

What can we learn from history about grief, loss and bereavement?

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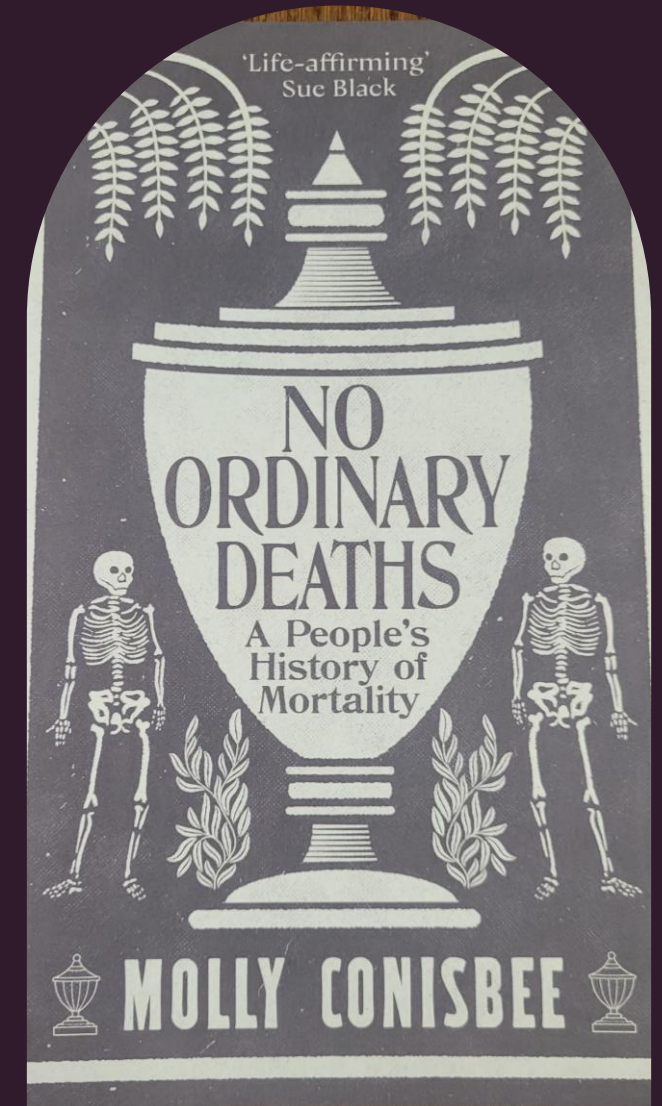
BRISTOL CENTRE FOR GRIEF RESEARCH
& ENGAGEMENT

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Two core themes

- How history has been shaped by grief - based mainly on recent publication *No Ordinary Deaths* and from archive, cemetery, and artifact research.
- Covering (briefly) how grief shaped the life cycle; ideas changed with religious Reformation; the languages and literature of grief; ideas about the impact of grief on health and mental health; the commodification of grief.
- How grief can be shaped by history (based on practice-based death walking and counselling work).



grief *noun*



- From Old French, *grever*, meaning ‘to burden’ (so it probably came here with the Normans).
- Anglo-Saxon had many nuanced words for grief, including deep grief, perpetual grief, violent grief.
- Possibly the earliest record of the use of ‘grief’ as a noun is in the 13th Century manual, *Acrene Riwle*, or *Wisse*, written for anchoresses, devout women attached to religious institutions. An early glimpse into the idea of grief as a state of ‘separation’ and detaching.



