

## Portrayal of Grieving in Ali Benjamin's *The Thing About Jellyfish* (2015)

Muhamad Luthfi Jayalaksana, Safrina Noorman\*  
English Language and Literature  
Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia  
luthfi.j@gmail.com, safrina@upi.edu

### ABSTRACT

Notions about death and grieving have been part of human life for as long as humans have lived. They can be found in many forms such as art, music and literature including children's literature. *The Thing About Jellyfish* (2015), a novel for children which is written by Ali Benjamin, tells about a grieving child who is in the transitional phase of being a child to become a teenager. This research attempts to discover the portrayal of grieving experienced by the child main character in the novel. As a study of text, this research uses qualitative method and it employs Kübler-Ross and Kessler theory of five stages of grief (2014) for analysis and Schroth's theoretical framework in analyzing portrayal of death, dying and grieving in children's literature (2017) to support the discussion. The findings reveal that grieving is portrayed through the construction of five stages of grief which may be unintentionally employed by the author. From the stages, it is revealed that grieving is also portrayed as a difficult and painful process for the child main character which ends with acceptance and the importance of moving on from grief.

**Keywords:** *children's literature, death, grieving, grieving children, portrayal*

## INTRODUCTION

Notions about death and other related ideas, such as grieving, have been part of human life for as long as humans have lived. There are many ways for humans to deal with death. Archaeologists have found archaeological records consisting of innumerable testimonies of how humans in various cultures at different times have dealt with death (Fahlander & Oestigaard, 2008). These records range from the prehistorical era to the historical era.

Religions and sacred religious texts have also contributed to the various perceptions on death and grieving. Religious figures such as priests “often advocate theological explanation of life and consequently death” (Fahlander & Oestigaard, 2008, p. 3). Furthermore, the notions about death and grieving can also be found in other forms that are more concrete. Davies (2005) argued that there are artistic, literary and musical compositions with the theme of death which are parts of human responses to mortality.

Nowadays, notions of death and grieving still can be found in the

society. It can be found in literary forms which include traditional books and e-books which can be non-fictional or fictional. This phenomenon is especially true in developed countries such as the U.S. and the U.K. The proliferation of literary works about death and grieving may be caused by the changes in the contemporary society of the developed countries.

These changes in the contemporary society do not only affect the adults, but also children because they are part of the society. Therefore, literary works about death and grieving are not exclusive for adults. Day (2012) argued that literary works about death and grieving for young adults (which is interchangeable with children's literature) have seen a rise in number. Day (2012) argued that the proliferation of children's literature on death and grieving is a part of a phenomenon called ‘bereavement turn’ which is a cultural movement where the society start to examine their attitudes towards death and grieving. The occurrence of this cultural movement is further

strengthened by the notion which says humans have enter postmodern era. In this era, Loo (2012) argued that children experiences childhood in which they have to deal with more adult issues which are reflected in contemporary literature.

The number of studies conducted by scholars strengthen the idea that the number children's literature on death and grieving has gradually increased every decade. Corr (2004a, 2004b, 2004c, 2004d, 2007, 2009), Schroth (2017), and Malcom (2010) have studied issues related to the topics, more specifically on death. Meanwhile, Day (2012) have also studied a novel, *A Monster Calls* by Patrick Ness which was published in 2012, and argued that its success as a proof of the emergence of the 'bereavement turn.' Corr (2004a, 2004b, 2004c, 2004d, 2007, 2009) analyzed hundreds of children's literature which are mostly published pre-2000s. Schroth (2017) analyzed three pre-1980s and three post-2000s children's literature. Meanwhile, Malcom (2010) analyzed 49 children's literatures ranging from book published in the 1970s to the

2000s with more than half of them were published in the year 2000 or after.

