This is About an Alligator and Nothing Else: Writing fiction to creatively process grief and metabolize injury into art

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Following initial supervisory ethical discussion, full ethical approval from the Bath Spa University Ethics panel was not required. The research has been conducted in line with requirements in place at the time of this decision. Should you have any concerns regarding ethical matters relating to this study, please contact the Research Support Office at Bath Spa University (researchsupportoffice@bathspa.ac.uk).

No new datasets were created during the study.

Abstract

This thesis presents a coming-of-age novel, *This is About an Alligator and Nothing Else*, accompanied by a critical commentary that reflects on my writing journey while processing the sudden death of my father, David Dempsey. My artistic practice was driven by the question: How could writing a novel about bereavement help someone who is actively grieving?

The novel was written in the year immediately following my father's death, so the processes of grieving and writing unfolded simultaneously. The central aim of this thesis is to examine how crafting a fictional world, in which characters face both personal and ecological grief, can be a safe container to explore the intense emotions of death while sustaining a bond with a deceased loved one.

The accompanying critical essay serves as a reflective piece, which I view as an 'unstitching' of my novel, a way of explaining my choices around setting, character, language, and narrative approach. My aim is not only to contribute to academic discourse but also to offer a more intimate, experiential perspective on how art can function as a powerful tool for processing grief.

Chapter One delves into how I turned to art following my father's death. **Chapter Two** discusses different theories about grief, reflecting on how they align and conflict with my personal and artistic experiences of mourning. **Chapter Three** focuses on my gravitation towards fiction and the unique possibilities this genre provided me as a grieving writer. Finally, **Chapter Four** examines how my identity as an adoptee and my home state of Florida shaped the evolution of my characters.

This research is focused on my personal experience of grief and responding to my sorrow with writing, but there is potential for ongoing research that explores other creative arts practises and how they can benefit bereaved people and communities.

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This is About an Alligator and Nothing Else: Writing fiction to creatively process grief and metabolize injury into art

Introduction

This dissertation includes a coming-of-age novel *This is about an Alligator and Nothing Else* and a contextualizing thesis. Together, they explore, and seek to answer, the question: How can writing a novel about bereavement be helpful to a griever? Specifically, how could it be helpful to write in the immediate aftermath of the death?

My autoethnographic approach to this thesis is necessarily personal and explores the use of fiction writing to help process grief after the death of a parent and reintegrate the bereaved person back into community and daily life. It is important to note that I have said *process*, not *heal*. Grief is an expression of ongoing love and I have no desire to heal from something so beautiful. Instead, this research grew from a curiosity: how can I translate my personal experience into fiction in order to comprehend my father's death?

Field of Inquiry

My novel was born out of a deep longing for my father and the place where he raised me: Florida. After his death, the pandemic left me stranded in the UK. I ached for the heat, the warm thunderstorms, and the bathwater of the Atlantic Ocean. I wrote about what I could not physically reach, using my writing to bring home closer and to recover the memory of my father, even if only on the page.

Writing about Florida comes with writing about its environmental decay and the climate crisis. Thanatologist Dr. Kriss Kevorkian, a specialist in death, dying and bereavement, coined the terms environmental and ecological grief after studying the decline in the Southern Resident orca population (2024). Kevorkian defines eco-grief as, "the reaction stemming from the disconnection, and relational loss of our natural world" (2024). These feelings of despair and bearing witness to the manmade destruction of Florida's natural habitats are woven throughout my novel, which reflects the decreased population of the Florida panther and manatees as well as the invasive species stemming from the pet industry. Additionally, the state's drinking water is at risk due to the water table being so shallow and the land is home to 44 superfund sites and 101 brownfields. Florida is a place of great beauty but it is also ground zero for the climate crisis in America, with many of its residents living near the ocean fronts and dealing with hurricanes that are growing in their ferociousness

season to season. Being a Floridian is not for the faint of heart, but this strange land is worth it.

My Purpose

My research explores how fiction writing can: create a safe space for grief to be witnessed; use imaginative circumstances to re-enter society and daily life as a new person post-bereavement; offer an example of how creativity can be used after a sudden bereavement; and continue a bond with loved ones who have died.

My novel foregrounds death and grief, pushing against Western culture's uneasiness about these topics. While I consider contemporary theories of grief (including those from psychoanalysis), I will primarily be mining my own experience of bereavement in the form of autoethnography. My novel and contextual research have helped me take an active role in my own grief journey and while it is not therapy, it is a safe container to hold my intense experiences and trauma. Writing fiction about a father-daughter relationship felt like a long meditation about (and a reliving of) my own childhood: safe, carefree, and full of uncomplicated love. Storytelling and reading have been sources of comfort for me since long before my father's death. This practice of journaling, writing fiction, reading, and using my imagination to continue my bond with him will not stop with this research. Rather, it will remain my lifeline as I continue to live with grief.

The two pieces of writing that comprise this PhD have given me the opportunity to "cooperate" with my grief. The art that has resulted from this process came from the greatest injury my spirit has endured: the death of my father. I am inspired by author Julia Cameron's assertion that writing can be used the way a filmmaker uses a lens, "to pull focus, to put things into a different perspective" (1998, p. 36). I can approach my loss in a different way by zooming in close on a single moment or pulling back to observe the larger landscape around me. Like a filmmaker I can take this movie that plays in my mind and add my own soundtrack and voice-over (Cameron, 1998).

A Note on Methodology

My practice-based research employs an autoethnographic approach to address my research question. According to researcher Christopher Poulos, autoethnography is defined as:

> An autobiographical genre of academic writing that draws on and analyzes or interprets the lived experience of the author and connects researcher insights to self-identity, cultural rules and resources, communication practices, traditions, premises, symbols, rules, shared meanings, emotions, values, and larger social, cultural, and political issues (Poulos, 2020, p. 4).

After the death of her son, Angela Matthews turned to autoethnography to help process the horror and pain of her loss. Matthews defines autoethnography as the combination of autobiography and ethnography and examines the intersections of firsthand experiences and the culture they take place within (Matthews, 2019, p. 2). She explains:

> The researcher is already a part of the world she is studying, so observations are internal. Field notes require autoethnographers to recall memories of pivotal experiences in their lives and as many details about those experiences as possible, so rather than gathering field notes by observing others, autoethnographers gather data by looking inward at past experiences. As we write about our experiences, we reflect on them and their meaning because writing is a method of inquiry, discovery, and analysis (2019, p. 3).

Like Matthews, my hope is that this personal reflection can enhance knowledge and contribute to new knowledge for grievers and those in the field of death studies and creative writing. By using writing and language creatively, I focus on my own experience rather than that of other bereaved people. This strategy protected me from being triggered in my early days of bereavement. Fiction writing involves intense thinking work, as it is all imagined. Taking my curiosities, agony, and questions about death to a novel meant I could mull over my feelings through a fictional relationship between a father and daughter. I needed this time.

My Reader

My novel and contextual essay are for grievers who are drawn to writing to make sense of the world and for creative writing teachers who have people experiencing bereavement in their cohorts and classrooms. But it is my deepest desire that these words find their way to

bereaved daughters who have a hole in their life without their parent. I want them to know there is a way to carry great joy and grief simultaneously.

A Note on Scope

This autoethnographic thesis is focuses on my own experience of death and use of writing fiction as a processing tool. There is potential for extending this research to other artistic practices. We might ask, for instance, how painting, dance, or collaging help us to process grief, and what these creative expressions might do that writing cannot, particularly when the human body is part of that art. But these questions are a matter for future work.

Chapter 1: The moment that changed my writing

> *Grief is a cruel kind of education. You learn how ungentle mourning can be, how full of anger. You learn how glib condolences can feel. You learn how much grief is about language, the failure of language and the grasping of language.*
>
> *-Chimamanda Ngozi Adiche (2020, p. 6)*

When my dad was a teenager he found a broken sailboat by the side of the road. Being the Miami boy he was, he fixed it up with a friend and would sail it around Biscayne Bay. I like to think I am industrious like him, taking something broken and fixing it so it can head back to the Atlantic.

This chapter explores my experience of being bereaved and the role writing played at the start of my grieving process. I share how I first turned to my journal, then music, art and finally my fictional world. It also considers my initial uneasiness on writing about my father's death: while I felt compelled to write, I also felt guilty about this impulse. As a writer, I had always responded to my inner world with art, but turning to the page as quickly as I did after his death felt strange, prompting questions about guilt, how material is generated, and recovery.

Engaging with my grief through writing

The last time I saw my dad was January 23, 2020. We hugged at the departure doors of the Miami International Airport as I left to return to London. I wheeled my large green suitcase down the sidewalk, turning back to holler, "Take care of mom!" He smiled and waved. I remember the sun was out and he was wearing shorts. Once I made it past security, I texted him that I had forgotten a box of Junior Mints in the side door of his car and apologized for leaving the melted chocolate for him to deal with. On our way to the airport, we'd stopped at 7/11, a beloved gas station, so I could have one last American treat: a Coke Slurpee, a staple from my childhood in Florida. That morning the machine was broken. I would be sure to put this exact moment in my novel (p. 129) because in retrospect it felt important. A bad omen I missed, but maybe my reader would notice. I grabbed the box of candy instead. "Good thing Junior Mints are my favorite too," he texted back with a smiley face, "have a safe flight sweetie."

The call informing me of his death came nine days later. It was 3 a.m. London time and I was thousands of miles away when I looked at my phone to dozens of missed calls from my mom and sister. He died on Super Bowl Sunday in Tamarac, Florida while I was struggling to fall sleep. I was alone when I received the call. “I have the worst thing to tell you.” My mother’s voice cracked. I screamed like an animal asking her to tell me what happened. Surely it was one of my grandparents. It had to be. I was wrong.

Earlier that weekend, my father’s stomach was bothering him. He’d planned to call the doctor the next day to make an appointment, thinking that it might be kidney stones, which he had suffered from before. Apparently, he stood up from his La-Z-Boy recliner and said he was going to take a shower. My mom asked if he wanted a sandwich. He said yes. Sometime later my mom found him on the shower floor. She called 911 and tried to give him mouth to mouth. There were more details she told me, details that my imagination ran with, ones that stayed in my mind and gave me nightmares and flashbacks. I imagined the steam from the shower, the noises, the compressions given and how they failed to help. I felt guilt for being so far away, but also grateful my mother was with him. If anyone could have saved him, it would have been his wife of over 40 years.

The first person I saw after receiving the news of my father’s death was a taxi driver. He was confused by the yelps and cries coming from his backseat. Desperate for connection, I told him my dad had died just hours ago. He replied quickly, “If he didn’t die today, he could’ve died tomorrow. This is the circle life.” My body tensed, preparing to shout. Instead, I stayed silent. This would be the first of many instances when people would try to give comfort but instead bring more pain. As the taxi driver continued through the dark streets of London, I took my phone out and wrote down his exact words. Then I wrote about the music that was playing and how confused I was that life was going on without my father. How could there be traffic? How could people be going to work? Why was the radio announcer taking song requests? To this day, I don’t remember if I was wearing shoes.

The writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adiche also turned to writing after the death of her father. In an interview about her essay, “Notes on Grief”, she explains that writing was always the tool she used to make sense of her life, so it was natural that she turned to it so quickly after her bereavement (Adiche, 2021). Adiche expresses a similar confusion to my own in the aftermath of her father’s death:

> I am filled with disbelieving astonishment that the mailman comes as usual and that people are inviting me to speak somewhere and that regular news alerts appear on my phone screen. How is it that the world keeps going, breathing in and out unchanged, while in my soul there is a permanent scattering? (2021, p. 12)

Like Adiche, my soul was scattered and I wanted to capture every detail of that feeling, as if naming it and writing it down would help me grasp the reality of what was happening.