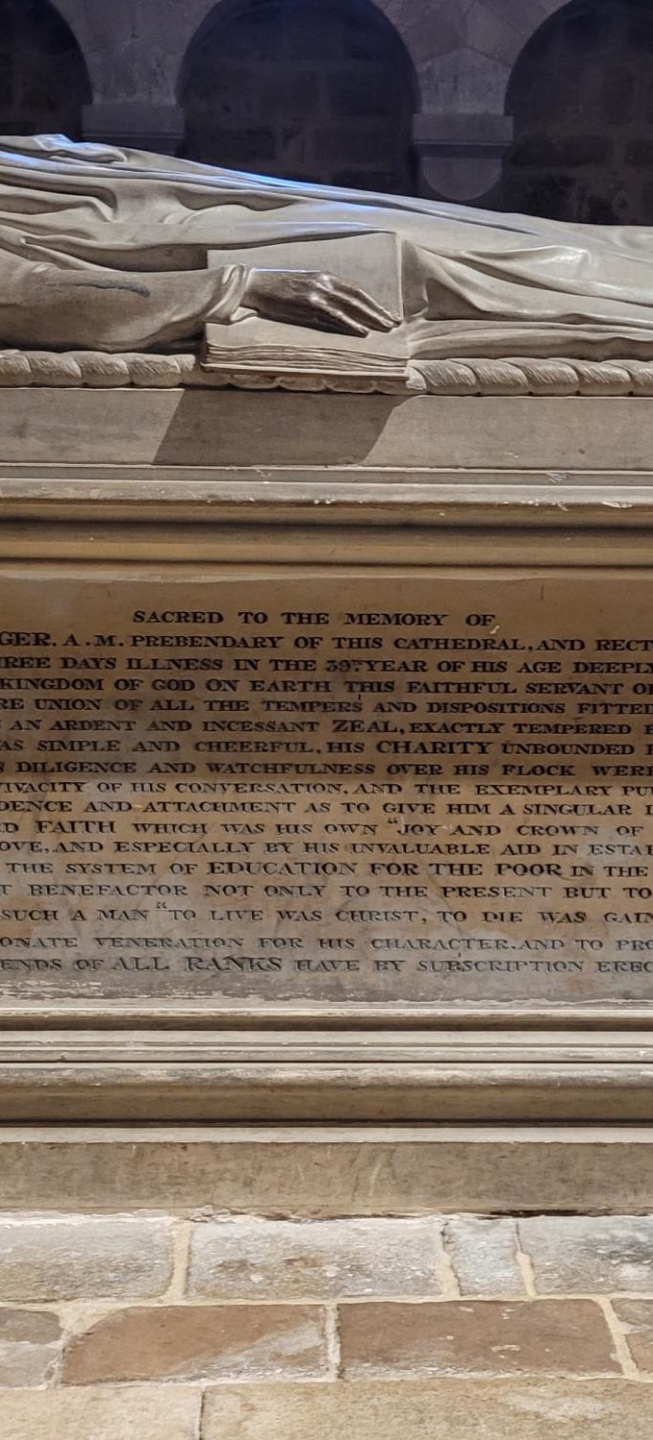
Grief and the Life Cycle, Pre-Reformation

- Grief structured around the idea of an ongoing contract between the living and the dead throughout the weeks and months of the church year.
 - Our Lady of Sorrows and other visual reminders in the church of grief and comfort for the bereaved.
 - Obits – weekly reminders of the dead.
 - Month's Mind (possibly from Norse *minne*, ceremonial drinking to the dead).
 - Year's Mind.
 - Masses, candles and chantry chapels (for the wealthy).
 - Services were mysterious, immersive, to be experienced somatically as well as spiritually.
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Post-Reformation Grief

- The Reformation abolished Purgatory.
- Changed the language of the church, including the funeral service (Latin to English).
- Disallowed masses or obits.
- Changed the funeral to a social rather than spiritual occasion.
- Offered a more 'individualistic' approach to grief and loss (personal, private, family, rather than community).



Languages of Loss

- Memorials and epitaphs rare for any but wealthiest pre-Reformation.
- Post-Reformation, become much more common (affordability) and increasingly elaborate (individualism, rise of capitalism).





Grief in Consolatory Literature

- *Pearl* – a late 14th Century poem exploring a father's grief after the death of his daughter. The 'Pearl maiden' appears in his dreams, offering him a memory of his child but also hope and redemption in the afterlife.
- *Ars Moriendi* – popular post-plague guides to dying well.
- Priscilla Maurice, *Prayers for the Sick and Dying* (1853).
- Consolatory writing one of the earliest 'successes' of the printing press.

