FILL IN THE BLANKS: WHITE SPACE IN CHILDREN'S PICTURE BOOKS ON GRIEF AND LOSS

by

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of
The University of North Carolina at Charlotte
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts in
English

Charlotte

2020

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ABSTRACT

SAMANTHA HOLT. Fill In the Blanks: White Space in Children's Picture Books on Grief and Loss. (Under the direction of Dr. PAULA T. CONNOLLY)

White space in picture books about grief and loss is space that becomes participatory by asking the reader or listener to make sense of what they are seeing while simultaneously joining it with their own real life experiences. This thesis examines the functions of white space in three representative children's picture books about grief and loss—*Saying Goodbye to Grandma* (Thomas); *Ida, Always* (Levis and Santoso); *The Rabbit Listened* (Doerrfeld)—in order to allow us to see white space represented as boundary space, as participatory space, and as safe space. Over the course of this thesis, I will examine the role of white space in order to demonstrate that it is not simply a space where illustration is lacking, but is a functional space filled with our own conceptions of boundaries, emotions, and experiences.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my thesis director, Dr. Paula Connolly, who has served as a mentor to me not only for this project but throughout my undergraduate and graduate career at UNC Charlotte. I greatly appreciate the wisdom and encouragement she has shared with me, both academically and personally. She has been instrumental in helping me develop my love for children's literature and learning, and I am so thankful for her guidance and listening ear.

I offer my heartfelt thanks to the members of my thesis committee, Dr. Mark West and Dr. Maya Socolovsky. I am exceedingly grateful for the guidance and kindness of Dr. West, who has patiently mentored and supported me throughout my time as a graduate student and shown me how a love of children's literature can be used to truly impact one's community for the better. I am sincerely thankful for Dr. Socolovsky, who has graciously given of her time to support me in this thesis and whose class on trauma in literature played a significant role in developing my interest in my chosen topic.

To my sweet friends at UNC Charlotte, particularly the members of the Children's Literature Graduate Organization, thank you for making my experience so memorable. To be surrounded by a community that supports one another and cheers one another on is an incredible thing, and I count myself lucky to have been a part of it.

Finally, to my family, you have walked this road with me. The words I could say would never say enough, so I simply offer you my most true and earnest thanks. You have seen this journey in an up close and personal way, and have chosen to be my shoulders to lean on every step of the way. Thank you, with all my heart.

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INTRODUCTION

Literature is a space where we discuss what it means to be human: to be temporal, emotional, and rational in a world that is often irrational, fast-paced, and confusing. Stories bind us together, whether written or oral, by asking us to construct meaning out of our experiences. For children, literature is often a place for processing major life issues. It is the space where they either encounter death for the first time, or find a space to cope with the grief they have already experienced. In literature, much of the space where children process death, grief, trauma, and loss is populated with explanation and discussion. We explain what loss means, how it happens, and what grief might feel like in an effort to rationalize it for children—as if the process of understanding it can make it more easily controlled or contained. We seek to explain the unexplainable, to give words to experiences and feelings that are difficult to express and harder to confine to a singular moment or space in time. While picture books can fall into this kind of practice, their use of visual narrative is capable of offering space that allows us to see and connect with the ineffability of grief for ourselves.

In the western world, a child's first encounter with literature is often through picture books. Although picture books are not solely for children, the majority are written with a child audience in mind. Picture books about grief and loss tend to fall somewhere on a spectrum between didacticism and philosophizing about death on one end, and opening up a safe space for a child to process their own emotions and experiences on the other end. Such safe spaces are not relegated to the child reader alone, but are capable of reaching adult readers as well. Picture books can easily become prescriptive spaces that tell us what to see and how to see it, particularly when the text is

dense and the images act mostly as descriptive illustration; however, this same form can become a space wherein the reader "becomes a co-constructor of meaning with the author" through the use of white space (Kiefer 13).

Books have often been recognized for their ability to help us cope with life's more difficult aspects. Researchers such as social work specialist John Pardeck have noted the importance of bibliotherapy, a therapeutic technique that "literally means to treat through books" (Pardeck 83). Counseling expert Leroy Baruth and librarian Marsha Phillips explain that "[t]he underlying assumption of bibliotherapy is that when people read they bring their own needs and problems to the reading experience. They interpret the author's words in light of their own experiences" (191). Bibliotherapy allows readers to "attain a better understanding of themselves" as they "identi[fy] with characters in literature" through a process of "identification, catharsis, and insight" (Baruth and Phillips 191, 192). The idea that individuals are able to see themselves in the characters and experiences represented in literature is a foundational aspect of what Louise Rosenblatt calls the "transaction" of reading in her research on reader-response theory (268). Rosenblatt explains the idea of such a transaction:

> The words in their particular pattern stir up elements of memory, activate areas of consciousness. The reader, bringing past experience of language and of the world to the task, sets up tentative notions of a subject, of some framework into which to fit the ideas as the words unfurl. If the subsequent words do not fit into the framework, it may have to be revised, thus opening up new and further possibilities for the text that follows. This implies a constant series of selections

> from the multiple possibilities offered by the text and their synthesis into an organized meaning. (268)

When we read, we are not coming to the literature as a blank slate. Instead, we bring with us all of our experiences of the world and our emotional journeys. We attempt to fit literature into our understanding and experiences; however, if we cannot assimilate it into our perceptions of the world, we either reject it altogether or begin to change our perceptions of the world in order to accommodate this new information. Thus, when we read we are constantly interacting with the text in such a way that either we shape it or it shapes us. We can read ourselves and our experiences into it, or we can allow it to change the way we understand ourselves and our life occurrences. Typically, reading is not solely one or the other but results in an ever-changing, constantly moving combination of both.

While bibliotherapy can be used with any individual, picture books become particularly important as tools for children. A specialist in education and literacy, Angela Wiseman argues in "Summer's End and Sad Goodbyes: Children's Picturebooks About Death and Dying" that "[r]eading children's picturebooks has the potential to support children through the emotional loss of losing someone they love" (13). As a "means by which we integrate children into a culture," picture books are capable of playing an important role in helping children understand grief, trauma, and loss (Salisbury and Styles 75). They are a space where children can safely explore overwhelming emotions and difficult circumstances. White space is especially valuable in providing space for exploration and understanding in picture books. Whereas filled space in picture books is often prescriptive, telling us exactly what to think instead of asking how we feel, white

space serves as a means of expressing the ineffable. It is a place where silence is allowed to speak and readers are able to look beyond the page and see their own worlds reflected.

White space in picture books is not necessarily white, nor does it require a lack of illustration. Rather, it is open space: space that becomes participatory by asking the reader and/or listener to make sense of what they are seeing while simultaneously joining it with their own real-life experiences. Picture books allow us to "merge the artist's new vision with [our] own prior experience[s], to co-create the image and its meaning," creating a situation where we not only have "coauthorship" due to the transaction process of reading, but are also able to "imagine and study co-artistry" (Wolfenbarger and Sipe 279). When we speak of poetry, we question the line breaks and the format. We ask what it means that a poet chose to stop at a certain word, to push one line of text farther out upon the page than the rest, why there are gaps between stanzas and what it means when some of those gaps are larger than others. We recognize that silence in poetry has meaning. Similarly, the silent spaces in picture books—whether verbal or visual—possess meaning of their own. Experts in children's literature and literacy Carol Driggs Wolfenbarger and Lawrence Sipe point out that "[y]oung and older children, like artists and poets, are also authors and coauthors of images and social meaning who deserve the time to ponder and the opportunity to discover forms of representation and inquiry that will develop their capacity for poetic searching" (280). It is the white space in picture books, whether literal or metaphorical, where poetic searching becomes most possible as we ask ourselves what the silence is speaking and fill in the blanks with our own questions, emotions, and ideas.

Although white space has been used at times as a means to hem in emotion, creating a boundary for rationalized meaning, pressure, and conformity—for example, the white border space surrounding Marcia Sewell's prescriptive illustrations in *Saying Goodbye to Grandma* by Jane Resh Thomas—there is a difference between white space used to create boundaries and white space used to open up the possibilities of meaning. Through the understanding of the role of white space in creating participatory space, we are able to understand the ways in which silence allows readers to co-construct meaning along with authors and the way picture books are capable of helping children cope with grief, loss, and trauma. Verbal text becomes part of the art of the picture book, requiring us to recognize both visual and verbal white space in order to fully understand how picture books are capable of utilizing meaningful silence. Such space is essential to picture books focused on grief and loss in order to ask questions rather than prescribe feelings. Moving beyond the ideas of white space as simply lacuna or boundary spaces allows us to understand the ways in which this space is participatory, ultimately giving us a better understanding of its importance. This thesis focuses on the functions of white space, seeking to explore its deeper meaning when used for rest or to create boundaries while also examining how it allows a picture book to hold emotional safe space for a reader and ultimately become a "grief companion." Alan Wolfelt, a leading American death educator and grief counselor, states:

> To "companion" grieving children means to be an active participant in their healing. When you companion a grieving child, you allow yourself to learn from his unique experiences. You let him be the teacher instead of the other way around. You walk beside him, not in front of or behind him. You see the world

> from his eyes. You accept his pain and the unique way he expresses it as the way it should be without telling him how he ought to feel or act. (3)

While Wolfelt is discussing the role of human caregivers as grief companions, I will argue that white space in picture books about grief and loss, when used to its full potential, enables these books to become a kind of grief companion capable of helping both children and adults work through and understand difficult emotions and complex experiences.

It is important to note that understanding the complexities of white space and illustration is well within the scope of a child's engagement with literature. In studying elementary school children's responses to picture books, Sipe found that "[f]or the children, an important part of the literary understanding of picture books was their comprehension of the form and content of illustrations, as well as the ways in which the illustrations had been arranged by the designer or illustrator" ("Construction of Literary Understanding" 264). Sipe notes that first and second graders were "learning visual semiosis and using it to interpret the general tone of the story," and that they were capable of "structural analysis" ("Construction of Literary Understanding" 265). Barbara Kiefer, an expert in children's literature and illustration, found in her studies that "[a]ll children seemed to be familiar with elements like lines, shapes, and colors" and that "children in grades three and above seemed to be aware not only of the elements of art but also that the artist chose to convey meaning to the viewer. These children talked about an artist's role in evoking emotional responses through the elements of art, and they commented on artists' technical choices" (37). According to the findings in studies by Sipe and Kiefer, children are capable of understanding the complex role of illustration

in the creation of meaning. They do not merely look at the pictures to see the images, but look at the pictures to understand the story. They are capable of understanding tone and mood through colors, lines, shapes, and other illustrative elements. In order to examine the illustrative elements in children's picture books about grief and loss, over the course of this thesis I will be using the theoretical frameworks of design and illustration as set forth by Kathleen Horning in *From Cover to Cover: Evaluating and Reviewing Children's Books* and Molly Bang in *Picture This: How Pictures Work.* As the picture books focused on within this thesis pertain specifically to children's grief and loss, I will also use Alan Wolfelt's work in *Finding the Words: How to Talk with Children and Teens about Death, Suicide, Homicide, Funerals, Cremation, and Other End-of-Life Matters* to guide the discussion of what it means to companion children through grief and how such a thing is best accomplished.

In order to thoroughly examine different ways in which white space can work, I have selected three main texts. *Saying Goodbye to Grandma*, authored by Jane Resh Thomas and illustrated by Marcia Sewall, is a picture book published in 1988 that demonstrates prescriptive illustration and white space solely used as boundary space. I have selected this particular text as it is largely representative of more standard picture books about grief. As the focus of the first chapter of this thesis, I will use this book to examine the use of conventional text and white space. White space is used to confine the emotional content to the page rather than to open it up for reader participation. Many picture books about grief and loss fall into a category of prescription, telling us what to feel or how a specific child feels in a particular situation rather than asking us how we feel or encouraging us to interact with the emotions and feelings stirred up by the book.

This book will allow us to understand the way that white space can be used to hem in emotion and experiences.

The second chapter of this thesis will focus on *Ida, Always*, written and illustrated by Carol Levis and Charles Santoso, and published in 2016. In this more modern picture book, we are able to clearly see how the use of white space expands from boundary space to space that can denote the passage of time, create emotion, and ask for participation in an emotional experience. In *Ida, Always*, white space takes the foreground as a space to wrestle with grief rather than being used as a background space against which pictures of dealing with grief are drawn. This text allows us to see the idea of white space stretched from "empty space" to "filled space," demonstrating that white space as meaning-making space can include certain elements of illustration. Through an examination of this text, we will see how white space becomes the space where we are invited into conversation about grief and loss with both the characters in, and the authors of, the picture book.

Finally, the third chapter of this thesis will center on Cori Doerrfeld's 2018 text, *The Rabbit Listened*. Through this text, we will see what it looks like when a picture book entirely rejects the notion of a prescriptive narrative such as that seen in *Saying Goodbye to Grandma*, and will begin to examine what happens when white space becomes problematized and overtakes the book. While white space within this text is used literally through its illustrations, it also begins to work in more metaphoric ways. Here, white space becomes filled by the presence of absence—an almost constant reminder of loss—and is seen as representative of personal space and emotional safety.

Each of these texts takes a different approach to the use of white space, allowing us to see white space represented in three significant ways: as boundary space, as

participatory space, and as safe space. While white space is not solely confined to children's picture books about grief and loss, these types of books are the focus of this thesis. As I conclude, I will discuss how these ideas of white space may be able to relate to other themes in children's picture books, ultimately opening up the door for further research and study into this area. Ultimately, we will see that white space is not simply a space where illustration is lacking, but is a functional space filled with our own conceptions of boundaries, emotions, and experiences.

