

University of the Sunshine Coast

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‘If the sky should fall’: an exploration of how a novella can portray the grief of bereavement from a comparative worldviews perspective

Abstract:

This article discusses my research into how our worldview shapes our experience of grief and loss in relation to death and dying and how, using the methodology of practice-led research, I wrote a novella, ‘If the sky should fall’. The purpose of the novella is to explore grief from a comparative perspective of Atheism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Judaism and New Age spirituality, and to explore worldviews through the lens of grief. The novella was submitted as my creative artefact for the degree of Masters of Creative Arts, Creative Writing, at the University of the Sunshine Coast.

Biographical note:

Belinda has worked as a magazine editor and writer. Belinda’s undergraduate degree was in Communication, majoring in Professional Writing. She studied fiction and novel writing with New York Gotham Writers’ Workshop, and completed her thesis for Masters of Creative Arts, Creative Writing, at the University of the Sunshine Coast in 2015. Her short story ‘The thimble’ was published in the December 2013 issue of *LiNQ*. Her short story ‘The imitation of grace’ was semi-finalist in the 2015 William Van Dyke Short Story Prize.

Keywords:

Creative Writing – Novella – Death – Dying – Bereavement – Grief – Loss

But ask us to prove even to ourselves that we are right in our belief and we are in a quandary (JW Sire 1994).

Introduction

The experience of grieving my young brother-in-law's murder in 2003 led me to make two observations: that we grieve the death of a loved one based upon our own worldview's set of beliefs and assumptions, not the deceased's and, that *something* is true – regarding what happens to someone when they die – whether or not we believe it, although we cannot prove it, and despite the juxtaposition of our acceptance or rejection of it as a belief. These observations led me through what I term a secondary grief: a crisis of faith. This crisis prompted me to explore the different suppositions of the stated worldviews in relation to death and dying, and to explore the nature of belief – how we arrive at our beliefs and whether or not they moderate the experience of grief and loss.

In her piece for the *New Yorker*, 'Can Reading Make you Happier?' (2015), Ceridwen Dovey discusses bibliotherapy: the ancient art of reading fiction for therapeutic effect. Dovey received a gift to see a bibliotherapist, to be prescribed fiction for her emotional wellbeing. When her therapist asked: 'What is preoccupying you at the moment?' Dovey surprised herself with her response:

I am worried about having no spiritual resources to shore myself up against the inevitable future grief of losing somebody I love. I'm not religious, and I don't particularly want to be, but I'd like to read more about other people's reflections on coming to some sort of early, weird form of faith in a 'higher being' as an emotional survival tactic (2015).

Dovey's comment supports the idea that terror management theory underpins religious beliefs. Soenke, Landau, and Greenberg (2013) suggest that the primary function of religiousness is to buffer the individual against the anxiety that the self and loved ones will inevitably die. It does so by providing attachment, structure, hope and the opportunity to view life as valuable and continuing on in some way after death.

As part of my process of trying to make sense of the grief of bereavement, I self-prescribed both fiction and non-fiction as bibliotherapy; they welcomed me into discussions I longed to have and challenged and expanded my understanding of the world. As the proverb says: Read one book and you'll be brainwashed, two books and you'll be confused, a hundred books and you'll be wise. To sift through my thoughts, I also wrote journal entries such as: 'Blinded by our time and culture we're almost convinced we see clearly. Within the parameters of our own worldview we're almost convinced we own truth' (Hopper 2008).

After five years of reading about worldviews, philosophy, religion, and the arguments and counter-arguments on whether science has buried God, I started to write what I realised was a memoir about the early years of coping with grief and loss. But I came to see that what I was writing was primarily my sister's personal grief, which I felt uncomfortable with, so I decided to experiment with the narrative device of fiction. I studied fiction and novel writing with New York Gotham Writers' Workshop to allow myself the freedom to explore different worldviews through fictional characters and

events. After a few years of writing character sketches and disjointed scenes, I enrolled in the Masters of Creative Arts at the University of the Sunshine Coast, to give a framework to my research and receive guidance in constructing a cohesive narrative. Research into posttraumatic growth suggests it is not unusual for creative growth to evolve from a trauma that shatters prior assumptions about the world and oneself (Janoff-Bulman 2004: 30).