Grief was acknowledged as
a cause of death

- Bills of Mortality
- Coroner's Reports and Verdicts
- Death Certificates (which were a product of the increasingly administered state)
- Takotsubo Cardiomyopathy

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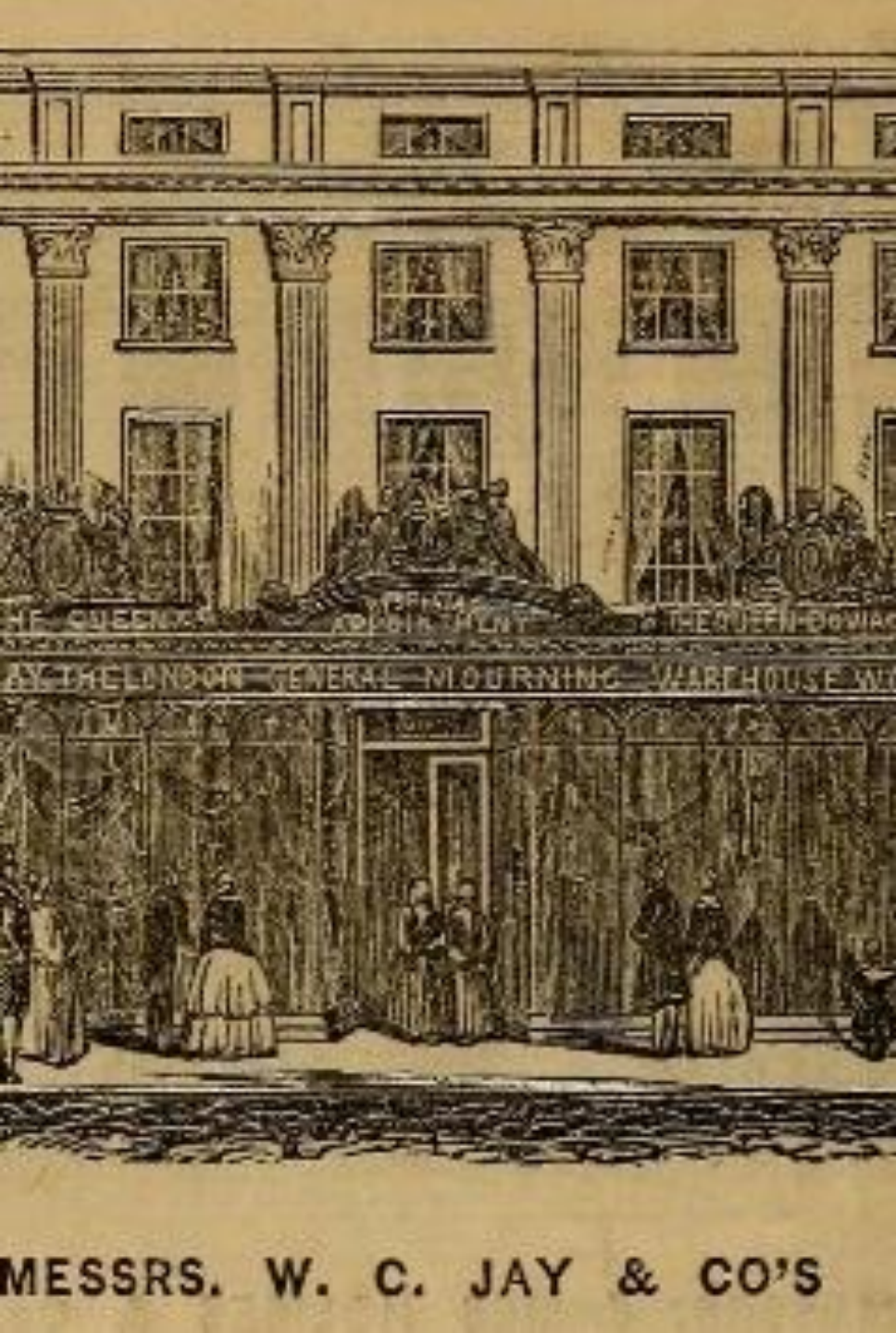
Lydia Stather