In the loneliness of that taxi, I was desperate for a place to "speak", or as C.S. Lewis puts it in *A Grief Observed*, a place to be witnessed or "observed" (Lewis, 1961). I did not have a partner, husband, roommate, or family member with me. I would be alone with the knowledge of my father's death for hours before landing back in Florida. What I did have was the Notes app on my iPhone. I felt the page listening to me as I blurted down my messy thoughts. I wrote in bullet points, unable to put together punctuated sentences. At first it felt crude and inappropriate to be writing down details about weather from the night he died, knowing that I would use them creatively. I would later understand that what I was doing was using my writing to grieve. To create art and to have this moment witnessed. I was staggering and stumbling towards creativity to alleviate my fury and isolation.

My father's eulogy

If I had to tell a stranger what my father sounded like it would be Santana's guitar solo from his 1969 Woodstock performance of "Soul Sacrifice". The intense focus on Santana's face throughout this concert is unforgettable. This song was pure magic to my father and me alike. We'd often end a long week by watching the whole Woodstock DVD from beginning to end, filling our home with the sounds of the 1960s. I can see everything so clearly. We are in my childhood home in Orlando. My dad is sitting in his blue La-Z-Boy while I lounge in the less comfortable chair inherited from my Grammy, Theresa Mendoza, his mother who would inspire D and Harley's last name. The screen door at the back of the house is open and there is a thin layer of pollen covering the patio where my father inlaid a hopscotch grid out of marble. Of course, the warmth and sunshine are there too as they are in every memory of my dad, and I have Florida to thank for that. A can of chilled Budweiser is in his hand and I'm wearing my Catholic school uniform (something that feels rebellious while listening to such unholy music). He points the remote at the speaker and turns it up as the bongos enter the song. I don't know where my mom and sister are, but they never seem to be around when we

turn the music up to the maximum volume. We will not yell over the music. Instead, we will look at each other to nod during the best parts.

My dad paid attention to music and taught me to do the same. He rarely spoke over the artists but instead would give his approval with head nods and break into smiles that brought out his eye wrinkles. I felt the power and emotion of the instruments and artists' voices. This obsession led to a childhood dream: to make soundtracks for television and movies. I would make friends playlists with songs that matched their exact emotion state. When someone in my high school went through a breakup, they would come to me and ask for a mix CD. When I didn't have words, I had music. When the drummer finishes his glorious solo, Santana takes over, bringing everything to a satisfying end. And I'm with my dad. It is the perfect musical memory and it would help me write first of many farewells to him.

The day after my dad died, I played "Soul Sacrifice" on repeat as I wrote his eulogy. I feel guilt admitting that I had to be forced to write it. It had only been one day since he died and I had no desire to speak at his funeral or put my love for my father into words for others. But as I watched my sister sit in my dad's old armchair writing her own speech, my mind shifted. Though she wasn't a writer, she sat there intently crafting her own words about the father she loved. I begrudgingly followed her lead, as little sisters often do. After all, *I* was the writer of the family. What would everyone think of me if I didn't use my words? I treated the writing of his eulogy like a band-aid that had been stuck on the skin too long and needed to be ripped off in one fell swoop. I typed as quickly as my fingers would allow. I didn't edit my words. It spilled out of me; I wept and closed the laptop. He deserved better than what I wrote that day, but I didn't have it in me. I needed more time to sift and sort through our love.

This art practice would give me time to find my language.

How the novel changed after my father's death

After my father's death I flew back to Florida and remained there for two weeks. I wanted to stay longer but my sister begged me to return to London so I could attend my PhD interview with Bath Spa University. She told me I had to go back, that dad would want me to. I told her I would return but *only* for the interview and then I'd fly directly back to south Florida to be with our mom. I had applied to the PhD with another idea for a novel that involved the

Everglades, feminism and how the climate crisis was unfolding in my home state. Initially, Floridian journalist and author Carl Hiaasen inspired me. My father enjoyed his reporting for the *Miami Herald*, and I loved his novel *Hoot* (2002), a story about young people saving a colony of burrowing owls from a developer who wants to build a pancake house on their land. For years, his fictional storytelling has brought attention to the ecological issues in my home state.

After the death of my father my obsessions and interests transformed with great intensity. How could I explain to my potential supervisors that I was now consumed by grief and drowning in it? It was the only thing I wanted to speak about which began to drive wedges with family and friends. My former curiosities had died with my father and I could barely remember what I was passionate about. I knew I wanted to change the novel: in the original the mother was already dead and now the father would have to be too. Crossing my fingers, I went into the meeting and explained that I would continue with the novel, but Harley would be going on a vastly different journey. I had changed, so the novel would too.

I never had the chance to return home to be with my mom. The UK government put a lockdown in place due to COVD-19, on the day of my interview. I was stuck in London. It made sense that the world fell into chaos and sickness after my father died. How could everything go on as normal? It would have made just as much sense for aliens to land on Earth and claim our planet as their own. This train of thought felt selfish, but my body was a hurricane, unpredictable at times, calm at others. I would give this literal storm to Harley's world, hitting her beloved town with a Category 5 hurricane that would destroy her home (p. 181-208). A storm she asked for.

My mother was left to collect my father's ashes, cancel his credit cards, pay the overpriced ambulance bill (how horrific to pay for something that did not help), sort his Social Security, alert the voter registration office and empty his closet alone. The paperwork of death is gruelling and you are required to prove the death over and over. My guilt and depression grew by the day and I developed symptoms that suggested I was experiencing peritraumatic stress (a precursor to PTSD). I wanted to swim in the Atlantic Ocean and fall asleep in my mother's bed beside her. I wanted to hold her at night and listen to her snore and to have her ask if I was eating and to stroke my hair as I lay in a ball on the ground. How was she going to sleep without my dad there? She'd never lived alone before. They had met at sixteen at a

school dance in Miami that my father snuck into; they had been together ever since. She needed me and I needed her. But it would be months before I would hug her or my sister again. My body went without touch, for fear of transmitting germs. I was desperate to be hugged. While everyone feared the worst happening to them, it had already happened to me and it made my mourning more volatile. There is never a suitable time to lose a parent, but the year 2020 proved immensely painful for the bereaved worldwide, with the inability to hold loved one's hands as they died or celebrate their lives with funerals and gatherings.

Since I was an international student, I could not pause my studies, nor did I want to for fear of losing my visa or my spot on the PhD program. In retrospect, I should have asked advice and support, but I did not have the ability to make this request and deal with the subsequent paperwork or red tape. It was the start of the pandemic, and no one was in the office or answering phone calls. I could not speak to a doctor or to my university's administration. Instead, I turned to art: first in the form of journaling, then to other creative outlets (in the form of literature, films, and music) and finally finding my way back to the novel. I would disappear into Sweetgator.

The compulsion to write and the revulsion against it

To this day, my family and I do not have an exact cause of my father's death, but he probably had a heart attack. A close doctor friend thought it might have been the 'widowmaker', a nickname given to a heart attack where there is full blockage of the heart's biggest artery. No, they did not run in his family. No, he was not sick. There were no blatant signs that something was wrong. My dad was an avid golfer and walked every morning. The week before his death, he visited his doctor and left with a clean bill of health. Even now, thinking about it makes me feel shocked and panicked, knocking the wind out of me, and forcing me to pause. How did this happen? What could have been done differently? But falling into the rabbit hole of what ifs and questions does not help. Writing, however, does, so I continue.

The world-building, character maps and research into south Florida gave me an entry point to reengage with my life without the immense guilt of "leaving" my dad behind in 2020, the last year in which he would exist. I am comforted by the words of Kathleen Higgins, who believes that aesthetic practices can bring beauty and ritual to the grieving process and

facilitate restoration, allowing for a recovery period during a time of immense turmoil. She explains:

> Aesthetic projects enable the bereaved to reengage with the world of the living, but without abandoning bonds with the deceased. The guilt that sometimes afflicts the bereaved when they do anything besides dwell on their loved one's absence is avoided in such activities, for these projects enlist the living to recognize the importance of the loss, perhaps most effectively when they are overtly aesthetically affecting (2020, p. 18).

Instead of feeling that I had abandoned my father, my writing allowed him to come along this artistic journey with me and still be part of my life. I made a ritual of my writing, buying a new journal, wearing my favorite perfume, and lighting the same candle before beginning my work. I drank the same black tea from the same mug. This was my dad time, a ritual that would carry me through the pandemic. The writing was not always at my desk. Sometimes it would happen on my daily walks (furiously smashing my thumbs at my phone when I was hit with a grief pain), in the bathtub after a bought of crying or on the 171 bus hurtling through south London. Because during this time I was making something aesthetic, it removed the personal and therefore I rarely felt overexposed. After the death of her child Gabriel, Tamarin Norwood wrote the story of his short life and her great love for him. She spoke directly to fellow grievers, gifting the advice, "grief is a thing you can craft, even when events are cruel and beyond your control, in the meanings you derive from them, there is sometimes a whisper of hope, or peace, or grace to be found" (Norwood, 138). Writing about my father was the whisper of hope I needed. I could take these overpowering emotions, and monumental love and craft it into something I could physically hold and give to others.

Journaling

After my father's death, my daily practice of journaling changed. I used to write long, rambling paragraphs that moved freely from subject to subject. But as my body grew tired and my thoughts became incoherent, I found lists more natural: a list of things I loved about my dad; a list of rules for life he'd taught me; a list of his hobbies. I was terrified I would forget him so I forced myself to remember as much as I could. It felt inadequate and bland. Yes, he loved riding his motorcycles, playing a round of golf with friends or strangers and swimming in the ocean. He was so much more, and I felt embarrassed by the simplicity on the page. It

was a month before I could write a substantial entry, with coherent sentences. I found that writing as if I were speaking to him was a helpful way into my emotions. It was never cathartic. I never felt better afterwards. But I did feel connected to him.

> *May 2020 (4 months after his death):*
>
> *Dad, your birthday's coming up. We're still in quarantine and we probably will be on May 31st, the day you would've turned sixty-four. I hate everything. I feel like I'm six years old again laying on my bedroom floor, kicking my door over and over again like I used to do when I was a kid. I don't like that the world still asks me to do things like pay rent or return emails. This is selfish but I miss how much you believed in me. I'm not sure who to get that from anymore. It feels like I'm asking for too much from everyone. The more time that passes I feel like people are going to want me to get over it, but I'll never get over losing you. You were my favorite person and I still love you very, very much. I hope it's okay with you if I cry and get angry and bring you up every single day. I know you didn't like the spotlight. I just want the bad dream to end, and I want you back. Come back.*

As I re-read this entry, I can see how I was struggling to express myself. I can hear the guilt in my words. I think of Chimamanda Ngozi Adiche who, after the death of her father, wrote, "You learn how much grief is about language, the failure of language and the grasping of language" (2020, p. 6). While the language in my journal is exactly what I needed at the time (and was for my eyes only), these emotions would need crafting and thought before I gave them to Harley or any of my characters. It would take draft after draft and days of careful editing to land on the correct tone. I used Florida to my artistic advantage here. Since it is a land of ecological grief, endangered animals, and precarious weather, it held its own difficult emotions. Where language failed, the sense of place would carry the story.

