

## Birds of a Feather: A Children's Story of Love, Loss, and What Came Next

**Tom Crice**

**Ellen Rakatansky, Illustrator**

DoveTale Press (May 31, 2018)

Hardcover \$11.95 (27pp)

978-0-9996853-0-3

*Birds of a Feather is a lovely story about a boy and his grandfather that opens up space for discussions of grief.*

A young boy struggles to understand his feelings following the death of his beloved grandfather in Tom Crice's moving picture book *Birds of a Feather*.

Getting out of the big city to spend time in his grandfather's small Texas town was always the highlight of the summer for one little boy. But word arrives that his grandfather has unexpectedly passed away. Feelings of sadness, anger, and confusion threaten to overwhelm the young boy—until the surprising arrival of two birds on a subway train gives him a new perspective.

Inspired by real events, the story is narrated from the point of view of a grown man reminiscing about his idyllic childhood days spent delivering flowers from his grandfather's shop, enjoying ice-cold sodas in glass bottles, playing dominoes, and catching fireflies. "Birds of a feather," the grandfather and his grandson share a special relationship. It is the focus of the book. No mention is made of a grandmother, father, or any relatives other than the boy's mother. Only the grandfather, LeRoy, is given an actual name, setting him apart.

Ellen Rakatansky's illustrations depict landscapes and scenes in soothing pastel colors done in a natural, freehand style with basic forms and lines. Subway cars, skyscrapers, stained-glass windows, and sunsets are all shown in shades of lavender, citron, periwinkle, and daffodil, befitting the book's flower shop. One small face in the delivery truck window gives a glimpse of the unnamed boy among the otherwise portrait- and figure-free illustrations.

The boy's mother is always in the periphery. She becomes an exceptional example of how to help a child work through the stages of grief. She is patient and calm, gives the boy space to work out his feelings, and is available to talk when he is ready. The boy himself exhibits all the traits typical in young children dealing with loss. His evolution is gradual and feels sincere. He attempts to move on with his life while working through unsettling feelings and occasional fits of anger.

When two birds accidentally enter a subway car and exit at different stations, the boy reasons that even though they are separated, they can still feel the excitement of flying: "life was still a big adventure." This simple but profound statement about carrying on after experiencing loss leads to a new mantra, "cheep-cheep," accompanied by some arm-wing flapping gestures that give children happy, hopeful imagery and a simple analogy to consider.

A versatile story, Tom Crice's *Birds of a Feather* may be shared as a celebration, recalling memories of loved ones, used as a springboard for opening discussions about death, as a tool for parents, teachers, or counselors to use when primary- or elementary-aged children are struggling with grief, or simply enjoyed as a lovely story about a boy and his grandfather.

## PALLAS GATES MCCORQUODALE (August 24, 2018)

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