

Picturebooks as stimuli for philosophical inquiry into death

Ping Su

University of Birmingham, UK

ping.su.19@ucl.ac.uk

Abstract

This article investigates the role of picturebooks in facilitating children's philosophical thinking about death. It challenges the protective silence and Piagetian frameworks that frequently exclude children from existential discourse. Drawing on Aristotle's concept of catharsis and Schiller's theory of aesthetic mediation, I argue that picturebooks make a distinctive contribution to facilitating children's philosophical engagement with mortality. Their combined visual and verbal structures enable children to process intense emotions while maintaining the rational distance necessary for philosophical reflection. The article also proposes selection criteria to help educators identify picturebooks that function as effective stimuli for philosophical inquiry. This approach empowers children to move beyond instinctive fear towards a meaningful understanding of the human condition.

Keywords

aesthetic education, catharsis, death education, philosophical inquiry, picturebooks

1. Introduction

The Piagetian framework of cognitive development has historically dominated the field, establishing the long-standing assumption that children remain incapable of understanding death before the age of seven (Kane 1979; Nagy 1948). Contemporary research refutes this view, confirming that children as young as three possess the capacity for biological reasoning about mortality (Bluebond-Langne 1980; Longbottom & Slaughter, 2018). While children are cognitively prepared to explore such concepts, adults frequently employ euphemisms or avoid the topic due to their own existential anxieties (Nguyen & Rosengren 2004; Matalon 1998; Schiffman 2019). This protective silence hinders children's ability to process life experiences and deprives them of opportunities to explore fundamental existential questions.

Death is one of the fears most commonly reported by children (Burnham & Gullone 1997), and the emotional sensitivity of this subject often complicates classroom discourse. Yet educators have a responsibility to facilitate reflection on mortality,

empowering children to engage with their own limitations rather than leaving these unaddressed. I propose that picturebooks are an effective medium for facilitating philosophical inquiry into death. Drawing on Aristotle's *Poetics* and Schiller's *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*, I identify two functions of picturebooks, namely catharsis and aesthetic mediation, and argue that these functions make a distinctive contribution to facilitating philosophical inquiry. I also establish selection criteria to guide educators in choosing appropriate picturebooks for this purpose.

2. Death education: From biological facts to philosophical reflection

In philosophy education, exploring death extends beyond conveying biological facts to addressing children's innate curiosity about existence. Death 'provides a conception of the ultimate limit of human existence' (Puolimatka & Solasaari 2006, p. 202), and Kastenbaum and Costa (1977) suggest that children's understanding of death is closely tied to their understanding of life. Questions such as *What is death?* and *Should I be afraid of it?* are not minor concerns but central to how children make sense of themselves and the world. Matthews (1992, p. 3) observes that children care deeply about 'the naively profound questions of philosophy', and argues that their thinking should not be evaluated solely against adult standards of rigour and discipline (Matthews 1994, p. 17). Building on this, Lone (2013, p. 173) develops the concept of 'philosophical sensitivity', a perceptual capacity that involves awareness of the abstract, general questions that permeate human existence, including questions about life and death. She argues that this capacity starts with the natural inclinations most children have to reflect about the fundamental mysteries underlying experience, and that it can be cultivated through education and practice over time. This suggests that thinking about death is not a taboo subject beyond the scope of a child's understanding, but rather a natural part of human intellectual development that philosophical inquiry can actively nurture.

Classroom inquiry enables children to engage in critical reflection on the metaphysical definition of death. Research in Philosophy for Children documents how children readily move from concrete observations about death towards genuinely philosophical questions, comparing sleep and death, questioning whether the dead can dream, and asking what the point of living is if one must die (Lone 2009a, 2009b). Such exchanges demonstrate children's capacity for metaphysical reasoning and show how philosophical inquiry transforms individual confusion into collective philosophical exploration.

It is important to acknowledge that explicitly introducing the theme of death in the classroom is controversial, and I do not treat it as self-evidently appropriate. However, two considerations provide ethical grounding for this approach. First, death is not a topic that educators introduce into children's lives from the outside. Research shows that children as young as three already encounter death through the cycles of nature, the loss of pets, and the deaths of family members, and they actively seek to make sense of these experiences (Longbottom & Slaughter 2018; Bluebond-Langner 1980). The question, therefore, is not whether children will encounter death, but whether adults will accompany them in that encounter or leave them to navigate it alone. Second, the protective silence that surrounds death in many educational settings carries its own ethical costs. When adults consistently avoid the topic, they signal to children that their fears and questions are unspeakable, compounding anxiety rather than alleviating it (Nguyen & Rosengren 2004). Philosophical inquiry, conducted with care and sensitivity, offers an alternative approach, one that does not impose confrontation with death but creates a space in which children's existing questions can be explored with the support of peers and educators. I argue that picturebooks, through their unique combination of words and pictures, create the conditions necessary for that engagement.