Years later, my journal entries about my father are still incoherent. They usually occur when I am at my lowest, in my deepest, "dad where are you?" times. While the novel helped me craft my grief, I still needed spaces to fall apart, as this relatively recent journal entry shows:

> *June 2024 (4 years, 4 months after his death)*
>
> *I Googled you today, dad. You weren't the first David Dempsey to pop up which made me feel strange. Instead, a man who stormed the capital on January 6th popped up. He was one of the most violent rioters that day and was sentenced to years behind bars. He is nothing like you and I hate that he has your name. Eventually, I found you on the internet, you're only existence is an incomplete LinkedIn page and your obituary. I*

> *helped pick out that photo, the one the funeral home printed on little bookmarks that I'm sure everyone threw away. They were expensive (it was part of the funeral package and mom did get a discount since you were church members). Your almost empty LinkedIn page is what had me closing the laptop and crying in the quiet section of the Senate House library. I thought about how many years you worked, and how you were still working when you died. You and mom never got to retire and live near the beach. I'm so sad for you. You had so much more you deserved to do. You deserved to relax.*

Psychologist Dorothy Holinger explains that finding a language for grief takes time and can leave the bereaved feeling unmoored. She suggests that once the griever has this language, they can "not only describe the sorrow but also, eventually, memorialise the beauty of the loved one and the life lived together" (2020, p. 70). It would take time to find my words, and as I drafted my novel I gravitated towards other artists for comfort and validation. Vuong contends that "Sequencing and pattern making is a huge part of being an artist" (Salzberg and Shaheen, 2022). I wanted to write and move on, but this work of "sequencing and pattern making" called for a gentler, slower pace. I could not just follow my raw emotions; instead, they travelled to my journal first through tears and then made their way to the novel. My raw expression of grief was not art; it was only for me (this topic is more thoroughly explored in Chapter 3: Why Fiction?).

Music

Beginning *This is about an Alligator and Nothing Else* gave me a purpose to revisit my 'dad' playlist. After writing his eulogy I did not return to my father's music or the special playlist for months. When I finally did, it was in service to the novel. I needed to sit with the music for inspiration since these songs would make their way into my novel and be core parts of these characters' personalities and journeys. The fiction operated as a protective shield to the memories these songs evoked. I wrote and listened in tandem (without writing, the music was too overwhelming). The first song Harley and D listen to together in the book is Paul Simon's "Graceland", a song that reminds me of long drives to the Atlantic Ocean with my family, with my dad in the driver's seat. I listen to these songs with reenergized focus, looking for my father in the lyrics. As I drafted the novel, I concentrated on my own body and how it danced so that I could give these shoulder rolls and hip sways to Harley. I pressed play on Led Zeppelin, Louis Armstrong, and Nina Simone when I needed to picture how D or Terry would

bop their heads around the fire pit or how Raf would sing into a hairbrush. When I came to the music through this lens it took on a different meaning and I was able to listen for hours and write the music into my novel (pp. 17, 74, 95, 156, 190) Writing this novel and creating my own world and soundtrack gave me back one of my favorite pieces of my dad. I write and imagine him nodding along, not just to the music but to my words.

It is a beautiful team effort, the artful grieving process. It is a cup of black tea handed to me by a close friend, the discography of Paul Simon and the great tit that sings outside of my window every morning. It is the re-reading of Tiffany McDaniel's *Betty* (2021), a beautiful coming of age novel about a Cherokee girl and her larger-than-life father. The click clacking of my keyboard: my life raft. For me, all music ignites memory, good and bad. The deliberate crafting and energy fiction requires has helped me regain the sweeter moments of my relationship with my father. For a sentence or two, my father is back. He is with me. The smells of my childhood home float nearby, and the image of my dad on the bathroom floor gasping for breath disappears. In my musical memory The Beach Boys are turned up loud in the pick-up truck and we are together, with Harley and D. I think he would be proud that I have found my way back to the music he gave me.

Turning to the arts and finding language

With my own grief language forming inside of me, I turned to literature, film, and music to begin my new membership of the "Dead Dad Club." In 2002 artist Dorothea Tanning was asked what the purpose of art was during distressing times, particularly after 9/11. The 91-year-old surrealist painter explained, "Art has always been the raft onto which we climb to save our sanity. I do not see a different purpose for it now" (Tanning, 2002). I too have come to see my art and the artwork of others as places of refuge, even tattooing her 1942 painting *Birthday* on my thigh as a reminder. During my mourning I immersed myself in movies, poetry, and paintings to stretch my imagination and loosen my sadness. I had already enjoyed Michelle Zauner's band Japanese Breakfast, so it was especially comforting when I learned that the death of her mother had found its way into her song writing. It felt as if Zauner had given me permission to do the same with my own artistic practice. In her memoir, *Crying in H-Mart*, Zauner beautifully explains her feelings of being bereaved:

> Sometimes my grief feels as though I've been left alone in a room with no doors. Every time I remember that my mother is dead, it feels like I'm colliding with a wall that won't give. There's no escape, just a hard surface that I keep ramming into over and over, a reminder of the immutable reality that I will never see her again (2021, p. 6).

This image of being trapped in a concrete room is something I have returned to over and over. In my novel, I try to capture this exact feeling, conveying death's permanence and brutality (pp 160-162). The thing I feared the most, losing a parent, had finally happened and I was trapped, my tongue twisting to find words to explain, my brain and body reaching for how to speak, how to move and how to ask for help. I failed over and over. My search for a precise language to capture these experiences drove my research and novel.

I soon realized that explicit language often frightens people. Friends, strangers, and family used words like, "loss" or "passed" instead of "death" or "dead". It enraged me and I would often express this to them, widening the rift between me and my community, sometimes irreparably. I decided early in my grief journey that I would not use euphemisms for death in my relationships, novel or research. Instead, I say, "my dad is dead" or "my dad died." Other times I have been pointed, saying "he dropped dead", because that is truly what happened: his heart stopped and he fell to the ground. The sanitization of vocabulary keeps the reality of death at an arm's length; I will have none of it in my work.

Part of my practice is to bring death into the room, allow it to sit at the table with us, and find out what it feels like to not to look away. Adiche captures the way grief involves an eruption of different emotions that changes the bereaved:

> A thing like this, dreaded for so long, finally arrives and among the avalanche of emotions there is a bitter and unbearable relief. It comes as a form of aggression, this relief, bringing with it strangely pugnacious thoughts. Enemies beware: the worst has happened. My father is gone. My madness will now bare itself (2021, p. 20).

My "madness" did bare itself. There were those who stayed and remained steadfast in their friendship, while others disappeared. Perhaps I burned bridges too soon, but with the loss of actual connections came my obsession with Sweetgator, Florida and my discovery of fictional connections and community. I knew I would have Harley and Raf's friendship fall apart and come back together. My madness had somewhere to go, somewhere where I had total control of who came and went. I bared myself to the page.

Turning inwards: my body's reaction and my obsession to understand

I knew it was important to reflect on my writing process. I was fascinated by my grief, how it moved through my body and changed my perspective and relationships. No one outside the fictional realm could come on this dark, strange journey with me. From counting my new grey hairs to the number of friends who stopped calling, it was all important. I would take the hurt, mush it around like clay, and construct a new piece of art. Melissa Febos explains that trauma therapy is about walking through the story when you are safe so you don't get stuck like a record player in that hurtful moment (2022). Similarly, in my writing I do not rush through difficult emotions. I do not *make* myself do it. I go slowly; I sleep and sleep some more. Sometimes I swim. Other times I listen to an entire jazz album from my father's collection. Next, I write and sift through the words. I listen and continue. I was grateful for the financial support and community that was offered to me by the SWWDTP (South, West and Wales Doctoral Training Partnership). Without its support, I would not have been able to sift through my grief and create this art. It is a privilege that I wish could be given to grievers in their studies and workplaces.

While I was grateful for the academic support system, part of me was worried that my project was too personal, too specific for the academic world. In the face of these doubts, I turned to other autoethnographers. Sociologist Gayle Letherby suggests:

> All research and (scholarly) writing is in some ways auto/biographical, involving intersections of the lives of those who write and those who are written about. All texts bear traces of the author within which the writer works from the self to the other and back again (2022, p. 14).

Letherby suggests that even if the researcher never says "I", that pronoun is nonetheless always implicit. I am simply being explicit and putting my personal narrative at the forefront of this work. Letherby continues:

> Auto/Biographical work, including creative auto/biographical writings, enables meaningful reflection of one story, many stories, unique stories, and collective stories. Such work highlights differences and encourages us to make connections. It challenges traditional practices and dominant discourses; it affirms and celebrates the real-world life experience of individuals and groups. (2022, p. 17).

I agree that auto/biographical writing can challenge dominant discourses (typically a Western, white perspective).

Stories have the power to change, heal and encourage. While ethnographers "rely heavily on interviews, observations, and field notes taken on site" (Neimeyer and Hogan, 2001, p. 109), autoethnographers connect the personal to the cultural and social (Ellis, 2004). As Angela Matthews explains, "Autoethnography integrates the research process with the self and the social world so that the personal, the social, and the researcher aspects of the author's personality are woven together" (2017, p. 73). As she points out, autobiography allows the author to write about their own lives, using "story to understand cultural issues" (p. 74). For me, it was the best methodological approach to study grief.

From the journal to my novel

This is About an Alligator and Nothing Else would not exist if my father was still living in Florida, playing golf at the weekend, listening to jazz records, and going to 4pm Mass with my mother every Saturday. I would likely have continued with the plan for the novel I described earlier, which exists in a parallel universe where my father is still here. It is a universe where he meets his grandchildren, Caleb Reese and Greyson Kyle, who were born in 2022. I wonder what they would have called him.

Without anyone to share these thoughts with, I turned to the page. I wrote of Florida, its sunsets, and cicadas: the place that raised me, where my father lived all of his sixty-three years. By submerging myself in Harley and D's story I was able to do the next best thing to traveling home: recreating it on the page. It would be at the end of this research that I realized the power of fiction in those months directly after his death. I stayed in one space physically, but mentally I was in the safe bubble of childhood memories: the taste of key lime pie and the scorching heat of the south.

After my dad's death, I rarely cried in comfortable places such as my bed or the shower. Typically, I would lay on my bedroom floor, curled up close to the baseboards. One evening, I cried so intensely into the phone that I broke the microphone (water damage the Apple store told me). The psychologist Dorothy Holinger believes that grief is a whole-body experience, and that when finding a language for your grief the body can "sound" like this:

> The brain: "I can't think straight." "Everything seems confused."
> The heart: "I have a hole in me." "I hurt. I ache."
> And the body: "It's hard to move; my limbs feel so heavy (2020, p. 70).

This is how I felt in the early days (and years) of my grief. My brain was foggy and words became stuck in my throat. I would sleep for hours, then cry for hours. I had changed so quickly, and it was jarring to those who knew me. Five years on and I still do not sleep like I did before the 3am phone call alerting me of his death.

While finding my own grief language, I was also creating a fictional world that was filled with bereavement. It was helpful to transpose my hurt, anger, and physical symptoms onto my fictional characters. As grief moved through my body, it also moved through Harley, Raf, Mrs. Padilla and Terry. When my friends acted with confusion or pity, I gave their language, words, and reactions to my characters, though taking care that no real person could be identified in my fiction. There was no break between my mourning, my grief, and my creative expression. I would cry myself to sleep and wake up to re-read, edit, and complete the next chapter. Slowly a novel emerged from this ritual of sitting, thinking, listening, and responding. The grief began to settle into me like an unwanted but necessary friend. I was desperate for validation and companionship; the novel and the research became that.

Laurel Richardson argues that the conventional method of writing (like we are taught as young children in school)—where we are taught to write only when we have fully formed ideas and organized points—is fundamentally flawed (2005, p. 960). I agree with Richardson who believes that knowledge can be gained *through* the act of writing as a method of inquiry. She explains:

> Language is how social organisation and power are defined and connected and the place where one's sense of self—one's subjectivity—is constructed. Understanding language as a competing discourse—competing ways of giving meaning and or organising the world—makes language a site of exploration and struggle (2005, p. 961).

