

# **Lament for a Son Study Guide**

**Lament for a Son by Nicholas Wolterstorff**

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# Contents

<a href="#">Lament for a Son Study Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Plot Summary.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">Section 1: p. 5-16.....</a>	<a href="#">5</a>
<a href="#">Section 2: p. 17-27.....</a>	<a href="#">7</a>
<a href="#">Section 3: p. 28-37.....</a>	<a href="#">8</a>
<a href="#">Section 4: p. 38-48.....</a>	<a href="#">9</a>
<a href="#">Section 5: p. 49-60.....</a>	<a href="#">10</a>
<a href="#">Section 6: p. 61-71.....</a>	<a href="#">11</a>
<a href="#">Section 7: p. 72-82.....</a>	<a href="#">12</a>
<a href="#">Section 8: p. 83-91.....</a>	<a href="#">13</a>
<a href="#">Section 9: p. 92-103.....</a>	<a href="#">14</a>
<a href="#">Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">15</a>
<a href="#">Objects/Places.....</a>	<a href="#">19</a>
<a href="#">Themes.....</a>	<a href="#">22</a>
<a href="#">Style.....</a>	<a href="#">25</a>
<a href="#">Quotes.....</a>	<a href="#">27</a>
<a href="#">Topics for Discussion.....</a>	<a href="#">31</a>



# Plot Summary

Lament for a Son by Nicholas Wolterstorff is a collection of anecdotes and quotes pertaining to the author dealing with the premature death of his son, Eric, in a mountain climbing accident. The narrator compiles stories pertaining to Eric's life and death to create an inspirational story of how the narrator overcomes such tragedy through his faith in God. "Lament for a Son" is a highly inspirational book that is meant to assist others in dealing with similar tragedies.

The author writes Lament for a Son to honor his son, Eric, who dies in a mountain climbing accident. He publishes the book to give voice to others' mourning. The narrator receives a call on Sunday that Eric is dead. He has three seconds of the peace of resignation accompanied by the feeling of offering Eric to someone before the cold burning pain pervades his senses. Eric is lonely in his latter years as his friends move away and get married, but Eric is loyal, principled, gentle and loving, though he can also be severe, stern and critical. Eric's family takes him for granted, but maybe all people take each other for granted. The narrator believes that it is wrong to bury one's children because children are the future and should bury their parents.

The narrator flies across the ocean to Kufstein to claim Eric's body. The narrator wonders why Eric climbed the mountain alone, but he knows why Eric did it. Eric is writing a thesis on the origins of modern architecture causing the narrator to lament all that might have been and now never will be. Eric is cut down in the peak of his vitality, and the narrator wonders if it would be easier if his child were worn down with disease and he were able to say goodbye. Writers claim that death is the great leveler, but they neglect to mention that each death is unique. The narrator decides to ignore the societal standard prohibiting men from crying because he has been assaulted and hurt. The narrator assembles his family to tell them that Eric is dead, but they must live their lives the same as if Eric were still alive, holding Eric in remembrance. The narrator finds a list of things Eric planned to do because humanity plans. The Gospels do not console the narrator because he does not forget about resurrection; he knows Eric is in eternity, but he cannot be with Eric here and now. Some people speak wisdom while trying to comfort mourners while others say inept things, but the heart is heart, not the words; it is important to express love in the face of death.

The narrator lifts Eric from his cradle as a baby and also places Eric in his coffin. Claire, Eric's mother, insists on seeing Eric's body. Eric's funeral gives rest to the narrator's soul. The narrator composes the liturgy that is used at Eric's funeral; he objects to extinguishing the resurrection candle. The grief of Eric's death leaves the narrator at a loss for words. Because each man is part of the whole of mankind, each individual is diminished by others' deaths. Eric's story is closed and only memories are left. The narrator feels the ache of his loss deep in his soul, but Eric's death is Eric's also because of all the things he can never again do. The narrator dreams of a sinister person frightening him and a reassuring voice comforting him. The narrator's passion for life is cooled. Books offer ways to turn from death and the pain, but the narrator will not look away because he does not believe it honors Eric's memory. Those who share grief



cannot comfort one another because each individual grieves differently. Death makes Eric special among the narrator's children. The narrator imagines a battlefield where he fails to protect one of the soldiers behind him. He is pained by innocent questions about his children and can find no way to live at peace with death.