3. Picturebooks as stimuli for philosophical inquiry

Philosophical inquiry into death requires not only ethical care, as outlined above, but also an appropriate medium through which children can engage with the subject without being overwhelmed by its emotional weight. Among the range of materials available to educators, picturebooks offer a particularly distinctive set of resources for this purpose. Picturebooks differ from illustrated texts in that their meaning is constructed through the interplay of two interdependent systems of symbols, words and pictures. Words encourage readers to keep reading, but pictures invite them to pause and take their time to interpret (Nikolajeva & Scott 2006). This is not a straightforward correspondence between the two systems. Each carries meanings that the other cannot fully encompass, leaving gaps that the reader must actively fill using their own experience and imagination (Lewis 2001; Murriss 1997). Picturebooks are not the only literary genre that encourages children to reflect on death, nor are they necessarily the most obvious choice. However, it is their distinctive textual structure that makes them particularly well-suited to the emotionally and philosophically challenging subject of death, providing space for meaning to emerge rather than simply offering ready-made answers.

I argue that the interplay between words and pictures serves two interdependent functions. First, it provides an outlet for emotional expression, enabling catharsis that removes the emotional barriers to philosophical inquiry. Second, it serves as aesthetic mediation, guiding children from sensory experience towards philosophical thinking. These two functions are theoretically sequential: catharsis is a necessary condition that clears the emotional ground, while aesthetic mediation builds on this foundation to create the conditions for rational reflection. In practice, however, the two functions are not strictly separate but overlap and reinforce each other as children engage with the narrative.

3.1 The function of picturebooks: Catharsis of emotions

For children, the anxiety and fear triggered by discussions of death are often nameless and overwhelming (Fofana et al. 2020; Garcia 2017; Shin & Liberzon 2010). A consistent finding is that death and danger are the most commonly reported factors of fear throughout the development from childhood to adulthood (Burnham & Gullone 1997; Gullone & King 1992). These fears are mostly related to situations or cues that are potentially dangerous and may cause physical harm (Muris & Merckelbach 2001). An excessive accumulation of such negative emotions can impair an individual's rationality and hinder philosophical inquiry. Although children possess the potential to engage in philosophical reflection on death, such reflection requires that emotional difficulties be properly addressed. Therefore, to facilitate rational inquiry, emotional barriers must first be removed. Picturebooks play a role in this process by providing children with a means to express and process their emotions.

Aristotle's theory of catharsis provides a theoretical explanation for the role of picturebooks. The word 'catharsis' originates from the Greek word *kathairo* which means to cleanse (Nichols & Zax 1977; Singal 1977). Aristotle (335 BC/2013) first developed a formal definition of the term in the *Poetics*. Nussbaum (1992) explains that the concept of poetic catharsis was Aristotle's response to Plato's view of tragic poetry in the *Republic*. Unlike Plato's view that suffering should be suppressed through censorship of literature, Aristotle believed that we need to experience potential tragedies in advance through art, so that we may face them more effectively in real life. Aristotle advocates for the 'golden mean' or 'middle path' (*mesotes*) regarding emotions rather than absolute suppression (Weber 2011). A decent person will have fear or anger but knows how to handle these feelings appropriately. The over-accumulation of negative emotions may lead to devastating results for personal well-being and collective interests.

In *Poetics*, Aristotle (335 BC/2013) defines tragedy as an imitation of serious action, which brings about a catharsis of these emotions through pity (*eleos*) and fear (*phobos*). Aristotle claims that 'a certain catharsis and lightening with pleasure occurs for everyone' (Rorty & Lear 1992, pp. 316–317), and so tragedy is well-suited to emotional education, helping people learn how to manage their emotions appropriately without having to experience real tragedy. In doing so, the audience can 'clear up' their emotions in a contained way and achieve 'a more balanced and natural, hence more healthy and pleasurable, humoral and thermal state' (Lain Entralgo et al. 1970, p. 235). Lear (1992, p. 334) explains this process as the relief of 'realising' these emotions in a safe environment rather than 'releasing pent-up emotions'.

While the concept of catharsis remains contested in Aristotelian scholarship, I follow Nussbaum's (1992) cognitive account, in which emotional response constitutes a form of understanding rather than mere discharge. For Nussbaum, emotions such as fear and pity are not irrational impulses to be suppressed or expelled, but cognitive states that involve judgement, reasoning, and beliefs about what matters. On this account, catharsis is not the removal of emotion but its clarification into understanding. Drawing on this Nussbaumian account of catharsis, the educator's responsibility is not to shield children from all encounter with difficulty, but rather to provide a secure space through fictional narrative in which children can engage with intense emotions such as fear and compassion at a safe distance, thereby achieving a clarification of emotion into understanding. Puolimatka and Solasaari (2006) also emphasise that education should involve children in experiences that prepare them to encounter the tragic because tragedy is inevitable and human limitations are exposed when facing it. As they note, when an onlooker gains insight into what may happen to them, this increases self-knowledge and dispels some of the illusions that have held them captive. Tragedy in picturebooks helps children to identify with tragic events and become accustomed to the catharsis of fear and pity.

Although picturebooks are a far simpler narrative form than the tragic drama Aristotle had in mind, or the literary texts Nussbaum discusses, the underlying logic remains the same: both create a fictional space that invites readers to experience and process difficult emotions from a safe distance. Picturebooks achieve this through their own distinctive means. Unlike ancient tragedy, which combined music, choral performance and dramatic spectacle, picturebooks work through the interplay of words and pictures. This dual structure provides both narrative and visual stimulation, creating a vivid and immediate emotional engagement that is well suited to young readers.