Richardson's argument that language is a place where struggle and insight occur encouraged me to remain curious about my writing practice. Richardson continues, "I have altered my primary writing question from "how to write during the crisis of representation" to "how to

document becoming" (2005, p. 966). This resonated with my own process. I do not write because I know; I write to find out.

As I drafted the novel in the early days after my father's death, my mind shifted, my preoccupations changed and my art morphed alongside these intense personality rearrangements. Petty arguments with friends no longer interested me. I was *becoming* rather than documenting what I knew to be absolutely true and certain. Writing *fiction* leant itself well to this practice. I did not know this new Anna, but I could get to know Harley.

In a podcast interview, Tamarin Norwood explains how her memoir for her son Gabriel was written in slow increments (Rake and Wheeler, 2024). She first felt a need to write, to simply capture the "shrieks" that tore through her after her son's death. She then began to see connections between her feelings, written words, and research, braiding these strands together to create *The Song of the Whole Wide World: On Grief, Motherhood and Poetry* (2024). She asked herself this question as she wrote: "How do I get this shriek to be as articulate as I can?" This is exactly what I am attempting to do: to turn my shrieks into something articulate. Norwood explains that writing allowed her to zoom in, expanding the time she spent with Gabriel and allowing tiny moments to hold profound meaning. Likewise, writing gave me more time with my father's love. I'm grateful that writing could do that for me, even if only for a few hundred pages.

One of the last activities my father and I did together was take an airboat ride in the Everglades. It was a warm day in January and our boat was full of tourists from Ireland. My parents and I loved that people were coming from around the world to see this beautiful piece of Florida. It didn't take long before an alligator surfaced beside our boat, causing the tourists to shriek but for dad and I to smile. I took a video of the creature, zooming in on its tail as it wriggled through the murky water. I wish I had aimed the camera instead at my dad, but I didn't. Instead, I captured a small glimpse of his hairy right arm and the pre-historic creature surfacing and dipping below the water. It would be this moment that stuck with me when I named the novel. I thought about our last trip together and how misunderstood the alligator is. How it is both ferocious and a tender caretaker to their young. *This is About an Alligator and Nothing Else*, reads to me as, *This is About Grief and Nothing Else* (pp. 192-193).

That night we sat around a campfire at the edge of Lake Okeechobee listening to the water lapping against the shore, bundled up close to one another. I remember falling asleep to

the sound of my dad's snoring and waking up the next day to find a lunch spot that served sweet tea and cornbread. It is hard to think about that trip, but it is part of this work: *remembering*.

Chapter 2: How grief theories influenced my writing

> Research is formalized curiosity. It is poking and prying with a purpose. It is a seeking that he who wishes may know the cosmic secrets of the world and they that dwell therein.
>
> - Zora Neale Hurston (1942, p. 143)

When I was a senior in high school a boy broke up with me via AOL instant messenger. My dad saw how upset I was and told me to get in the truck. I didn't ask questions and he didn't ask for details. He drove us down Mills Avenue in Orlando until we reached Lil 500, a racetrack that was home to noisy go-karts and slick oiled paths. We went around and around until he figured I felt better. I was distracted by my hurt, moving my body and using my brain to pass him on the track. I don't remember who won. It wasn't how I would have chosen to repair my hurt, but it worked.

This chapter explores my experience with Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's five stages of grief and my uneasiness and fury with any prescriptive approach that involves stages or steps that supposedly lead to an end of grief. I then discuss three methods that resonated with me and my personal approach to creative grieving: Continuing Bonds Theory, the Dual Process Model and bibliotherapy. Finally, I propose that there are alternative ways to grieve beyond the stages, such as Cameron's (1998) approach of taking your injury and metabolizing it into art through a creative practice. I believe that reflexive and creative approaches will allow bereaved people agency in their processing as they enter their 'new situation'. The purpose of this chapter is not to exhaustively catalogue grief theories or prove or disprove why certain ones are helpful, but to explore what was helpful for me in my own creative grief journey.

My introduction to grief theories and how they brought me to write

The night after my father died I turned to Google for answers. It had been a surreal day watching my mother breakdown and my sister calmly move through her phone contact list to alert family and friends. I spent the day hiding in the guest bathroom crying then trying to support my mother, unsure who was comforting who. Our new family of three already felt small and strange; none of us knew what roles we were meant to take now that the mediator was gone. Surely, the internet would tell me what was going on. I typed something remarkably close to *what to do after your dad drops dead*. I wanted an authority figure to explain how to grieve: to definitively tell me what was 'normal' and what was not. My search turned up with variations of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's five stages of grief. Before that evening, I knew virtually nothing about the grieving process. By the end of it, I had the stages memorized: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance.

I sat in my parents' guest room only feet away from the bathroom floor where the night before, my father had been gasping for breath. Acceptance was the word I read over and over. I could feel the first signs of what I would call grief rage burning in my chest. This was the final stage. I was furious. I would never *accept* my father's death and I would never be done grieving his loss. Later, I would realize that Kübler-Ross's stages were incorrectly interpreted; in fact, they were meant for the dying, not the living. Then, I dismissed them as fraudulent and without compassion.

After spending more time in the world of death studies, I learned there was plenty of research but no solid answers. British psychiatrist Colin Murray Parkes explains that "most of the early studies of the psychology of bereavement were conducted on white, Christian widows" (2001, p. 34) or on young middle-aged people (p. 36). This resulted in our now culturally biased views of what 'normal grief' looks like (Parkes, 2001, p. 34) and how it is often pathologized by the medical community. While some cultures encourage overt expressions of grief, others discourage outward signs of mourning and may even consider it abnormal. This leaves the study of bereavement in a precarious place. Parkes goes on to explain, "We find psychologists blaming doctors for seeing grief as an illness, sociologists blaming psychologists for drawing universal conclusions from the study of one particular culture, psychiatrists blaming physicians for ignoring the psyche, and ethologists accusing all the rest of Anthropocene" (2001, p. 26). This can be seen in the current debate about the

DSM-5 adding 'prolonged grief disorder' as a psychological disorder, a move that, I believe, delighted big pharmaceutical companies. There is also a current debate on the usefulness of grief models and theories created by psychologists. Jennifer Senior explains:

> This is one of the many things you learn about mourning when examining it at close range: It's idiosyncratic, anarchic, polychrome. Many theories you read about grief are helpful, beautiful even, but they have a way of erasing individual experiences. Every mourner has a vastly different story to tell (Senior, 2012).

I felt Kübler-Ross had done exactly this: erased my experience. But her story was more complicated than I realized.

It was in 1969 when Kübler-Ross, a psychiatrist, identified denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance as key stages in her book *On Death and Dying*. This book brought about radical changes to the doctor patient relationship and gave people "personal sovereignty over illness and dying" by putting an emphasis on listening (Byock, 2014, xii). Kübler-Ross's book has been credited with giving rise to the hospice movement and patient-focused palliative care. Psychology professor, Dr. Mary Frances O'Connor explains these stages were never intended for the griever: they were originally meant for terminally ill patients (2022). In her book *The Grieving Brain*, O'Connor explains that applying these stages to people in the wake of bereavement was a big leap (2022, p. 73). Researchers Jason Holland and Robert Neimeyer (2001) offer that the five stages of grief persist because they offer predictability and comfort and "even a provisional "roadmap" through the terrain of loss" (2010, p. 116). O'Connor makes a similar point, stating that "the hero's journey, or in this case, the griever's journey, is an epic narrative structure we find in most books, movies, and campfire stories from Ulysses in the *Odyssey* to Eleven in *Stranger Things*" (2022, p. 74). O'Connor suggests that this leaves grievers feeling like failures if they are not "overcoming" a certain linear set of obstacles (2022, p. 74) One month before her death, Kübler-Ross and David Kessler adapted the stages by adding a sixth: meaning-making. This concept was originally developed by Robert Neimeyer (more on this later in the chapter). While I think it is dangerous to have numbered stages, costly programs for grievers, and points or lists in the grieving process, I see immense value in the idea and ritual of meaning making.

While I did not encounter Freud's writing on grief in the early days of my bereavement, my recent investigations have found his early work unhelpful if it is read to be

prescriptive. In his 1927 essay *Mourning and Melancholia*, published in the wake of World War 1, Freud argued that the purpose of mourning is for the bereaved to detach from their loved one and thus take back the energy they'd invested in the deceased (O'Rourke, 2010). One of the most important views Freud had was that mourning should come to an "end" and the bereaved invest in new relationships (Knusten, 2020). Kathleen Woodward explains that Freud believed mourning was necessary tool to get the grief "done and over with" (1993, p. 85), thereby freeing ourselves from the bond we had with our loved one.

However, Freud's views evolved when his daughter Sophie died at twenty-six, then, one year later, his beloved grandson Heinerle died in early childhood. These events deeply distressed Freud. He observed that while the intensity of pain would dissipate, a feeling of loss would remain forever (Woodward, 1993). Woodward tells us that Heinerle's death occasioned the "one time in his life that Freud cried" (1993, p. 86). Soon after, Freud wrote to a friend, explaining "I don't think I have ever experienced such grief…I work out of sheer necessity; fundamentally everything has lost its meaning to me" (Woodward, 1993, p. 87). Freud's shift in thinking suggests that grief is an incredibly personal journey that changes throughout our lives and reflects the relationships that are lost to death.

Instead of focusing on theories, stages, or the clinical side of my grief, I imagined my way forward with creativity and the written word. Nothing that came into my head or imagination was wrong; it was something to be curious about. I would share with my mom, writing group and grief group, but mostly with the page. It took time, but I now see my grief as polychrome or multicolored, like a Florida sunset. I have chosen to see my reaction my father's sudden death as anarchic or uncontrolled and without order. Colorful, explosive chaos made more sense to my pained and curious body than a set of stages.

How the Dual-Process Model can help grieving writers

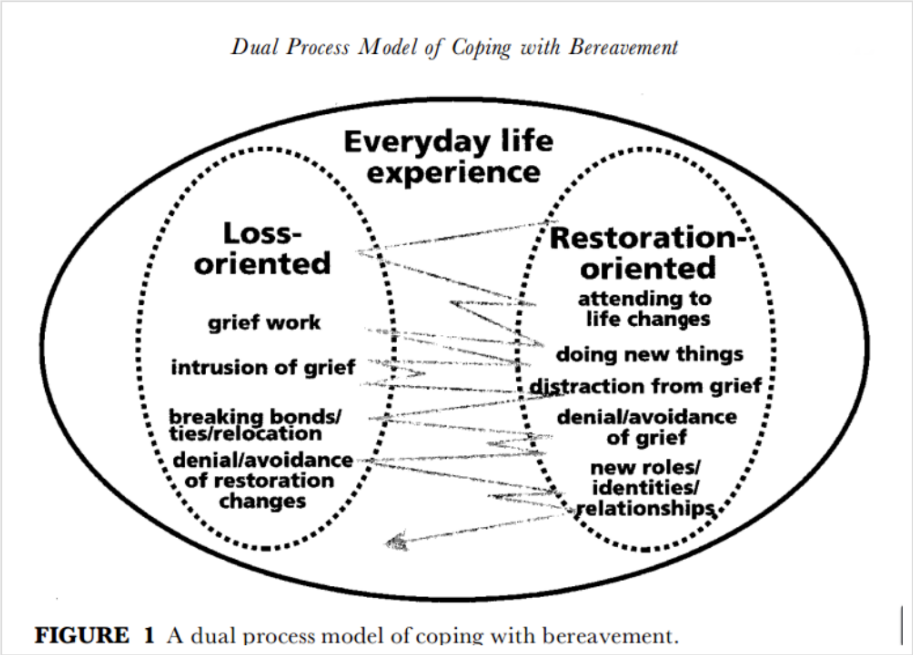

Figure 1 (Stroebe and Schutt, 1999, p. 213)

For the last several years I've negotiated how to exist in the world without my father and find time to do "grief work" (Stroebe and Schut, 1999). There is a give and a take to all of this, an oscillation similar to Margaret Stroebe and Henk Schut's Dual Process Theory (1999). This theory proposes that there are "two types of stressors, loss and restoration oriented, and a dynamic, regulatory coping process of oscillation, whereby the grieving individual at times confronts, at other times avoids, the different tasks of grieving" (1999, p. 197). This means that someone may cry in the car as a song that reminds them of their loved one, then shop for groceries. They may look at old photographs, then have a wonderful cup of coffee with a friend. The point is that they move in and out of grief in their daily life, and this balance is necessary and normal. For me, this oscillation includes visiting my mother's closet, where my father's ashes sit, then watching a TV comedy. It means replaying his death in my head over and over, then making art. It isn't a black and white oscillation, it is more like a child's swing going back and forth, back and forth.