CHAPTER ONE: KEEPING DEATH AT A DISTANCE: WHITE SPACE AS BOUNDARY IN *SAYING GOODBYE TO GRANDMA*

Saying Goodbye to Grandma (1988), authored by Jane Resh Thomas and illustrated by Marcia Sewall, serves as an example of prescriptive text and descriptive illustration in a grief-focused picture book. The text is prosaic and sits on the page in large chunks, typically opposite or below an illustration that is boxed in by a thin black line creating the frame. White space is literal within the book; it is the white backdrop against which the words are contrasted and the boundary that hems in the illustration, acting as an outer barrier that further serves to isolate the imagery. The feelings represented within Sewall's illustrations are in no danger of seeping off the page as the white space is used to create a boundary between image and reader. While the black frame prevents the illustration from mixing with the verbal text, the white boundary prevents the images from overflowing into the world of the reader. Within the book, white space never expands into participatory space. Instead, it draws a clear distinction between the protagonist, Suzie, and those who witness her story through reading or listening. Tending more towards a narrative examination of children's grief processes, the story is more descriptive of mourning than it is participatory. The lack of participatory space in *Saying Goodbye to Grandma* creates a story better suited for passive reading than active engagement. While this collaboration between Thomas and Sewall serves as a description of a child's grieving process, its use of white space solely as boundary space prevents it from being a grief companion and creates a text that prescribes emotion instead of connecting with it.

As a description of a child's grieving process, the written text in *Saying Goodbye to Grandma* serves to guide parents in how to help a child with the death of a loved one through a focus on remembrance. Wolfelt writes: "Whenever [they] can, [adults should] include children in conversations about the death. [They should] [t]alk about the person who died often and tell stories of special times the child and the person who died spent together" (20). As Thomas's story begins, Mom "[tells] stories about Grandma" while Suzie and her family drive to Grandpa's house (7). Mom shares memories of Grandma with Suzie, encouraging Suzie to engage in the conversation. Memory-sharing is a key part of the story as Suzie connects with Grandpa by sharing in some of Grandma's favorite activities: "Grandma liked to watch the sun set," Grandpa tells Suzie, and "[s]he used to sit in that chair there and cast for bass in the evening" (Thomas 14). Suzie and Grandpa watch the sun set and fish in the lake, remembering Grandma through actions and experiences as well as through words.

Remembrance carries over into the funeral where the minister and family friends share the wonderful things they loved about Grandma. The minister says that "[e]verybody here remembers [Grandma's] kindness," as he tells stories about how Grandma "brought food and washed [his family's] clothes when [his] son was ill" (Thomas 34). Suzie is able to see that memories of Grandma extend beyond her own family and into the community to which Grandma belonged. At the close of the funeral, those present "stood up to sing […] Grandma's favorite hymn," engaging in another act of remembrance that celebrates things that were important to and about Grandma (Thomas 35). The singing of the hymn marks it as something that was special to Grandma, creating a reminder for Suzie of who Grandma was as a person. When Grandpa

is invited out to dinner, he promises to "bring a jar of [Grandma's] peaches," finding ways to integrate reminders of her into his everyday life (Thomas 42). Many of the memories shared throughout the book focus on Grandma's cooking. As Suzie's family heads home, she thinks about how cooking and fishing remind her of Grandma and decides that when she visits Grandpa again, "[h]e would teach [her] fishing, and [they] would learn together how to cook" (Thomas 48). Like the adults around her, Suzie uses her memories to maintain a connection with Grandma even after Grandma's death. Wolfelt tells us that "[o]ver time" the grieving child comes "[to] understand that she is who she is partly because of the role [the deceased person] played in her life and she will integrate cherished memories" (20). Through the sharing of memories, Suzie is able to keep Grandma's legacy close and move forward in her grieving by continuing to see the way she, her family, and the community have been shaped by Grandma's life.

Additionally, Thomas's written text demonstrates the importance of allowing children space to grieve in their own way and respecting that their needs are different than those of an adult. One of the most poignant examples of this in Thomas's story is when Suzie and her cousins play capture the flag in a storage room at the funeral home during Grandma's wake (28). While Suzie tells readers that she is afraid Mom "would scold us," Mom simply tells Suzie that she is "glad [Suzie] found a quiet way to let off steam" (Thomas 29). Wolfelt says that for children, "[r]ough, physical play in itself may be an expression of grief. It might also be a needed break from the intense feelings that grieving brings" (19). This idea is also consistent with the publication period of the book: medical specialists Salladay and Royal write in their 1981 article about children's grief that "[m]any times a child's response to death may seem callous and uncaring,"

particularly as they "may just as quickly resume play activities" (206). Although Wolfelt's notions of children's grief are more modern, clearly we see that even at the time *Saying Goodbye to Grandma* was published it was widely recognized that children's responses to grief can differ from the responses of adults. Overwhelmed by the funeral, Suzie and her cousins find a way to momentarily escape their grief, though Thomas is quick to clarify this does not mean the children are not in mourning as two pages later we see Suzie crying into an armful of Grandma's old dresses (31).

Thomas's verbal text clearly depicts the importance of helping children understand what to expect during events that mark a loved one's passing. When Suzie is not sure how she feels about attending Grandma's funeral, Dad tells her that she "[doesn't] have to go" while Mom explains that "[t]here will be music […] and prayers, and friends. And [they will] all go with the casket to the cemetery" (Thomas 33). Ultimately, it is Suzie who makes the final decision to "go to the funeral with Mom and Dad" (Thomas 33). Salladay and Royal believe such decision making is important in allowing the grieving child to feel a sense of agency, writing that "[t]he child should […] be provided the option of attending [the funeral] or not, as well as the opportunity to refrain from any part of the ritual which may be disquieting" (211). Should the child choose to attend the funeral, Salladay and Royal claim that it "may be used positively to afford the child a sense of closure, just as it does for adults;" however, it is important that "if the child is to be included, she or he needs to be prepared for the activities of the ceremony. A trusted and familiar adult should fully explain why the funeral is being held, and describe as completely as possible what will take place" (210, 211). Suzie finds closure through the funeral, evidenced by her contentment as she returns home and

"[falls] asleep and dream[s] about taking the train to visit Grandpa in a month. [They] would talk about Grandma and remember the way things used to be," even as they move on and make new memories together (Thomas 48).

While *Saying Goodbye to Grandma* adequately treats the idea of helping a child through the grieving process, it does so in a way that is better suited to adults than to children. Although told from a child's perspective, the large blocks of text and the difficulty of words such as "handkerchief" (24), "cologne" (30), "bouquets" (34), and "hymn" (35) might require an older reader. The book can be shared between a child and an older reader through the process of reading aloud; however, the written narrative lacks many of the features we associate with children's picture books. Kathleen Horning writes that "when it [comes] to words, rhythm and sound quality [are] more important to young children than meaning" (91). The lack of patterned language coinciding with the difficult subject matter of death and mourning creates a verbal narrative that may struggle to hold a child's attention. The pace moves slowly, with superfluous written text drawing away from the main focus of the story. At Grandma's wake, "[a] woman with red hair squinted her eyes and asked [Suzie's] mom, 'Are you [Grandpa's] sister?'" (Thomas 27). Half of the verbal text on the page is devoted to this question and Grandpa's response. When Suzie notes that "[t]here [is] nothing much for kids to do," the boredom she is feeling will likely be mirrored in the child listening to the story read (Thomas 27). Suzie is the character with whom younger readers are supposed to connect, so moments that linger less on her experience and more on the experiences of the adults around her actually take us away from an exploration of the child's grief process to focus more on the formality and expectations of grief in the adult world.

It is important to note that none of the adults in the story take time to ask Suzie how she is feeling. The closest they come to engaging with her in this way is when Dad finds Suzie crying in Grandma's closet and observes, "You don't want to go [to the funeral], I guess" (Thomas 33). Mom and Dad give Suzie the option of attending and tell her what it will be like when she asks, but no one ever directly asks her about her emotions. Suzie's internal thoughts are presented to readers and listeners of the story, but are rarely verbalized to her cousins, parents, aunts and uncles, or Grandpa. Readers may feel a sense of closeness to Suzie as they are privy to her thoughts; however, such intimacy comes at the cost of unanswered questions and unprocessed emotions. In feeling connected to Suzie, whose questions and concerns often remain internalized, young readers may feel that this is the way they themselves should behave. In fact, Suzie appears as a model of a grieving child: well-behaved, quiet about her own feelings, and respectful of others. She is able to jump through the "three general stages" believed to exist as part of children's grieving processes in the 1980s in order to land squarely in the realm of "acceptance" while demonstrating little "denial" or "depression" (Salladay and Royal 208). Children to whom this story is read may very well think that they are supposed to feel the way Suzie does in response to a death in the family, despite the fact that what a grieving child truly needs is someone to "[s]how up with curiosity and a willingness to bear witness to his grief in whatever form it takes" (Wolfelt 17). While these views of grief demonstrate evolving conceptions of the way children process death, with Wolfelt offering a more contemporary view as opposed to that of Salladay and Royal, they also demonstrate the limitations of the book. Adults reading the story may find it helpful to see how this one particular child experiences grief and mourning, but the

book does not engage the child in mourning as she moves through the grief process. Rather than asking how the child reader or listener feels, Thomas's book tells us how Suzie feels.

There is no question as to what grief means within the story; it is defined for us, reflecting the use of white space as boundary space that limits our interaction with the book rather than inviting us into participatory space. Sewall's illustrations offer little variation throughout the story. The pastel medium and simple look of the sketches prevent us from seeing much emotion displayed through the pictures. Facial expressions take on a slightly blurry quality, leaving expressions of sadness and happiness extremely simplified—for example, limited to upturned or downturned corners of the mouth to express emotion— and often undefined. A double-spread shows Suzie and her extended family gathered around the table for supper (Thomas 12-13). While two of the children are smiling along with Mom, Suzie and Grandpa are drawn with their heads slightly bowed. Off-center enough to draw our eyes away from Grandpa in order to follow the story's narrator, Suzie's location shows us that the "picture is meant to be explored" because she shifts "the main emphasis away from the center" (Bang 76). Such exploration lets us see that Suzie's location in the image connects her emotionally to Grandpa, thus allowing us to read her expression as more than mere dissatisfaction with her food. Her facial expression alone is not enough to let us know that she is sad; the emotion behind her expression is unrecognizable without the further clues provided in the rest of the illustration. The lines of Grandpa's eyes are sketched in pen to look gathered, giving him a slightly dejected look. He is seated directly next to Suzie, becoming the center of the segment of illustration that appears the left page (Thomas 12). He is the

"point of greatest attraction," yet because of his proximity to the story's narrator, we are invited to continue examining the picture (Bang 76). While the written text tells us that "none of [the kids] talked very much" at supper, the placement of two of the young cousins on the right page seems to contradict this statement (Thomas 13). The boys appear to be engaged in conversation, and because they are the only clearly visible humans in this part of the picture (Dad is lost in the gutter of the book), our focus is drawn to them as our eyes sweep across the image. They act as contrasts to the obvious sense of quiet portrayed by Suzie, serving to alienate her from others in the scene while reestablishing her bond with Grandpa.

Although Grandpa's sadness is evident in this illustration through the combination of visual and verbal text, it is bound to the world of the picture by the thin black frame outlining the image (Thomas 13). Bang tells us that "[t]he rectangular frame of the picture forms a separate world inside itself," keeping the image and everything inside it separate from the world of the reader and/or listener (76). Outside of the frame lies nothing but the creamy white page; while the bottom half is filled with written text and page numbers, the top of the page is a horizontal bar of unfilled space. This space does not invite engagement; instead, it acts as an outer layer of the frame already surrounding the picture. It is not part of the illustration, but serves as a background against which to contrast Thomas's words. Visually, it reminds one of the blank frame around a Polaroid picture; Thomas's writing could just as easily be a caption of the image as it is the verbal text of the story. Like the frame around a Polaroid, this outer layer of white reminds us that we are not actually there. We cannot fall into the image, or even project it onto our own world. If we could somehow enter Grandpa's house and find the exact location of

the image, we could not hold the picture up and see it seamlessly fit into the room around it. The white space would act as a constant border, marking it as 'other' than the world surrounding us.

Sewall uses nature in illustrations to give a sense of a world bigger than the protagonist and her loss. While Suzie is wrestling with her first real experience of mortality, this experience is juxtaposed against a backdrop of nature: nature that is eternal and immortal where human life is not. When Sewall illustrates Suzie joining Grandpa on the dock to fish and watch the sun set (15), the colors of the sunset reflect Kathleen Horning's idea that gradation "adds familiarity by reflecting the sorts of gradual change we see in everyday life" (Horning 104). Such familiarity provides comfort to the reader even as the silence of the scene may seem disconcerting. Compared to the vast sky above them, Grandpa and Suzie appear small and insignificant. Bang tells us that figures "[appear] much more vulnerable or less important if [they are] made very small," an idea consistent with the visual imagery on the page (92). The expansive sky thus becomes the central focus of the picture, putting nature on display as it moves beyond Suzie and Grandpa to the hills and mountains across the lake and to the edges of the picture frame. What it does not do, however, is continue off the page. Bang states that "the edges and corners of the picture are the edges and corners of the picture-world," meaning that as much as Sewall attempts to render the infinite nature of the sky, it is bound by the black frame and the white outer layer that rest upon it like a weight (80). Grandma is gone, but the sun is setting just as it did before she died and will continue to do now that she is deceased.