As a narrative art form, picturebooks present fictional suffering rather than real-life tragedy, thereby providing children with the opportunity to experience fear and compassion from a safe distance. This constitutes the fundamental precondition required for catharsis as understood through Nussbaum's cognitive account. Compared with word-only narratives, the dual symbol systems of words and pictures provide both verbal and visual stimulation. Pictures convey emotional atmosphere and visual details, while words provide a narrative framework and conceptual guidance. These two elements work together to help young children engage more directly with the narrative and develop an emotional connection to it. Unlike visual narratives such as animations or films, the reading pace of picturebooks is determined by the reader. The linear nature of words guides readers to follow the progression of the narrative, while the spatial dimensions of pictures urge readers to pause and examine closely the details that words have not expressed (Nikolajeva & Scott 2006). This tension between progress and pause takes on particular significance when dealing with the emotionally sensitive subject of death. It provides children with the space to process their emotions gradually as they read, ensuring they are not overwhelmed by the emotional impact of the narrative.

As children turn pages and pause upon them, they engage not merely in information reception but in aesthetic creation. Through the interplay of words and pictures, picturebooks offer children multiple paths to engage with the narrative, enabling them to actively participate in the creation of meaning through their own experiences and imagination. When children participate in the narrative of picturebooks, they are no longer passive recipients of death-related content but become co-explorers, and this active engagement is the necessary precondition for philosophical inquiry. The following section uses a textual analysis of two picturebooks to illustrate how this cathartic mechanism is realised within the combined visual and verbal narrative.

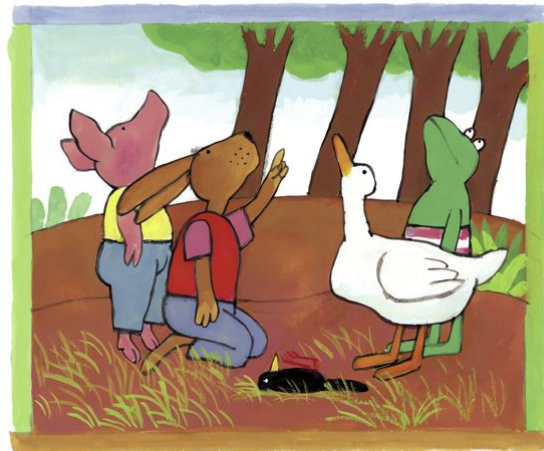
In *Frog and the Birdsong* (Velthuijs 2015), the main character Frog finds a blackbird who is 'broken' and not moving. Pig suggests that the bird may be sleeping, while Duck thinks it is sick. Ultimately, Hare points out that the bird is dead (Figure 1). They bury the bird and cherish the memory of the beautiful birdsong through a funeral ritual, before laying down their sorrow and continuing their lives with another birdsong from another blackbird. By presenting death within the context of animal communities, this book transforms death into an aesthetic object that maintains a certain distance from reality, providing material for teachers and students to observe and discuss together.

Figure 1: *Frog and the Birdsong* (Velthuijs 2015)

(Frog and the Birdsong, copyright 1996 © Max Velthuijs published by Andersen Press Ltd.)



He knelt beside the bird and said, "He's dead."
 "Dead," said Frog. "What's that?"
 Hare pointed up at the blue sky.



"Everything dies," he said.
 "Even us?" asked Frog. Hare wasn't sure.
 "Perhaps, when we're old," he said.

The genre characteristics of this book further enhance its cathartic effect. The picture compels the reader to pause on the page where the blackbird lies motionless, and unlike the words, it cannot be swept along by the narrative rhythm. The calm tone of the words provides an emotional buffer during this pause, allowing children to gradually process their fear of death rather than being instantly overwhelmed by their emotions. The revelation of death is also gradual. From the pig and the duck's initial misunderstanding to the hare's final confirmation, children follow the characters as they come increasingly close to the reality of death. Each guess occupies a single page, and readers should only turn to the next page once they have fully understood and reflected on the current one. The catharsis does not occur only when one turns to the final page and discovers that the blackbird is dead. Rather, it unfolds gradually with every pause, every guess, and every moment of reflection.

The various guesses about the blackbird's condition made by the frog, the pig and the duck reflect the cognitive confusion young children experience when confronted with death. The presence of the hare symbolises an experienced guide in philosophical inquiry, transforming vague sensory impressions into rational, universal statements by naming death plainly and asserting that dying is the inevitable fate of all living things. The book concludes with a funeral and the song of a new bird, completing a full emotional catharsis that moves from cognitive confusion, through collective grief,

to an affirmation of life's continuity (Figure 2). In this way, picturebooks help children 'reweave psychological places of safety amid chaos' (Manifold 2007, p. 24).

Figure 2: *Frog and the Birdsong* (Velthuijs 2015)

(*Frog and the Birdsong*, copyright 1996 © Max Velthuijs published by Andersen Press Ltd.)



Very carefully they laid the dead bird in the hole.
Frog threw flowers all around it and then they
covered the bird with earth.



The tired friends set off happily for home.
As they passed the bottom of the hill, they
heard a sound. There in a tree was a blackbird
singing a lovely song – as always.

