are not the only person with the problem in the room,” she said.

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