While Horning discusses the idea of predictability in terms of verbal patterns within a book, the basic concept is reflected within this illustration of the sunset (Thomas 15). Horning writes that "predictable structures […] allow authors to introduce more surprising or unusual elements successfully with a carefully constructed familiar context" (95-96). The predictability of the sun, setting every night, allows the discussion of something as unfamiliar as death to seem less frightening. Although dwarfed by the nature surrounding them in the visual image, the written text centers around Grandpa's and Suzie's interactions with one another in the scene. Suzie "stood beside [Grandpa], and he took [her] hand. [They] didn't say a word until the sun had finished going down" (Thomas 14). Their emotional bond is reflected in the fact that both are depicted in blue, a color which stands out against the oranges and reds of the sky above them. Bang tells us that "[w]hen two or more objects in a picture have the same color, we associate them with each other. The meaning and the emotion we impart to this association depend on context, but the association is immediate and strong" (44). While Suzie is typically depicted in red throughout the rest of the book, here we see that the grief she shares with Grandpa creates a connection between them through an experience of communal mourning.

The focus on Suzie's connections within the story does not translate into a connection between Suzie and the child reader or listener because her experience with grief is presented as one that is extremely personal and leaves little room for universality. Wolfelt reminds us that "[w]hen you put a child in charge of his own grief, you show respect for his loss and his unique way of processing his pain;" however, *Saying Goodbye to Grandma* leaves no room for the child reader or listener to lead (17). Instead, the

grieving process is filled with Suzie's thoughts and observations. She is the leader of the grieving process. Although this makes sense in the space of the book as it is Suzie's grief experience which we are reading, it means that there is no extratextual co-construction of meaning between the reader or listener and the author. In order to serve as a grief companion, a picture book must open up space for a child to process his or her grief within the confines of the book. The book thus becomes a grief object, something with which the child can interact as they work through their own emotions. There is no interaction with *Saying Goodbye to Grandma*. It is a story about one girl's grief journey. The extremely linear narrative leaves no gaps for a child to fill in with their own thoughts or experiences, but rather moves from one moment to the next in describing how Suzie handles her grandmother's death.

Saying Goodbye to Grandma is incapable of acting as a grief companion that can recognize "that grief is a process, always changing, always moving" (Wolfelt 17). Wolfelt is essentially arguing that a child's grief cannot be contained within any sort of prescriptive box, yet *Saying Goodbye to Grandma* literally attempts to box in Suzie's grief through the frame of the picture. Additionally, the book does not deal with the concept of different funerals, but with one funeral in general. It does not open up a conversation about all kinds of loss, but focuses specifically on the loss of Suzie's grandparent. It emphasizes one specific kind of grandparent-grandchild relationship, one specific kind of funeral, and one specific kind of childhood grief. While there is nothing wrong with choosing to tell this kind of story, and it can, in fact, be helpful to children experiencing this particular type of loss and this particular type of funeral, the book's view of grief is narrow in scope. It is never larger than the page and it never expands

beyond Suzie's experiences. It is written for a specific audience, which can be beneficial in creating a story that resonates with a particular set of readers, but the simplification of the grief process does even the story's intended audience somewhat of a disservice. While readers may be able to see that Suzie is having this experience and recognize that they have had similar experiences, they are not asked to interact with this text. It focuses on Suzie's grief process to the exclusion of the reader, who may not have experienced such a neat and tidy grief process as Suzie's. Although readers who have lost grandparents or extended family who live at a relative distance from them may find that the book reflects a small part of their own loss, readers wrestling with the loss of a parent, sibling, friend, or extended family living in close proximity will likely feel left out by this particular story. Grandma is not a daily, or even weekly, part of Suzie's life; thus, readers trying to cope with a loss that also disrupts their routine experiences may feel isolated by the text.

In addition to boxing in the emotional elements of the book, white space acts as a weight holding each image in place. Sewall's muted colors indicate that this is not a bright and cheerful story, though Suzie notes that she "had fun sometimes at Grandma's funeral" (Thomas 46). Likewise, the white outer layer of the visual frame metaphorically weighs down the illustrations and anchors them into position, demonstrating the heaviness of the subject matter and the idea that it must be contained. Bang writes that "[t]he force of gravity affects our responses to horizontal, vertical, and diagonal shapes, and it affects our responses to the placement of shapes on the page" (52). This is due to the fact that we tend to "see pictures as extensions of the real world" (Bang 50). When verbal text rests atop the framed-in illustrations, we see the illustrations as weighted

down because it looks like one object is set atop another. When the family accompanies Grandma's casket to the cemetery (36-37), the text rests atop a double-spread illustration. Bang describes "the bottom half of a picture" as a place that "feels more threatened, heavier, sadder, or constrained" (71). Suzie's internal remark that she "didn't want to leave [her] grandma [in the cemetery]" acts as a means of interpreting the image; here, the feelings of grief are at their peak because it is the final moment of goodbye (Thomas 37). Grandma's body is buried, which marks her death as a reality. This picture is weighed down visually and metaphorically by the large blocks of written text and the weighty subject matter they contain (Thomas 37). The surrounding white space serves simply as frame and as background against which to contrast the text, and there is a heavy feeling of emptiness because the space is not participatory. It is simply there, hemming in the illustration and leaving nothing to explore but the description of the funeral. There is no interaction with this white space, no wondering what it actually means. It merely exists, active only insofar as it serves as boundary.

Additionally, the bars of white space which hem in the pictures on pages that lack verbal text appear to pin the illustrations in place and keep it floating in the midst of blank space. When Suzie cries into Grandma's dresses (Thomas 31), the illustration is pinned into position by the white space surrounding it. Metaphorically speaking, Suzie does not move from this space. She exists in the world of the book, but she is not real outside of it. The image offers little with which to interact, serving simply as a visual description of the written text on the opposite page. Words tell us what Suzie does, while the illustration does nothing more than depict it. The effect is stagnant, leaving the illustration hanging in space without anywhere to go.

The lack of participatory white space within this book creates a story incapable of interacting with children as anything more than a narrative. There is no opening for children to read themselves into the text, as the boundary space closes them out of the illustrations that might otherwise invite them to participate. Salisbury and Styles write that "all challenging picture books make readers work hard […] at filling in the gaps between the words and pictures to construct meaning" (97). *Saying Goodbye to Grandma*, then, is not a challenging book in this way. Readers and listeners are not asked to construct meaning or fill in gaps. The words say exactly what they mean, and the pictures depict exactly what they say. While certain illustrative elements—such as the size of the figures as discussed previously in the context of Grandpa and Suzie fishing at the dock—invite analysis, they do not tell us anything beyond what the verbal text implies in regard to Suzie's emotions. The idea that "picture books can provide a safe space in which children can explore emotional relationships, including some of the big issues of life" is not present here (Salisbury and Styles 86). Children are not invited to explore their feelings in *Saying Goodbye to Grandma*. They may be able to explore Suzie's feelings, but the book tells about grief rather than asking about grief. It is prescriptive, explaining that this is what grief is like rather than asking how a child's grief process may or may not differ from Suzie's.

Saying Goodbye to Grandma appears to be aimed toward a passive reader or listener rather than an active participant, perhaps as a result of the time period in which it was written. While grief is something we generally see as ineffable, here there is no space for grappling with its amorphous nature and no silence provided in which to contemplate it as something more than words can express. In this book, grief is easily explained,

easily contained, and processed quickly. The book ends with Suzie expressing her plans "to visit Grandpa in a month" (48). As she tells us about the fun things that she and Grandpa would do to keep remembering Grandma, Suzie's grief appears to be resolved by the end of the story (48). The visit to Grandpa's house to attend Grandma's funeral is sufficient time for Suzie to be prepared to move on, making no reference to the fact that "[g]enerally, children's grief comes in waves or recurs at different times, often in relationship to new events or developmental milestones in their lives" (Corr 15).

Although certain aspects of *Saying Goodbye to Grandma* are admirable in their respect for Suzie's grief, they are unable to serve a child actively grieving as much as they might serve the adult companioning that child through grief. Every page is filled, either with illustration or written text, and leaves little space left for contemplation. These filled spaces prescribe emotion instead of reflecting it back onto the reader or listener to ask what they think or how they feel in response to the story. The book does not open up a dialogue about grief and loss so much as it describes a particular kind of grief and loss, resulting in a story that never reaches its full potential in relating to children. While it addresses a psychological view of childhood grief current with the time period in which it was written, its lack of participatory space prevents it from becoming the kind of timeless picture book that can relate to children across generations, cultures, or even decades.

CHAPTER TWO: PICTURE BOOKS AS GRIEF COMPANIONS: PARTICIPATORY SPACE IN *IDA, ALWAYS*

Written by Caron Levis and illustrated by Charles Santoso, *Ida, Always* (2016) utilizes white space for multiple purposes, including boundary space, passage of time, creating emotion, and asking for participation in an emotional experience. Throughout the book, white space takes the foreground as a space to wrestle with grief rather than being used as a background space against which pictures of dealing with grief are drawn. Ida and Gus, two polar bears who live in the Central Park Zoo, are best friends who do everything together until the day Ida becomes ill. As Ida and Gus wrestle through grief and pain together and as Gus goes on to mourn Ida after her death, readers are invited into the process rather than being allowed to remain casual observers. After studying young students' responses to literature, Elizabeth Dutro found that "[r]eading literature is often an emotion-filled experience. Encountering others' experiences on the page can bring our own rushing swiftly, viscerally, back to us" (425). Discussing the uses of bibliotherapy for children, psychologists and counselors Prater, Johnstun, Dyches, and Johnstun argue that "[b]ooks can help bring problems to the forefront so students can deal with them," allowing them to "examine their own thoughts and behaviors as they identify the thoughts and behaviors of characters in books who are dealing with difficulties similar to their own" (6). Whereas Jane Resh Thomas and Marcia Sewall's *Saying Goodbye to Grandma* serves to isolate readers/listeners from the grief experience, *Ida, Always* written by Caron Levis and illustrated by Charles Santoso seeks to involve its audience in the process of grief both in the picture book world and in the reality of their own lives. Through its use of white space to create a participatory, meaning-making

space in which readers/listeners are invited to join with the authors to construct the emotional realities of the text, *Ida, Always* becomes a book capable of acting as a grief companion that "active[ly] particip[ates] in [a child's] healing" by "accept[ing] [the child's] pain and the unique way he expresses it as the way it should be without telling him how he ought to feel or act" (Wolfelt 3). Often, Santoso's illustrative elements repeat throughout the book, occasionally with significant changes that echo back to earlier images while demonstrating how these same pictures can work differently depending on context, color, line, and other design components. Due to the repetition of these details, this chapter will study groupings of illustrative elements rather than move through the story chronologically.

From the very outset of the book, Santoso's use of illustration attempts to take us from a more global, distanced perspective to an intimate, personal experience. Peritextual elements are fully illustrated and provide us with a more global perspective. As the book's main plotline begins, we are moved into a more intimate setting that focuses on particular characters rather than the vaster world in which they exist. The peritext depicts a world that is ongoing. Readers "drop in" to this world to experience this particular story, but we are clearly shown it is a world that existed before we entered it and that will continue after we leave it. We are given a glimpse into a world that keeps turning even when Ida is no longer there to experience it. A depiction of expansive sky gives way to the title page and an illustration of New York City that crosses the gutter to form a double spread. The buildings reach toward the sky and in the distance, surrounded by lush greenery, is the Central Park Zoo. The beginning of the story brings us even closer as the double spread opening offers viewers a perspective of hovering above the zoo (Levis and

Santoso 1-2). The people walking around the zoo are distinguishable but blurry, as are the animals housed in their separate enclosures. Levis' words tell us that "Gus lived in a big park in the middle of an even bigger city. Buildings grew around him and shifted the shape of the sky. Zookeepers poke in and out. Visitors came and went" (2). The verbal text introduces us to a world of pattern and order, as well as a sense of eternality echoed in the visual illustration which is populated with circular shapes and depictions of nature. The buildings "grew around" Gus, shifting our perspective so that we think of him as the central figure rather than the zoo or even the city itself. The use of language such as "in and out" and "came and went" establishes the habitual nature of each day at the zoo, a sameness that existed before the story began and will presumably continue; however, in the midst of this large-scale "sameness," we are able to recognize that the overarching pattern of the zoo's day-to-day operations is a backdrop for a closer look at Gus.

Like the zoo itself, Gus has his own patterns. Levis tells us that "every morning […] Gus crawled out of his cave and spent his day with Ida. Ida was right there. Always" (3). We have moved from a view of the sky to a view of the city, from a view of the city to a view of the zoo, and now we are firmly situated within the polar bear enclosure. Distant figures remain blurry and impersonal, but the polar bears and their zookeeper, Sonya, are centered, distinguishable, and personalized. While the world around them continues, these figures become the focus of the story and are thus depicted in greater detail. Such movement implies that even as the world goes on around us, individual experiences, feelings, and lives are occurring within it. While there is connection to that which happens around us, individual experiences are important, too, and individual stories deserve to be told. Although the concept of grief has yet to be introduced in the

book, Levis and Santoso make careful effort to establish the world wherein it will exist before examining it in the specific case of Gus the polar bear. This allows the reader to see the later-introduced grief as part of the world, but not the whole world. Instead, they are introduced to a world and routine that existed before Gus's specific experience with grief and will thus be able to exist after it. There is a large-scale experience of the zoo, the city, and the world, but there is also a simultaneous small-scale experience occurring between Gus and Ida. Horning tells us that "nothing ever happens accidentally in a picture book" (120), a concept thoroughly depicted in the fact that counterbalances between the global and personal, the distant and near, and the intimate and indistinguishable remain over the course of the story but are established immediately from the outset through the combination of verbal and visual text.