In the classroom, teachers may adopt the guiding approach of the hare by using the simulated funeral ceremony in the book as a cathartic conclusion, helping students transform nameless fears into an understanding of the life cycle. This allows catharsis to go beyond mere emotional release and become a purposeful act of meaning-making, helping children achieve philosophical acceptance of the limitations of life without having to endure real-world suffering.

Unlike *Frog and the Birdsong* (Velthuijs 2015), which achieves catharsis through the gradual revelation of death, *The Sad Book* (Rosen & Blake 2005)¹ demonstrates how picturebooks can achieve emotional catharsis by authentically depicting tragedy. The main character Rosen loses his son Eddie, and sadness envelops him and never leaves, even in the happiest moments. He is sad when walking, talking or even sleeping, and sometimes behaves irrationally, such as shouting in the shower. He does not want to

¹ The illustrations from *The Sad Book* discussed in this section are not reproduced here for copyright reasons. They can be viewed at <https://web.archive.org/web/20260707112139/https://www.themarginalian.org/2015/08/25/michael-rosens-sad-book-quentin-blake/> (accessed 7 July 2026).

talk about it to anyone. At the end of the book, Rosen has not fully recovered from his grief, but instead suggests some ways of living with it, such as accepting that everyone has to deal with sad events, doing one meaningful thing every day, acknowledging that being sad is not the same as being horrible, or writing about sadness. Rather than offering hope, the author lets the sadness unfold intensely, beautifully and tragically.

Catharsis is a natural process but social norms may forbid the release of feelings such as sorrow. For example, children may stop themselves from crying or expressing their anger because people defensively learn not to express emotional distress (Armstrong 2007). The portrayal of the imperfect state of grief in this book shows children that the emotions brought by death cannot always be swiftly resolved or overcome. Such narrative power enables children to acknowledge their complex feelings in an aesthetic environment rather than suppressing them to conform to societal expectations.

The genre characteristics of this book play a key role in facilitating catharsis. The book describes the protagonist as 'shouting in the shower'. Based on the words alone, children who have not had a similar experience might interpret this familiar everyday scene as happy play. However, the picture captures the sorrow of that moment, conveying an emotional depth that words alone cannot fully express. This enables children who have not experienced bereavement to go beyond the limits of their own experience, empathising with the character's grief and developing a genuine emotional connection. For children who have experienced similar losses, this accurate portrayal of grief offers an alternative path for catharsis. They see themselves in the character's situation and feel that their complex, unspoken emotions are acknowledged and understood, thereby bringing into awareness and understanding the grief that had previously remained unacknowledged. Catharsis awakens the mind and can serve as the first step on a journey of self-discovery, helping children to gain a better understanding of themselves (Nichols & Zax 1977).

The contribution of *The Sad Book* to philosophical inquiry lies in its transformation of grief from a private psychological trauma into a universal emotional experience. Teachers can use this opportunity for catharsis to guide children in exploring themes such as the authenticity of emotion and the fragility of life. Throughout this process, teachers need to recognise that children's experiences of death and loss vary greatly. For children who have already experienced bereavement, such conversations provide a space where they feel seen and acknowledged. For those who have not yet had such experiences, it offers an opportunity to broaden their emotional understanding and

prepare them for potential future loss. Through such dialogue, children are no longer merely subjects experiencing sadness but become agents capable of reflecting upon, naming, and coexisting with their grief.

The catharsis brought about by picturebooks serves not only as emotional comfort but also as a necessary precondition for philosophical inquiry. It removes emotional barriers by freeing children from anxiety and unease and brings them back to the emotional balance advocated by Aristotle. On Nussbaum's account, this clarification of emotion is not merely a return to calm but a cognitive achievement in its own right: as fear and compassion are brought into focus, children begin to form evaluative judgements about what has happened and why it matters. It is at this point that Lone's concept of 'philosophical sensitivity' becomes relevant. Rather than requiring a separate trigger, the impulse to inquire emerges from within the cathartic process itself: once their emotions are acknowledged and named, children naturally move towards the kind of wondering that underlies philosophical reflection. Catharsis thus does not merely remove an obstacle to inquiry but actively initiates it. It is on this foundation that Schiller's theory of aesthetic mediation becomes operative, explaining how the interplay of words and pictures guides children from the emotional clarity achieved through catharsis towards sustained rational philosophical reflection.

3.2 The function of picturebooks: Aesthetic mediation

Aristotle's concept of catharsis provides a theoretical explanation for how picturebooks remove emotional barriers, while Schiller's (1794/2004) theory of aesthetic mediation in his *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* further demonstrates how picturebooks can guide children towards rational philosophical thinking. While emotional catharsis helps children move from emotional build-up to emotional release, aesthetic mediation addresses a further issue, namely how children transition from sensory experience to rational thought once emotions have been channelled. Emotional catharsis and aesthetic mediation therefore form a progressive relationship, jointly creating the conditions for philosophical inquiry.

