

Book Review: *Laughing in a Waterfall*

By Marianne Dietzel, Laughing Bridge Publishing, June 2010

Reviewed by Chris Lewis

Anyone out there teaching a college or graduate-level course in Death and Dying or Grief and Loss? For your classes, I would heartily recommend Marianne Dietzel's loving chronicle, *Laughing in a Waterfall*, a seemingly unlikely (but well-explained) title for such an honest portrayal of the depths of parental grief.

Post-high school educational settings could make wonderful use of Ms. Dietzel's intensely personal story, which describes in detail the brief, unusual life of her only daughter Nina, because in her own narrative are imbedded one after another of generalizable truths and commonly experienced grief reactions. One can imagine, for example, asking students to circle phrases or paragraphs in this family's stunning story which seem to illustrate common themes or behaviors of heavy grief. Their texts would be laden with circles of recognition.

This eloquent bereaved mother did not set out to write for the reader's learning, although she was a teacher by profession at the time. She tells us

"...Dennis took me in his arms and said, 'I am going to miss her so much!' I could not even fathom missing her; it was too tame of a word for what I was feeling. I couldn't look ahead to what life might look like in the future. I didn't want to go there. Although we cried in each other's arms, my husband and I could not comfort each other. The same pain for which there was no comfort gripped us both."

that she "wanted the facts clearly recorded" for Nina's two brothers (which explains the detailing of names and places), and that "writing was a crucial part of my grief journey." While many of those who mourn use writing as a healing tool, Ms. Dietzel writes with such intelligence and gracefulness that we are swept along as she beautifully shares her journey with us.

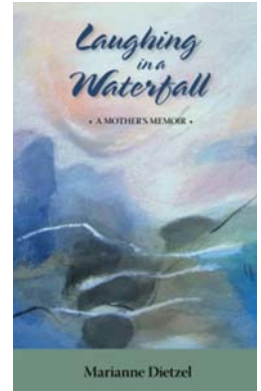
Besides her daughter Nina who died instantly with her closest friend Kirsten, the author also suffers the loss of her mother and a dear friend, Kirsten's Dad, all in a three-year span. She uses the metaphor of flowers in various stages of bloom to put these deaths in perspective, and to gently compare her own grief over each one. Each death is notable from a learning standpoint: The mother and "Oma" who died so slowly, with awareness going first; the friend Paul, whose brief illness and home funeral prepared the author's family for what they would soon have to do again; Kirsten, the soul sister who companioned Nina even into eternity; and the author's beloved first-born Nina, whose death pushed her mother into the darkness of wishing to be dead, for "it was too hard to live here without her."

Laughing in a Waterfall is especially compelling reading at this late-autumn time of year, since Nina died the day after Thanksgiving and her family, who had strong Advent and Christmas traditions, searched for ways to cope. "Because Nina died at the beginning of Advent, we already had rituals for the season that we built upon to create a space to honor her and our grief. Advent would never be the same for us again." Then, because Nina's death occurred far from home where she was attending school, there was a me-

morial service on an especially bittersweet day: "Saturday, December 21, the day of the memorial, was the day that Nina was scheduled to arrive home from Harlemville for Christmas. Oh, what would it have been like if she had arrived for Christmas, year after year, with different stories of her life, of adventures and misadventures?... In the end, we just don't know. We can only know that this is how it went, and trust that this is how it was meant to have gone."

In this painfully honest account, there are so many wonderful examples of meaning-making by those who loved and missed Nina. From her youngest brother telling his Mom that "if we keep smiling our hearts won't stop beating," to the older son playing Faure's "Elegy" on his cello at his own sister's memorial, to dad Dennis, with a cordless drill, "attaching the lids to the coffins, driving the screws into the predrilled holes," to Marianne herself "waiting in the grocery store line, or swimming at the beach, I looked at the individuals who came across my path differently. I sensed their uniqueness, how special they were to the people close to them, and how much they would be missed if they were to die."

By the end of this story the reader feels an intimacy with the Dietzel family, who are based in the Twin Cities. Minnesota readers will recognize numerous familiar places mentioned in the book. A very interesting side benefit is learning more about Camp Hill Village, an intentional community about 100 miles northwest of the Twin Cities, where the Dietzel family lived for periods of time, alternating with



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city life in the metro area. The author candidly describes the joys and challenges for her in such an uncommon lifestyle, and includes its details so we can get to know her beloved Nina, who thrived there, even better.