The narrator will live with his regrets and accept them as a part of life, waiting for Judgment Day to apologize to Eric. The narrator learns to spy God in the light, but he cannot find God in the darkness. He asks God to protect his family, just as he asked God to protect Eric. The narrator now comprehends the suffering of the world deeper. A bitter friend asks why he does not reject God, but the narrator sees the glory of God in the world around him. He is sure he will talk to Eric again during God's reign on Earth. God suffers with us; mourners are consoled by the tears of God. Jesus Christ hails mourners, promising that they will be comforted. God is love, and love is suffering, so God is suffering. When God's cup of suffering is full, redemption will be fulfilled. The narrator will live the reality of Eric's death, but his wounds remain. His suffering may be a blessing, but it is hard to see it as such. The narrator's family must be restructured to exist without Eric. Eric's family visits his grave one year after his death and say goodbye to Eric until they meet again in God's kingdom. Eric's parents commission Cary Ratcliff to compose a requiem in honor of Eric; the requiem addresses the awfulness of death, a lament, God's share in mankind's suffering, what Eric might say, the endurance of faith, and Christian hope.



## Section I: p. 5-16

### Section I: p. 5-16 Summary and Analysis

Lament for a Son by Nicholas Wolterstorff is a collection of anecdotes and quotes pertaining to the author dealing with the premature death of his son, Eric, in a mountain climbing accident. The narrator compiles stories pertaining to Eric's life and death to create an inspirational story of how the author overcomes such tragedy through his faith in God. Lament for a Son is a highly inspirational book that is meant to assist others in dealing with similar tragedies.

The narrator writes to honor his son, Eric, who dies in a mountain climbing accident in Austria at the age of twenty-five. The narrator publishes to give a voice to others' mourning since there is a certain universality in the loss of a loved one. Although the grief does not remain as intense, the raw wound still remains. Anyone worth loving is worth mourning. The narrator owns his loss because it is a part of who he is. Every lament is a love song. ERW writes JR about his desire to return to the mountains.

Eric is born in New Haven and dies twenty-five years later in Kaisergebirger. He is buried in June, among the willows. Eric's cheek is hard in death; his spirit is gone, taking his warmth and softness with it. Eric is gone, but the narrator is not good at separating the person from the body. The call comes on a Sunday at three o'clock in the afternoon, right after Eric's younger brother has been sent to a plane to join Eric in Munich. The narrator learns that Eric had an accident while climbing in the mountains alone; Eric is dead. The narrator's three seconds of peaceful resignation, accompanied by the feeling of offering Eric to someone, is followed by the cold, burning pain. Eric is a quick and bright child who attends college as a Merit Scholar and studies Art History. Eric is a hard worker, though he is adventuresome and lives intensely. He has a grateful eye and a lot of faith in God. The narrator feels his son puts an "inscape" on things, referring to Gerard Manley Hopkins' poetry. Eric is lonely in his later years as his friends marry and move away, but Eric is loyal and principled though a bit too severe, stern and critical. Eric remains gentle and loving, expressing excitement over his little brother spending the summer with him in Munich. Eric loves the mountains, but this love ultimately proves to be his death.

The narrator feels he took Eric for granted; maybe all of mankind takes their loved ones for granted. The narrator realizes the great gift of Eric's existence only after Eric is gone. He receives letters expressing appreciation of Eric and, though the narrator is grateful, his pain outweighs his gratitude. The narrator does not realize how much he loves his son until Eric is gone. Eric is truly gone now; he is not in the group of students walking down the street nor will the narrator ever receive Eric's calls or letters again. Now, when the narrator's family gathers together, they cannot all be together. The aspect of never in death is painful. The narrator considers all of the things that Eric will never see or do, referencing Job 7:9-10. The narrator laments about how wrong it is to bury one's

children. People expect to bury their parents, but children are their future and should bury their parents.



## Section 2: p. 17-27

### Section 2: p. 17-27 Summary and Analysis

The narrator flies across the ocean to reclaim his son's body. His friend, Bernhard, meets him and they go to Eric's apartment in Munich where they find four of Eric's friends. The things in the apartment speak of Eric, but they have no meaning without their owner. The narrator travels to Kufstein to claim Eric's body, but the undertaker advises him against seeing the mutilated corpse. The undertaker yields Eric's effects to the narrator; the unscathed boots and backpack scream mockery to the narrator when compared to his son's mutilated body. A reference to Job 14:1-2 states that though the flower withers, the effects remain. The narrator wonders why Eric climbed the mountain alone, but the author deep inside knows. Eric prefers solitude when his friends are unavailable. He is also lured by the physical and mental challenge, as well as the menace and danger. Mostly, Eric seeks a spiritual experience through climbing the mountains. Eric's deepest self draws him there. Although the narrator knows why Eric climbs mountains, he keeps asking himself why.

