

 Book Review

A Million Miles from Boston

Reviewed by **Cynthia Pill, PhD, LICSW**
NASW MEMBER

Occasionally a book written expressly for children deserves recognition and visibility not only for a general readership but also for professionals who work with a specific population. The central theme of *A Million Miles from Boston* by Karen Day concerns childhood grief. This engaging book, while pitched to any middle school age child, would be especially useful for a youngster whose parent has died. It is a testimony to the author that, while depicting the underlying sadness and confusion that any grieving child experiences, Day writes a highly engrossing book that appeals to emerging adolescents because it touches on universal issues of friendships, the complications of boy-girl relationships, school, summer adventures, and most of all, family.

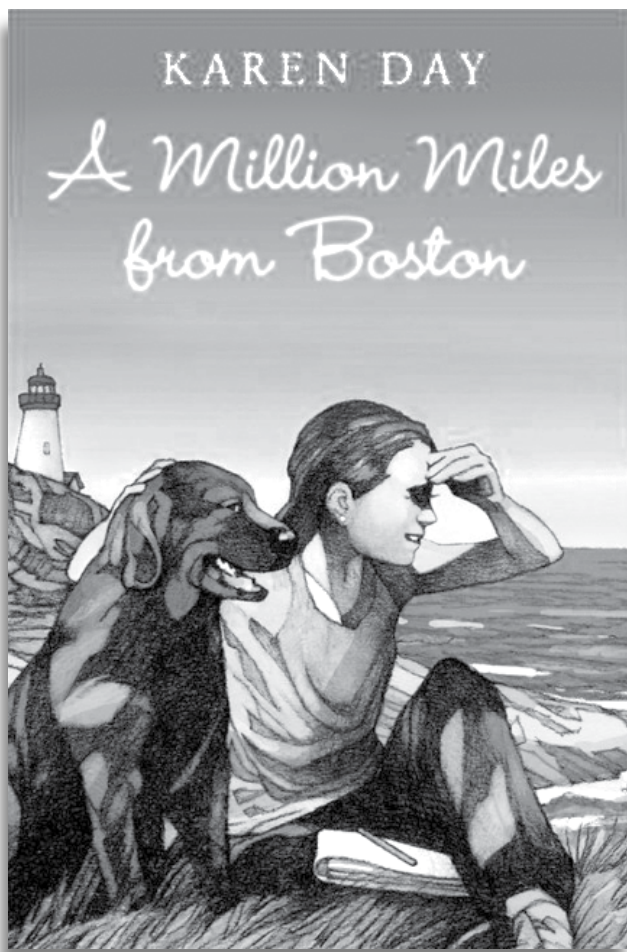
We first meet twelve year old Lucy when she is ending elementary school and leaving Boston to go to her most favorite place in the world, their family summer cottage in Maine. Family for Lucy is her Dad and brother Bucky, for their mother died when Lucy was six and Bucky only one. Perhaps the summer place is Lucy's favorite spot because it is where she most vividly remembers her mother. In her own words: "Inside our cottage I listened to the quiet. Back in Boston, we'd moved into our house only months before Mom got sick, so I wasn't sure what had been there before she died, or what came after. But up here I remembered her."

In many ways, Lucy is lucky. Neighbors and extended family are loving and supportive and easily reminisce with Lucy about her mother. Her father is sensitive and involved with his children while trying to make a life for himself. But this is the rub, he has a new girlfriend Julia, a physical therapist who once treated him for a bad back, and Lucy does not like this one bit. In her own mind, Lucy won't even call Julia by her first name, but rather refers to her as "The PT".

Interlaced within the general story line of a young girl's summer exploits, Day captures the essence of childhood grief: the struggle of a young girl to deal with her mother's death; the yearning to hold onto memories about her mother; the desire for predictability and sameness in order to guard against any more change; satisfaction in doing things that her mother had also enjoyed; coming to better understand the distorted memories surrounding her mother's death; and finally, making a permanent place for her mother within

herself and opening up to Julia without feeling disloyal to her mother or jealous about her father.

