

The Semicolon

Britt Saylor

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*With its poignant and metaphorical take on grief, *The Semicolon* is a powerful picture book about finding hope after loss.*

Britt Saylor's thoughtful picture book *The Semicolon* addresses the confusion and overwhelm of mourning.

After the loss of their father, a child is plagued by nightmares in which they are sucked into a pit of despair. When their father's colleague Mr. Smeechie, a grammar teacher, gifts them their father's old grammar book, the dream monster evolves into a sentence-ending period that pulls the narrator in like a black hole. They use the other punctuation marks in their father's grammar book as guidance to navigate their grief, and when Mr. Smeechie shares the meaning behind their father's favorite symbol, the child finds renewed hope.

Quotation and punctuation marks are the symbolic motif that runs throughout the story, embodying the child's struggle to find the right words to convey their grief. While a period is a black hole that signifies a definite end, a comma is a lifeboat that carries the child over the tumultuous sea of sorrow. Their discovery of the semicolon ties the emotional threads together, symbolizing healing and the fact that life goes on after loss.

The grammatical marks, letters, and words that make up the child's jumbled thoughts swim across the illustrations at first, evoking the chaos and confusion of immediate grief. From this chaos comes order as the child finds their voice and identifies their emotions. This coming together and understanding is reflected in the events of the story too—as when the child begins to speak to Mr. Smeechie after a time of feeling at a loss for words, and in the shift in color saturation of the illustrations as the story progresses.

From the dark, stormy waters of the nightmare emerges a bright, breezy meadow filled with happy memories and hopeful possibilities; the thick shadows of the book's first half fade as light begins to stream in through windows and doors left ajar as the story moves toward its conclusion. Papers scattered across desks, half-empty mugs of tea, framed photographs on shelves, and other background details lead to vibrancy. The child's heartbreak, confusion, and hope are palpable in their facial expressions—and in the book's precise word choices too: they are “slurped” into despair and “ferried” into healing.

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AIMÉE JODOIN (April 4, 2023)

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