Through my creative practice, I propose that writing fiction is a tool that bereaved people can use to as a roadmap to move in and out of their grief, in a manner that is in line with the Dual Process Model. While grievers may naturally oscillate between focusing on their loss

and daily life duties, writing can has the potential to ease the bereaved into this process in a structured, less intimidating way. It does not rely on stages or steps and is not a "phasal model". Instead, it is akin to what Stroebe and Schut describe as "a waxing and waning, an ongoing flexibility, over time" (1999, p. 213).

After my own loss, I craved a guidebook, map, or numbered list I could follow; I wanted my process to be graded and was desperate to pass. I appreciated the Dual Process Model and how I could see my entanglement with grief like the moon, in separate phases that were not always visible to the eye but always there, sometimes a sliver, other times full. I slowly returned to my novel, which gave me purpose and a playground. The act of writing was a ritual that helped me re-enter life. Higgins describes how having an "aesthetic practice" can be helpful after the death of a loved one:

> Profound loss catapults the bereaved person into an alternative "world" that differs in marked ways from the world we usually occupy, an alternative world lacking even the basic coherence we need to function. Aesthetic practices facilitate restoration of coherence to our experience, as well as reconnection with the social world and recovery from the breakdown that profound loss involves (2020, p. 9).

This was my experience. I felt as if I'd entered a different world and struggled to re-enter my former life and its duties. Working on my PhD offered me pre-determined dates and deadlines that kept me afloat and naturally moved me between loss-orientation and restorative orientation. Moments of wanting to cry while re-reading my dad's last text messages were followed by an afternoon of reading my supervisors' comments and editing the novel. These moments of reprieve allowed me to reengage with my daily activities and duties; it felt restorative. My supervisors were kind and generous with not only their academic assistance, but also did not shy away from speaking about my father with me. I felt safe in my PhD world, where I could hide inside my novel and emerge every few weeks. Writing gave me routine and somewhere for my mind to "go" every day of the pandemic. It patiently waited for me each morning, or whenever my body allowed me to get out of bed.

The beginning of the book was written in the months following my father's funeral, and they catapulted my mind and body into a much safer place: my childhood in the Florida sunshine. It was my first encounter with the restorative side of the dual process model, and I was grateful (with a twinge of guilt) for the reprieve from the other, more tumultuous side.

When immersed in the fictional world of Sweetgator, my body was in restoration mode, but as soon as I shut the computer, I was plunged back into coping with the loss. Matthews states, "Fictionalizing our experiences can provide a distance from our pain but allows us to acknowledge it at the same time" (2022, p. 137).

As an artist, I am obsessed with the idea of chewing your hurt – tasting it and swallowing it so that it can let it feed and nourish you. Cameron's view resonates with my own:

> Writing is medicine. It is an appropriate antidote to injury. It is an appropriate companion for any difficult change. Because writing is a practice of observation as much as invention… we can help it along, lean into it, cooperate. Writing allows us to rewrite our lives (1998, p. 35).

For me, this creative metabolization of "injury" meant staring out the window to observe the foxes that rest in my back garden. It meant rapidly typing on my computer when my body had a grief sensation so I could accurately portray Harley's physical reactions in the novel. It meant sitting on the floor with hundreds of printed pages of my written material organizing them into a novel with appropriate structure. It also meant listening to Paul Simon's *Graceland* on repeat and closing my eyes to revisit memories of my father.

How the Continuing Bonds Theory can help grieving writers

Writing and researching this novel has been a way of staying connected with my dad. I was able to live imaginatively in this liminal space with him, having conversations and visiting new places via Harley and D. While parts of the book dealt with grief, in the first hundred pages D is not only alive but healthy, happy, and enjoying summertime in south Florida. I could escape from a place of despair and exist with the dead within these first hundred pages. My grief would never be over; it would be ongoing, and I felt this was beautifully reflected in Klass, Silverman, and Nickman's Continuing Bonds theory (1996), who also argue that disengagement or letting go should not be the "goal" of grief (p. 4).

What does it look like to never "get over" someone's death? The poem 'Refusal to Mourn' by Andrea Cohen (2024) beautifully captures what I mean to never move on, to never give up a bond:

In lieu of

flowers, send

him back.

When one person dies, many tiny deaths come along with it (which therapists call 'secondary losses), such as the death of their voice and stories. I also lost relationships after my father died. People didn't know how to be around me, and I didn't know how to be around them. As I lost connections with family and friends, I gained them in my novel.

My characters were learning how to be human, while the people around me were losing steam. Further, this novel became my testimony. It was proof that it happened: that I had a dad who loved me very much, and who I loved very much. I had thirty years with him. It certainly was not enough but it deserved to be celebrated and mourned. I saw my novel as proof of what happened to my heart after my dad's stopped beating, but I recognise that this view raises questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. As Gaylene Perry says of her own novel, "These characters became real, and they were capable of effecting real-life change. In the first instance, they could change me" (2007, p. 43). A book has been created. It cannot die. In the same way a physical memorial can be used as a "symbolic object that establishes a permanent link with the dead" (Tutter and Wurmer, p. 33), I believe my fiction too serves as a continued bond, and a physical object that celebrates the relationship I had with my father.

Perry explains that writing can help us process grief, "reconciling the idea that some matters may never be reconcilable." This speaks to my own experience. Gently, my therapist has moved me closer and closer to the phrase: "It is what it is." At first these words made me ball my fists into small rocks and caused my breathing to stop. But the further I move through the world without my dad, and the more people continue to leave my life or choose not to engage with my grief, my therapist's words stay with me like chilled aloe to a sunburn, as do Perry's: "I am not convinced that there is always an *out* or a *through* to be reached" (2007, p. 43). There is no amount of writing that will heal me or make this okay. I am simply writing to continue a bond, to feel understood and to contribute to the understanding of grief and how to live with it.

Like Perry, I do not see my construction of this novel as "healing" and like her, I am uncomfortable with this term. Often, when I went home to visit my mom or would go on a long walk, these activities were seen as therapeutic. "I bet that will be healing," they said, as if these small moments would fix me so *they* wouldn't have to. Surely, Anna will be healed by a quick one-mile hike or swim in the ocean, perhaps she'll cry less now. It was their own way of making themselves feel better. Get healed, go out there, read those books, go on those walks, stare at a tree. *Keep your grief away from us*, is all I hear.

Translating my grief into academic language has been a challenge, even more so than the process of fictionalizing my experience of loss. It was necessary for my language to move from raw and scattered to presentable and clear. At first, writing this critical piece felt as if my experience of grief was being sanitized. However, over time I have found that being able to express myself in different forms and voices can help me to operate in a society whose grief literacy is rudimentary. To discuss grief in a more formal way may be more palatable, and less daunting, to those who are intimidated by the topic, and also help me to reach a different readership than my novel. Febos offers:

> Writing about your personal experiences is not easier than other kinds of writing. In order to write that book, I had to invest the time and energy to conduct research and craft plot, scenes, description, dialogue, pacing—all the writer's jobs. I also had to destroy my own self-image and face some unpalatable truths about my own accountability (2022, p. 19).

The time, energy, reflection and rest it took to create *This is About an Alligator and Nothing Else* has given me the ability not just to continue a bond with my father but also to make something meaningful and long-lasting to represent our love. The process has also given me insight into the grieving body, enabling me to have a healthier body and a more holistic understanding of the grieving process. As Febos explains, "Expressive writing about trauma strengthens the immune systems, decreases obsessive thinking, and contributes to the overall health of writers" (2022, p. 9).

As I wrote, researched and met other grievers, I refined Harley's story to try to achieve a truth that was larger than my own. Moreover, I began to see my work as part of a larger project in which grief can be witnessed and spoken without the fear and taboos society has attached to it. Febos believes that writing about trauma is helpful for the survivor: "In addition to the satisfaction of transforming her pain into something useful to others and connecting her

to a power greater than herself, the social change a trauma survivor manifests can serve as a kind of monument" (2022, p. 148). In the same way that survivors of physical statues and memorials are created for the dead and the survivors of war, COVID 19, and 9/11, my book is my monument. I visit it when I need to feel closer to the dead, and to remember where and who I came from. I am bonded to my father, in the life we lived together and even in his death.

How bibliotherapy can help grieving writers

In his book *How We Grieve: Relearning the World*, Thomas Attig explains how grievers turn to literature to help them comprehend their loss:

> As they turn to books in privacy, mourners frequently seek reassurance in perceptive and sympathetic *general understanding from others*. Some hope to find a book that they can give to others who seem to understand so little of their anguish and struggle; many who want to offer comfort and support also turn to books to find ways to understand better those they care about in a time of need" (1996, p.10).

I also have an unwavering desire to receive a sympathetic understanding from others. I am looking for myself in books, movies, and songs, asking: *Am I in this story? Am I seen here? Is my response to death normal? Am I normal?*

Ted Bowman explains that "stories are contagious...that self-disclosure invites self-disclosure" (2023, p. 1). In the aftermath of his wife's death, Bowman explored how bibliotherapy (also referred to as poetry therapy or therapeutic storytelling) helped him. He describes bibliotherapy as a "creative arts therapy modality that involves storytelling, the reading or writing of specific texts with the purpose of healing" (2023, p. 2). This practice does not necessarily involve a therapist. Individuals can thoughtfully choose books, art, or films that can provide comfort or advice about a specific emotional issue. This is why I read voraciously, and this is why I write as if my life depends on it. While numerous works of literature, music and poetry have offered me solace, two that have been especially powerful to me: *A Monster Calls* by Patrick Ness and *Our Father Who Art In A Tree* by Judy Pascoe.

When I first read Patrick Ness' *A Monster Calls* (2011) my father was alive. Even then, I wept so hard I could not breathe. When I finished the book, I called my parents and told them I loved them. My father would be dead within a year. Looking back, one of the

reasons this novel was so powerful is rooted in the grief work it began in me before I had experience with the death of a parent.

On my fourth read (which happened two years after my father's death) I understood my obsession with this text. It was 12-year-old Conor O'Malley's righteous anger and the yew tree. This young boy's fury over his mother's impending death became physical; he punched classmates and destroyed his grandmother's living room. His grief became physical in a way I never allowed mine to be it felt cathartic to watch this young man explode. When the talking yew tree comes to Conor's window for the first time, he is not scared. He tells the tree, 'Shout all you want…I've seen worse' (p. 22). Conor has been close to death, so a horror-film experience of a roaring yew tree hitting his window at night, or the sound of his name coming from a graveyard, could hold no fear for him. After my father's death I began watching the scary movies I had avoided for years. I was drawn to Shirely Jackson's most grotesque stories and would read them late into the night, never once being frightened. Like Conor, I had seen worst.

