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Autobiography & Memoir

We'll Be the Last Ones to Let You Down: Memoir of a Gravedigger's Daughter
Rachael Hanel
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Grief becomes personal for gravedigger's daughter when her father passes away.

Rachael Hanel knew about death. Since her father was a gravedigger, she had spent many childhood hours playing in graveyards, watching funerals, and hearing her mother tell detailed stories about past suicides, murders, and other tragedies that were part of their small town's history. In Hanel's creative memoir, *We'll Be the Last Ones to Let You Down*, she reflects on her observations and growing awareness of the impact of death on her neighbors, her community, her family, and herself.

Realizing from an early age that life eventually ends and that many townspeople would someday gather around one of the graves her father had dug to say final goodbyes, Hanel gradually becomes aware that seeing the effects of death and feeling them are not the same. She begins to notice that grief is a different issue, and it becomes personal when her father passes away. Suddenly, death is not just something associated with watching her father do his job or seeing other people crying and suffering. Mourning herself, Hanel recounts her walk through the various stages of her awakening.

Death can be a daunting topic on which to base a book, but Hanel, a former journalist who has written over twenty nonfiction children's books, skillfully prevents the narrative from becoming unnecessarily morbid or sensationalizing the subject. Her vivid descriptions of scenes allow the reader to imagine being there and feeling the emotions of the moment. The tone throughout is somber, but not to the point of uneasiness. Ironically, Hanel's caring and compassionate recollections of tragic stories about untimely deaths seem to bring those characters to life, allowing the reader to participate in the grief of the loss.

Hanel excels at being able to weave together seemingly contradictory themes as she tells her stories. For example, while in one moment there is sadness at the loss of a family member,

there is also the sense of loving family bonds and a desire to cherish the living. She is particularly effective in balancing the various themes while simultaneously developing them each appropriately.

This is definitely not a book you would take to the beach for an afternoon of light reading. But Hanel's style and openness are so compelling that it leaves the feeling that reading it was time well spent.

Jeff Friend