We are introduced to the idea of panels as one of the first illustrative elements that will be repeated over the course of the story. Such panels allow us to see white space used to indicate the passage of time that occurs between each subsequent section. The first set of panels depicts Gus and Ida's life before Ida's illness, while a nearly exact replica of these panels occurs soon after Ida's death. Additionally, panels are used to depict the waiting period between Gus's first inkling that something is wrong with Ida and the moment he learns for certain that Ida is dying. In the first set of panels, focused specifically on Gus and Ida, white space is used to demonstrate the passage of time as the book portrays the way they play with one another (Levis and Santoso 4). Through the use of three panels grouped together on a single page, we are shown first that "When Gus tossed the ball, Ida was there to catch it" (Levis and Santoso 4). White space breaks up the first panel from the second, where we learn that "when Gus splashed water, Ida was

there to splash him right back" (4). After another gap of white space, we are told that "[Gus and Ida] chased and raced until school bells rang" (4). According to Bang, "[s]pace implies time," a statement clearly depicted through these illustrations (108). The use of white space not only indicates that these activities are happening at different times over the course of a day, but also works in conjunction with the verbal text and filled illustration to depict these as habitual occurrences.

Although split into three panels, the illustrations of each of these activities form one continuous picture such that if we removed the gaps of white space they would fit perfectly together to form a cohesive illustration of the bears' habitat. Subsequently, this also allows us to read the images as part of one individual day and as part of a larger pattern of Gus and Ida's everyday lives. Hours and days pass between the panels, constructed by readers rather than by anything explicitly stated in the written word. The use of the word "when" allows us to read this as "every time." The book does not tell us that Gus threw the ball today and Ida caught it, but that "[w]hen Gus tossed the ball, Ida was there to catch it" (4). Such language implies that this is a routine process. The white space allows us to see a passage of time between panels while the verbal text allows us to gain a context of pattern and routine. Sipe tells us that "[i]n a picture book, both the text and illustration sequence […] have a synergistic relationship in which the total effect depends not only on the union of the text and illustrations but also on the perceived interactions or transactions between these two parts" ("How Picture Books Work" 98-99). Although it is not filled illustrative space, the white space here becomes so much a part of the "synergistic relationship" between verbal and visual text that it, too, requires

interpretation. In this way, the white spaces between the panels become spaces that speak without language and require readers to obtain meaning through visual literacy.

The playfully rounded shapes of the panels add levity to the page, a feature particularly important when contrasted with the panels that appear after Ida's death occurs approximately twenty-three pages later. The panels demonstrate a desire for normalcy while pointing out the stark differences between Gus's daily life with Ida and how he ultimately must learn to live without her (Levis and Santoso 30). Bang argues that "we feel more secure or comforted looking at rounded shapes or curves" because they are softer and more gentle, implying a sense of safety (89). While the panels depicting Ida and Gus playing with one another vary between being triangular and rectangular in shape, their edges are rounded and softened such that they give us a sense of happiness and comfort (Levis and Santoso 4). Their habitat is a safe place; bright colors fill the illustrations to create an inviting landscape with a joyous feel. The colors change as these panels are repeated after Ida's death. Levis' verbal text tells us that after Ida's death, Gus "dives and swims alone, and he eats his lunch with Sonya [the zookeeper]. They roll Ida's favorite yellow ball" (30). The location illustrated within these panels is the exact location seen earlier as Gus and Ida play together, but now the colors are muted. The once lush greens and bright blues now carry a grey tinge which gives the habitat an entirely different feel. Examining children's responses to picture books, Barbara Kiefer found that children are quick to pick up on such changes in tone through the use of color. She notes that "[t]hird, fourth, and fifth graders spoke about the effects that the color in pictures had on their emotions, reporting that bright green made them feel happy or that browns and grays made them feel sad or scared" (33). Gus's posture has also changed;

whereas the earlier panels depict Gus in motion as he plays with Ida, here he looks lethargic and melancholy. He lays flat on his stomach with his back legs sprawled behind him and his front legs stretched out before him as though he cannot force himself to move. When he swims, he appears to float in the water, letting it carry him where it will rather than actively swimming or enjoying it. The smile that filled his face when Ida was alive has disappeared, and he appears to be letting life happen to him rather than engaging with it directly. Still, the panels maintain their rounded edges. Despite the deep ache present within these images, Gus's environment is still a safe place. He may be alone, but as evidenced by the presence of Sonya, the zookeeper who now eats lunch with Gus, he is cared for with love.

In these panels, white space not only denotes the passage of time but asks us to closely consider how Gus's life has changed. Standing in direct contrast to the earlier panels through the repetition of similar activities and the shared location, the panels illustrate Horning's idea that pace "break[s] up […] text into meaningful segments, words and images" (97). The first panel ends after telling us that Gus "dives and swims alone" (Levis and Santoso 30). The white space not only demonstrates that time is moving forward, but gives us a chance to digest the newness of Gus swimming by himself instead of with Ida in the first moment since her death that he participates in what were once his normal activities. It offers us space to process the change in environmental color and Gus's posture, as well as the change in his daily activities. Without the white space that breaks up these panels, we would miss how the passage of time allows us to see this as Gus's new normal, and we would be able to move through the panels more quickly without taking time to consider how each one illustrates a new moment of grief. Wolfelt

notes that for children, "[g]rief is more stretched out over time […] since they take in different aspects of their loss as they grow" (9). Similarly, Corr tells us that "[a]s they try to cope with their losses and their grief reactions, bereaved children typically find themselves looking both backward, to the death event itself and what they have lost, and forward, to what all these events will mean for their present and future lives" (16). While Corr is specifically addressing the grief process of children, adults may struggle with similar difficulties and find that they are just as engaged in Gus's grief process as a child reader or listener.

Each new activity presents a fresh sense of grief for Gus. Everywhere he turns is a reminder of a space Ida once filled and that she will never fill again. He misses her when he swims, but experiences a new ache as he and Sonya "roll Ida's favorite yellow ball," because this activity serves as another reminder of something else Ida is not here to do with him and a reminder that her death has left an indelible mark on his life (Levis and Santoso 30). The white space breaks up each of these grief moments; it gives us a moment to examine what it means for Gus to be doing an activity alone, then directs us to the next panel where there is yet another wave of grief waiting as Gus must learn to do something else either on his own or with someone other than Ida. Rather than putting it all together in a single illustration, Santoso's choice to break these moments up into panels with gaps of white space allows us to see each new activity as a fresh moment of pain, a new twinge of loss as Gus attempts to regain normality in a world that has irrevocably changed for him. He must relearn each of these things he once knew, one at a time. The grief does not come and go all at once, but presents itself in waves with each reminder of his loss. Readers may see their own experiences reflected in Gus as he seeks

a new normal which is both healing and a continual reminder of how things once were. In their heartbreak over Gus's experience, they may find themselves able to grieve their own lost sense of routine and normalcy.

The panels that exist between the events of Gus and Ida's idyllic life and Gus's new normal after Ida's death look slightly different than the panels which we have previously discussed: when Ida first becomes ill, Gus is not sure what is happening to her and we see him waiting for her to come out and play in a series of three vertical panels that extend off the page (Levis and Santoso 10). Like the earlier panels of Gus and Ida playing with one another, the colors here remain bright. Similar to the panels after Ida's death, Gus is now alone. Instead of rounded shapes, we now see three rectangles separated by vertical columns of white space. The fact that these panels take up the entire page gives us a sense that something is looming: in this case, it is the coming news that Ida is dying. The lack of round edges matters here, because Santoso does not want us to feel safe. As Gus waits, he realizes that "Ida had never slept so late" (10). As all of the regular sounds of day-to-day life in zoo continue as normal, Gus recognizes that something is terribly wrong. The last panel depicts him having fallen asleep with his paws dangled in the water, telling us, "Still, Ida didn't come." The verbal text ends here. We are not given any sort of conclusion until we turn the page, no explanation or hopeful thoughts about how Ida might just be tired today. Instead, we move from being told that Ida was "coughing, snoring" and "[s]leeping" to being told that she never came out to play with Gus (9). We know that these panels take place over the course of a single day by looking at the way Santoso has illustrated the sky; morning gives way to evening as Gus waits in the same exact spot all day, his posture and the changing light the only

things apart from the verbal text which vary across the images contained in the panels. Here, white space offers us anticipation and anxiety. Each space between the illustrated panels offers us room to hope that in the next panel, Ida will come out and play and everything will go back to normal. Each space simultaneously causes us to wonder why Ida is not out playing, giving our minds the opportunity to fill in the answer for ourselves. This tension between hope and apprehension leads us to begin experiencing sadness even before Ida's death, highlighting the fact that when it comes to long-term illnesses, the grieving process can often begin while the dying person is still alive. There is an anticipation of loss while still working through the hopeful denial that surely Ida must be okay and will show up any minute.

The fact that a page turn is required in order to move the story forward after learning that Ida did not appear all day demonstrates the power of the book as an object, as it is up to the reader to decide whether to turn to the next page or close the book. For child listeners, this decision may fall to the adult reader; it is thus their burden of responsibility to be aware of how the child is engaging with the text and how unsettling it may or may not be for them. Wolfelt tells us that "[c]hildren tend to grieve in small spurts, showing sadness only occasionally" (8). At this point in the story, it is clear that Ida is ill and that something bad is about to happen. If they are not ready to move forward in the story, readers can choose not to turn the page. They may close the book and pick it up another day when they feel better equipped to handle the next part, or they may flip back through the pages and choose to focus on the happier times that Ida and Gus share together. While Levis and Santoso have created the linear narrative of the story, the reader is not required to follow it. Rosenblatt explains that "[r]eading is a transaction, a

two-way process, involving a reader and a text at a particular time under particular circumstances" (268). The meaning of the story can easily change as the reader navigates their own path through the book. While the physical object of the book and the words and images it contains remain the same, readers are able to contribute to the meaning of the story through their interpretations of it, their way of relating to it, and how they interact with the physical object itself. Here, the question of turning the page hangs in the air and creates a metaphorical sense of "white space." Turning the page requires reader participation; it is a participatory act of engaging with the story.

Similarly, closing the book or moving backwards through the pages is also participatory; readers must necessarily make a choice. This does not mean that every page turn works as white space. While some of the pages simply lead us further into the story, this particular page turn sets up a change in the tone and understanding of the story. Once we move on to the next page, our understanding of the story is forever changed. The verbal and visual text have combined to allow us the ability of anticipating what will likely happen next, so here we must decide whether to participate in where the author and illustrator are moving the story or to reject it and stay with what we already know. Thus, the meaning of the story in the mind of the reader lays firmly within his or her own grasp. The participatory space is being created by the book itself, an un-illustrated "space" of turning the page that is just as much a choice on the part of the creators as the rest of the text in the book. In this way, the location of the page turn becomes a deliberate choice which makes it a part of the textual elements. Although it is not a "white space" that we can physically see on the page, it becomes "white space" as it requires us to participate in and provide meaning to an "in-between" space that acts as something both deliberate and

unexplained. It requires readers to construct an idea of “what comes next” and choose to enter into that space, interacting with the book in an emotional way such that the story enters the real world of the reader through its ability to require thought, participation, action, and reaction.

The sense of foreboding given by the words, “Still, Ida didn’t come” (Levis and Santoso 10), is starkly contrasted with a moment only a few pages earlier where white space becomes boundary space and a visual cue for the unforeseeable future (Levis and Santoso 5). As Gus and Ida are depicted in an illustrated circle situated upon an otherwise white page, this illustration marks the first of five pictures spanning the course of the story wherein a rounded illustration is nestled against an entirely white border. (Levis and Santoso 5). Here, the written text is nestled inside of the circle, telling us that “the city pulsed around [Ida and Gus]” (5). In a moment of foreshadowing, Ida tells Gus that he “[does not] have to see [the city] to feel it,” encouraging him instead to “Listen” (5). Here, white space prevents us from seeing the city around them and keeps us focused on Ida’s idea that we can know something is there without physically seeing it. Like Gus, we do not need to see the city; our vision is limited to this single moment in time. White space serves a dual purpose as it also protects this moment. It shelters Gus and Ida from the outside world and from anything that might disrupt their time “flopped onto their favorite rock” as they listen to the city surrounding them as it moves through its daily routine (5). Nothing can disrupt them here—the white space is impenetrable. While we have previously seen that white space can bring unwanted experience and knowledge, such as through the page turn which brings us the news of Ida’s impending death, here it

creates a safe space while simultaneously asking us to ponder why this moment is important enough to require protection. It protects the innocence of this moment.

While white space can offer safety and security, poised within this is the question of whether we will linger with this innocence or allow our curiosity to move us forward. It can serve as a refuge, but within that protected space a decision is also required as to how long we will remain safe and ignore the impetus of the story as it propels us further into the book and further into an experience with grief. A similar moment appears two pages later. Levis's verbal text tells us on the left side of the opening that "[e]very day was always the same," with the words situated on a page completely covered by an image of the cityscape overlooking Gus and Ida's habitat (7). The right side, however, features an expanse of white space. An illustrated circle rests in this middle, housing the words "Until one morning, when keys clicked and shoes clacked, Gus crawled out…" (8). Once again, we are seeing a protected moment. We are blocked from seeing anything else that is happening in the world of the story by this white space, which keeps our focus solely on Gus. Combined with the use of the word "until," this nest of white space provides an uncomfortable feeling of "before," as if we are waiting for an inevitable disruption in the happiness Gus and Ida experience prior to Ida's illness.