There is something unique about night-time grief. There is time for your brain to wander and thoughts to trickle in. It was around 3am when my mother called me seven times in a row with the terrible news. It is in the dead of night when the yew tree visits Conor to tell him stories in Ness's *A Monster Calls*. And it is in the same silence that Simone's dead father whispers to her from the tree in her backyard, beckoning her to climb to the top and speak with him, in Judy's *Our Father Who Art In A Tree* (2005). Simone is angry and refuses for anyone in her family to forget her father who died suddenly from heart complications.

Pascoe's 10-year-old narrator gripped me in the same way Conor did. These young characters and their talking grief trees gave permission to the impossible. They allowed for other worldly magic to come in and fix things, which is exactly what I was seeking in the months following my father's death. Instead of talking yew trees, I swallow melatonin to sleep and combat the insomnia that has taken over my nights. There are no signs. Nothing magical or mystical has tapped on my window and spoken to me through the wind. A butterfly did not land on my father's casket as he was wheeled out to the hearse that took him to the crematorium. There was nothing blatantly beautiful that happened after his death.

But in fiction, magic can exist. A tree can offer solace and a storm can hit your home and suck up your dead father's tools and wardrobe. It provides a different way to heal, a

different way to interact with hurt and tears. I was soothed by the idea that something beyond human relationships, medicine and therapy could exist alongside death. I craved something unbelievable because the unbelievable had happened to me. I wanted the dead to rise. I wanted magic; so, I entered the worlds of Conor and Simone as often as I needed.

I can see the benefits of bibliotherapy in my own reading practice. As I connect with fictional characters I find strategies for addressing my over-powering emotions and conflicts with friends and family. I am, nonetheless, cautious about putting the word "therapy" with books, and wonder if a more appropriate term would be biblio-processing. As I read, characters introduce me to new perspectives and change my viewpoints on how to approach my trauma. When I engage with literature through a creative grieving lens, I increase my openness, curiosity and empathy. Yet, although reading has given me comfort, ideas, and the permission to be brave in my creative practice and life, it has never been enough for me. This is where writing comes in, as C.S. Lewis explains perfectly: "I must have a drug and reading isn't a strong enough drug now. By writing it all down (all? no: one thought in a hundred) I believe I get a little outside it" (1961, p. 11).

Childhood language around grief

In my view, the modern 'grief greats' are C.S. Lewis, Max Porter, Joan Didion and Michelle Zauner. Harley, of course, does not have their eloquence and her childlike language gives me permission to play with language and use metaphors and location in place of hefty vocabulary. While writing from the perspective of such a young child has allowed me to imaginatively return to an important time in my relationship with my dad, it has also posed an interesting dilemma. I lost my father at the age of thirty, while Harley lost D when she was twelve, but after my father's sudden death I very much felt like a young child again, in desperate need of my parents and childhood home. My moods were catatonic, as if I were a toddler unable to communicate a single need to those around me. My ability to use fiction as a means of processing is explained by author and researcher Katherine Frank who explains that her fiction is "not the same as the other forms of writing that I do, and it becomes meaningful for me precisely because of this fact...It doesn't just happen, and it may be more difficult (emotionally or artistically) for the author than a traditional analysis" (2000, p. 485). I agree

with Frank and believe that fiction gives a type of freedom that my journal or a memoir could not. Frank continues to expand upon how her fiction is a practice, stating:

> I have noticed that I often turn to fiction to work out problems for which I am unable to find the appropriate theoretical language or framework, either because I am not yet quite sure where to locate my ideas in the existing literatures, or because I feel that my attempt to translate a certain experience into academic language is incomplete or deficient in some way. In attempting to render a character reliable and believable, I can also learn a great deal about the systems and environment in which this fictive person's actions become meaningful as well as my own questions, assumptions, and emotions (2000, p. 485-486).

Like Frank, I also turn to fiction to solve problems. In my novel, I do not need to tie up loose ends. I can have my own interpretations of events that my family or those close to me can object to or claim transpired in a different way. Fiction is a playground to find language, solutions and more hopeful endings than what I experience in my own life and relationships. Unlike the writing in my journal that is filled with questions and concerns, Harley's inner-world and life trajectory could be tied up in a bow; albeit it a complex, messy one.

Chapter 3: Why write fiction?

> *I write entirely to find out what I'm thinking, what I'm looking at, what I see and what it means. What I want and what I fear.*
>
> *- Joan Didion (2021)*

Writer Toni Morrison was in a dark, helpless mood when she called a friend. She explained to them that she was too depressed and paralyzed to write. They immediately responded, with "No, no, no! This is precisely the time when artists go to work—not when everything is fine, but in times of dread. That's our job!" (Morrison, 2015). This call to action snapped Morrison out of her slump, reminding her how creatives respond to chaos and sadness. This chapter will explore how the process of writing fiction gave me validation and the permission to be curious. I explain why I chose to write fiction instead of personal essays or a memoir and how this choice engaged my imagination and gave me clarity.

Writing for understanding

I am writing this chapter in Delray Beach, Florida at a local library, several miles from the Everglades. I've come home for a month to take care of my mother. It was the second middle-of-the-night call I received from her and I braced myself for the next death. Instead, it was a broken ankle. "This will heal," I told her, "but I'm coming home."

I shuttle her to doctors' appointments, cook her fresh food, and tell her it will be okay. But her fall has reminded her of her age and of my father's absence. "I'm alone," she says to me. "No one knows me anymore." I nod and stroke her hair trying not to cry. It hurts me that she thinks this, but it makes sense. "I miss David, I miss David," she says. I don't tell her how strange it is that she has now started referring to my dad by his first name. I imagine it is her way of claiming him and her grief as a wife. Our losses are different and I hate to be reminded of this. She lost her husband and I lost my father. They are not the same. His death has changed our mother-daughter relationship, and I have found myself having to be more controlled and responsible in ways I wish I didn't have to be, but it is also a privilege to love her in this new way.

Every evening around dusk, I walk alone to her mailbox at the end of the road to gather bills, advertisements for furniture stores, local politicians, and the rare letter from a

family member. Before I bring the mail home, I remove all the envelopes addressed to "David Dempsey". It's been almost four years since his death, but he still receives mail from banks about retirement funds and other insurance promotions. He never had the chance to retire by the Atlantic Ocean like they dreamed. I like to think it is a small act of love, to remove these letters. I rip them into small pieces, place them in a neighbor's trash can and walk home with the tie dye Florida sky above my head. I think of texting Georgia but decide not to. I would not know how to explain myself. Both of her parents are alive. I need thousands of words to articulate this specific pain. I needed an entire world, a whole novel to give this experience the attention it deserves. These are the type of emotions I am curious about. The feeling of seeing your dead father's name on an envelope and how it makes your heart drop and chest heave. How when one parent dies, you have a visceral, primal desire to protect the other, who still has breath. Why do people treat me like I am the same? Why doesn't everyone understand? I think to myself, I'll write until they do.

Mindset shifts while writing

At the start of my research, I innocently believed that finishing this book would mean that I was an expert in my own grief and would be healed. However, as my writing practice developed, so did my sense of its purpose. As grief was rearranging my hormones, moods, and approach to creativity, the novel's completion mattered less and less. Instead, I focused on the act of writing and the world and plot of Sweetgator, which became a balm to my loneliness. My brain was not allowed to wander to the night my father died, nor did I have time to scroll Instagram watching other people continue as normal. I had to sit still, reimagining my inner world through a fictional lens, with a character twenty years my junior.

Ocean Vuong maintains that it is the practice of writing, rather than the final product, that is of utmost importance:

> What if all of this, one book after another, is not at the end to say, "Look what I've done, look at the material manifestation that I've done," but rather that the hard diligence it takes, the care–as a filmmaker you know this, too–the care you put into making something is actually a practice? It's not a product, but a practice in order to embody life better. What if all of this fretting, because the poem demands so much care and consideration, what if all that is actually the practice to live more fully at the end? (*City Arts & Lectures*, 2023).

Like Vuong, I have found that writing about my grief allows me to "embody life better." My nervous system has calmed and I can speak about a father/daughter relationship without breaking down. Vuong reflects, "the poems and the books are the residue, the ash of the practice of paying attention" (*City Arts & Lectures*, 2023). That is what my novel now means to me.

Being curious while writing

Vuong believes that it is the author's job to tend to their curiosities (2022). Describing his own writing he offers, "I don't really know what I'm doing, I'm just following the curiosity. The work of the writer is not so much to nail anything down but to widen the theatre of wonder" (2022). This idea of "following the curiosity" provides a framework for my own approach to creative grieving. The record producer Rick Rubin believes that creatives can tap into a deeper level of thinking while writing, by "bypassing our consciousness" (2023, p. 65). As he puts it:

> We don't know how it works and we don't know why it works, yet many artists tap into something beyond themselves without recognizing the process at play, purely through accessing the subconscious…Artists have created some of their best work with fevers of 103 degrees, or in the late hours before sleep and early morning haziness (2023, p. 64).

While the art I created in the tumultuous aftermath of my father's death needed fine tuning and adjustments, I'm proud of myself for creating in such strange, sad circumstances. After I embraced the act of writing as my way of thinking and being curious, I was able to be more joyful and daring in my fiction. I agree with Rubin's belief that "All art is a work of progress. It is helpful to see the piece we're working on as an experiment" (2023, p. 78). This novel and research are an experiment that I believed saved my life.

Both Vuong and Rubin's approach to the act of writing confirms my scattered thoughts, filling notebooks with scribbles and spending hours making playlists for my characters. When people ask, "What's your book about?" I struggle to answer. I want to say, "It's about my father. It's about losing something so beautiful. It's about grief and how obsessed and curious I am with it." My process is similar to Cameron's, which she sees as "a lot like getting in the car in New York and driving to California: I knew where to start and

where to end and that Chicago was somewhere in the middle, the Rockies somewhere after that, but, beyond that, it was an adventure" (1998, p. 84). Though the end goal of my writing is to have a published novel, I have never been a writer who begins a book or story with a solid plot or mapped out journey. It always starts with curiosity and a deep desire to be understood. For years, it has always been set in Florida. Like Harley, I am in constant pursuit of the idea of home. I listen to the sounds of the place I am writing about (even if that means YouTube videos of cicadas and thunderstorms) and try to eat the food (finding sweet tea in London has proven impossible so I have had to make it), translating my emotions and dreams into landscapes and characters.

Additionally, when the story demanded that I imagine how Harley would feel years after D's death, I needed to put myself in that psychological space. Writing impelled me to envisage Harley's future, and by extension, my own; in the height of my grief and depression, hope existed, even if it was only on the page. My writing, as Vuong proposed, indeed helped me 'widen' my own theatre of wonder, going so far as to offer the possibility that I might live a full life without my dad.

This is not navel gazing

I fight the idea that writing is a selfish act. Julia Cameron's words help to remind me that self-analysis and introspection (seen by some as navel-gazing) has a place in writing. She observes, "Valuing our experience is not narcissism. It is not endless self-involvement. It is rather, the act of paying active witness to ourselves and to our world" (1998, p. 59). Ultimately, I know that no one will understand my specific grief. I cannot even understand my own mother's and we have lost the same person. But I've found it a worthwhile task, attempting to explain a beautiful father-daughter relationship set in my home state.

I wanted to write about a grieving daughter where nothing massive happens after death. She does not build a school for orphans; she does not fall in love or go on to become a famous heart surgeon or ecologist. Often in novels and films about loss and grief the main characters are launched into something impressive, their own hero's journey. What if the impressive thing is continuing to live? Harley doesn't need to rise to greatness. She is content. It is Raf who wants more. Harley just wants to find home. Consistency. Stability. As I write her story, I write my own.