According to Griffiths, worldviews are representations of the world that give us a vision and language with which to evaluate our concepts of the world, and the merits of any particular worldview rest primarily on the superiority and plausibility of its theories over rival theories (2007). Worldviews are paradigms of ontological and epistemological assumptions and presuppositions on which individuals base their understanding of the world. Griffiths argues that epistemology (the logic of justification – the process of testing rival theories on the basis of their internal coherence and the correspondence of their causal hypotheses with empirical data), is more important than ontology (the logic of discovery – the mysterious process by which one adopts a particular worldview) (2007).

Joseph Campbell's psychoanalytical examination of worldviews highlights their commonalities and, based on their shared elements of myth, Campbell extrapolates that all worldviews are fundamentally the same and only superficially different; that they are all born of myths and legends that appeal to human nature and longings and follow the same narrative structure: a hero, or messianic figure's call to adventure, and their overcoming obstacles to bring rescue or redemption to others (1993). Conversely, as a religious historian, Dickson asserts that worldviews are only superficially the same and are fundamentally different, and argues for the importance of approaching them on their own terms, suspending assumptions and preconceptions, in order to give them each the respect they deserve (2004: 10-11).

The focus of my research in this area was on the essential differences among worldviews in relation to grief and loss. Just as grief is universal to the human experience, so too is our proclivity to theorise. And whether or not we are aware of our beliefs – or worldviews – they are theories: maps or models that we construct as mental representations of our physical, social, emotional, spiritual and political landscapes (Schulz 2010: 92), through which we make sense of our experiences of grief and loss, of death and dying. And with the loss of a loved one, the bereaved's very biopsychosocial self is shaken and thrown off balance (Rubin and Yasien-Esmael 2004: 150).

I came to understand this dislocation of worldview from experience as a secondary grief: secondary to the immediate and primary grief for my brother-in-law and my sister and their children, but still a grief, which simmered away in the background at first, then came to a boil a few months later when I decided that I would seek to understand how differing worldviews would make sense of a violent, unjust death. I suspected that sorting out my beliefs would help me sort through my grief: if our greatest fear is that the sky should fall, then our worldview is the means by which we prop up the sky. A sentence from Sire's *Why Should Anyone Believe Anything At All?* became the cornerstone for my research: 'But ask us to prove even to ourselves that we are right in our belief and we are in a quandary' (1994: 16). I found this confronting because I was

frustrated at not being able to prove my beliefs, even to myself, and liberating because everyone else was in the same position.

I initially conducted research-led practice, where the questions and conundrums that arose for me after the death of my brother-in-law informed the direction of my research into worldviews. Then I changed methodologies to practice-led research, because through the creative practice of trying to write believable characters, I realised that each character's set of beliefs determined their own questions regarding death and dying and, therefore, the direction of the narrative and subsequent research into worldviews.

I decided the novella was a form well suited to my purpose of exploring the thematic of grief and loss from a comparative worldviews perspective, as the narrative I was crafting centres on the everyday dramas of one particular family in the wake of their tragedy. The novella had a strong influence on social, political and religious developments in Western Europe during the Renaissance. With its roots in Italian literature, the traditional novella consists of four aspects: the cornice – usually an unhappy act of God or deed of man; time unity – where the story focuses on a brief period of time or a specific event; evolving length – economising on psychological development or lengthy description, hewing rather to plot and situation; and, the thematic classification centering on the everyday dramas of men and women (Clements 1972).

I decided to subvert the time unity aspect of the traditional novella, not only chapter-by-chapter, but also within chapters, so that flashbacks and scenes are told out of chronological sequence. I also marry to the novella, literary devices normally employed in the short story composite such as Tim Winton's *The Turning* (2004), where different stories are written in different voices, tenses and points of view. Where a composite novel is a patchwork narrative joined by characters and theme (Sponsor Kuttainen 2007), my novella, 'If the sky should fall', has one overarching narrative focused on the main character Simona's grief, which progresses through each chapter, consistent with the novella form. Each chapter is either told by, or focused on, a different character's point of view – and worldview – and includes reflections on their journey of grief, coming to a dénouement in the final chapter, when Simona is confronted about her choices: to come to terms with, or compound her grief.