From the previous studies, it appears that most of the studies include older children's literature. Moreover, most of the children's literature analyzed depicted a child main character below the age of 12 as most of the previous studies are picture books which are intended for younger children. Therefore, studies on newer novels that portray a main character that is in the transitional phase of being a child to become a teenager, such as *The Thing About Jellyfish* (2015) written by Ali Benjamin, may contribute to the studies of death and grieving in newer children's literature. *The Thing About Jellyfish* (2015) is also chosen because the novel appears to be quite popular. It has been translated into more than 20 languages in more than 30 countries ("The Thing About Jellyfish (a novel) | Ali Benjamin", n.d.). It has also won several awards such as New York Times Bestseller, National Book Award Finalist, and the Winner of E.B. White Readaloud

Award ("The Thing About Jellyfish (a novel) | Ali Benjamin", n.d.).

In conducting this research, Kübler-Ross and Kessler's five stages of grief theory (2014) is employed to analyze the novel. The five stages of grief consist of denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. However, they should not be seen as a linear progress because everybody may experience different things (Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2014).

Kübler-Ross and Kessler (2014) explained that denial stage is symbolic rather than literal. Symbolically, it may be realized in a form such as when a grieving person does not believe that they are sleeping alone, while in the past, they always sleep beside their loved one whom they lost. Meanwhile, an example of literal denial is when a grieving person gives a statement that denies their loved one's death. Besides of the symbolic and literal form, denial may be realized as numbness or paralysis because of shock when a grieving person learns about the fate of their loved one.

Anger stage comes after a grieving person gone through denial stage because when the denial fades, more feelings start to surface (Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2014). This stage comes when a grieving person begins to feel that they will survive whatever comes after they accept the actuality of their loved one's death. Anger stage appears when a grieving person starts to function at basic level or about to become normal.

Bargaining, as Kübler-Ross and Kessler (2014) explained, is when a grieving person 'bargains' so that their loved one may be restored. A grieving person may 'bargain' to God by saying things such as 'I will be a good person if you let her live', etc. Bargaining is related to imagination and the feeling of guilt.

Depression happened when the feeling of grief becomes deeper and Kübler-Ross and Kessler (2014) argued that it is not a sign of mental illness, but it is a normal response to a great loss. Depression may affect the grieving person's daily activities. For example, they may lose appetite and refuse to socialize. They may also feel deep sadness, emptiness and

loneliness. A grieving person may feel that the depressive stage will last forever.

Kübler-Ross and Kessler (2014) stated that acceptance is learning to live with the loss of the loved one and it is a stage when true healing starts. This stage is often confused with the idea that the grieving person being all right with their loss. In fact, a grieving person does not like the reality or all right with it. However, they have no choice but to accept it.

Unfortunately, the more a grieving person's identity is connected to their loved one, the harder it will be for them to truly heal (Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2014). As a grieving person heal, they learn who they are and who their loved one was in life. After they truly accept the reality and heal, they will start making new connections, new meaningful relationships and involving themselves back in the many parts of life that they abandoned when they are grieving.

Besides of Kübler-Ross & Kessler's theory (2014), this research also employed Schroth's theoretical

framework in analyzing portrayal of death, dying and grieving in children's literature (2017). Schroth's theoretical framework (2017) is inspired from Nikolajeva's work (2004) which focuses on formal traits which include composition (plot, temporal structure), characterization (the palette of narrative devices used by writers to reveal a character), and narrative perspective (voice and point of view).

Schroth (2017) argued that there are several aspects that could decide whether a literary work is accessible or relatable to its reader or not. Aspects that can determine the readability of children books are (1) formal and temporal structure; (2) place and space (somewhere the characters can physically stay in); (3) paratext (pictures or illustrations); (4) point of view; (5) characterization; (6) embedded texts and stories; and (7) stylistic devices. After all of the aspects are analyzed, then conclusion on the readability of a literary work could be determined.

## **METHODOLOGY**

In order to discover how grieving is portrayed in *The Thing About Jellyfish* (2015), this research uses qualitative method, which is more focused on the process of collecting, analyzing, and interpreting the data to draw conclusion about the portrayal of grieving. This method is more appropriate as “the cultural strategies, metaphors and taboos that characterize humanity’s responses to death can best be accessed through qualitative methodologies” (Bradbury, 1999, p. 26).