If you read *Laughing in a Waterfall* as a griever, you will find yourself nodding and being validated by the author's sharing of regrets, longings, attachments to mundane reminders such as her daughter's facial lotion, weeping while driving, writing messages in the snow which her daughter might see from heaven. If you read it on a quest for understanding about grief, you will be enriched by her descriptions of such common bereavement themes as needing to isolate even while longing for connections, spouses who grieve differently, and recognizing the complexity of multiple losses.

In the end, the author brings the reader back to the "waterfall" as a metaphor for "moments when we hover at thresholds between the world of earth and the world of spirit." Her story does not end there, and neither will the contemplation you give to her book.

Marianne Dietzel is now a Hospice Bereavement Coordinator, and a Certified Music Practitioner. She can be contacted at www.mariannedietzel.com. Her book is available at local independent bookstores.

"When the three of us got under that pounding falls and looked up at the water heedlessly and endlessly falling down upon us, all we could do was laugh....We all knew that it was not just the three of us there." (second summer after Nina died)

Book Review: *Isabelle and Grandma Birdie*

By Stephanie Stevens, Stephanie's Garden Press, 2009

Reviewed by Nancy Rolfsrud

Sometimes talking to children about death is difficult for adults. The story, artwork, and life lessons in *Isabelle and Grandma Birdie* will help make those conversations easier.

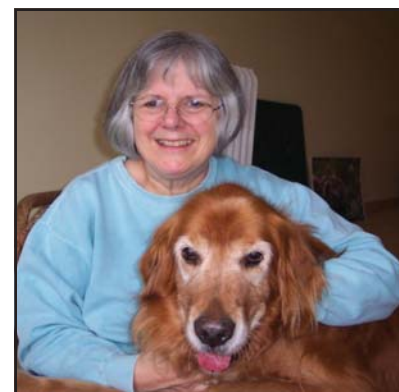
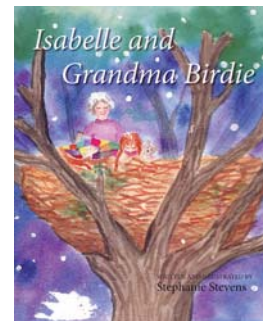
Isabelle and Grandma Birdie is a sweet children's book. It tells the story of eight-year-old Isabelle visiting her Grandma Birdie's cabin in the woods for the summer. Isabelle experiences the wonder of the outdoors and of animals that summer, and she also learns about the inevitability of death when a little bird dies. When Isabelle asks what happens after death, Grandma Birdie responds that no one knows for sure but that she likes to think that those we love are still with us in some way. Grandma Birdie then dies suddenly after Isabelle returns home. When Isabelle visits Grandma Birdie's cabin in the woods that next summer, something unexpected happens that brings the words of Grandma Birdie back to comfort Isabelle.

The artwork in *Isabelle and Grandma Birdie* perfectly matches the tone and feeling of this comforting story. The pictures welcome the reader into the story and then hold the reader warmly throughout the story.

Life lessons are the underlying theme in *Isabelle and Grandma Birdie*. Enjoying the beauty and simple pleasures of life as well as accepting the unfairness and finality of death are depicted. Normal reactions in coping with death—shock, denial, sadness and lingering loneliness—are caringly portrayed. Self-soothing through positive thoughts and memories is taught by example. Differences in people's beliefs about what happens after death are sensitively addressed. The need to move on with life after a death has occurred is captured beautifully in this one sentence of the book: "But life went on, as it must."

Stephanie Stevens has used her wisdom as a bereavement counselor and her skills as an artist well in creating *Isabelle and Grandma Birdie*. Her book is an excellent resource to help educate children about the cycle of life.

Editor's Note: Author, illustrator Stephanie Stevens, MA, is a bereavement counselor for Itasca Hospice in Grand Rapids, MN. Previously published works include two poetry books, *Across the Fence* (1983) and *Uncommon Light*, which received a 2003 Northeastern MN book award. Stephanie has also had several poems published including "Winter of Grief" for which she received a National Hospice and Palliative Care 2007 Poetry Awards honorable mention. *Isabelle and Grandma Birdie* is available by email at gregstep@hughes.net or by calling 218-245-3143 or (c) 218-259-2683.



Stephanie and her dog Zeek