In Tim Winton's *The Turning* (2004), a composite novel set in Western Australia, the central story is a third person account of Rae, a woman who lives in a caravan park with her two young daughters and her abusive husband. Rae makes friends with a new temporary resident, Sherry. Rae wonders what makes her new friend so different, having a sense of peace about her and seeming to have her life together. Rae discovers that Sherry and her husband are new converts to Christianity, after making a mess of their lives. At first Rae is upset about the religious dimension to their lives, but as her abusive situation worsens, Rae comes to wonder whether she too needs a saviour. *The Turning* thus deals with characters reflecting on their worldview in response to grief. Winton's adult novels are known for religious themes set against harsh Australian landscapes and difficult relationships. He has stated:

At the time I started writing, religious themes in Australian novels were just unheard of. Unless they came from Institutional Catholic situations ... Australia is an anti-religious place. There are lots of reasons to do with our history ... The role of the church was pretty

rocky, I think, in early Australia. It bred a huge distrust of authority and religion. It's very much harder to float a religious notion in any sense in Australia ... Faith is generally seen as a bit embarrassing (Winton, interviewed by McGirr 1999).

Like Winton, I was interested in exploring relationships, loss, and the interplay of grief and worldviews, but expanded my exploration to include worldviews from Atheism, Buddhism, Islam, Judaism and New Age Spirituality. I also include characters assessing, amending and defending their worldviews, in response to their grief experience.

The challenge, then, was to avoid writing stereotypes or propaganda. Gibson argues that the novelist presents us with individuality and diversity alike without any attempt to reduce either to the terms of a singular scheme or totality (1999: 8). Hence the novel (and, by extension, my novella) becomes the form for, and expression of, an ethics of free, democratic pluralism. I sought to achieve this by humanising objective, abstract ideas within worldviews, through the portrayal of subjective characters, contrasting the nominal with the pious or zealous.

Robinson states, 'There's a lot of writing about religion with a cold eye, but virtually none with a loving heart' (qtd. in Mason 2014). Therefore, I sought to write each character and their particular beliefs with compassion and empathy. This does not mean the narrative is without conflict, tension and misunderstanding; I aimed to give a contrapuntal thrust to the characters' relating and arguments, and to provide anecdotal evidence for how or why they each believe what they believe. I aimed to portray – through dialogue and action – whether or not each character is settled in their beliefs and whether they arrive at their position through intellectual assessment, circumstance, or experience (Schulz 2010: 87-110).

To attempt to add tension to the narrative, I set the characters in close relationship with one another and have them face a shared experience of grief and loss. Through dialogue and action, their worldviews – and differences – hopefully become apparent. I represent and interpret different worldviews using the artistic freedom that Ommundsen gives in the name of cultural diversity:

that the individual artist is free to explore, modify, subvert or reinvent particular cultural traditions and customs whether or not the artist belongs to or is accepted by the communities or cultural backgrounds, through characters and settings that may have nothing to do with his or her own cultural background (qtd. in Birns 2007).

Fiction-based research challenges the fact/fiction dichotomy that has historically dominated our understanding of what is and is not considered research (Leavy 2013: 24), with practice-led research asserting that creative work in itself is a form of research that generates detectable research outputs; that the training and specialised knowledge creative practitioners have, and the creative process they engage in, leads to specialised insights, which can be written up as research (Smith 2009). Moreover, Ellis and Bochner encourage researchers to: 'explore the intersections of social research and fiction in order to produce well-written, vivid, and engaging texts that have the potential to connect the particular and the universal' (qtd. in Leavy 2013: 33) Leavy further argues that fiction is an ideal mode of research for exploring cultural events and ideas because it can help us to understand and bear witness (2013: 28).