The data of this research are in the form of grieving contexts. The contexts are in the form of excerpts obtained from the novel that assumed to portray or reveal the grieving process experienced by the child main character, Suzy Swanson. The data analysis employs Kübler-Ross and Kessler theory of five stages of grief (2014). Meanwhile, Schroth’s theoretical framework in analyzing portrayal of death, dying and grieving in children’s literature (2017) to support the discussion of the findings. The analyses attempt to describe the grieving instances, which contain

formal elements and narrative aspects, to reveal the portrayal of grieving.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

From the analyses of the grieving contexts in the novel, there are three findings. First, it is found that the five stages of grief, which are denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance or healing stage, construct the child main character’s grieving process. The portrayal of grieving can be revealed through the analyses of the stages. Each stage has different intensity or depth and frequency of appearance in the novel’s grieving contexts.

Second, the acceptance or healing stage and depression stage, are more intense compared to the other stages. Thus, it is assumed that the more intense stages may reveal a particular intention. It appears that the novel portrays grieving as a difficult and painful experience, which involves denial, anger, depression and other efforts to cope with loved one’s death. However, the grieving process ends with acceptance and the

importance of moving on from the loss.

Third, the stages do not strictly follow a certain pattern. Although in the novel, the main character's grieving process ends with an acceptance stage, the appearance of the stages in the plot does not exactly follow 'denial-anger-bargaining-depression-acceptance' pattern as the stages sometimes intertwined. Stages that can be found in the same grieving contexts are the depression and acceptance stages in three grieving contexts; the bargaining and acceptance stage in one grieving context; and the depression and anger stage in one grieving context. This shows another portrayal of grieving as a complex process with no particular pattern that a grieving person has to experience.

This subchapter will explore the findings through elaboration of the grieving stages ordered according to their intensity. However, only three from the five stages will be explored as the portrayal of the other two stages are not as intricate as the others so that they can be ignored. Besides, there is also some limitations, especially

space limitation so that the findings cannot be fully presented.

#### **4.1.1. Acceptance**

In general, the acceptance stage is a stage where someone accepts the reality of loved one's physical nonexistence and recognizes that their nonexistence is a permanent reality (Kübler-Ross and Kessler, 2014). This stage is one of two most intense grieving stages besides the depression stage. However, different from the depression stage, the acceptance stage is found as the main character's goal, or the novel's resolution, that drives the novel's plot. Therefore, this novel portrayed healing from loss and moving on with life as a state of mind which is the ultimate goal of a grieving process.

Acceptance stage can be realized in many different ways. In this novel's case, there are four different ways in which Suzy Swanson's healing process is portrayed. Ordered from the time of appearance, they are: (1) acceptance, (2) self-questioning, (3) trying to answer questions, and (4) moving on.

#### 4.1.1.1. Accepting Reality

The first way is accepting reality. In the novel, acceptance is realized as accepting the actuality of Franny Jackson's death. This way is a sign when someone starts to heal from loss. It is different from moving on, in which Suzy does not only accept the actuality of Franny's death, but also to stop dwelling on the past and start to live her life like normal. This way is found the earliest in the novel, which is in the first chapter, 'ghost heart'.

Because some hearts beat only about 412 million times.

Which might sound like a lot. But the truth is, it barely even gets you twelve years. (Benjamin, 2015, p. 3)

The excerpt of the grieving context is an example of this way. It is the main character's, Suzy Swanson, reflection related to mortality and Franny Jackson's death. While it does not explicitly show her acceptance of Franny's death, it can be implied from the statements. 'Some hearts' actually refers to Franny's heart which is estimated to beat 412 million times. Although it seems to be a large number, it actually

equals to 12 years. Suzy stating the fact of Franny's age at the time of her death is Suzy's way of accepting the reality of Franny's death. However, in the earlier part of the novel, it seems that Suzy has not truly accept the actuality of Franny's death. In the course of the novel, Suzy still dwell on the past and think about the unclear cause of Franny's death, which lead her to try to discover the cause of Franny's death also lead her to other stages of grief.

Her true acceptance is found in the later parts of the novel, which is the climax. Particularly, it is found in the parts when Suzy' plan to go to Australia as one of the steps to uncover the cause of Franny's death happens to fail. In the end, Suzy has no choice but to accept the fact that no one knows for sure what has happened to Franny and accept the fact that her efforts would not bring Franny back to life. Below is the grieving context that shows the acceptance:

Neither of them told me what I suddenly understood—that whatever it was, whatever the



reason, it didn't really matter. It *had* "just happened."