- Lydia Stather from Sculcoates, Hull
 - Born in 1869, Lydia was described as 'delicate'
 - When Lydia was just 7, her father died, followed shortly afterwards by her much-loved grandparents
 - When her own mother died suddenly in 1890, Lydia was overwhelmed with grief
 - Found drowned a week after her mother's death
 - Her inquest recorded an 'open verdict' but grief was often recorded as a cause of death
 - There was often real compassion for those who ended their own lives
 - Coroners went to great lengths to protect the reputation of the deceased, and that of their family, and rarely delivered a suicide verdict
 - Community would often come together to support the survivors
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The Commodification of Grief

- Nineteenth century 'grief commodification' as mass production makes the externalities of grief (mourning) affordable to a much larger number of people.
- Royal fashion, respectability, but also high mortality rates.





Mourning Warehouses

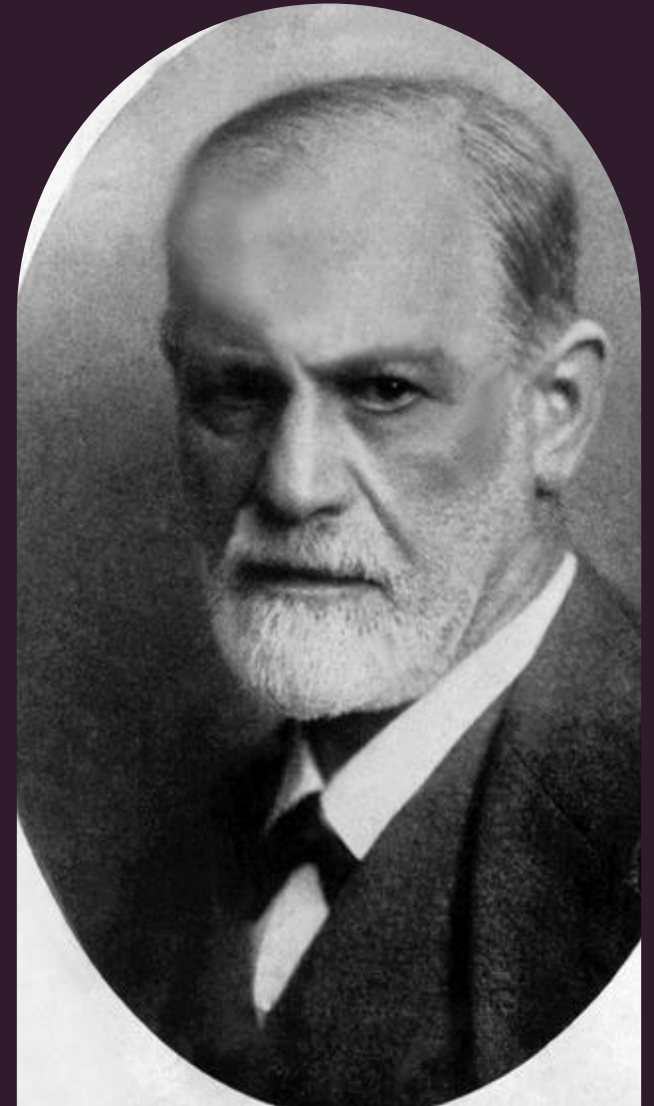
- Rise of the (mourning) department store: Robinson's and Jay's – linking grief to the evolution of modern consumer cultures.
- Aimed firmly at female consumers, but also 'insecure' middle classes who wanted to 'do the right thing.'
- Mass production from the nineteenth century onwards meant mourning could be fashioned in all kinds of ways that even those on a relatively modest income could afford. Almost anything could become an object of mourning...

Mourning Teapot



Freud and Grief

- By the later nineteenth century, the fashion for elaborate mourning was beginning to decline.
- In 1917, Sigmund Freud wrote a short essay, *Mourning and Melancholia*, in which he explored what he called the 'work of mourning,' or the ways in which we learn to detach ourselves from the dead.
- He wrote this essay during World War I – the industrial-scale deaths of which would change the face of formal mourning, at least in western Europe. Shortly after, his favourite daughter, Sophie, died.
- Freud believed that only time would help diminish our sense of loss after a death – an idea that still has currency today.
- Freud's intervention also recognised bereavement as a legitimate 'issue' for talking therapy.