Schiller posited that human nature is governed by two fundamentally opposing drives, the Sense Drive and the Form Drive. Within the context of death education, children who are entirely governed by the Sense Drive may become overwhelmed by instinctual reactions such as fear and grief, leaving them in a passive state of instability (Weber 2011). By contrast, if education resorts solely to the Form Drive through the mechanical transmission of biological facts, it risks descending into a barbaric dogmatism that overlooks the lived emotional experiences of children. Schiller

suggests that the tension between these two drives is often irreconcilable and contradictory, and this reminds us that the task of the educator is to seek a balance whereby students are neither overwhelmed by emotion nor alienated by abstract knowledge. Schiller argued that this balance is achieved through aesthetic experience, which provides the theoretical basis for the role of picturebooks as mediation.

To re-establish this balance, Schiller proposed a third drive as a means of achieving aesthetic mediation. He termed this the 'play drive' (*Spieltrieb*). Schiller's use of 'play' carries none of its everyday connotations of entertainment or recreation. It refers instead to a liberating intellectual activity that frees the individual from the competing constraints of both sensibility and reason (Schiller 1794/2004, p. 80). This is a serious and disciplined form of engagement, not a trivialisation of the subject. Through this third drive, aesthetic mediation provides the individual with a 'bare plane', enabling them to detach from the familiar sphere of phenomena and find a space for free exploration between emotion and reason (Schiller 1794/2004, p. 99). In the context of death education, this holds particular significance, enabling children neither to be overwhelmed by emotion nor to be forced to accept abstract knowledge, but rather to find a standpoint for philosophical reflection that lies between the two.

The words-and-pictures structure of picturebooks enables this aesthetic mediation to be realised. In picturebooks, the words drive the linear narrative, while the pictures reveal spatial details left unsaid by the text. The relationship between words and pictures is not fixed. Sometimes they tell the same story, with the pictures visually representing what the words describe, creating a sense of symmetry. At other times, they complement one another, with the words driving the narrative forward while the pictures reveal details or emotional nuances that the words have not mentioned. On occasion, they may even contradict one another, with the content of the picture differing entirely from the verbal description, leaving the reader to make their own judgements and interpretations. This ambiguous relationship leaves gaps between words and pictures that the reader needs to actively fill in. Meaning is not pre-established within the words awaiting to be discovered but is instead realised through the interpretive process of the reader. For young children, this text structure remains open to interpretation and invites them to engage their personal emotions, imagination, and rational responses (Murris 1997).

It is important to note that as picturebook readers, children are less influenced by social experience, cultural conventions, and established moral systems than adults (Arizpe & Styles 2003; Fremantle 1993; Haynes & Murris 2016). This grants them

interpretative freedom and enables them to engage with cognitive gaps in an intuitive and original way. On the subject of death, this process of meaning-making holds particular philosophical significance. When children attempt to find connections between words and pictures, resolve contradictions and fill in the gaps, they are transforming their intuitive experience of death into a form that can be thought about and expressed. This is what Schiller referred to as the transition from sense impulse to rational thought. Death is a unique subject in philosophy. It is the most concrete of realities, for the physical demise of the body is an observable biological event. Yet death is also the most elusive of phenomena to experience directly, for no one has ever returned from death to describe it. This 'visible yet unknowable' nature creates an inherent correspondence with the tension between words and pictures. The concreteness of the pictures touches upon the sensory reality of death, while the abstractness of the words points to a rational inquiry into its meaning. In the spaces between words and pictures, children are able to engage with this theme, one that cannot be avoided yet cannot be fully expressed, and this very engagement marks the beginning of philosophical inquiry.

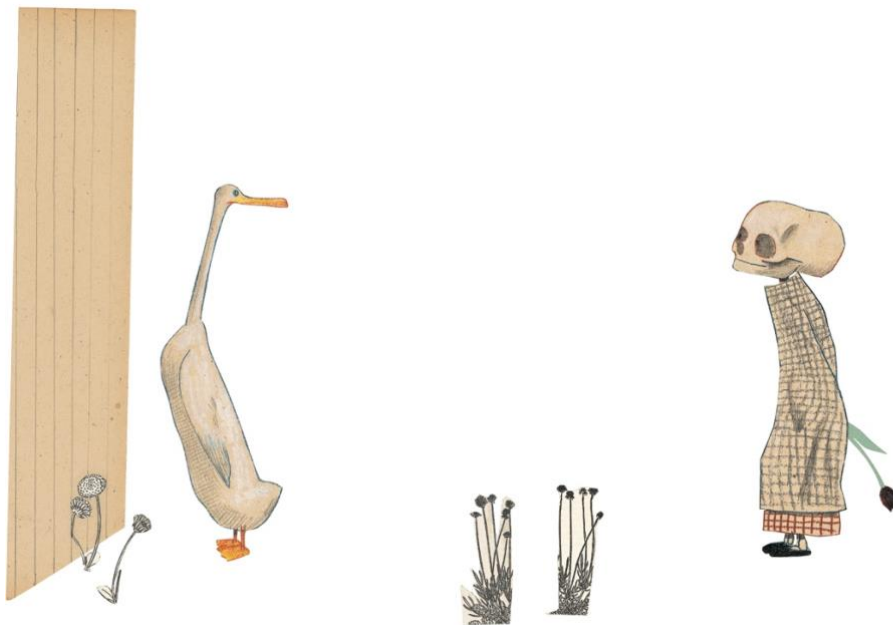
Philosophical inquiry requires a safe space as a precondition. Picturebooks do not simply convey facts about death but instead provide children with a 'relatively risk-free space' (Rautio & Winston 2013, p. 20) that is distanced from both internal affect and external reality. This allows for the symbolic representation of feelings and events, which, according to Hanney and Kozłowska (2002, p. 10), enables children to experience 'exposure to traumatic cues in a less direct manner', to tolerate anxiety, and to contemplate 'the unspeakable or unthinkable' through the image of the artwork (Hanney & Kozłowska 2002, p. 41). This mediating role enables children to attain internal agency when facing powerful natural forces. Rather than being forcibly suppressed, emotional impulses are moderated and refined, and the originally fluctuating and overwhelming sensory experience can be separated from its specific context and transformed into a form that can be examined and described. On this foundation, rational inquiry becomes possible. The following analysis of two picturebooks illustrates how the interplay of words and pictures serves as aesthetic mediation in death education.

