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Niina Marni – Welcome. How are you? – as the Kaurna people of the Adelaide Plains from where I come would say.

I acknowledge that tonight we are gathered on the land of the Barngarla people, and I pay my respect to their elders past and present.

Melissa wrote 'Yesterday You Were Here'² in the wake of sudden and unexpected loss of her children, Koda and Hunter and her husband, Damian. She had to navigate not only the challenges of her personal grief and grapple with the emotional turmoil of family and friends but also confront her son Koda's friends who were confused and troubled by the loss of Koda.

Tapping her unique circumstances and drawing on her experiences, including her contact with young children as a teacher, she set about exploring death through the eyes of a young child.

She asked how she might help Koda's friends and other children to endure and grow from the pain and anguish surrounding the sudden loss of a friend.

Her mission became her passion. She learnt how to paint using watercolours. The pictures in 'Yesterday You Were Here' are testament to her success.

Perhaps paradoxically watercolour painting is traditionally a 'take along hobby'³ that is an ideal way to relax in nature's

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² Little, M. (2018) Yesterday You Were Here. Wakefield Press: Mile End, South Australia.

³ Raynes, P. (1994) Watercolours: Travel-station. RD Press: Surrey Hills, NSW.

wilderness rather than a means to tackle the grief wilderness, as Melissa has done.

The essence of watercolour painting is said to be colour that is “light, in turn composed of form and texture, pattern and atmosphere.”⁴ As you will see on reading Melissa’s book her paintings evoke that essence.

Some of her paintings are composed of vibrantly coloured images of, for instance, a nature park and a beach that serve as useful frames for the silhouettes mostly of children. Early in the book these children are engaged in everyday activities that Koda and his friends, like other children, shared as fun, often in laughter.

However, the child silhouette in a cemetery alters the atmosphere, as does death. The mood changes, as it did for Koda’s friends. Their lived loss can be felt. Then, there is no colour, just silhouettes surrounded by white-space but accompanied by words to encourage talking parent to child, child to parent, friend to friend.

Next the colour returns with images depicting everyday events when the loss of a loved one, the loss of a friend is vividly remembered – the empty chair at the birthday party, for example. ‘Tomorrow I will miss you, but I will think of you and smile ...’ says silhouettes of two children standing with an adult. Why? ‘... because yesterday you were here.’

Out of Melissa’s search to help Koda’s friends has come her beautifully written words – simple, yet powerful.

Everyone encounters grief and loss in their lives, yet we are ill-equipped to deal with it⁵, to manage our own grief and to feel comfortable around the grief of others, including children.

⁴ Ibid, p5

⁵ As my past experiences as the Commissioner for Victims’ Rights and before a police officer revealed, and my knowledge as a Victimologist confirm.

Grief is painful. It is inevitable. It is intensely personal. We avoid talking about it. When others grieved in ways we do not comprehend, our responses can unintentionally do more harm than good. Yet, we can offer much to enrich coping.

Koda's friends were disappointed their friend would no longer join them in play, in school and elsewhere as well as on special occasions. Disappointment is an element of grief⁶, and one as adults we do not readily know how to discuss with children.

Yesterday You Were Here is a story (grounded on the realities Melissa witnessed) to help mum's, dad's, grand-parents, teachers and others, plus children 'safely' traverse the landscape of loss and grief. This insightful book ends with blank pages, so readers can capture their own story of grief.

Thank you, Melissa for (as Martin Luther King invited us) 'daring to dream'. Importantly, thank you for having the courage and strength to achieve your dream, for the benefit of others.

That you have turned your pain and anguish, your grief into a mission to help others is highly commendable, as is your book that I launch this evening as a great honour but also respect for Koda and Hunter.

Your book in sadness will be a kind friend.

⁶Grant, A. (2016) *Stumbling Stones: A path through grief, love and loss*. Hardie Grant Books: Richmond, Victoria Australia.