(Benjamin, 2015, p. 302)

This grieving context happens when Suzy is in the airport, but cannot board to the plane. Suddenly, she gets picked up by Mom, Aaron and Rocco. Mom and Aaron tries to explain to Suzy what's the possible cause of Franny's death, but they are not sure. After that discussion, Suzy suddenly realizes that whatever the cause is, things just happen show. This sudden realization shows her true acceptance of Franny's death.

#### 4.1.1.2. Self-questioning

The second way of acceptance stage realization is self-questioning. Questioning the cause of loved one's death only appears when a grieving person has start to accept the actuality of loved one's death, where the feeling of denial has fade (Kübler-Ross and Kessler, 2014).

In the novel, it is depicted by Suzy Swanson's questioning herself about the cause of Franny's death. It appears after Suzy starts to accept the actuality of Franny's death. The appearance of this way is related to

the statement given by Suzy's mom that does not satisfy Suzy who question the cause of Franny's death. This shows that grieving may make us dwell on loved one's death and start questioning things surrounding the death. Below is the grieving context that presents Suzy's self-questioning:

**Maybe Mom was wrong. Maybe things don't just happen, like she'd tried to tell me.** Maybe things aren't actually as random as everyone seemed ready to accept. (Benjamin, 2015, pp. 42-43)

Suzy's narration, which says her mom is wrong when she said that things just happen, shows a disagreement with her mother. Suzy cannot accept 'things just happen' as an answer when she asks why Franny dies. Suzy thinks that there is a possibility to know the truth about the cause of Franny's death as things may not be as random as it seems to be. Her mom's unsatisfactory answer and Suzy's reflection result in her self-questioning about the cause of Franny's death.

#### 4.1.1.3. Trying to Answer Questions

Trying to answer questions is the most prominent realization of Suzy Swanson's acceptance stage. It is the main aspect of the novel's plot progression. This way of realization involves a series of actions and thoughts depicted by Suzy. This portrayal shows that a grieving person's efforts is an important aspect in healing from loss.

Suzy's efforts in discovering the cause of Franny's death is portrayed as very complex and challenging, especially for a 12-year-old. The efforts include researching and taking notes on Irukandji jellyfish up to planning to go to Australia to meet Dr. James Seymour, a scholar living in Australia who has been stung by an Irukandji jellyfish. Her effort to contact Dr. Jamie Seymour is presented in the grieving context below, which is an excerpt of Suzy's letter draft to Dr. Seymour:

So what I am thinking is this:  
What if my friend classmate had been was stung by a jellyfish?  
Would we even know? Would anyone even be looking for that?  
I mean, is there any way to prove that the reason she drowned

wasn't because of the Irukandji?

How can anyone ever be sure?

And if we don't know it happened to her, how can we prevent it from happening to someone else?

(Benjamin, 2015, p. 121-122)

Suzy writing a letter draft for Dr. Jamie Seymour shows her effort to discover the cause of Franny's death. She explains in the letter her assumptions and questions surrounding Franny's death such as the possibility that Franny was stung by a jellyfish, the indicator when someone was stung, and how to prevent being stung by a jellyfish.

#### 4.1.1.4. Moving On

The last realization of the acceptance stage is moving on. This way of realization is portrayed as re-maintaining or making relationships and involving oneself to things that are abandoned because grieving. This is the resolution of the novel's plot. In the novel, it is depicted by Suzy starting to talk to other characters. First, she talks to her family members, Mom and Aaron. There is also an interaction between Suzy and Rocco,

Aaron's boyfriend, who tries to calm her down. Opening up to them and accept their help prove to be able to make her feel relieved. Below is the example of grieving context that shows this way. The narration happens in an airport where Suzy supposed to depart from her home city to Australia.