I first came to know about this book when the author, Karen Day, approached me three years ago as she was working on the first drafts. She had learned about the groups I was running for women who were children when their mothers' died and hoped that I could help as she constructed the psychological aspects of childhood grief and family life in the wake of a young mother's death. We consulted



a number of times over the past few years and the resulting book, which came out this spring, is both a good read and a beneficial resource. Day is a gifted writer, able to show how kids feel without having them put their feelings into words. And while the story portrays sadness, Day tempers this sadness by placing the death of Lucy's mother six years earlier and so what is depicted is not the terrible immediacy of the death, but rather the expectable result of trying to process what has happened.

In addition, Day has created a brief companion *Study Guide* which therapists or family members can comfortably use with children who are dealing with parental loss. The questions are direct and simple, such as "What does Lucy do when she feels sad? What do you do?" or "What are some ways Lucy keeps her memories of her mom alive?" Because the questions are written in easily understandable language, young readers can even use the guide on their own. *A Million Miles From Boston* is a most worthwhile children's book and one that therapists might like to recommend to families dealing with issues of early parental death.

Day, Karen. *A Million Miles from Boston*. 2011 Wendy Lamb/Random House; 212 pages. ❖



Movie Review

Fish Tank

Goldie Eder, LICSW
NASW FILM FESTIVAL COORDINATOR

Fish Tank (directed by Andrea Arnold, 2009) is a grippingly realistic story of 15 year old Mia (played by new actress Katie Jarvis, whom the director found at a British housing estate—equivalent to a US public housing project), who lives with her younger sister and their young, alcoholic mother. Mia appears angry at everyone, and spends her days roaming around the housing estate seemingly looking for trouble. She escapes to an abandoned room or apartment in her building to create hip hop dances, derived from the rap videos she watches. She sees an advertisement for a dance audition and practices for it.

Her mother's new boyfriend Connor (the recently popular actor Michael Fassbender) moves in and tells her she has talent. Dancing appears to be the only positive goal Mia has, other than wanting to free a horse some young men keep tethered to a stone near where she lives. We watch Mia pick fights with peers and have screaming matches with her mother, and regard her younger sister as a brat. But as her mother's boyfriend spends more time with the family, Mia gets confused; at first he praises her as a dancer, shows some nurturing kind of affection, and then, disturbingly, seduces her when he is drunk. Mia attempts revenge on Connor at first, but finally shows some of that vulnerability we saw earlier in the film when she identified with the tethered, starving horse. In the end, Mia decides that she will take the opportunity to leave her family and the housing project to go to a residential

school, seemingly in order to make more of a future for herself. It seems unfair that Mia had to leave her home to get a new start, but she figured out that that's the way it is, and she had enough resilience to move on. Apparently, she is not alone in her dilemma.

Little did I know when I selected this honest, emotionally hard hitting depiction of a coming of age story riddled with pain, that the August riots in British cities would break out. The real events provided evidence that the writer/director, Andrea Arnold, had insight into the nihilism and hopelessness that appears to pervade at least a minority of British poor and middle class urban youth.

Elizabeth Anderson, LICSW will be the discussant for this study of adolescent developmental passage. Elizabeth, in private practice in Cambridge, is trained in Emotional Family Therapy and Internal Family Systems, and is an ardent film fan who invites you to participate in what promises to be a discussion made more relevant by the unanticipated events of the summer. ❖

NASW-MA FILM FESTIVAL

Fish Tank

Sunday, October 30, 2011, 2-5:30p

Rabbit Hole

Sunday, December 4, 2011, 2-5:30p

Details, [page 9](#)

The NASW-MA Greater Boston Region presents the...

Greater Boston Region CE Book Club

Thursday, October 20, 2011

7:00-9:00 PM (Registration 6:30 PM)

Massachusetts Eating Disorders Association Offices, 92 Pearl St., Newton

Prior to meeting, participants will read...

Unbearable Lightness

by **Portia de Rossi**

Topic: *Eating Disorders*

Discussant: *Amy Valleli, LICSW*

Using the content of the book as well as the expertise of the discussant, the group will focus on deepening participants understanding of the experience of having an eating disorder, barriers to treatment, and interventions to overcome these barriers.

\$20 NASW Members / \$30 Non-Members

Approved for 2 CEs for Social Workers

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