

Clare Roth  
Des Moines IA

Dear Ms. Sebold,

I won the Analytical Thinker award in third grade. While I was receiving my award, I asked what analytical meant. Everyone laughed while I struggled to understand what was funny and what I had just been commended for. It's the way I've always been. A problem crops up. I gather information from as many resources as I can, mentally explore it, bounce ideas off other people, and come to a conclusion. It's a subconscious pattern.

When my father died, I started doing the same thing. I frequently brought up death in conversation. I asked the people close to me what it was, why it happened, and what would happen to us – and to him. But they squirmed. And stalled. And changed the subject. I soon found out that people were uncomfortable with the topic, with the questions, with Death, with *me*. So I stopped asking, talking, and thinking about death. It was obvious that death was a taboo mystery not meant to be understood by an adolescent girl, and that I was being morbid and wrong by questioning this unwritten rule.

I started reading your book, *The Lovely Bones*, just about the time all of my questions and thoughts about death were almost fully stifled in my conscious. I still thought of how I missed my father and his place in my life but after that, my thoughts stopped at the mental roadblock I had set up. NO THOUGHTS PAST THIS POINT! it screamed at me. I obeyed because I did not want to be morbid in thinking analytically about death, no matter how naturally it came to me.

Your book, however, made me question this sign's authority. I read about Susie's father's pain and his relationship with, and dependence on, his remaining children. As I itched to examine my father's death's effect on my mother's relationship with me, I took a tiny step up to the sign. I learned of Sam's helplessness when comforting Lindsey. As I suppressed wonderings of how my friends felt around me in relation to my Dad's death, I took another imperceptible step towards the sign. I discovered Susie's heaven and all the different aspects of it. Resisting thinking of my father's whereabouts and goings-on all the while, I edged myself yet even closer to the roadblock. And when Ruth investigated Death itself—all that the afterlife entails, and how the dead relate to the living—what I had been yearning to do for years—my tiny, itchy steps towards the block turned into a full-on sprint, and I plowed past the sign as well as the surrounding people's stigma of my alleged "morbid" thoughts.

I thought, asked, and talked about Death as much as I wanted to, and ignored the cringes from the people around me. I found talking about Death itself made thinking about my own easier. The afterlife was no longer a strange mystery of the universe but rather an integral part of my life. Reading your book set me free from the social stigma that had restrained my analytical thoughts.

David Sarnoff once said, “We cannot banish dangers, but we can banish fears. We must not demean life by standing in awe of death.” By putting death on a pedestal not to be touched or thought about, I had put my life into a box confined by the fear of death. I found that talking and thinking and asking about death is natural, and that through this we can free ourselves from the restraints our fear of it puts on our lives. We can truly live.

And that’s what your book did for me, Ms. Sebold. *The Lovely Bones*, with its narrator, Susie, observing the problems and tribulations her earth counterparts faced from Heaven, showed me how thinking about death is not only natural, but essential to living a truly full life. It allowed me to break free from the shackles social stigma put me in, and through this, live life not in fear, but in freedom.

Most of all, it allowed me to break through the roadblock that I, in fear, had set against myself, and let me think freely...and analytically.

Thank you,  
Clare A. Roth

Copyright © The Center for the Book in the Library of Congress. Used by permission.