The effect of this illustrative element appears in opposite format six pages later as a rounded white center complete with verbal text is surrounded on every side by illustration (Levis and Santoso 11). Zookeeper Sonya tells Gus that "Ida [is] very sick. Usually, there's a way to make a sick bear better, but this time [is] different. Ida [will not] hurt, but she [will] get tired and too weak to swim and play. Then one day, when her body stop[s] working, Ida [will] die" (11). The language is precise and uncomplicated, an

important feature of speaking to children about death as noted by Wolfelt who believes it is necessary to “use simple, concrete language” instead of “abstract or complex descriptions for death” and to “[a]void euphemisms” when discussing such difficult topics with a child (21, 23). This particular opening features a double-spread illustration; while it borders the central white space on the left page, it takes up the entirety of the right page where we see Keeper Sonya and Gus. The illustrated border takes up approximately an inch and a half of space between the edges of the page and the central white figure up the length of the book, and around one inch between the page edge and the white space across the width. The white space thus remains the heaviest presence upon the page; while we can see around it, we must look to the page on the right of the spread in order to see anything other than a background of nature. The white space grabs our attention immediately, while the illustration fades into the background. According to Kiefer, “Illustrators try to ensure that the eye moves from one part of each double-page spread to another, both within the picture and between the picture and any printed text” (129). While this is typically the case, the white space asks us to pause before we continue to examine the rest of the spread.

In an exact reversal of previous images where illustration takes the center of a white border, here the illustration of the outside world surrounds the central white shape to depict a world that is continuing even as we, like Gus, desperately wish it would pause before anything else goes wrong. The white space thus becomes the focal point of the spread. Situated in such a way that our eyes are drawn to it first, the white space is starkly contrasted against the darker, more muted colors of the illustration. The book will not allow us to look away from reality. The soft, blurry edges where the illustration attempts

to overlap the white space depict the world creeping in on this protected area, as if there is not enough time to consider the impact of the words before life continues. Ida is dying, and while the illustrated world continues, for a moment both our eyes and our minds are stuck inside the figure of white space, trying like Gus to make sense of horrific news in a world that continues moving even as we try to stop and catch our breath.

Although painful in its apparent emptiness, the white space in this image serves as a pause wherein both readers and Gus attempt to make sense of what is happening. Wolfelt writes that part of a being a grief companion to a child, someone who walks through their journey of mourning alongside of them and helps them as they process these difficult and complex emotions, is "[a]llow[ing] long pauses after questions or gaps in talking for [the child] to fill or not" (24). White space acts as a gap in this scene, as much a choice of illustration as the filled space surrounding it. Its appearance signifies a stopping point, a visual cue that this is a space for processing emotions rather than flipping to the next page quickly. Author and children's literature scholar Perry Nodelman argues that "[p]ictures convey feelings because their artists cannot avoid interpreting the things they depict" (59). Here, white space slows down the pace of the book, keeping children focused in the moment. The white space is part of the picture, offering a means through which to interpret both the verbal text and Gus's emotional journey. It opens up space for examination and conversation as the words come to a natural close on the page and the filled illustrative space is muted and still. We are not pushed to move on to the next spread, but are asked to remain in the moment. We are asked, in essence, to observe. Wolfelt identifies observation as one of the chief jobs of a grief companion, noting that it is necessary to "[w]atch the child. Take cues from him on

how to talk about the death and under what circumstances" (18). As we observe Gus's grief, the book likewise allows the reader to engage with it. Kiefer found that "[o]n many occasions books reminded children of part of their unique personal experience. A story event or illustration often triggered a personal connection that might seem to have little relation to the book itself" (32). Children may see their own life-altering experiences reflected in this moment, whether it is specifically a death or another kind of loss or trauma which they are grieving. The use of white space allows them to read themselves onto the page, a page that does not simply depict Gus's experience but reflects the child's own through the blank canvas of white space.

Santoso uses vignettes in some of the most painful moments of the book, as Gus and Ida begin to process the weight of their grief. The use of these vignettes keeps us focused on the progression of Gus and Ida's emotions rather than on the passage of time depicted in the panels. The first set of vignettes appears immediately after Gus learns that Ida is dying. Two illustrated oval vignettes appear on the left page while Gus and Ida appear suspended against a white background on the right (Levis and Santoso 13-14). The first oval vignette is incomplete, extending beyond the border of the page to indicate that here the picture-world is not contained. Instead, the picture-world blends with our real world as the illustration suggests that it extends beyond the borders of the book. Just as Gus appears to be attempting to outrun the heartbreaking news he received in the previous spread, we, too, would like to put it behind us and return to the happy moment where Gus and Ida are playing ball and promising to be there for each other always. The second oval vignette is completely contained by the white space. Gus appears in the mouth of Ida's cave. The image is dark with only a small amount of light filtering

through to allow us to see the shadowy figures of the bears. In the white space beside it, the written text grows larger and larger. "'Don't go,' [Gus] growl[s]" (13). The text expands and picks up again on the next line. "Don't go," trails off before growing again in size to form another "Don't go," with an ellipsis expanding all the way to the gutter. It finishes with a completely capitalized "DON'T!" in the largest font that appears at any point in the book (13). The verbal text itself becomes part of the illustration as its developing size demonstrates Gus's growing grief and desperation. We want something else to look at, but we are only given two choices. We can either look at Gus and Ida, seeing the two friends aching over their inevitable separation, or we can look at the white space which removes us from the images of the two polar bears and reminds us of our experiences with death. If we choose not to look at Gus and Ida, we are left with words that echo the cries of our own grief: "Don't go." We are reminded of the enormity of that burden. Bang writes that "[w]e feel differently looking at different pictures, because we associate the shape, colors, and placement of the various picture elements with objects we have experienced in the 'real' world outside the picture," and that "[i]t is these emotions attached to remembered experiences that seem largely to determine our present responses" (92). It is not merely objects that we associate with shapes, colors, and placement, but also emotions and memories. The vast, empty white space echoes the helplessness Gus feels in this moment and may bring to mind our own feelings of helplessness in the face of grief. Often, grief is ineffable; Gus has no other words to describe his pain than the repeated "Don't go" (13). The silence of the white space is an emotional one as it attempts to express the inadequacy of attempting to represent grief. For the child reader, the words on the page act as permission to feel. Once again, readers

have the opportunity to close the book if the emotion becomes too much. Alternately, they may choose to turn the page where they will find respite in the fully illustrated pages (15-16).

Whereas it is often white space that is considered lacuna, or a space of rest, after each set of white-backgrounded vignettes a page turn leads us to double-spreads completely filled with illustration in order to provide a break from the overwhelming emotion of the book. Worn out with grief, Ida and Gus fall asleep, their "two bear hearts echo[ing] each other's beat" (16). As their grief gives way to sleep, full illustration returns; the city looks as it always has throughout the book, yet it is circled protectively at the entrance to their cave on the left page as Gus and Ida inhabit the bottom corner of the right hand page. Although it is unfair that the world moves on even as one's life is falling apart, there is also something comforting in routine. The idea of illustrated space as lacuna clearly demonstrates that the white space in the story is not simply empty space, but is working space. It is doing something that causes us to have such a strong emotional reaction that we actually feel relief when we encounter large illustrations. The illustrations comfort us as the verbal text tells us that "[t]wo friends folded into one shadow and slumped quietly on the rocks. Two bear noses sniffled, two bear breaths panted, two bear hearts echoed each other's beat" (15-16). The repetition of the word "two" is heartbreaking as we realize that soon we will move from "two" to "one" when Gus is left alone without Ida. There is a strong tension between the security of Gus and Ida's friendship and the inevitability of loss, a tension highlighted by the interplay between verbal and visual text that simultaneously comforts us while reminding us of the pain that is to come.

A second set of vignettes appears as Gus and Ida continue working through their grieving processes together, having now moved past the initial shock of the news of Ida's illness (Levis and Santoso 21-22). The passage of time does not appear in the illustrations, but is instead firmly contained to the verbal text. Levis's written text tells us that Gus and Ida had "growling days and laughing days and days that mixed them up" (21-22). The words are spread out across two pages as illustrated vignettes of the bears float freely on the page in simple pictures that demonstrate these actions. The space between the words is echoed by the white background. We must rest in the idea of growling days and laughing days separately while working to understand that the two can be mixed together and neither is more or less acceptable than the other. Wolfelt tells us that it is important "[a]s a companion [to give] the message that you do not have expectation of the child" so that he can "express his feelings in whatever way he needs" (18). There is no right or wrong way to grieve, a point Levis and Santoso are careful to support through the juxtaposition of happy and sad moments in the grieving process. Santoso does not try to fill the background space, leaving the emphasis on the experience of grief rather than allowing us to be distracted by other elements—no matter how welcome such distraction might be. The lack of an illustrated world behind the bears suggests that they are in a world of their own. Time has stopped. They cannot envision a world beyond their own here and now because all they are promised is this time together, time they do not want to come to an end. The reader is given a visual indicator of living through grief as the white space prevents us from seeing a passage of time, standing in direct contrast to the way such space has been used previously and thus demonstrating that this space is layered and complex in its uses and connotations. As it removes the

passage of time except through the written text, it demonstrates the way days blur together, the way grief seems endless and lacks any sort of linear coherence. Horning notes that a picture book is "a complex, carefully planned work of art" (120). While this space is not filled with illustration, the white space is itself an illustrative choice, carefully planned and purposeful in its use. The choice to leave white space is just as deliberate as the choice to add leaves or polar bears, to fill in a background of sky or city. It is not filled illustration, but works as part of the illustration in its own way.

When Ida dies, Gus is seen with her in a floating vignette that seems particularly small contrasted against an almost entirely white page that denotes the ineffable nature of grief. The white space feels heavy, looming over the bears as Gus "press[es] one last pat into Ida's paw" after she has died (Levis and Santoso 27). Bang argues that "[s]pace isolates a figures, makes that figure alone: both free and vulnerable" (104). Here, the space surrounding the small figures of Ida and Gus makes them appear both exposed and accessible. There is no hiding the grief behind any other colors, figures, or elements on the page. Additionally, their smaller size in this image allows them to seem more relatable to children. The silent grief fills the page through white space that is not empty, but rather filled with emotion. The verbal text tells us only the facts of Ida's death. It never once mentions how Gus is feeling, yet the white space asks us to consider Gus's grief. The heavy weight of his pain hangs in the air around him; it does not require words in order to be expressed. Corr points out that "children do not always articulate their grief in words" (15). We are not told how Gus is feeling because there are no adequate words to describe it, but we are asked to engage with his emotions. Once again, we find relief through illustration; the right-hand side of the opening is completely filled as we move

from Gus's individual grief to the collective grief of the city (Levis and Santoso 28). The illustration appears to separate us from the moment of Ida's death and moves us into the days that follow. It offers distraction from the enormity of Gus's grief; although we are told that "[t]he city cried," we are not experiencing it as intimately through the collective experience as we do through Gus's individual experience.

Perhaps part of the reason for this more distanced perspective is seen in Kiefer's findings that "[y]ounger children often 'chose' a character that they wanted to be as they read or looked through a book" and that "[s]ome children assumed the roles of characters and created dialogue as they viewed the illustrations" (30). Gus is the central character of the story, the character through which we experience the emotional journey. Children and adults alike may read themselves and their own grief experiences into Gus. Since the book does not tell us exactly how Gus is feeling, we fill in that blank by relating it to our own experiences of grief and loss. We are attached to Gus in a way that we are not attached to the city as a whole. When we are taken out of Gus's individual experience and into the more collective experience of the city, there is not as much white space. It provides emotional relief as we are offered a break from the intimate and personal grief process that we experience alongside Gus. As the idea of grief is expanded into the greater world, we are allowed a bit of distance from the intensity of Gus's mourning. We are able to see that while grief is a personal and often isolating experience, it is also a collective experience. Others may not have had the same relationship with Ida, or in the case of readers, with the person who was lost, but there is a sense in which we, like Gus, are less alone in our grief when we see that parts of it are shared. We are told how the city is feeling, so we do not need white space in order to process and define those feelings

for ourselves. Instead, we are shown rainy skies that bring to mind the pathetic fallacy, as if nature itself is grieving for Ida. The colors change from the bright tones used before Ida's death and become muted with browns and greys. While we know that the colors of the world do not literally change as a result of loss and death, we are being shown what the world looks like through Gus's eyes. Without Ida, his world has lost a large part of what made it beautiful.