Writing is a safe container to explore grief

When I struggle to write or need a moment of calm, I stare out the window. I also use this 'mind-wandering' technique when my writing becomes emotionally overwhelming; it helps me to re-connect with my body. It was during one of these window meditations that I had a moment of clarity about my practice. I was gazing at a leafy branch outside the library when I noticed a large wasp tapping itself against the glass over and over. At first I was alarmed and moved away, but then I saw the window was shut tight so the wasp had no way of entering. I inched closer and noticed its translucent wings and thin yellow stripes. I whispered to the insect, reminding it that there was freedom if it would simply fly in the other direction. The bug and its stinger being safely on the other side of the glass were the perfect metaphor for how I've taught myself to grieve creatively. Just as the glass window physically protects me from being stung, my fictional characters emotionally protect me from my personal grief. I am safe to step closer to my pain and notice its soft and sharp edges because there is a layer of protection. I can be playful and curious. It cannot sting me. Looking at grief intellectually or through the lens of literature allowed me to have some measure of control of it. At times, my sorrow felt contained by the PhD. Approaching death with journals, articles and research allowed me to approach the topic with a protective screen.

Researchers Bodil Furnes and Elin Dysvik propose that writing programs can be beneficial to grieving people. They observe, "Writing down one's own ideas opens a channel that allows a person to become acquainted with his or her own thinking potential" (Furnes and Dysvik, 2010, p. 426). I would elaborate and add that I also become more aware of my emotional potential. They continue, "When an individual is dealing with very difficult, unpleasant, and painful issues in the grief process, focused writing may be experienced as gentler than a direct, undisguised, free-writing form" (p. 428). Author Isabel Allende also found solace in the writing after the death of her daughter Paula, explaining:

> In the process of writing and pains of my fate, and telling part of the history of my country, I found that life became more comprehensible and the world more tolerable. I felt that my roots had been recovered and that during that patient exercise of daily writing I had also recovered the anecdotes of the past, and recalling the emotions my own pro. (1989, p. 43).

Like Allende, drafting my novel and having my characters interact with one another gave me a place to make the world more tolerable. It also gave me a space to practice being human again in between bouts of crying, so maybe, one day I could head back to the dance floor with my friends. I felt a sense of 'recovery': of being able to re-live, re-witness my own childhood through an imagining of Harley's. It felt safe in those early pages of my book.

Finding my father on my map again

Sociologist Neal Krause conducted a study with older Japanese people who experienced the death of a loved one. Three years after the death, they found those who had a positive view of life after death (such as an afterlife) had lower blood pressure than those who didn't (O'Connor, 2022, p. 18). The positive outlook was measurably helpful to the body and nervous system. Though I know that writing will not bring my father back or restore my former life, I believe it has eased my nervous system and given my grief a destination, which according to this study is helpful for the brain. Professor Mary Frances O'Connor explains in her book, *The Grieving Brain* that that our brains struggle with loss because it has created a "map" for your loved one; you can imagine where they are, the place they rest their head at night and where they eat their morning bowl of cereal (O'Connor, 2022, p. 11). You know where to go to find them – even if that is *in* your brain. When that person dies, your mind can no longer locate them, which causes distress. O'Connor explains, "If your brain cannot comprehend that something as abstract as death has happened, it cannot understand where the deceased is in space and time, or why they are not *here*, *now* and *close*" (2022, p. 27). Grieving brains struggle because they no longer have a map of where their person is. While my mother finds comfort in my father being in heaven, I have had to search elsewhere. Gravestones and urns for ashes can also help our brains with this re-mapping and I propose that writing is another place where we can locate our dead loved ones. Though my father is no longer on Earth, it gives me some semblance of comfort that his ashes are sitting in my mother's closet. If I think harder than that about where he is (or isn't), I become overwhelmed and can feel my chest tightening and my breath quickening. Often, when my brain wants to "find" my father, the next best thing I can do is visit my novel. It is my ritual. My practice. If his grave was down the road I would go there and speak to him. Instead, he lives in a Word document, and I talk to him there.

Why not memoir?

In an email I wrote my parents in October 2, 2019, four months before my father's death, I ask my parents:

> Now this is annoying and intrusive but I want to check...have you both been to your doctors lately? Are you keeping up with the appointments you need to go to? Please, please, please stay on top of your health. If something feels strange, listen to your body. And if anything ever happens and you find something wrong don't wait to tell me. Christina and I would want to know right away.

My mom replied to the email telling me to worry less. My dad never replied. I wept after re-reading these emails months and even years later. Did my body know something? Should I have made sure my dad read it? These bouts of sadness cause me to walk away from my writing, stalling the art and sending my day into darkness. Perhaps in a decade or two I will be able to think of those memories, for now, only fiction feels safe.

A memoir of this experience would have forced me to explain the texture and smell of the four large peace lilies at his church service or how my uncle and cousins held the coffin as it was rolled down the aisle of our church and how the whiskey at his memorial brought me no joy. The drunkenness of my dad's golf buddy who my father never considered a close friend, and how uncomfortable his hugs made me weren't feelings I wanted to reveal or sit with for lengthy periods of time in my writing practice. That would not feel like art, it would feel like torture; the ripping off of a band aid over and over. I didn't hide behind Harley but found it easier to speak her grief freely, which was a mix of my grief, my mother's, and others who I had met. Fiction also allowed me to approach painful and difficult memories and emotions. While I avoided thinking about the moment I learned of my father's death, I was able to revisit this through the most difficult scene in the book: the moment Harley finds out D is dead. My friend (and fellow fatherless daughter) Zosia made me realize I was holding back. She wanted to hear Harley scream when she found out her father was dead; she did not want me to tell the reader. I admitted to her that I wrote the Magic Kingdom chapters quickly, without re-reading or tweaking for clarity. She encouraged me to return the scene on Main Street, to notice Harley's body and voice. She encouraged me to bring my artistry to this moment (pp. 138-141). Writing a novel rather than a memoir also meant that I was able to do other things when writing than just sitting and remembering. I could dream. I could put my

characters in a river. They could see herons and pythons. It was almost like having a new adventure with my dad.

Memoirs that helped

I admire the vulnerability of authors such as C.S. Lewis, Joyce Carol Oates, Joan Didion and Naja Marie Aidt who have written memoirs about the deaths of their beloved spouses and children. Each were writers before their respective losses so it makes beautiful sense that they turned to their art. In her memoir, *A Widow's Story,* Oates explains, "For writing is a solitary occupation, and one of its hazards is loneliness. But an advantage of loneliness is privacy, autonomy, freedom" (2008, p. 2). While writing memoir felt like freedom for Oates, it felt like a trap to me. The construction of my novel happened in the immediate aftermath of my father's death and I needed distance. Lewis's *A Grief Observed* was originally published 1961 with a pseudonym, and he was trying to avoid a connection to the text. This is also why he did not name his wife, Joy Davidson, and instead referred to her as "H" throughout the essay. It was not until after his death in 1963 that it was republished under his name (Hooper, 1996). It was Lewis who inspired me to not use the word dad throughout my novel and instead have Harley call him "D." It was too hard for me to hear the word dad or see it on the screen; the distance helped and it gave me the idea for the last page when Harley can finally say his name (p. 214).

Memoir often asks you to dig into wounds and put your pain on the page. I knew this genre of writing would be risky while I was emotionally vulnerable and isolated during the pandemic. I needed something joyful and full of magic; fiction could give me that. Febos explains that an "analytical part of me takes over when I write and creates a distance between me and the subject, and in that space, I have always been able to breathe. Like a cracked door the cold could seep through, so did the truth begin to seep into me" (2022, p. 122). This was my experience as well: when I wrote the novel I was able to crack the door open, there was a distance and I felt safe. I was excited to convey a loving family where the ties that bond between characters was not reliant on them being blood relations. I remember my mom asking me if the end of my novel was sad. "She ends up with someone from her family, right?" I told her no, but that was okay because I grew up without my biological family, and Harley would do the same. She would be okay, even if she did not end up living with her blood relatives.

My fiction is not therapy

In *Writing into the Wound: Understanding Trauma, Truth and Language*, Roxane Gay reminds us, "We are walking wounds, but I am not sure any of us know quite how to talk about it" (2021, p.17). In my novel I seek to find a way to talk about "it" – in my case "it" being death and its aftermath. It is my strong belief that there is no better place to excavate and explore an emotional wound than in fiction, where your imagination can have as many encounters and conversations as needed. Writing protects you. It gives you a place to put people's unkind words and strange reactions to death.

For Gay, to write about trauma goes beyond a mere expression of feelings:

> So many people assume that when you're writing about trauma, when you're writing about marginalization, oppression, whatever, anything sort of negative, that you're writing only from emotion…people underestimate that it's a craft. That writing is a job and I'm not just doing it to exorcise my demons, I'm doing it to elicit a response from the reader and to accomplish something (2021, p. 36).

I agree that writing about trauma is a craft. As mentioned before, in the later drafts of my novel the writing had something to accomplish; it had a clear mission. Harley was written to be deeply lovable with a clear punchy voice and a deep care for land and animals so that my reader would sit in her pain alongside of her, not in pity but with empathy. This was my intention: to make my audience experience grief or connect to their own through characters they cared about. To do this, I needed to be careful to keep some critical distance, rather than re-triggering myself. This is why, in tandem with writing the novel, I was also partaking in weekly therapy sessions as well as Eye Movement Desensitisation and Reprocessing or EMDR. According to the EMDR institute, it is a psychotherapy treatment used to alleviate distress attached to traumatic events (2025). While I don't have time to fully explore the connections between EMDR and fiction writing here, I believe there is a meaningful link between the two: both involve movement, whether it's the eye movements in EMDR or the creative flow of writing that can help process and shift memories within our minds. I propose that writing, like EMDR, might serve as a powerful tool for emotional processing.

This is About an Alligator and Nothing Else was born out of incredibly small snippets, reactions, and moments from my daily life. This took years. I did not go from my father's

funeral to my writing desk with speed and ease, writing thousands of words at a time. When I wrote, I would draw from simple, everyday life moments. If I were on the bus and a little girl cried and whimpered for her daddy, I would scribble down my jealousy. If I was at a gathering of new friends and someone asked me where my parents lived, I would jot down their uncomfortable reaction and how their eyes darted to other parts of the room planning their escape after they heard my response. I bullet-pointed angry, raw emotions in Moleskine journals or the Notes section of my iPhone. It was the former that held my rawest emotions. I then weaved my reactions and emotions into my 12-year-old protagonist. I was chewing on the grief, swallowing it, and turning it into art: *metabolizing* it as Cameron says. I delighted in reading the work back to myself the next day and found deep joy in Harley's company and her world. Finally, I was not alone.

Gay's observations about both her own personal trauma and collective trauma strikes a chord with me. She explains, "My responsibility is to write beyond my personal feelings. My responsibility is to tell a story that will inform people or get them to give a damn" (p. 29). This is my purpose as an artist, as a writer: to make people care. I wanted my readers to *care* about the death of Harley's mother and father. I wanted them to yearn to see Florida and to love the manatees, herons and alligators that live there. I found it impossible to look the other way when death came for my dad. I was pre-occupied with the hurt. I needed to hold space for my darkness, to be a witness to my body, and to write the story I needed to in order to live in my body again.

Gay writes in a comparable manner about the nonlinear, messiness of healing:

> We don't talk a lot about the messiness of recovery, because people like to believe that it is a contained and discrete experience. It happens, it's over, you heal, you move on. You heal, but sometimes the wound reopens, and it heals again and then reopens and scar tissue develops, and so on. I try to also accommodate that in my writing so that people are clear that I'm not offering you some sort of magical solution. This is not therapy. This is just a memoir (2021).