The four of us walked toward the parking garage. When the sliding door opened and we stepped outside, there was a great burst of traffic and cold air and bright light. It hit me hard, **as if I'd been holding my breath underwater and I'd finally lifted my head above the surface.**

**It was like gulping fresh air for the first time in a long time.**

(Benjamin, 2015, pp. 306-307)

The grieving context implies that the airport is a symbol of Suzy's effort to discover the cause of Franny's death. Before she left the place, which symbolizes her obsession to discover the cause of Franny's death, she feels like she suffocated which is a negative experience. However, after she opens up to her mom, Aaron and Rocco then

walks out from the airport through the sliding door, she feels relief. It feels like gulping fresh air. This implies that trying to discover the cause of Franny's death is not the way to truly heal. It is opening up to her family and accept that Franny's death 'just happened'.

#### **4.1.2. Depression**

Depression stage is self-explanatory. It is a stage when someone feel depressed. It can be realized in many different ways, such as feeling empty, intense sadness, desperation, withdrawal from daily activities, and many more (Kübler-Ross and Kessler, 2014). It is one of two most depicted grieving stage besides the acceptance or healing stage. The continuous portrayal of the depression stage implies that Franny Jackson's death has deeply affected Suzy Swanson's psyche, which affected her daily life and interaction with other characters.

In the novel, the depression stage realizes itself in four different ways: as (1) unwillingness to speak or *not-talking*, as the main character called it, (2) isolation, (3) dark

thoughts and imaginations, and (4) negative physical experience. Below, the ways is further elaborated.

#### 4.1.2.1. Unwillingness to speak

Suzy Swanson's unwillingness to speak or *not-talking* first appear in the beginning chapter of the novel, in particular, the second chapter, 'touch'. The following grieving context presents the first way of her depression stage:

It was exactly one month since the Worst Thing had happened, and almost as long since I'd started *not-talking*.

(Benjamin, 2015, pp. 8-9)

'The Worst Thing' refers to Franny's death and Suzy connects it to how long she has been *not-talking*. This shows that there is a correlation between Suzy's *not-talking* to Franny's death. This may imply that a loved one's death may result in unwillingness to speak, which is a realization of depression stage. The grieving context also clearly shows that Franny's death has a significant impact on Suzy's life as implied from Suzy's statement which calls Franny's death as 'the Worst Thing'.

After Suzy's statement about her decision to stop speaking, her *not-speaking* is portrayed throughout most of the novel's plot. Suzy is unwilling to speak to every character in the novel, including her own family members, unless urgently needed. If any interaction happened and Suzy needed to give a reaction, she often resorted to a minimal response such as a nod or shrug. It is present in the example of the grieving context below which includes Suzy and her classmate, Justin Maloney:

"Hey Suzy," Justin said. "I guess we're partners?"

**When I didn't respond,** he looked down. "Well," he said. "I guess I'll go get the pond water. If that's okay."

**I shrugged.**

(Benjamin, 2015, p. 80)

#### 4.1.2.2. Isolation

The second way of depression stage realization is isolation. This is different with Suzy's enjoying silence and enjoying being left alone, because Suzy does not enjoy the feeling of isolation. Her isolation is not only physical isolation as in staying away

from others, but also mental isolation, which make Suzy feels alienated. This shows that grieving is portrayed as something that may make a grieving person feel physically and mentally isolated, which may also make them feel lonely and desperate. One example of isolation is presented in the grieving context below:

*And that made me realize this:  
Everyone's story is different, all  
the time. No one is ever really  
together, even if it looks for a  
while like they are.*

(Benjamin, 2015, p. 18)

The context shows how Franny's death makes Suzy reflects about life and then she realizes that people are basically on their own in living their life. Everyone can only control their own lives that follows their own unique 'life plot.' Suzy's thoughts show that she thinks that her life is 'isolated' from others. Furthermore, her feeling of isolation is also implied in her statement that says 'no one is ever really together' which means that Suzy is actually alone and togetherness is only an illusion.

#### **4.1.2.3. Dark Thoughts and Imaginations**

The third way of depression stage realization is dark thoughts and imaginations. Thoughts and imaginations are considered different because thoughts are mostly verbal while imaginations are visual. The following grieving context present an example of Suzy Swanson's dark thoughts:

Seeing them, all that easy happiness, but also couldn't remember it, all at the same time.