Eric is writing a thesis on the origins of modern architecture when he dies. In a dispute in the 1920s over the future direction of architecture, the winners vote for the use of the latest technology while the losers lean towards local indigenous architecture. Eric writes about the losers, specifically Paul Schultze-Naumberg. Eric never finishes his thesis, but the narrator wonders if it matters. Some people make no contribution to culture while others make creative additions to society. The narrator wonders whether Eric's contribution would have mattered. He also considers if people only carry love, trust and faith into God's kingdom or whether they carry culture as well. The narrator laments all that might have been and now never will be for Eric. Standing in front of the library where Eric spent many of his last hours, the narrator laments that Eric is not there as he should be. The narrator wishes he could turn back time and fix these mistakes, but he recognizes the impossibility of his desire.

Eric is eliminated at the peak of his vitality. Eric's research is outlined, and Eric looks forward to climbing the Matterhorn with his friend in the late summer. The narrator ponders whether the death of a child is easier when the child is worn down with disease and parents are able to say their goodbyes; no one was able to say goodbye to Eric. Each death is unique. The narrator's friend's son commits suicide a few weeks before Eric's death, and the narrator considers whether it is easier since the young man wants to die. Talking to his friend, the narrator learns that death is still difficult. Writers say that death is the great leveler, but they neglect to specify that each death is unique and that there is an extreme solitude in suffering since no one can know what another feels. The narrator questions the societal standard prohibiting men to cry. He has been assaulted and hurt; he will cry and perhaps be able to see things through his tears that he would not be able to see otherwise. A quote from Augustine in Confessions IX, 12 is used to state that crying is acceptable for men when grieving.



## Section 3: p. 28-37

### Section 3: p. 28-37 Summary and Analysis

The narrator assembles his family to tell them that though Eric is gone, they must live their lives the same as if Eric is still with them. This means not forgetting Eric. According to the Christian and Jewish way of life, remembrance of the past is important because mankind finds God in history. Eric's life is a gift that must be remembered. The family decides to leave Eric's belongings out on display as a memorial. The narrator finds a list of things that Eric planned to do. Humans plan, but death means that many things will never be done. The Gospels do not console the narrator because he did not forget about the resurrection. Although he knows that Eric is in eternity, he cannot be with Eric anymore during his life. Death becomes the enemy by taking Eric. Nothing fills the void that Eric's death leaves because Eric is irreplaceable. There is a hole in the world where Eric should exist; no one will ever see or know exactly as Eric saw and knew.

The narrator thinks about what one should say to someone who is suffering. Some people speak wisdom while others say inept things, but it is not important since the grieving hear the heart, not the words that are spoken. It is important to express love in the face of death. One should never say that it is not that bad because it is. Some people say nothing because they find the topic too painful, but tears are salve to the wound while silence is salt. Friends of mourners should ask and actually care how mourners are feeling. The narrator lifts Eric from his cradle as a baby and also places his son in his coffin. Claire, Eric's mother, insists upon seeing Eric's body. Mourners' eyes and hands must experience the dead body to truly persuade them of their loved one's death. This is a sort of leave-taking. Although a person's body is only their dwelling on earth, it is how people know one another. Only Eric's face shows in his coffin, and his smirk reminds his parents of when he was a know-it-all teenager; he looks like he knows something his parents do not know.





## Section 4: p. 38-48

### Section 4: p. 38-48 Summary and Analysis

Eric's funeral gives rest to the narrator's soul. The narrator realizes that Eric's death is not all there is left to life. The narrator composed a liturgy for his friend with cancer several years before Eric's death, but ironically, his friend attends Eric's funeral. The liturgy thanks God for Eric's presence and expresses grief that Eric is no longer present. A shroud and lilies are placed over Eric's coffin as the congregation and choir sing. They celebrate the Eucharist, the sacrament of God's participation in their brokenness. During the service, Claire reads the "Song of Hannah." At the end of the ceremony, the narrator comes forward to express his appreciation for the outpouring of love and faith. After speaking, he sings "For All the Saints." Eric's family follow the coffin out of the church with the narrator holding the resurrection candle which he objects to extinguishing. The narrator buries himself when he buries Eric.

The narrator wonders what Eric's death means or if it is beyond meaning; he is at a loss for words. John Donne's quotation discusses that all mankind is one volume which is translated in death; each man is part of the whole of mankind, thus each death diminishes the individual. A quotation from Isaiah 40 states that life is fleeting, and all flesh is grass which withers and fades. The world looks different now after Eric's death. Pain is caused by formerly joyful reminiscences. Something is now over, especially in the places that the narrator visited with Eric. Eric's story is closed, and only memories are left. There is no way to experience Eric now. The narrator must start over; even though he feels that his happiness is past, he still laughs. His sorrow is no longer the islands; it is now the sea. A quote from Maria Dermout's "The Ten Thousand Things" asks if sadness can be relieved.