Duck, Death and the Tulip (Erlbruch & Chidgey 2016) illustrates how the complementary relationship between words and pictures serves as aesthetic mediation, creating Schiller's 'bare plane' in which children can explore death between sensory experience and rational thought. Duck meets a character who introduces himself as Death, and she soon realises that Death has been following her

all the time. Death follows Duck everywhere and they develop a subtle relationship (Figure 3). Duck feels frightened at first but then acquaints herself with Death. They swim in the pond and discuss what the next life will be. With the colder weather, Duck feels cold and dies quietly. Death carries Duck tenderly to the river and places the tulip on her. The book concludes with the words 'But that's life, thought Death' (Erlbruch & Chidgey 2016).

Figure 3: *Duck, Death and the Tulip* (Erlbruch & Chidgey 2016)

(Wolf Erlbruch, *Ente, Tod und Tulpe* © Verlag Antje Kunstmann GmbH, München 2007)

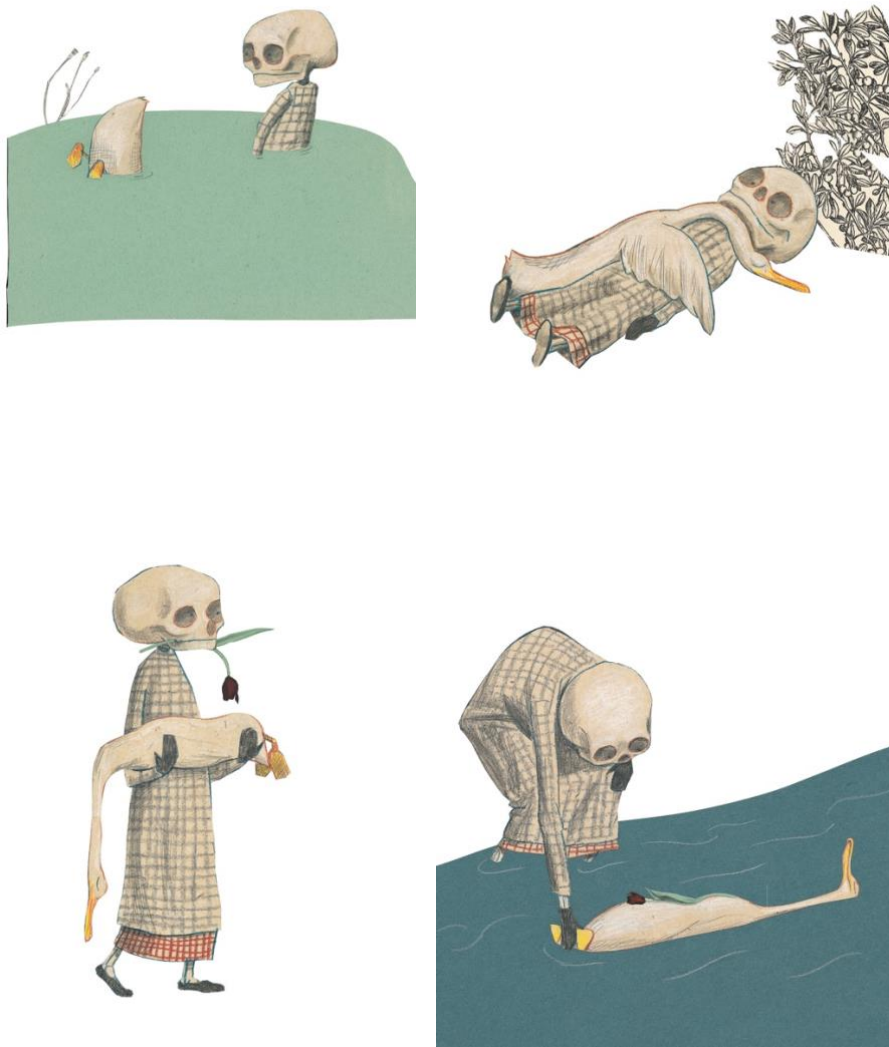


The aesthetic mediation function of this book is achieved through the complementary interplay of words and pictures. The words describe the development of the relationship between Duck and Death, while the pictures convey emotional nuances through visual details that the words do not explicitly express. The image of Death is an example of this complementary relationship. While the words merely introduce Death's existence, the pictures capture the tension between the skull and the warm-toned robe, soft shoes and gentle smile, evoking children's existing understanding of death while simultaneously alleviating their fear. The tulip, which replaces the traditional symbol of Death, such as an axe or blood, conveys a message through the picture alone, transforming death from a threat into an acceptable reality. The two embraces depicted in the book, Duck offering warmth to Death when he is cold, and Death gently holding her after she dies, use visual imagery to portray death as a relationship of companionship rather than an end (Figure 4). When reading, children need to process both the narrative information in the words and the emotional

nuances of the pictures, actively building their understanding of death by drawing connections between the two. This process of filling in the gaps is what Schiller referred to as the transition from sensory experience to rational thought. Children no longer merely passively experience the fear that death brings, but become active constructors of meaning.