**Mostly, though, I knew I didn't deserve happiness.**

**Would never deserve it ever again.** (Benjamin, 2015, pp. 35-36)

From the context, it is shown that Suzy compares herself to others who feel happy and thinks that she will not feel happiness as she does not deserve it. This thought arises because of Franny's death, particularly, because Suzy does not have a chance to say sorry to Franny after the event when she gave Franny 'the clue'. The clue is Suzy pouring urine into Franny's locker. This is done to tell Franny a clue that she has

changed into a different person. Before Franny changes, she asks Suzy to tell her through a dramatic clue if she ever changes into a different person, specifically if she starts to act like Aubrey LaValley and her clique. From the context, Suzy's dark thoughts come from the feeling of guilt, which previously found as one of the causes of denial stage. This shows that the feeling of guilt may cause different feelings, thoughts or actions.

Meanwhile, dark imaginations as a realization of the depression stage presents itself as visuals that are related to mortality of living creatures, in this case animals. Below is a grieving context that shows Suzy's dark imagination:

**I squeezed my eyes shut.** For a few seconds, the darkness was a relief. **But then a picture popped into my head, and it was not a good one.** I imagined the touch tank breaking, the rays and tiny sharks spilling out all over the floor. And that made me wonder how long the animals could last before they drowned in the open air.

Everything would feel cold and shrill and bright to them. **And then the animals would stop breathing forever.**

I opened my eyes. (Benjamin, 2015, p. 11)

Suzy's dark imagination starts when she closes her eyes. Then, a negative picture popped into her head, which means that it suddenly appears and it is not what she wants. She also admits that it is not a good or positive imagination. Then, the picture of the touch tank breaking, which contains many living creatures, including the rays and tiny sharks, is a negative picture as the tank breaking may result in the creatures' death. This is further proven by Suzy who thinks about how long will they last and imagines the cold and shrill feeling that they will experience, which is a dark thought and imagination. In the end, she also thinks about them stop breathing forever or their death, which is a dark picture.

#### 4.1.2.4. Negative Physical Experience

The last way of depression stage realization is negative physical

experience. There are only two grieving contexts that shows this way. This experience is in a form of a sweaty-sick feeling and a feeling of lump swelling in the throat whenever Suzy thinks or reminded of Franny. Kübler-Ross and Kessler (2014) does not explicitly describe negative physical experience as an indication of depression stage. However, it is assumed that they are the effect of deep sadness triggered whenever Suzy thinks about Franny. This finding shows that depression does not only affect the psyche. Depression may also result in negative physical experiences, as depicted by Suzy in the novel.

#### **4.1.3. Denial**

The denial stage, similar to the depression stage, is self-explanatory. One realization of denial stage is denying loved one's death. However, this stage can represent itself in other ways and it is often realized in subtler ways because denial is more likely to be symbolic than literal (Kübler-Ross and Kessler, 2014). Therefore, to identify this stage, it is important to

read the grieving contexts found in the novel closely.

It is found that the stage can only be found in the third chapter of the novel and it is portrayed by Suzy Swanson in two different ways. The ways are: (1) shock and (2) statement of denial. Below are the elaborations of each way.

##### **4.1.3.1. Shock**

Shock is a common first reaction when someone is told about a loved one's death. It is depicted by Suzy in the third chapter, 'sometimes things just happen', which is a flashback chapter to the time when Suzy first knew of Franny's death. The following grieving context presents the shock that Suzy experienced:

*Mom spoke evenly, her words coming out at normal speed, yet everything seemed slowed down, as if time itself had grown heavy. Or maybe like time had stopped existing altogether.*

*"Franny Jackson drowned."*

*Three words. They probably took only a couple of seconds to*

*come out, but they seemed to last about half an hour.*

(Benjamin, 2015, p. 14)

Suzy feeling that time slows down, even not existing, is a part of her shock. Knowing someone's death for the first time often results in denial which may be realized as shock (Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2014). Her shock affects the way she perceives the statement 'Franny Jackson drowned' as if it was delivered very slowly. Her shock also affects how she process the statement because it appears that she does not immediately acknowledge the news.