While white space within *Ida, Always* is often literal, the book also introduces the concept of metaphorical white space. One example of this is the participatory space provided by the previously discussed page turn as Gus waits to learn why Ida never appeared, but the idea of metaphoric white space is also repeated through Santoso's illustrated skies. After learning that Ida is dying, Gus and Ida watch the night sky together (Levis and Santoso 17). We are told that as "[a] plane roared overhead [,] Gus and Ida wondered where it was going. They wondered where Ida was going, too" (17). No explanations or answers are given, creating a kind of verbal white space for readers and/or listeners to fill with their own explanations. The evening sky is overhead, but we are left with open-ended words that invite participation rather than prescribe an answer. Wolfelt writes that it is important to "ask open-ended questions with long pauses, allowing [the child] to form her thoughts and fill in the silence on her terms" (18-19). This is essentially what Levis and Santoso's verbal and visual texts are combining to allow here. The sky serves as white space due to its open nature. While the figures of Gus and Ida are illustrated in the bottom third of the page, the sky is what primarily draws our attention. It is not busy space, but space that invites interpretation. Although it is not white in color, it is "white" in its lack of explicit detail. It does not tell us what to see; it

asks us what we see instead. Similarly, the final opening of the book shows a double-spread where Gus appears on the left-hand page looking up toward an expansive sky that crosses the gutter to fill the right page (Levis and Santoso 35-36). He is small in scale compared to the open skies, reflecting Bang's idea that a "figure appears […] less important if it is made very small" (92). Thus, Gus's small size and his placement in the far left corner tell us that he is not the focal point of this spread. If we look closely at the clouds in the sky on the right page, we can see that one of them appears to be an impressionistic form of a polar bear: specifically, Ida. While the left page tells us that "Ida is right there," a single word rests in the center on the right: "Always" (Levis and Santoso 35-36). Gus looks to the sky and sees Ida's memory around him. Although the sky is filled space in terms of illustrative elements, it acts as white space through its treatment as a restful background and canvas for the imagination. It does not tell us how to feel, but asks what we see. It clearly demonstrates that white space does not have to be literally white in order to be participatory. It is space that asks questions and invites readers into the process of meaning-making, space that listens rather than tells. It does not depict every action or reaction in great detail, but provides still spaces that we must fill with meaning.

Bright, hopeful colors return to the story as Gus begins to participate in the world that is still moving around him. As he remembers what Ida told him about the city, that "you don't have to see it to feel it," he realizes that the same is true of Ida (Levis and Santoso 33). Her physical presence may no longer exist, but her spirit and memory will stay with him. We may not know what happens to Gus next, but the story invites us to imagine that he is at peace and filled with hope for the future. Although they may not yet

be at that place in their own grieving processes, children reading or hearing this story may be encouraged to see that a figure with whom they have identified throughout the book can find a way to hold grief and hope at once. Gus does not forget Ida, nor is his pain completely gone; however, he is able to keep moving. He is able to live in and engage with a new normal, one that may not look the way he wanted it to look but that stills holds a beauty and peace of its own. The book does not have to explicitly state this in order to convey it, offering us white space in which to define what this new normal means and a chance to choose how we interpret the end of the story.

White space asks us how we see our own world through the lens of the picture book. Wiseman argues that "[c]hildren's picturebooks can provide a way to address and support children as they experience trauma and begin to understand the emotions surrounding their grief" (11). While Santoso's deliberate use of white space throughout the picture book reflects his own ideas of grief, the space it provides for readers to wrestle with their own emotions allows them to work in tandem with this space as an illustrative element in order to construct meaning. It does not merely tell us what Gus's experiences are through the book, but provides space for the reader to understand how their own experiences are reflected within the story. As we bring our own emotions and experiences to it, the book itself becomes a grief companion through its use of white space by asking questions, providing pauses, and offering a space that "listens" as we merge our own grief journeys with that of Gus.

CHAPTER THREE: HOLDING SPACE: EMOTIONAL SAFETY IN *THE RABBIT LISTENED*

Whereas *Saying Goodbye to Grandma* and *Ida, Always* are picture books that tell a literal story about grief and loss, *The Rabbit Listened* (2018) by Cori Doerrfeld is a story that largely functions as a metaphorical narrative. White space is used both literally and metaphorically within the book, predominantly for the purpose of providing an emotionally safe space capable of holding not only the grief of the protagonist, Taylor, but the grief of the reader or listener as well. To hold space is to be "willing to walk alongside another person in whatever journey they're on without judging them, making them feel inadequate, trying to fix them, or trying to impact the outcome. When we hold space for other people, we open our hearts, offer unconditional support, and let go of judgement and control" (Plett). The concept of holding space does not apply exclusively to grief, but to any and all difficult life occurrences and emotional processes that are part of the human experience. Taylor, who is never identified as male or female throughout the book and will thus be referred to throughout this paper by the gender neutral pronouns "they" and "them," experiences a traumatic incident when the block castle they have built is destroyed by an onslaught of diving birds. As Taylor struggles to cope with their loss, animal characters attempt to tell Taylor what to do in order to feel better or get over their grief. These animals become angry when Taylor does not respond the way they would like, and Taylor is left more lonely than ever. It is not until a rabbit comes and holds space for Taylor by listening, letting Taylor lead the grief process, and offering unconditional, non-judgmental love and support that Taylor is able to work through their complex emotional reactions to the loss they have experienced. Similar to the way the

rabbit holds an emotionally safe space for Taylor, white space within *The Rabbit Listened* holds emotional safe space for the reader. Although the rabbit is not itself white space, it serves a function for Taylor not unlike that which the participatory space in the book serves for readers and listeners.

While we previously discussed the power of the book as an object in regards to *Ida, Always*, we see this same concept reflected in the idea of held space in *The Rabbit Listened*. Readers and listeners can close the book when the emotional journey becomes too overwhelming, and return to it when they are ready or willing to once again pick up those thoughts and feelings. While this is true of all books, it is especially important for stories that deal with such intense and complex emotions as grief. We are far less likely to be emotionally overwhelmed by a happy story than we are by a story where a character experiences deep trauma or loss. Thus, it is important for picture books about grief to be able to hold space for the reader as objects capable of containing feelings that one can either reject or accept depending on their emotional readiness. This is particularly significant for children, who "often immerse themselves in everyday activities as a response to their overwhelming feelings about grief. [….] [T]he reality is that they may need more emotional space to process their feelings and therefore mourn for longer periods of time" (Wiseman 3). While the presence of grief can typically be felt in every moment of a life it has touched, we do not actively engage with it in every second. This is especially true for children, who, per Wiseman, tend to seek the structure of daily activities as a way to cope with the overwhelming nature of loss and the emotions associated with grief. While it is important to maintain some semblance of a routine in order to hold onto a sense of normalcy, attempting to place a rigid structure onto the

emotional process of grief is more harmful than it is helpful as grief does not abide by our timelines and is a highly personal experience for each individual. Something that holds space for these emotions, rather than seeking to imbue them with specific rules and timelines, thus becomes a space where grief can be engaged by choice, a space where it is safe to let feelings and emotions flow freely.

Additionally, *The Rabbit Listened* extends the idea of metaphorical white space that we first began to see in *Ida, Always*. White space is not always white in *The Rabbit Listened*. Just as the sky in *Ida, Always* has the connotations of white space through its lack of busyness and openness to interpretation, large splotches of muted color are also capable of serving as white space in *The Rabbit Listened.* We will begin the discussion of Doerrfeld's verbal text and illustrations by looking at literal representations of white space and how they are capable of holding space for the reader. Following this discussion, we will examine how the discussion of white space moves us into questions of whether or not it is capable of serving as a metaphysical state and if it is an inherent part of the narrative function of metaphor. In order to thoroughly understand the use of white space in *The Rabbit Listened*, we will examine the functions of white space as they occur throughout the book rather than moving through the story chronologically. In this way, we will see how the function of white space is context-specific and is simultaneously capable of holding emotional safety as well as feelings of isolation and loss.

The Rabbit Listened initially introduces white space as a space of both comfort and safety. As the story begins, we see Taylor illustrated in a series of vignettes across a white background (Doerrfeld 1-2). We assume that Taylor is in their home as they have

access to a box of building blocks that they are comfortable enough to take and use as if it belongs to them. Taylor is clearly a young child, as evidenced by their small size and onesie outfit, which makes it implausible that they would be able to go somewhere outside of their home on their own. Additionally, Taylor does not seem curious or concerned about the space around them, indicating that they are in a familiar place. The lack of illustrated detail in the background keeps our focus firmly on Taylor and their emotional state. We are not distracted by extraneous details; Doerrfeld is clearly expressing that Taylor's location is not nearly as important as what Taylor is doing or feeling. Taylor's face lights up with a smile as they pull out the blocks, and over the course of three vignettes we see Taylor carefully positioning blocks on top of one another and lining them up to be perfectly straight (1-2). Doerrfeld depicts Taylor in a variety of positions as they attempt to see their blocks from different angles in order to align them in perfect formation. We notice that Taylor's excitement about their project leads to focused concentration as the final vignette on the right page shows Taylor's tongue sticking out of their mouth while they gauge the right spot to set the next block. Such hard work and concentration make it clear that this is something which Taylor loves, cherishes, and cares about deeply.

The orderliness of the blocks provides us with a sense of the orderliness of Taylor's pre-trauma life. There is nothing messy or chaotic in the background; there is only white space. The only glimpse of Taylor's life we see is Taylor themself and the perfectly structured blocks. Our idea of Taylor's normal routine is solely one of joy found in creativity and order. Taylor's facial expressions indicate that they are happy and content in this environment, and feel safe enough to create "[s]omething new. Something

special. Something amazing" (Doerrfeld 2-3). Even the finished block castle, while it reaches up vertically, is grounded by the horizontal shapes of the blocks (3)—shapes which Bang argues "give us a sense of stability and calm" (52). White space is a part of this order. We sense that Taylor is at home or in another familiar, comfortable space, but this space is not represented through filled illustration. Instead, this known and safe place is associated with Doerrfeld's chosen backdrop of white space. As readers, we are required to fill in the blank of the space we believe Taylor to be inhabiting. Since we recognize that Taylor is somewhere they are able to flourish in creativity and happiness, we interpret the white space as representative of the place where this is possible. The white space might be Taylor's home or bedroom, or even Taylor's backyard or the house of a relative. Since Taylor is the only character currently inhabiting this space, we interpret it as belonging to Taylor. Thus, when other figures enter it post-trauma, it feels as though they are forcing themselves into Taylor's personal space. Although we are not specifically told the location that Taylor is inhabiting, we are given all that Doerrfeld needs us to know: it is a safe space and an orderly space, concepts which become attached to the white space of the book as it depicts this environment.

Since white space is a space of comfort and normalcy for Taylor pre-trauma, losing white space post-trauma actually compounds Taylor's feelings of loss and grief. When the birds destroy Taylor's castle, they are not simply destroying an object: they are destroying Taylor's understanding and way of life. As Taylor struggles with their emotions after this traumatic event, animal characters attempt to overtake and crowd their way into Taylor's grief process in an unhelpful manner. The fact that we are presented with so many different animals in such quick succession overwhelms us because there is

no space for Taylor to be alone or to say what they need. Animals appear one right after another, with no room to breathe in between. This creates a feeling similar to the one we get when the swarm of birds attacks Taylor's castle, implicitly connecting the animal companions with the agents of Taylor's trauma. Similar to the way the birds physically destroy Taylor's block structure, the bear, elephant, hyena, ostrich, and kangaroo all physically interact with the fallen blocks of the castle—representations of Taylor's loss—as if these pieces belong to them. This creates a situation in which Taylor is now burdened with the responsibility of making others feel better about Taylor's own loss. Instead of being able to focus on their own grief, Taylor's grief is compounded by the attitudes and feelings that others attempt to place on them. The animals do not ask about Taylor's feelings, and provide no opportunity or room for Taylor to express what they need. Wolfelt points out that "[i]t's tempting to try to shelter children from grief and mourning. [….] Yet we must remember, despite what messages we hear from others or within our culture, hurting is a necessary part of the journey on the way to healing" (8). As the animals take up the white space of the book, they leave no room for Taylor to hurt. Each of the animals has their own method for attempting to "fix" Taylor's grief, which comes across as an attempt to fix Taylor. However, Taylor is not broken. Taylor is working through a grief process that is a normal response to loss and trauma, yet is not being given the space to do so successfully.

The animals not only disrespect Taylor's grief process, but disrespect the trauma experience as well. The animals touch the tumbled blocks before Taylor attempts to do so or tells the animals that such behavior is okay. Taylor is not ready to interact with the pieces of their loss yet. In attempting to do so for Taylor, the animals step over Taylor's

boundaries and coopt both Taylor's trauma and grief. They expect Taylor to take responsibility for healing by being active about moving forward. This brings about the adverse feeling that somehow it is Taylor's fault if they are still grieving, because they could choose to do a better job of it if they truly desired. The animals appear angry as they leave, giving the impression that they blame Taylor for struggling. This adds to Taylor's burden by asking Taylor to bear the fault for their own grief in addition to the pain of the grief process.

We see this idea play out with the arrival of the chicken. As the chicken's head pokes its way into the scene, Taylor appears curled up in fetal position while grieving their loss (Doerrfeld 10). It appears distant from Taylor due to its placement on the opposite side of the gutter, forming a double spread illustration. Despite the fact that only half of its body is exhibited on the page, he is already as large as Taylor. We are thus left with the impression that the chicken is bigger than Taylor, beginning a pattern wherein each of the subsequent six animals is also larger than Taylor. The size of the animals indicates that the parts of the grieving process they would like Taylor to engage with are still too overwhelming for Taylor. Wolfelt argues that "[s]ince children can only cognitively understand death and grief from within the parameters of their development, it may take a long time—even years—for children to fully express their grief and move toward healing. They might literally need to grow into the ability to express their grief or understand the full extent of their loss" (20). Taylor is clearly not ready or able to engage with the chicken when it enters. The chicken invades Taylor's space in a frantic and chaotic way, as evidenced by the flying feathers Doerrfeld depicts it losing in the vignettes that follow its entrance (11-12) and the frenetic repetition of words and

exclamation points in statements such as, “I’m so sorry, sorry, sorry this happened!” and “Let’s talk, talk, talk about it!” (11). The chicken interferes with Taylor’s personal space more and more, getting closer in each subsequent vignette and leaving less white space between them until it appears to be touching Taylor (11). The less white space that exists between Taylor and the chicken, the more unsafe and uncomfortable both Taylor and readers feel. Taylor’s body language clearly depicts that they are uncomfortable with the chicken. This same idea repeats as Taylor encounters the bear, who looms over Taylor to take up approximately three-quarters of the length of the page as it asks Taylor “shout” (Doerrfeld 15). Just as white space lessens with the entrance of the chicken, the bear also infringes upon the white space. Noting that “the movement and import of the picture is determined as much by the spaces between shapes as by the shapes themselves,” Bang’s theory of illustration offers us a way to interpret these vignettes featuring the chicken and the bear: the lack of space and the dominance of the animals shows us that there is only room for the feelings of the animals. Taylor never fully unfolds from their protective, balled up posture, and their eyes widen each time the chicken or bear comes near. When the chicken touches Taylor, Taylor’s eyes appear frightened and they frown, their arm held out at such an angle that they appear to be blocking the rest of their body from the chicken. The chicken and the bear are not safe companions; they are draining companions.