## Section 5: p. 49-60

### Section 5: p. 49-60 Summary and Analysis

The narrator has an out of body experience where he attaches himself to Eric. He feels the ache of his loss deep down, but Eric's death is Eric's loss as well. Eric can never see, hear, walk or be with his family again. The narrator dreams that he walks down a street with his friend when one disappears. He feels a sinister presence but is afraid of confrontation. A reassuring voice tells him to do what he must. One faces malevolence, not love, in death. The narrator still delights in things, but his passion is cooled. Without his loved one, his home becomes a house. The narrator is repelled by the ordinary manner in which life continues in stores and at his office. He is unable to jog or swim, though he used to enjoy both activities. No music speaks of his terrible brokenness. The narrator is both unable and unwilling to return to work immediately because it would not be honoring and remembering Eric. The narrator skims books on grief, but books offer ways to turn away from the pain of death and the narrator will not look away because he owes it to Eric and to God to remember.

At times, it seems to the narrator as though Eric is not dead, that Eric is just away. He can picture and hear him at times. The narrator is grateful when his friend tells him that grief isolates, especially those who share one's grief, since each person grieves differently and cannot comfort one another. Those not grieving must touch both. The death of a child is indescribably painful. It is worse than the death of one's parents because it is a change of expectations. Parents raise, nurture and develop their children; their children are their future, and once those children are gone, the future is similarly destroyed. The narrator ponders where Eric was more special than his other children. He considers the choice Hitler gave to the Jews to choose a child to kill. The narrator would have been immobilized; each of his children are special, but Death personified chose Eric to make him special. When the narrator prays, he thanks God for all five of his children, but he laments only for Eric. The narrator imagines himself at the head of a battlefield. His father is already dead, and the narrator fails to protect one of the soldiers behind him. This symbolizes his legacy in terms of his children.

## Section 6: p. 61-71

### Section 6: p. 61-71 Summary and Analysis

The holidays are the worst for the narrator because he is expected to sing songs and show his joy. He is pained by innocent questions about his children; sometimes he explains his situation, but sometimes he does not. There is no way to live at peace with death because death is the enemy of peace. The narrator refers to Revelations which states that there will be no more death or mourning after the old order passes away. He tries to keep himself from healing. The narrator regrets not appreciating Eric more, writing him more, taking time for him and warning Eric against climbing mountains. Apologies are for the living, not the dead. The narrator's friend warns him against rehearsing his regrets, but the narrator refuses to stop because he knows God forgives him. He will live with his regrets and accept them as a part of his life, waiting for the Great Day to come when he can apologize to Eric; love needs to hope for reconciliation.

The narrator is angered when someone offers him a book by the father of another young man who died in a climbing accident because the book suggests that God shook the mountain intentionally. Psalm 18:36 claims that God calls his son home, but the narrator disagrees. Paul speaks of God overcoming death, so the narrator is convinced that God is also pained by Eric's death. The narrator references a book by Rabbi Kushner about the confusion of God as an instrument of death compared to God's inability to stop death. He also references C. S. Lewis' anger at God over the death of loved ones. The narrator is not angry; he is baffled and hurt. He has had a solid belief in God from his earliest days, but though he has learned to spy God in the light, he cannot find him in the darkness. He wonders if it is best to wait in silence, referring to Psalms 42. The narrator's dialogue with God has changed, but his faith endures. The narrator asks God to protect his family despite the fact that he asked the same for Eric. His faith and lament are joined and inseparable.



## Section 7: p. 72-82

### Section 7: p. 72-82 Summary and Analysis

People often ask the narrator if his character has changed. He now comprehends the suffering of the world more deeply, though he cannot fully comprehend individual's sufferings. He knows more about suffering and helplessness since Eric's death. There is no technology to overcome death. The narrator has changed for the better, but he would exchange those positive changes to have Eric back. The Christian gospel tells more of the meaning of sin than of suffering because sin belongs to mankind and pains God; sin is overcome only through God's forgiveness. There is no answer to why humans suffer, but there is more to suffering than mankind's guilt. The narrator refers to Isaiah 45:15 and Pascal, stating that God hides his face from mankind even when he speaks to them.