#### 4.1.3.2. Statement of Denial

The second way, statement of denial, is the easiest to identify as it commonly takes way of a simple statement that express denial of a loved one's death. The following grieving context shows how it may take form:

*I stared at my mom. "No, she didn't," I said.*

*You hadn't. You couldn't have.*

*I was sure of that.*

(Benjamin, 2015, pp. 14-15)

After Suzy's mom told Suzy about Franny's death and explained some details about her death, Suzy explicitly 'denies' her death by telling her mom '*No, she didn't*', then she reflects on the reality through her narration which says '*You hadn't. You couldn't have. I was sure of that.*'

This type of denial does not actually mean that she is denying the fact that Franny is dead. Most of the time, such statements are made by grieving individuals as a protective mechanism because overcoming loved one's death is a very difficult process for the psyche (Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2014). When someone hears a news about their loved one's death, many feelings may surface and it can be mentally overwhelming for them. Therefore, denial becomes the protective mechanism for their psyche.

#### 4.2. Learning How to Grief

From the findings and analyses of the novel, it is revealed that the portrayal and existence of children's literature about grieving and death may imply the adults' awareness of the importance for



children to learn how to grief and learn about death, more specifically for children in the U.S and other developed countries. The existence of children's literature such as *The Thing About Jellyfish* may be a part of what Day (2012) called the 'bereavement turn' which is a contemporary cultural movement in the society. Day (2012) argued that this movement may be caused by the portrayal the ageing population on the news and the portrayal of timely or untimely death and its effects in the popular media in the developed countries.

However, the existence of children's literature which brought the topic of grieving and death may be a proof of the difficulty the adults have in introducing the topics to children as strengthened by Malcom's statement (2011) which says "most Americans have trouble dealing directly with issues of dying and grief" (p. 51). Therefore, the adults in developed countries used children's literature as a medium to introduce children to grieving, death and other related topics. This is also in line with Heath, Sheen, Leavy, Young, and Money (2005) argument which says

that stories may be a catalyst for children development by providing other perspectives and options for thoughts, feelings and behaviors.

Children may learn more when they relate and feel what the characters feel in the stories. This can happen as feelings appear to play a significant role in how children respond to questions about death and might have a significant influence in the development of their understanding of death (Kenyon, 2001). Therefore, when reading the novel, as Suzy Swanson progresses on her grieving process, the readers may relate and learn about grieving process. This idea is strengthened by the findings in studies conducted by Corr (2004a, 2004b, 2004c, 2004d, 2007, 2009) which discovered that the purpose of portrayals of death, dying, and grieving in children's literature is to familiarize children with the concept of death, while also help them in coping with loved one's death, help the adults in helping grieving children and teaching them on concepts of death.

However, it should be noted that the portrayal of grieving and

death in children's literature is constructed by the authors who are mostly adults. Thus, the depiction of grieving and death in children literature, which is the work of the adults in the society, somehow reflects adults' complexities and the value that the society want to embedded in children (Bailis, 1977, Gibson and Zaidman, 1991). This idea is also applied to *The Thing About Jellyfish*. Therefore, children are educated to grief in a certain way, even though grieving is ideally a personal thing that every individual experience differently.

Unfortunately, there seems to be a lack of discussion and portrayal about grieving, death and other related topics in Indonesia. This assumption is strengthened by the limited number of studies on children's literature about grieving and death if compared to the number of studies conducted in the U.S. and the U.K. This may happen because Indonesian society still sees concepts about grieving and death as a part of life that needs to be dealt personally and immediately or the society simply takes concepts about grieving and

death for granted. It may also happen because Indonesian adults have a hard time explaining these concepts which is similar to the adults in the developed countries such as the U.S. and the U.K. This is unfortunate because from children's literature on grieving and death, children may learn about grieving and death, which also help the adults if they find it difficult to introduce these topics.