While previous illustrations in the book depict the tumbled blocks of the ruined castle spread out across both pages of each picture book opening, the shift to multiple vignette illustrations upon the page with the entrance of the chicken causes the blocks to be squeezed into smaller spaces (Doerrfeld 11). As the chicken encroaches on Taylor’s

personal space and attempts to tell Taylor the right way to grieve, the blocks are made to fit into a more confined space. Bang notes that “limited space makes us feel hemmed in, squeezed” (112). It is not until the chicken leaves that the blocks again appear to scatter off the page, implying more room and space as the chicken walks away. The return of greater white space is not only the return of physical room, but also emotional room. While Doerrfeld’s words simply tell us that “the chicken left,” the illustration depicts it with an open beak as its wings flap up, appearing to shrug Taylor off in anger and irritation (12).The chicken is drawn to look like it is stomping away. Similarly, the bear exits with a furrowed brow and disgusted curl of the lip (Doerrfeld 16). The animals appear angry at Taylor for not grieving in a way that would invite others into the experience. Wolfelt observes that “[i]t takes wisdom and courage to step back and let the child lead [in the grief process]. It is not always easy to observe a child’s grief without feeling a need to pass judgement or command action” (17). For this reason, Wolfelt believes that “[i]t’s wise to remain open and throw away preconceived ideas of what a bereaved child should look like or act like” (19). Since white space was part of Taylor’s pre-trauma normal, its post-trauma disappearance as a result of the animals’ presence actually heightens the feeling that something is terribly wrong. The lack of white space marks a change in Taylor’s safe space, and the more change that occurs as a result of the trauma, the more difficult it is to create a new normal.

This idea carries over as more animals appear, each attempting to fix Taylor’s grief while in reality making it worse. As animals continue to enter Taylor’s grief space, Taylor is made to feel guilty and ashamed for the way they are processing their grief because the animals treat it solely as a collective experience. We associate the white

space of the book with Taylor because Taylor is its sole inhabitant prior to their trauma. The white space is, in essence, Taylor's home. While grief can be both collective and individual, none of the animals that Taylor meets were present when the trauma and loss occurred. We are not given any indication that Taylor's home was the animals' home, too. As far as we know, none of these animals were part of Taylor's life pre-trauma. The only things on the page that we know for a fact were part of Taylor's "before" are the blocks and the white space. The animals are attempting to enter both an experience and an environment that does not belong to them.

White space in *The Rabbit Listened* is not merely representative of normalcy, familiarity, and ownership, but is also participatory space that invites readers to identify with Taylor's experience and emotions. Upon the animals' exit, the vast white space with which we are left opens up a participatory space where we are asked to empathize with Taylor's feelings while also seeking to understand our own (22). Once the animals leave, Taylor appears lonelier than they were previously (22). This is not because there is more white space, but because the animals' attempts to fix Taylor have left Taylor feeling abnormal and misunderstood. Now Taylor is left alone, their eyes appear closed and downcast and their hands tucked into their crossed legs (22). They are curled up tightly into themselves, a picture of heartbreak and shame. While the animals have been coming and going, the verbal text of the book has not mentioned how Taylor is feeling. Readers must interpret Taylor's emotions through Taylor's posture, gestures, and facial expressions. We can see Taylor's face, but there is little to distract us from pondering why we feel so uncomfortable with what the animals are doing, how we would feel in Taylor's position, and what we would do if we were Taylor. Salisbury and Styles point

out that “in the picturebook the visual text will often carry much of the narrative responsibility” (7), while educational psychologists Anderson, Reynolds, Schallert, and Goetz note that “the meaning of a communication depends in a fundamental way on a person’s knowledge of the world and his/her analysis of the context as well as the characteristics of the message” (368). The way Taylor is illustrated is intended to provide readers with context to understand Taylor’s emotional state. We recognize the meaning behind Taylor’s behavior because we are able to relate it to our own. The book does not have to verbally tell us that Taylor was sad in order for us to recognize it in the visual representation of their posture and facial expressions. Readers may perceive Taylor’s emotional states differently due to their own experiences. Thus, the idea that Taylor looks ashamed and embarrassed will resonate with some readers while other readers will see Taylor’s expressions as more lonely and afraid. None of these readings are wrong, but simply reflect emotional differences between individuals reading or listening to the story. The vast amount of white space that takes up the page keeps us focused on Taylor without anything else to distract us, while the book’s silence on Taylor’s personal feelings asks us to provide our own interpretation of Taylor’s emotional state that largely reflects our own feelings about trauma and loss.

Leaving behind the discussion of the unhelpful animal characters and turning to an earlier point in the book, we can further see the participatory nature of white space in the illustration that immediately follows Taylor’s trauma as it attempts to express the ineffable. After birds descend to destroy Taylor’s castle in a swirling cascade of dark purple and tumbling blocks (Doerrfeld 5-6), we turn the page to find that we are once again facing an entirely white background (7-8). While white space is still familiar, this

familiarity is now compounded with ideas of loss and absence. It is safe in that it is a space which Taylor knows, but it is heavy with sadness because Taylor recognizes that it has changed irrevocably with the loss of the castle. The vast white space of the double-spread feels silent and heavy with only the figures of Taylor and the blocks to break it up. Wolfenbarger and Sipe argue that "[p]icturebook authors are like poets searching for concise, spare, evocative language that captures the essence of what the characters are experiencing (279). Similarly, picture book illustrators must determine how to capture complex emotions within the confines of a page.

What is most notable in the white space of this particular spread is how it expresses an unspeakable experience. The verbal text merely tells us that "things came crashing down" (Doerrfeld 8). Taylor does not have the words to express their grief, and the white space reflects this idea of silence and absence. It feels empty because it is actually filled with grief, a seeming contradiction that points out the complexities of which such space is capable. It is a space filled with all of the words that Taylor cannot utter, and a space that becomes filled with the emotions of readers as they remember what it is like when the world seems to fall apart. Wolfelt points out that "[p]reschoolers are still building their vocabulary and their ability to communicate by expressing words. They may not understand these mixed feelings of grief, let alone know how to verbalize them. They need help naming these feelings" (12). Here, white space has not lost its sense of safety, but allows us to see visual representation of the feeling that we do not have the appropriate words to express emotions and feelings. There is a sense of comfort in being understood, and the white space offers us the sense that our wordlessness is a normal response to trauma and loss.

Wolfelt speaks directly of preschool children's inability to verbalize grief, but the very nature of grief defies verbalization. As we have discussed previously, Taylor is represented as a young child. Children will be able to relate to a character who looks and seems as small as they are, while adults can relate to Taylor due to the fact that grief tends to bring out the "inner child"" in all of us through the desire for protection, shelter, and restoration of normalcy. While children may be most likely to struggle with the verbalization of their emotions, adults may experience similar difficulties. It is challenging to speak of loss, perhaps even more so when that loss is particularly traumatic. Whether or not Taylor or readers fall into the preschool category, they may still struggle to comprehend their own tumultuous and often complex feelings. The white space here provides us with a visual representation of those feelings which are difficult to name. When Taylor completes their block castle, the space behind it is filled with a gentle, magical purple (Doerrfeld 3-4). Now that the castle has been destroyed, the space behind Taylor is empty. Readers are invited into an illustrated examination of the feelings of loss. The space that, for Taylor, was once filled with something they loved may be similar to the space which was once filled for the reader by a person who is now lost, or the friends from a school left behind during a move, or the family that no longer looks the same because of a divorce—a space where something once was normal, known, and loved, but is now no longer the same. While the white space seems empty, it is constantly recalling to us the things which once filled it. We find that its emptiness is thus actually rife with emotion, filled with feeling and connotation about the ever-present nature of grief and the way we struggle to express it.

The participatory nature of white space is evident as we simultaneously find both comfort and sadness within it. The choice to illustrate Taylor's companions as animals instead of as humans is deliberate: it increases Taylor's sense of isolation while simultaneously providing readers with a safe way to discuss what is helpful and what is not helpful in their own grieving processes without feeling like they are being disrespectful to, or about, adults. Corr tells us that "[q]uite often, bereaved children have a sense of themselves as being different or alienated from other children, thinking that no one understands how they feel" (14). The lack of other human figures in the story immediately sets Taylor apart from the other characters. The book does not have to explain why Taylor feels different from everyone else in order to show it. It is enough to say that "Taylor was alone" (Doerrfeld 22). White space contributes to this sense of detachment because we are still prevented from seeing Taylor's surroundings. Although white space remains the safe and familiar territory of Taylor's pre-trauma existence, the lack of distraction that kept us focused on Taylor from the beginning of the story now keeps us firmly placed in an environment that is entirely about the grief experience.

White space originally offered us a chance to focus on Taylor's creative activities and pleasant emotions; we did not need distraction because we felt happy watching Taylor flourish. The white space itself has not changed post-trauma, but Taylor has changed and we have changed. The emotions which Taylor is experiencing, and which readers are experiencing along with them, are no longer desirable ones. They are feelings we would prefer to escape. The same white space that allowed us to sit in Taylor's joy now asks us to sit in Taylor's, and our own, pain. Since we are not offered a way out of this grief, we must either close the book to escape it or join in the emotions on the page.

Readers may wrestle with their own feelings of how things and places they once loved now serve as reminders of their loss. Safe spaces, such as one's own home, may be a place where empty chairs at the kitchen table remind us of our grief. The white pages of *The Rabbit Listened* ask us what it means for a space to be simultaneously safe and heartbreaking, and how we continue to engage with life when everywhere we look there are reminders of absence. These overwhelming feelings may seem overbearing, but the white space is capable of holding them for us because it offers no firm right or wrong answers. It asks us to question and work out our emotions, and offers no judgement. We may leave the white pages of the book behind and return to them when we feel more ready to engage with Taylor's grief journey—and through their grief journey, engage with our own.

The notion of holding space is best defined by the character of the rabbit, who appears late in the book after all of the other animal characters have come and gone. The rabbit enters so quietly that "Taylor didn't even notice [it]" as they huddle into a ball of pain with their head tucked into their arms and their knees curled up to their chest (Doerrfeld 23). We are told that the rabbit "moved closer, and closer," but we do not see it stepping on or through the tumbled blocks the way the other animals did, signaling a greater respect for Taylor's loss (24). Unlike the other animals, the rabbit is the same size as Taylor. It does not overpower Taylor, but curls up beside them (24). While the rabbit moves to inhabit Taylor's space, it does so quietly and without forcing itself into a position to be face-to-face with Taylor. It does not attempt to make Taylor acknowledge its presence, but waits until Taylor is ready. It simply creeps close enough for Taylor to know that it is present however Taylor needs it, and because of this Taylor feels

emotionally and physically safe enough to let the rabbit into their grief by uncovering their eyes and turning toward it (23-25). The vignettes that appear as Taylor begins to interact with the rabbit do not depict the blocks, showing us only the two characters. The absence of the blocks prevents us from feeling hemmed in as we did when the chicken, the bear, and the other animals forced their way into Taylor's personal space. There is more white space in these vignettes, as the characters take up less than half of the page. The blocks only appear in the subsequent vignettes once Taylor has asked the rabbit to "[p]lease stay" and has turned to hug it (25). In the illustrations that follow, we do not feel squeezed or uncomfortable because we know that it was Taylor's own choice to invite the rabbit into their space. Thus, even though the blocks return and must fit into the smaller vignette shapes, our feelings about the situation are different than they were when animals forced themselves into these scenes.

Although grief is uncomfortable, both for the person experiencing it and the one observing it, the rabbit does not try to make itself feel better by getting Taylor to do something with their grief or move past it. Instead, it cares enough about Taylor to sit in the uncomfortable space with them and wait. Wolfelt notes that an important characteristic of a grief companion is the ability to "allow room for what you don't understand" (18). Whether or not silence is how the rabbit would handle grief, it is what Taylor needs the most in this moment—and the rabbit is focused on Taylor's needs rather than its own. The fact that Taylor asks the rabbit to stay demonstrates a deep trust. This is the first character that has helped Taylor feel safe. We see tears of relief in Taylor's eyes as they hug the rabbit (25). Doerrfeld tells us that "[t]he rabbit listened" and did not leave (25). The rabbit is not a harmful companion entering into the safety of the white space

surrounding Taylor, but is instead a character who increases the safety of that space by holding unconditional, non-judgmental love and support for Taylor.