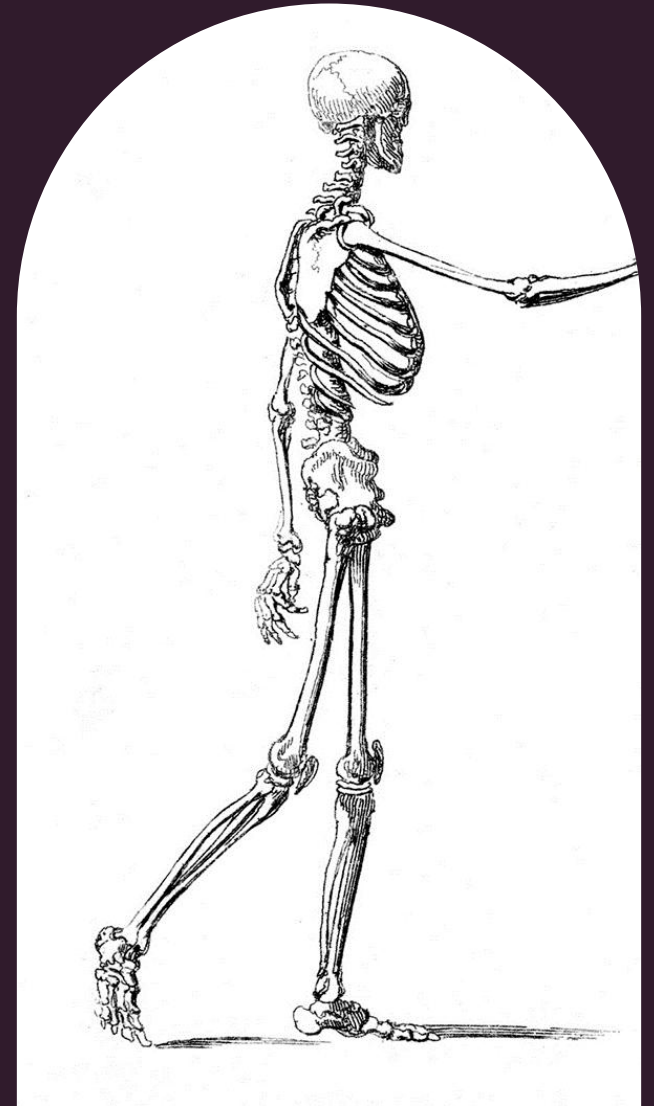
‘Give sorrow words’

- Pre-dating Freud, talking about and engaging with the dead was encouraged and understood as a necessary part of grief.
- What might that look/feel like today?



Walking With Death

- Began developing walks about five years before lockdown – exploring social histories of dying and death and inviting participants to share their own thoughts on history and personal experience.
- Site-specific, accessible, free - engaging with the details of space and place.
- Bristol, Bath, Totnes, Huddersfield, Manchester, several cemeteries were some of the early walk locations (all themed).





Rooted in the 'everyday' and 'overlooked'

- Invited participation, sharing of stories, and honouring of memories. Or just walking/coming along!
- Creating permissive pathways for people to discuss their own experiences of grief and loss with history as their prompt.



Lockdown

- Created fourteen longer ‘armchair’ walks, exploring (amongst other things) Lych Ways, spiritualism, funeral traditions.
- Emphasised the political and social importance of walking/being outside, whilst uniquely connected to our collective sense of loss, grief and enclosure at that time.



Finding safe, contained, collective space

- So much political division and toxicity now – trying to use walking spaces to heal and share.
- Using history to create spaces in which we can reflect about the here and now (for example, vaccinations).
- This has been helpful for some clients in dealing with grief (medium).

What we might learn from the past

- Holding compassion for the bereaved.
- Understanding that loss takes time to accommodate, and perhaps it never is.
- Understanding grief as a motivator for other behaviours.
- Talking about death.
- Preparing for death (in a mindful fashion – death boxes etc.)
- Understanding that any experience of grief and loss is unique to us – non-linear, deeply personal, and often life-changing, but that it can still be acknowledged within community.



Thank you for listening!