Abelson asserts that beliefs are assumed to provide value to their possessors, therefore giving them the status of possessions (1986), and that the greater the individual's investment in defending their belief, the greater value the belief holds for the individual, although the bases for these values have little to do with the probable truth of the beliefs. While Abelson refers primarily to the social and psychological value of a belief, he uses the fiscal tool of cost-benefit calculation to determine the 'sunk cost' attached to beliefs: 'Presumably an individual would not abandon present beliefs if their sunk cost exceeded the apparent value of the beliefs which would replace them' (240). Abelson's assumption is that individuals value their beliefs and the social benefits associated with their community of believers, above all else. In my novella, I focus on the interplay between the primary grief of loss, and the secondary grief associated with each character trying to make sense of their loss through the prism of their worldview. This secondary grief is explored through the thoughts, actions and dialogue of members of the Livingston family, as they each struggle to make sense of their shared primary loss and how it fits with their own, and each other's, worldviews.

To bring emotional depth and passion to my characters, I researched the emphasis individuals place on their beliefs because of what philosophy calls the First Person Constraint on Doxastic Explanation (*Jones 2002*), which suggests our belief-attachment is subjective, rather than objective (doxastic, meaning 'logic'). To inform the interaction and dialogue between characters of differing worldviews, I researched 'the bias blind spot' (the asymmetry of attributing bias to other people's connections to an issue, but not our own); 'the ignorance assumption' (the assumption that a person who does not share our belief must be ignorant of the information that forms the basis of our belief); and 'the idiocy assumption' (the assumption that a person must be idiotic if they do not share our belief despite being aware of the same information). Research shows that it is a human tendency to employ such assumptions when relating to individuals who hold beliefs different to our own (*Ehrlinger 2005*).

From the Greek tragedies of Aeschylus, Euripides and Sophocles, through Dante, Gray, Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Tennyson, Tolstoy and twentieth century writers such as Hardy, Eliot, Auden and Woolf, to contemporary Australian writers such as Carey and Winton, the themes of grief and loss are significant in the history of literary expression (*Riegel 2003*). Riegel theorises the 'work of mourning' evident in Canadian author Margaret Laurence's work and suggests that while some of Laurence's writing is memoir, much of her mourning involved 'writing fictional texts that explored autobiographical material' (2003). This was the context from which I wrote my novella: drawing upon autobiographical experience to authentically portray my fictional characters' grief. My own grief and loss experience provided the basis for empathy, the distance – and connection – I needed as the author, to attempt depict the universal human experience of grief and loss, even for characters of differing and conflicting worldviews:

Empathy and intimacy are two types of inquiry into the other...having empathy and having the distance that comes from not being a member of whatever groups can be a powerful tool for observing (*McDonnell qtd. in Baranay 2004: 7*).

Fiction-as-research is an ideal mode for exploring grief and worldviews, for Leavis defends literature as a form of knowledge that has intellectual authority and can function

as a force for social and cultural renewal, saying the surest insight into human nature, human potentiality and human situation is that accessible in the great creative writers, as they establish what human centrality is (2005). My hope was, that exploring grief through creative writing, and expanding my understanding of how people from differing worldview process grief, it might aid my own 'work of mourning' and allow me to add a new perspective to the existing body of grief literature, to aid others in their grief journeys.

Responses to grief are not uniform, even amongst those who share the same worldview – due to differing emotional make-ups, degrees of conviction and levels of understanding of a set of beliefs. Even grief itself 'is not neat like a narrative arc. It does not end; it is not 'resolved'. It does not follow a checklist of emotions from beginning to end. It is not one thing, or the other thing; it is lots of things' (Davis 2012).

My brother-in-law died on my 30th birthday. The anniversary of his death came while I was making final edits to the exegesis, which I submitted for my Masters of Creative Arts, along with my novella. It was the first time in twelve years that I didn't cry on the anniversary of his death. I wondered whether writing and thinking about grief so extensively, had indeed helped in my 'work of mourning', to finally resolve both my own primary and secondary grief.

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