## BOOKS

### CURRENT WIDOWHOOD

***Helena Znaniecka Lopata.*** *Thousand Oaks, California, USA: Sage, 1996. £39.00 hb, £18.99 pb.*

Helena Lopata, a professor of sociology and Director of the Center for the Comparative Study of Social Roles at Loyola University in Chicago, has been studying widowhood in America and elsewhere for nearly 30 years. In this book, she draws together knowledge from her own research with that of other scholars. She reports the findings of studies dealing with emotional responses to bereavement, the stress of caring for the dying, the changing social roles and status of widows, friendship, remarriage, income changes and poverty, loneliness and the social reintegration of widows, community and social support. When the information is available, she notes ethnic differences and sketches the historical background of the contemporary experience of widowhood. One chapter discusses widowhood in India, Israel, Korea and Turkey; the others include only North American studies.

The book is organised around 'myths' which head each chapter, such as 'Grief is a universal experience with definable stages and length of time'; 'In widowhood, women are likely to turn to their siblings for major supports'; or 'Widows are valued and respected members of American society'. By 'myth' she seems to mean a generalisation or stereotypical characterisation which oversimplifies or distorts a more complex reality, not necessarily an altogether false belief. But many of these myths seem contrived to fulfill the book's thematic device. Who, for instance, holds the belief about siblings quoted above (which, in fact, was found to be true in a Canadian study, but not in Chicago)? Most people, I would think, in America or Britain, do not have many clear, well-defined preconceptions of widowhood. And these myths often refer to only one of many topics covered in each chapter.

The book is more a loosely articulated review of research than a sustained argument. But some themes emerge: that traditional societies were not as supportive, nor modern societies as liberating for widows as might be supposed; 'modernisation', even in the United States, does not necessarily do away with the values and expectations of more traditional patriarchies. But there is no lasting role of widow in contemporary America, once the period of mourning is over, no defined social expectations (and this too, surely, is a reason why there are few contemporary 'myths' about widowhood – there can hardly be widely held expectations about a role that is not recognised). In her conclusion, Helena Lopata emphasises the resilience of widows, repudiating the idea of widowhood as a passive or dependent state.

As a review of sociological research on widowhood in America, *Current Widowhood* is a useful resource, although it misses out some important research, such as the study by Robert Weiss and Colin Murray Parkes (*Recovery from Bereavement*, Basic Books, 1983: New York, USA). The style, especially where it lays out very basic information, seems intended more for an introductory text.

***Peter Marris***
*University Professor*

### WHEN SOMEONE DIES
### Help for young people coping with grief
### WHEN SOMEONE DIES: How schools can help bereaved students




***Dwaine Steffes.*** *Richmond, Surrey, UK: Cruse Bereavement Care, 1997. £2.95 each + £1.00 p&p.*

Bereaved teenagers can be difficult people to comfort; they can appear surly, indifferent even, when death strikes their family. Adults wanting to help might find it useful to have a small stock of these booklets available for such an eventuality. One is designed for the over-11s and sets out the experience of loss in simple, non-patronising language which will enable the young person to recognise what he or she may be going through, and will probably provide some reassurance and advice.

The other is meant for teachers, and deals with the full range of childhood and adolescence, and a comprehensive range of bereavements including disasters occurring to pupils and teachers both at school and elsewhere. Most of the advice is sound. However, the advice to refer suicidal adolescents to 'professional counsellors' is in my opinion too vague. They need to see an adolescent psychiatrist or other mental health professional at the local hospital or child and adolescent psychiatric clinic as a matter of urgency, and I hope future editions will make that clear. The recommended books listed at the back are excellently comprehensive, but Rebecca Abrams' book *When Parents Die*, is meant for young adults not the 11-16+ age group.

I am glad to have the attractively produced students' booklet to give to my bereaved adolescent acquaintances and patients, and I recommend the teachers' one to be on the bookshelf of every headteacher.

***Dora Black***
*Consultant Child and Adolescent Psychiatrist*

### DEATH AND BEREAVEMENT
### The psychological, religious and cultural interfaces.

***Dewi Rees.*** *London, UK: Whurr Publishers Ltd, 1997. £19.50 hb*

This is a particularly useful book for any counsellor who is likely to encounter bereaved clients from ethnic minorities. The author is a general practitioner and hospice doctor. He is also a devout Christian, and he writes from this standpoint.

The most valuable part of the book is the clear and succinct account of the belief systems of all the major world religions, with special emphasis on their beliefs about death, and their funerary customs. This factual and informative section takes up about a quarter of the book.

The second part of the book (the divisions are mine) is more subjective, being an account of the author's views, based on his experience, on a variety of related subjects. These include the writings of Freud and Jung, the process of dying, and the choices facing those who have to care for their dying relatives. There are chapters on normal and abnormal reactions to bereavement, the death of a child, a child's understanding of death, suicide, and the death of a pet. This part of the book is well documented, the material being derived partly from Dr Rees' own experience, and partly from the writings of others. Here, as in the rest of the book, he attempts a balanced account of the different views, and usually comes down in favour of compassion and common sense; his Christian beliefs are obvious but not intrusive.

In the third section Dr Rees addresses more controversial issues – continuing relationships (communications) with the dead, and near-death experiences and the various explanations that have been given for these strange phenomena. He believes that it is impossible to decide between them on rational scientific grounds and in any case holds that science deals only with 'how' questions, whereas most people would like 'why' answers.

In the final chapter on 'The significance of death', despite attempts to be fair to all concerned, including declared atheists like Freud, it is clear that the author's interpretations are strongly influenced by Jung, by his own Christian faith, and by his belief in an afterlife. The book ends with a remark made by one of his patients a few days before her death, 'Doctor, the veil is thinner than people realise'. BC

***Hyla Holden***
*Consultant Psychiatrist*

## VIDEOS

### FAMILIES AND LOSS

***Kim Hopkins, Amanda Rudman.*** *London, UK: Institute of Family Therapy, 1997. £75.00*

*Families and Loss* is a record of one family's therapy over a series of six sessions. Tony (father), Daniel (nine) and Sean (seven) come for therapy following the death of the children's mother. The parents previously separated and Tony's new partner Fran also participates in the sessions. The therapist is Judith Hildebrand and her consultant Gwyn Daniel. Excerpts from the sessions show the therapist exploring the family's loss and its effects on their lives as she encourages open and clear communication between the family members and supports their coping skills. The accompanying booklet describes the therapist's thinking, choices and dilemmas in each session.

The work is an excellent example of systemic therapy, and we see the therapist using a range of methods, skills and techniques as she balances working with feelings, relationships and the choices facing the family. For those unfamiliar with this model, the booklet is essential and is best referred to for explanation between each excerpt. The therapist most often sees the family together but, recognising the differing needs of the adults and children, she also has one session with the adults, another with the children and a third with Tony on his own. The excerpts provide a valuable illustration of working with children, and there are examples of the therapist engaging the children by involving them in creating a family genogram and through drawing their present and imagined future. I highly recommend this video both for training and for the use of experienced counsellors. BC

***Judith Bevan***
*Family Therapist*