Similar to Gay's (2021) work, writing my novel was not therapy; I even struggle to say it was therapeutic. It was *comforting* to write, but it did not replace the necessity of working with a trained psychologist, peer support groups and medication. Writing was a piece of the puzzle, but just one of the ingredients I needed to survive my new situation.

After the death of his mother in 2019, Vuong wrote a poetry collection titled *Time is a mother* (2022). After its completion, he explained in an interview that although he was not "free" of the feelings of grief, he knew more about them. He felt grounded but not 'healed' (Salzberg and Shaheen, 2022). I appreciate how Vuong moved the conversation about writing difficult topics away from catharsis, which I believe has become a cliché. When I tell someone that I am writing about grief I see panic in their faces, their brain reaching for words to assuage the awkwardness. I stand and wait, know what's coming next. "That must be cathartic," they say. I smile and say nothing, but in the future I may draw on Vuong's response:

> The common narrative around writing is that it should be catharsis and cathartic and I don't feel that way. It's a conduit of energy, the grief is also an energy. It's never been cathartic for me but there is a satisfaction in building something that could then be shared (Salzberg and Shaheen, 2022).

This resonates with my own writing. I feel held by the pages and paragraphs but it does not make me feel any less heavy with sadness. Within the pages of my novel, I feel that my father can momentarily exist, and that aspects of our relationship can be witnessed.

Fiction as a space for practicing radical hope

The poet laurate Ada Limón also approaches her writing as a place of discovery, explaining, "poetry isn't a place of answers and easy solutions. It is a place we can admit to an unknowing" (PBS NewsHour, 2022). She continues, "At a time when language is often used only as a blunt tool, poetry reminds us that language can also be used for nuance, mystery, and even radical hope" (PBS NewsHour, 2018). Before my father's death I knew how to create an imaginative world. I had a resource: literature. My own and others. I am convinced that having an already-formed artistic practice gave me a structured workspace for my grief, a playground of sorts. I knew how to go down the slide on my own and where the water fountain was. I was able to go there, into my writing practice, alone and without handholding. I could simply play, experiment, and see what felt right or not.

Fiction is a space to practice radical hope. This is what I've done through the community of Sweetgator, especially in the aftermath of a devastating hurricane. By the end of *This is About an Alligator and Nothing Else,* Harley is several years into her grief journey

and has lived with this new reality longer than I have (pp. 211-214). Although she is forever changed, she is no longer in a state of trauma or depression but has reached a place of relative peace. Fiction has enabled me to move time forward, something I'm desperate to do. I want to speed my mother's healing and my own and reach a state of calm within my body. I want to know that I can survive this and live with joy.

Vuong explains that his impatience also draws him to fictional words: "When you're a writer, within a single sentence, a city can rise or fall. It could be daylight or night-time. And if you write it, it's true. A couple seconds later, there it is" (PBS NewsHour, 2022). The control over time that writing gave me was comforting. The plot was in my hands: I could be brutal then tender to my characters, allowing them to have conversations I wasn't able to. I could ensure that Harley, Terry, Raf and Mrs. Padilla were mending and moving forward, and I did this because I desperately want it for myself and my family. Moreover, readers have needs too. I recognise that I couldn't leave a YA/crossover audience in a place that was too bleak. They need consolation and hope, as I do. This is why I chose to not end Harley's story when she is twelve. Instead, the novel ends five years later when she is a Senior in high school. We see that Harley and her Sweetwater family are recovering and finding stability and joy again. Fiction allows for this radical hope in an imaginative future. I gave hope to my readers, and I gave it to myself.

Chapter 4: Harley and me

> *"Like the dead-seeming, cold rocks, I have memories within that came out of the material that went to make me. Time and place have had their say."*
>
> *-Zora Neale Hurston (1942, p. 2)*

"The story has a happy ending, right?" my mom asks.

I turn to my mom, "are you happy?"

She pauses. We talk about how we will always miss David, my dad. We talk about the joy we have felt since his death, like the birth of my nephews Caleb and Greyson and long afternoons walking along south Florida beaches.

"It's not a happy ending, and it's not bad either."

"Well, she at least ends up with her family, right?"

I laugh and remind my mom she adopted me and that technically *I* did not end up with my biological family, but I am deeply content. This would be the case for Harley as well. My journey to knowing I can create community and be loved began long before this novel. It started with my adoption.

The importance of place in my writing

I was born on June 27, 1989, in Jacksonville, Florida. The hospital was located between the St. Johns River and the Atlantic Ocean, a fitting start for a child born in the Sunshine State. Two days after my birth, I was adopted by my parents, Marie and David Dempsey. Years later, therapists, strangers and even an astrologist would point to this exact moment of my birth parents "abandoning me" as my Chiron or "core wound". I've long ignored the suggestion that being "abandoned" would determine aspects of my personality. Though, my art is obsessed with family bonds, and the desire for people to create communities, friendships, and connections. This is a testament to the deep love I was given by people who had no biological connection to me.

As a child, I had found it comforting to fill in the gaps of my birth story with my own musings of who my birth parents might be. Sometimes I would imagine they deeply missed me and would scare myself into believing they could change their minds and take me back.

Other times I imagined they had forgotten about me altogether and went on to have more children, my half-brothers, and sisters. I never shared these thoughts with my family. The stories lived in my head and over the years I built my birth parents into something closer to folklore than reality, similar to what Harley does with her own mother (p. 12). Through the course of my research and novel, I have come to realize that all those years of imagining versions of my origin story have probably impacted my writing. The search for home within people and places. The more I question my choices of making twelve-year-old Harley my narrator and the fictional town of Sweetgator the place of the main action, the more I wonder if this is where my fascination and ability to create fictional connections began: in a hospital room in northeast Florida, waiting for my adoptive family to arrive.

Several years after I was born, my parents were contacted by their adoption lawyer about another baby who needed a home. They said, "No, Anna made our family complete." I would take my role as the youngest in the family very seriously. I made us whole, and it was my job to keep us together. Strangers and friends have asked: don't you want to meet them? Have you ever looked for them? My answer, for an exceptionally long time was no. I have sat in several offices across from well-meaning professionals who insist everything comes back to this moment in my life, making it hard for me to bring any other hurt or problem to a professional. I remain curious, but I do not let their words stick. Being adopted is an odd thing to wrap my mind around, but I am grateful to my biological parents and my parents. They have taught me that family has absolutely nothing to do with blood. I have given this belief system to Harley whose family goes beyond the nuclear, societal vision. In writing Harley, I wanted to create a character who, from an early age, knew what it meant to miss something or someone you had never met. I did not 'kill off' Harley's mother as an interesting plot device. At first, I did it because I wanted to highlight D and Harley's relationship. But once I reached the end of the book, I realized other attachments were at play in my own writing. In the creation of this novel, I've had to tap into my own 'motherlessness'. Of course, I did grow up with a mother: a deeply empathetic, patient and loving one. But she does not have scars on her stomach or tales of how I kicked, moved, and caused her heartburn. This makes her no less my mother. I repeat, it makes her no less my mother. But because of this knowledge I can relate to Harley, whose mother died when she was a child. I can imagine this loss: while it's different than my own, neither of us truly 'met' our mothers.

Since my father died, I have had to rebuild my relationships and have found the greatest comfort in community organizations, groups, and events. All of these connections are outside of my family, and I think that's important to note. I have been fortunate to find resources through The Dinner Party, an online and in-person grief organization based in the U.S., as well as The New Normal Charity (TNN) in the UK. In addition to grief groups, I have begun volunteering at Camp Erin, a free bereavement camp for children across the U.S. and Canada. I am so grateful for my "chosen grief family." There is a reason why Harley does not end up with her biological family members at the end of the novel. Harley's loss is irreplaceable not because it is of a biological parent but because of the gentle and beautiful relationship she has with him. It is community that comes to her rescue, not her blood family.

It was not until my dad died that I began to wonder about my biological family. With him gone, there was a gap I was desperate to fill. My curiosities took over, grasping at anything to distract from his physical absence. Where did my thick curly hair come from? Do I have half brothers and sisters? My father had brown hair and blue eyes: we looked alike. But now that he was gone I felt adrift, as if part of me had disappeared. Connecting to my biology, I thought, would offer comfort. I finally asked my mother how much she knew about my biological family; I did not want names only general facts. She handed me letter that she'd kept for 30 years. It was from a family counselor who had interviewed my biological mother and father who were both teenagers at the time of my birth. I locked myself in a room and read the letter dozens of times. It turns out my brown hair was from my Lebanese father, my pale skin from my Irish mother. He loved to surf and she was described as effervescent.

It had taken my father's death for me to finally have the courage to ask: *where do I come from?* The writing was my way of asking: *who am I now?*

Conclusion

Alligators have excellent peripheral vision, which make them great hunters. They can also see directly in front of themselves, allowing them a wider view than humans. In fact, the only place they cannot see is the area directly behind them; it is their blind spot. As I wrote the novel, it seemed the only place I *could* look was behind. I was more comfortable in the past, the place where everyone I loved was still alive. Through this artistic practice, I have learned to be more like the alligator and turn my vision to what lies ahead, which for many years I was unable to

face. Fiction writing widened my lens to be more like the alligator, to open myself to a theatre of wonder and possibilities my life could hold off the page. I knew I would leave Harley in a safe place by the end of the novel, so why not give that security to myself as well?

I wrote to find the periphery, the things I could not yet see. I wrote out this grief, gathered up all my lost feelings and put them onto a page where they spoke to each other. The hope was to eventually face forward, and I believe I now do, mostly. I find camaraderie in Zora Neale Hurston's autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road*. After her mother died Hurston explains:

> There was an end to my journey, and it had happiness in it for me. It was certain and sure. But the way! Its agony was equally certain. It was before me, and no one could spare me my pilgrimage. The rod of complement was laid to my back. I must go the way (1942, p. 86).

Like Hurston, *no one could spare me my pilgrimage*. I sit with this line; I repeat it over like the chorus of my favorite song. Since beginning my grief journey, I have become obsessed with cycles. The cycle of the seasons, how trees interact with their surroundings and the consistency of the sun setting and rising each day. I turn towards the natural world because it does not ignore life, death, and change. It is a circle, going round and round like Harley and Raf did on the teacups in Magic Kingdom before they found out that D was dead. Round and round I still go, with the seasons and with my grief.

This brings me to *This is About an Alligator and Nothing Else* and Harley Mendoza. The fictional character named after my father's old motorcycle and my grandmother's last name. With her help, I have created my own world full of conversations, images, and heartbreak. I lived thirty years with my dad, and I relived some of those years on the pages of this novel. It is not because I have complicated grief or am unwilling to live in the "real" world. It is my way of existing. It is a gift to myself, to show the path I took into the darkness and back into a brighter place. There is no letting go of the great love I have for my father, there is no replacing it or moving on. There is only making room for something else. My goal was not to find meaning in his death, nor was it to produce something beautiful out of my sadness. I am still sad. I found no meaning. I simply wanted to find a way to exist inside my body; a body that can hold many things, including memories, love, and trauma. I carry my father in my dreams and in my stories. What a terrifying but beautiful thing. This novel is witness to my heaviness. It is *my* grief observed (Lewis, 1961).

As I finish this work, Santana's *Soul Sacrifice* plays in the background, and I think of the first piece I wrote after my father's death: his eulogy. Since then, countless words have poured (or been chiseled) out of me and a novel now exists. I am struck by how far I've come and how much joy I have experienced. In my heart, I believe I've expressed my love ongoing for him. There are no happy conclusions, no easy answers, only brief moments of respite between the tears and gasps for breath. My art is a reminder that I still have air in my lungs, a heart that continues to beat. How I wish yours was still beating, Dad.

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