Figure 4: *Duck, Death and the Tulip* (Erlbruch & Chidgey 2016)

(Wolf Erlbruch, *Ente, Tod und Tulpe* © Verlag Antje Kunstmann GmbH, München 2007)



In philosophy classes, teachers can guide students to focus on the details in the pictures that are not explicitly described in the words, such as the contrast between the tulip and the traditional symbols for death, or the similarities and differences

between the two embraces, and encourage them to express their own interpretations. The phrase 'But that's life' at the end of the book provides a starting point for open-ended philosophical discussion. *What does death mean? What is the meaning of life? Is death an end or a transformation?* There are no standard answers to these questions. The role of the educator is to use aesthetic mediation to create a safe space for children, enabling them to gradually transform their emotional experience of death into rational philosophical inquiry.

Unlike the picturebooks discussed above, *Rosie's Walk* (Hutchins 2017)² does not explicitly engage with the theme of death. However, the threat of death that pervades its pictures represents one of the most fundamental forms in which children encounter the idea of mortality, namely as an unnamed but felt danger lurking at the edges of ordinary life. For children who are not yet ready to confront death as an explicit subject, this book may serve as a preparatory resource, enabling them to engage with the underlying anxieties that death provokes at a safer remove before moving towards more direct philosophical engagement with the theme.

In *Rosie's Walk*, the words describe in a matter-of-fact manner the scene of Rosie the hen walking leisurely around the farm, while the pictures reveal that a fox is following close behind and that Rosie has repeatedly come close to being caught. The words and pictures tell entirely different stories, and readers must form their own judgements and interpretations based on the calm narrative of the words and the tense scenes depicted in the pictures. This conflict between words and pictures gives rise to a form of 'useful dissonance and disturbance' (Haynes & Murriss 2016, p. 175), which constitutes the core mechanism of aesthetic mediation. The pictures evoke underlying anxieties about the threat of death, while the calm narrative of the words psychologically separates the reader from the characters' danger. The process by which children fill in the gaps between the two allows them to approach the subject of death from a safe distance, transforming what may be a terrifying threat into something they can observe and think about. As Schiller (1794/2004, p. 121) noted, 'man is superior to every terror of Nature so long as he knows how to give form to it, and to turn it into his object.'

² The illustrations from *Rosie's Walk* discussed in this section are not reproduced here for copyright reasons. They can be viewed at <https://web.archive.org/web/20260707111948/https://whatmakesasuccessfulpicturebook.wordpress.com/2011/12/28/pat-hutchinss-rosies-walk/> (accessed 7 July 2026).

In philosophy classes, teachers can guide students to focus on the gaps between words and pictures and encourage them to express their own interpretations of this contradiction. The aesthetic distance created by the tension between words and pictures provides the conditions for children to shift from passively perceiving threats to actively reflecting on their nature, for instance, what danger implies, whether death is necessarily frightening, and what humans can do when faced with the unknown. The role of the educator is to use the space created by this mediation to guide children in gradually transforming their intuitive experience of death into rational philosophical inquiry, thereby gaining a sense of inner control and transforming a potential threat into a philosophical issue that can be understood and discussed.

Catharsis and mediation are two interdependent functions through which picturebooks play a role in death education. Catharsis enables children to move from emotional build-up to emotional release by removing emotional barriers. Building on this, mediation guides children to transform their emotional experiences into rational thought through the interplay of words and pictures and the use of narrative gap. This interplay creates a space for children to both process their emotions and engage in philosophical reflection. However, not all picturebooks dealing with the theme of death are equally effective in fulfilling these two functions. In Section 4, I explore the specific criteria educators may consider when selecting picturebooks.

4. Criteria for selecting picturebooks

Picturebooks offer rich and diverse material for philosophical inquiry into death. Comellas (2014) analysed award-winning picturebooks from major international awards between 1990 and 2013, finding that although books addressing death constitute a limited proportion of total publications, they depict a wide range of death-related themes and emotional responses. This diversity demonstrates that picturebooks, as a genre, possess the narrative resources to explore the subject of death.

However, the narrative and publishing diversity of picturebooks does not automatically translate into philosophical insights in the classroom. Realising the role of catharsis and aesthetic mediation in philosophical inquiry depends largely on the discernment and selection of books by educators. Given the sensitive subject matter of death, establishing clear criteria for selecting picturebooks is practically valuable. The following section outlines specific criteria from three perspectives, namely emotional authenticity, narrative distance and philosophical openness.