There are some aspects that make this novel can be accessible for children to relate to the story and, subsequently, learn about grieving process also death. The first aspect is the point of view used to narrate the story. The novel's narrator is Suzy Swanson herself, thus, the novel uses limited first-person point of view which makes the main character closer to the reader and her grieving experience more personal and subjective. Whitehead states that 'by far the most important device in persuading a reader of the "realness" of the fictional world is the presence of a trustworthy and informative narrative voice' (Whitehead as cited from Schroth, 2017, p. 26). These are possible because the reader will know

the private thoughts and imaginations of the character.

The next aspect is the characterization. Suzy Swanson is described as an introverted 12-years-old girl who is very interested in science. Thus, children readers who have similar characteristics may find it easier to relate to the character and, subsequently, to the story of the novel. Meanwhile, other readers who do not share the characteristic may not relate as much. For example, younger children may not be able to relate because they may have not experienced the things that a common 12 years old experienced. However, if similar experience is the only consideration to decide whether the reader can or cannot relate to the main character, this means that children above the age of 12, even adults, can relate to the main character.

Unfortunately, there are also some obstacles that some children readers may face when reading this novel. These obstacles may make it a little difficult for some children readers to fully comprehend the novel. First, In *The Thing About Jellyfish*, because of the formal

structure, the novel immediately presents the reader with the foreshadowing of Suzy Swanson's acceptance stage in the first chapter of the novel. Meanwhile, Franny Jackson's death is not explicitly presented. It is in the third chapter of the novel that it is explicitly presented. Therefore, the first chapter of the novel may create confusion for younger children who read the novel.

Furthermore, the temporal structure of the novel is nonlinear, which is indicated by the use of flashback plots which are written in italic. These flashbacks are used to reveal Franny's death and the history between Suzy and Franny. This type of plot structure can hinder the reader's understanding of the novel, especially for younger children. It is easier for them to understand simple stories, even more so if it has illustrations. Therefore, this novel may be best for older children or children who have better reading comprehension. This novel is also quite lengthy with 343 pages. More complex novels without illustrations and with the length of 343 pages may

even make it harder for younger children to understand the story.

Speaking from the social and cultural context, this novel may not be suitable for Indonesian children because they may find many social and cultural differences. These differences may make it difficult for them to relate to the main character and the story in general. Indonesian children who are fluent in English and have sufficient exposure to the U.S. culture and social context may find it easier to comprehend the story.

However, besides of those obstacles, this novel is still a good recommendation for children readers to learn about grieving process and moving on from loved one's death. Reading this novel may prepare them to cope with the inevitable loss of their loved ones in the future.

## CONCLUSION

This research, entitled Portrayal of Grieving in *The Thing About Jellyfish* by Ali Benjamin, aims to discover the portrayal of grieving in *The Thing About Jellyfish* (2015), a children novel written by Ali Benjamin. Based on the analyses and

discussion using the five stages of grief theory by Kübler-Ross and Kessler, (2014) strengthened by a theoretical framework for analyzing the portrayal of death, dying and bereavement in children literature by Schroth (2017), it is found that the novel portrayed grieving through the construction of five stages of grief. The stages portray the child main character's grieving process. Each of the stages has different intensity or depth and frequency of appearance in the novel's grieving contexts.

Acceptance or healing stage and depression stage are the more intense stages compared to the others and it may reveal a particular intention. It appears that the novel portrays grieving as a long and difficult process or a struggle, which involves denial, anger, depression and other efforts to cope with loved one's death. However, the grieving process ends with the need to truly accept the reality and move on from grieving and start living a normal life.

The stages also do not follow a certain pattern. Although in the novel, the main character's grieving process ends with acceptance stage,

the appearance of the stages in the plot does not exactly follow ‘denial-anger-bargaining-depression-acceptance’ pattern as the stages sometimes intertwined. This shows that grieving is portrayed as a complex process with no particular rules that a grieving person has to go through. It is a personal process that each individual experienced differently.

Furthermore, the portrayal of grieving in children literature and the existence of the novel itself appear to be proofs of the importance of learning how to grief, particularly for children. They need to learn about grieving also death because the society want to embedded particular values in children. In *The Thing About Jellyfish* case, the value is that while grieving process can be a difficult and painful process for a grieving person, in the end, they need to accept the reality and move on with their lives.

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