Similar to the way the rabbit holds space for Taylor, the white space of the book becomes a holding space for readers. We see the nature of white space reflected in the character of the rabbit, whose overarching feature is its ability to listen. Corr points out that "[e]ach child is likely to cope in his or her own ways and in different ways at different times in his or her life" (16). While there are underlying similarities between the elements of the grief process, everyone experiences and reacts to grief in a different way at different moments. Grief is rarely orderly. Doerrfeld tells us that "[t]he rabbit listened as Taylor talked [….] as Taylor shouted [….] as Taylor remembered… and laughed. The rabbit listened to Taylor's plans to hide… to throw everything away… to ruin things for someone else. Through it all, the rabbit never left" (26-29). Here, Taylor experiences the "roller coaster of emotions" that Corr believes is typical of children, who may deal with "such feelings as numbness, sadness, anger, confusion, fear, worry, regret, loneliness, guilt, and self-blame. Sometimes, children's grief involves fatigue and turning within themselves, whereas at other times it can lead to agitation, irritability, lashing out, or getting into trouble" (14). As grief becomes messy, Wolfelt argues that "it's a companion's place to tolerate, encourage, and validate these explosive emotions without judging, retaliating, or arguing" (19). Doerrfeld's constant repetition of the phrase, "[t]he rabbit listened," sets the rabbit squarely in the realm of companion that Wolfelt believes is necessary and important to help children through the grieving process (25).

Like the rabbit, who remains open to Taylor's emotions and experiences, the white space of the book remains open for readers as a witness to their grief. Dutro found

that "[t]he sharing of a difficult story in response to any text testifies to the reader's own experiences and signals a reader's need for witnesses. Just as with testimony on the page, the reader's testimony, revealed publicly off the page, intimately involves its witnesses, its listeners" (428). While Taylor's story offers testimony of their grief experience within the confines of the book, readers and listeners who observe it may read themselves and their own experiences onto the pages. Taylor's grief may remind readers of their own, and the white space of the story holds no judgement of what it means to mourn a loss. Children who are reading this book with an adult may be able to discuss their emotions and experiences in response to the text with those around them. Regardless of whether they speak it to another person, the object of the book becomes a "witness" of sorts to the reader's own emotions. Although it is not physically capable of responding to an individual, memories and feelings can be held metaphorically within its pages. The book, then, is not separate from us as much as it is a part of our own cathartic process. Rosenblatt notes that our understanding of a book cannot be separate from our own life experiences, pointing out:

> In aesthetic reading, we respond to the very story or poem that we are evoking during the transaction with the text. In order to shape the work, we draw on our reservoir of past experience with people and the world [….] we lend our sensations, our emotions, our sense of being alive, to the new experience which, we feel, corresponds to the text. We participate in the story, we identify with the characters, we share their conflicts and their feelings. (270)

Taylor's grief experience thus becomes comingled with our own emotional experiences and memories of loss, trauma, or pain. The white space of the pages works to remind us

of Taylor's loss, keeps us focused on Taylor's emotional states, and symbolically provides space for the working out of Taylor's grief while asking us to participate with it. We make meaning out of the white space because of our experiences with silence and our need for space that is not filled—space that asks questions and causes us to think as in *The Rabbit Listened*, rather than space that tells us what to think and prescribes feelings such as we saw in *Saying Goodbye to Grandma*.

The ability of white space to hold space for a complex multitude of emotions is seen most clearly when Taylor plans to build a new castle. Taylor, who eventually comes to a place where they are truly able to look at the destruction around them and take the time to mourn their loss, makes a "plan to build again" (Doerrfeld 30). Doerrfeld tells us that this occurrence happens "when the time was right," but does not tell us what precipitates the right time, or how Taylor knew the time was right (30). The right time could not be forced on Taylor by anyone else; it is simply an innate sense of readiness for the next step. Taylor is ready to rebuild, and this is the only thing that makes the time right or not. As Taylor imagines what the new castle will look like, soft shades of pale purple fill the background of the double-spread illustration (31-32). Negative space is created against the backdrop of purple in the shape of blocks, utilizing white space to show us that the castle is an idea in Taylor's head that does not yet exist in reality. It is not easily built within the space of a page turn, but will happen one step at a time. Taylor must be able to imagine it, to find a way to dream again, before they can step forward and attempt to build something new. Taylor does not say that it will be more amazing than what they lost, but simply that it, too, can hold value. Readers are not told why white space is used to create the image of a new castle, but are left to infer the purpose of it for

themselves. While the white space used to form the castle depicts a larger structure than that which Taylor lost, Doerrfeld is careful not to make it seem as though the new castle is better. It is simply different. The fallen blocks remain on the floor in front of Taylor, showing that the chaos and pain of Taylor's loss have not disappeared but that the white space which forms the idea of a new castle is capable of holding both past loss and present hope simultaneously. Taylor does not have to get rid of their grief and pain in order to keep moving forward, but is able to grieve and be hopeful all at once. The remnants of destruction are still there, but so is the idea of new order, or a new normal. The white space used to illustrate the blocks does not show an attempt to fix Taylor's grief, but rather an attempt to acknowledge it without judging Taylor for being ready to take the next step in rebuilding. The white space of the imagined castle holds the reality of Taylor's loss and the change brought about by it even as it depicts the beginnings of something new.

White space is clearly used through *The Rabbit Listened* as something capable of holding safe space while inviting readers to participate with the emotional journey of the book and the feelings it stirs up about their own personal experiences; however, the book also expands our understanding of white space to include more metaphoric ideas. When the block castle comes crashing down, Taylor's particular loss is not specified; rather, the written text merely states that "things came crashing down" (Doerrfeld 8). It is the visual text which depicts the block castle, giving the reader something concrete to look at even as the verbal text opens up the possibilities of what the "something" referred to is. The castle may serve as a metaphor for the loss of a loved one, for a traumatic experience that shakes up one's core beliefs about life. Since metaphoric meaning is undefined and asks

the reader to participate in creating an understanding of it, we may ask ourselves if the essence of metaphor is a kind of metaphysical white space in which our minds are asked to fill in a gap that, while not white in color, is "blank" in terms of specific definition. While there is no definitive answer to this question, it causes us to wonder about the links between unfilled spaces that seek reader participation. Metaphor asks us to fill in a deeper understanding of the words and images with which we are provided. While the illustrations and words that serve as metaphor may not themselves be white space, it is possible that the concept of a metaphor is a kind of white space with which our minds are asked to participate.

Likewise, we may find ourselves asking if white space is always inherently white. In our discussion of *Ida, Always*, we talked about the openness of the sky and its ability to serve as a kind of white space through the use of muted color and stillness. When Taylor builds their first block castle, the structure is a set against a blurry backdrop of pale lilac (Doerrfeld 3-4). This space may not be white, but it is open and restful. It is not defined, nor is it busy. It blurs into the white space as if it is a part of it. Its lack of prescriptive feeling can be read as a kind of white space, inviting us to choose what we see in it. The purple backdrop sets the tower apart. If we interpret the purple as having almost a magical quality, there is a sense in which we can see it as innocence, as if we are looking at life through the eyes of a child. When the purple becomes dark and swirling on the following pages before dissipating completely, we lose the idea of it as white space because it becomes chaotic and busy (5-6). It does not invite us in to its space as much as it expels us from the participatory experience we enjoyed when it was the calm background to Taylor's castle. When the purple disappears, we feel as if we have lost

something precious. It is not just the castle that we, like Taylor, are missing on the page, but the magical quality of beauty and creativity.

Throughout *The Rabbit Listened*, literal white space works as holding space where we are able to accommodate multiple, and seemingly conflicting, emotions at once. It is able serve as safe space while simultaneously working as space that reminds us of loss. Just as the rabbit holds space for Taylor, white space in *The Rabbit Listened* holds space for the reader. It offers readers a place to wrestle with their own emotions and feelings and asks them how they relate to the characters and the story. Readers may return to the book whenever they need it, or set it aside in moments when they do not feel capable of coping with their own pain. Through its commitment to being non-judgmental about emotions and grief, it offers the most important features of a grief companion: the ability to listen and let the griever lead. It opens up the door to further ideas about white space through its use of metaphor, asking us to consider the possibility of white space as a metaphysical state of being wherein readers are asking to fill in the blanks of meaning. As the book's meaning is co-constructed between Doerrfeld and the reader the book listens to what readers bring to it, creating a story that simultaneously belongs both to us and to Taylor through a shared experience of grief.

CONCLUSION

Literature is a vehicle through which we wrestle with the idea of what it means to be human, particularly in a world filled with grief and loss. Often, a child's primary introduction to literature is through picture books, meaning that picture books are a medium through which children can learn to live in the world around them. Such books are capable of having a therapeutic effect: Wiseman notes that "[r]esearch on grief and loss demonstrates that children need time and guidance on how to deal with their feelings […] and that literature can be an important part of this process" (12). As children read picture books themselves or listen to picture books read to them by others and identify with the characters and feelings held with the pages, they may be able to work through their own complex emotions and find comfort in feeling less alone as they see their experiences reflected within a book. Certain picture books are more conducive to this than others; while white space has at times been used to constrain and prescribe the grief experience, it is equally capable of creating a space wherein the child reader is able to "co-construct" meaning with the author and illustrator in such a way that the experience within the book reaches beyond the pages and affects the child's real-world coping abilities and understanding of loss (Kiefer 13). In order to create participatory experiences that allow children to wrestle with the nature of humanity in age-appropriate ways, we must understand how white space creates constructive space and recognize its importance as an element of picture books.

In *Saying Goodbye to Grandma*, we experience death and loss through first-person narration as told from a child's point of view. The story is matter of fact, telling readers how Suzie feels and giving us a specific example of grief to look at rather than a

space within which to examine it. White space is used as boundary space: it prevents the emotions of the book from seeping off the page while simultaneously creating a barrier between the reader and Suzie. There is little room for participation with the story as the meaning is blatantly prescribed for us on the page rather than inviting us into its construction. Whereas *Saying Goodbye to Grandma* is a simple narrative aimed at a passive reader, both *Ida, Always* and *The Rabbit Listened* engender active engagement with verbal and visual text in order to serve as grief companions capable of holding space for readers and listeners. *Ida, Always* extends the use of white space from mere boundary space to space which denotes the passage of time, creates emotion, and asks for participation in an emotional experience. It stretches the meaning of white space from space that is literally white to space that is restful, open, and still in a way that invites interpretation and requires reader interaction. We move from literal narratives in *Saying Goodbye to Grandma* and *Ida, Always*, to a more metaphorical narrative in *The Rabbit Listened. The Rabbit Listened* further widens the concept of white space by asking us to consider it not only as something that occurs on the page, but as something metaphysical and constructed in the mind through the use of metaphor. White space in *The Rabbit Listened* demonstrates the complexity of space which is at once safe and emotionally complicated. It does not serve a single purpose, but is instead capable of holding two seemingly opposite concepts at once, such as the idea of comfort comingled with feelings of isolation.

Although much work has been done in the area of understanding illustrative elements in picture books, little research has examined how white space works within this particular form. We tend to relegate the concepts of white space and silence to the field of

poetry, where we more readily recognize the ability of gaps and spacing to "speak" of deeper meaning; however, just as the spaces of rest in poetry are filled with unuttered words and concepts, the white space in picture books serves as a quiet space that is rife with meaning and purpose. The use of white space is deliberate: it can be used to create boundaries, invite participation, visually express the ineffable nature of grief, and hold space for readers and listeners. While this thesis has focused solely on the use of white space in picture books about grief and loss, white space is commonly used across all genres of picture books. The purpose of this thesis is not to discuss how white space operates in every genre of the picture book form, but rather demonstrate how its participatory nature is particularly effective in helping children cope with experiences of death and loss. Such discussion of white space opens the door for further research into this area; while it is possible that the participatory aspect of white space crosses genres, white space may have further uses in picture books that deal with fantasy, history, nonsense, non-fiction, and more. It is possible that the use of white space changes based on the intended age of the reader, the concept being discussed, the time period in which the book was written, and the culture to which the book belongs. While such ideas are outside the scope of this particular thesis, they are areas ripe for research in order to understand more about the way visual elements in picture books can be used to create meaning.

A greater understanding of white space allows us to understand how readers are capable of interacting with texts through the interplay between what we read on the page and what we bring to stories from our own life experiences. Wolfenbarger and Sipe point out that "[t]oday's picturebook authors and artists invite readers into the play of visual

elements and unexpected textual avenues. They are calling for coauthors who play ‘out of bounds,’ who seek layers of meaning, not a single already-told tale” (280). White space invites readers into the realm of co-authorship, offering us a more nuanced idea of picture books than simply viewing them as literature only appropriate for young children. As Wolfenbarger and Sipe tell us, “[a]ny picturebook, no matter how ‘simple’ the subject matter, can be considered a sophisticated aesthetic object” (278-279). Through the use of white space, picture books are capable of connecting to the difficult emotional experiences of readers. They provide both a verbal and visual experience, serving not only as a literary form but as an art form. As picture books about grief and loss help us understand what it means to be human, they are capable of speaking not only to young audiences but to adult readers as well. The significance of white space as both a visual element and communicative tool further speaks to readers and listeners of all ages as it asks us to understand the importance of silence. White space is not inactive space, but instead actively engages with both the meaning of the book and the experiences of the reader. When used well, it creates a literary experience capable of helping readers cope with real life situations and struggles. Ultimately, white space in children’s picture books about grief and loss allows us to better understand the importance of silence, non-judgmental support, and listening in response to children’s grief. As we seek to understand the incomprehensible nature of loss, we find refuge in the ability of well-used white space to speak to the feelings and ideas we cannot utter. In its ability to express the ineffable, white space reminds readers they are not alone in experiencing the difficulties of being human even when they cannot find the words to describe their experiences.

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