The first criterion concerns the authenticity and complexity of the emotional narrative. Picturebooks selected for philosophical inquiry into death should present difficult emotions, such as fear and grief, in an honest and unresolved way, rather than simplifying or avoiding the realities of death. It is this quality of emotional authenticity that creates the conditions for catharsis. Manifold (2007, p. 21) suggests that picturebooks should go beyond 'comprehending ambiguities' and 'logical explanation' to attend to the imagination in visual metaphor, verbal rhythm, and simple narrative to guide readers towards a profound philosophical understanding of death and pain. Such narratives do not present reality in a simplistic or one-dimensional manner. Rather, they introduce complex emotional experiences, offering children a variety of possible ways to process fear and grief. *Frog and the Birdsong* and *The Sad Book* demonstrate how these qualities operate in practice. The former gradually reveals the reality of death through progressive disclosure, while the latter presents grief in its irrational and unresolved state, directly confronting rather than softening the emotional experience. These narrative qualities are what allow the cathartic process to occur.

The second criterion concerns narrative distance. Picturebooks selected for philosophical inquiry into death should maintain an appropriate distance from the subject of death through a variety of narrative strategies, enabling children to move from emotional experience to rational reflection and creating the conditions for aesthetic mediation. Animal characters, for instance, maintain a sufficient distance from human mortality while allowing children from diverse backgrounds to identify with them naturally, as they often lack specific characteristics such as gender, race and age (Peller 1959). Both *Frog and the Birdsong* and *Duck, Death and the Tulip* employ this strategy. Beyond the choice of characters, the gap between words and pictures creates a form of cognitive distance, inviting children to fill in meaning through their own imagination and experience rather than confronting the subject of death directly. Whether the relationship between words and pictures is complementary or contradictory, this interpretive space allows children to approach death indirectly, transforming an overwhelming subject into one that can be observed and reflected upon. Furthermore, picturebooks that do not directly depict death can also be effective resources for exploring this topic, as long as their narrative characteristics and the relationship between words and pictures create an appropriate distance and space for constructing meaning. For example, in *Rosie's Walk*, death is never explicitly mentioned, yet it is constantly present in the pictures as an underlying threat, guiding

children to engage with the subject in an indirect way. These narrative strategies together create the conditions for aesthetic mediation to take place.

The third criterion concerns the capacity of the picturebook to generate philosophical questions. Drawing on Cam's (2006, pp. 32–36) Question Quadrant, picturebooks selected for philosophical inquiry into death should be capable of prompting what Cam calls 'inquiry questions', that is, open questions that do not have a single settled answer and that go beyond the text itself to address broader existential concerns about life and the world. Examples of such questions include: *Is death an end or a transformation?* and *What can we do when faced with the unknown?* It is this quality of narrative openness that makes genuine philosophical inquiry possible. Schrank (1982) similarly argues that stories suited to this purpose should offer alternative possibilities rather than definitive answers. *Frog and the Birdsong* and *Duck, Death and the Tulip* exemplify this quality, the former holding loss and continuity in tension without resolving the question of what death ultimately means, the latter ending with the open-ended statement 'But that's life'. It is this narrative openness that enables children to move from emotional engagement towards genuine philosophical inquiry.

These three criteria—emotional authenticity, narrative distance and philosophical openness—together form a framework for educators when selecting picturebooks. Picturebooks that meet these criteria are not merely tools for processing emotions but also a starting point for philosophical inquiry. They guide children from an emotional experience of death towards a rational understanding of the human condition. It should be noted that these criteria are not the only or absolute guidelines. As children in the classroom vary in age, cultural background and personal experiences, educators need to adapt flexibly in practice according to the specific context and select picturebooks that best meet the needs of individual children.

5. Conclusion

I have argued that picturebooks offer children a safe and effective means of engaging philosophically with death, without confronting real-life tragedy directly. This is achieved through two interdependent functions. Catharsis, understood through Nussbaum's cognitive account, enables children to experience fear and compassion from a safe distance, removing the emotional barriers to rational thought. Schiller's theory of aesthetic mediation then explains how the interplay of words and pictures, each leaving gaps the other cannot fill, guides children from sensory experience towards philosophical inquiry. Together, these functions transform death from an overwhelming emotional subject into one that children can openly explore using

picturebooks in a safe classroom environment, provided they are facilitated by an appropriately trained teacher. The books selected to support this process will need to meet certain criteria, as not all picturebooks will work. I have proposed selection criteria to guide educators in choosing appropriate picturebooks.

It must also be noted that, as the analysis of picturebooks in this article has shown, the cathartic and mediating effects described here do not occur automatically but depend on the educator's thoughtful guidance. Death is an emotionally heavy subject, and children's experiences of and responses to it vary greatly. When facilitating a discussion of this nature, educators act not as authorities on death and dying but as facilitators of inquiry, creating the conditions for children to explore the subject safely and without coercion. A systematic discussion of teaching methods lies beyond the scope of this article, but this aspect is worthy of further exploration in future research. Ultimately, the purpose of philosophical inquiry is not to provide answers to the question of death, but to create a space for children to engage with this fundamental question, enabling them to gradually develop an understanding of the human condition through the combined engagement of reason and emotion.

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