The narrator's bitter friend asks why he does not just scrap "this God business." According to the narrator, the world declares the glory of God, and the narrator is convinced that Jesus Christ is the son of God when he reads the New Testament of the Bible. His faith is a footbridge, and he cannot dispel the sense of conducting his inspection of the world in the presence of God. The narrator wants to talk to Eric again, to be able to say anything to his son. Because God raised Jesus Christ, the narrator knows that God can raise Eric also, but he wonders why God allowed Eric to die in the first place. When the narrator is next able to talk to Eric again, it will be during God's reign on Earth. The narrator is now surrounded by death; he used to see it here and there, but now it is all around him. Mankind lives with the dead until joining them. The narrator wonders how faith can endure amongst such suffering. He sees God crying and wonders why God permits himself to suffer, referring to Psalm 116:15. The narrator believes God suffers and thinks that maybe it is death to look at the face of God because the human mind would be so overwhelmed at the sight of such suffering. Each person who suffers adds to God's suffering. The narrator is only beginning to learn what it means that God suffers.



## Section 8: p. 83-91

### Section 8: p. 83-91 Summary and Analysis

Man is made in the image of God. He shares God's knowledge, love, justice, sociality, creativity and suffering. The narrator alludes to the Beatitudes, stating that Jesus Christ blesses those who mourn for they shall be comforted. Left to his own devices, man cheers the victorious so the narrator wonders why Jesus Christ hails mourners.

Mourning is a quality of character that belongs to Jesus Christ's realm. Mourners have seen injustice which makes them more prepared for justice. Jesus Christ promises to comfort mourners. The narrator quotes Henry Nouwen's "A Letter of Consolation," which states that by God wanting to experience death with mankind, it proves that there is something more than death awaiting mankind.

By joining the mourning, mourners see the tears of God which console them, a quote from Psalm 126 states. Suffering occurs when something prized is taken away. Suffering is a deep mystery, and all people suffer. Suffering is love. By Jesus Christ commanding mankind to "love thy neighbor as thyself," he in essence commands mankind to suffer. Love is suffering, and since God is love, God is suffering. God shares in mankind's suffering. Man and God exist together in the history of the world. God's work to deliver himself from suffering is God working to deliver the world from agony. When God's cup of suffering is full, redemption for mankind will be fulfilled.



## Section 9: p. 92-103

### Section 9: p. 92-103 Summary and Analysis

Jesus Christ is resurrected with wounds from his crucifixion, but the mere fact that he rises from the grave is a sign of mankind one day rising from their graves. To believe in Jesus Christ's resurrection, according to the narrator, is to rise from the graves of suffering love for mourners. Death wins if nothing good is produced from the experience of death. The narrator will live the reality of Eric's death, but his wounds remain. Mankind is healed by Jesus Christ's wounds, but the narrator wonders if mankind's own wounds will ever heal. He wonders if this suffering will bring peace. He doubts it since death is the mortal enemy of peace. Quoting Henry Nouwen's "A Letter of Consolation," the narrator claims that it is important to understand mortality in order to appreciate life.

Suffering may be a blessing since it creates a glow of courage, love, insight, selflessness and faith. Suffering also makes character, but the narrator wonders how he can manage to receive his suffering as a blessing without obscenely thinking that God jiggled the mountain in order to make the narrator better through Eric's death. The narrator feels Eric is around again; everything is changed with the potential of reminding him of his son. Eric's younger brothers had begun asking Eric for advice, and his parents see Eric as an equal; now, the family must be restructured with one part of it missing. The narrator and his family visit Eric's grave one year after Eric's death. The narrator imagines Eric inside the coffin as he walks around the grave rather on top since walking across Eric's grave would seem like desecration. The narrator wonders what will happen when God raises all mankind from the dead. He bids Eric goodbye until they meet again on the Day of Judgment. It is necessary to be still; the end is the beginning, a quotation from T. S. Eliot's "Four Quartets" reminds.



# Characters

## Narrator

The narrator of "Lament for a Son" writes the book in order to honor his son, Eric, who dies in a mountain climbing accident at the age of twenty-five. He publishes the book in order to give voice to others' mourning. He receives a call on Sunday about Eric's accident. Three seconds of peaceful resignation where he feels that he is offering Eric to someone is followed by a cold, burning pain. The narrator takes Eric for granted during his life and does not realize the great gift of Eric's existence until his son is gone. The narrator does not realize how much he loves Eric until Eric dies. The narrator feels it is wrong to bury one's children since they are supposed to be the future. The narrator flies across the ocean to claim Eric's body in Kufstein. He wonders why Eric climbed the mountain alone, but he already knows his son's reasons. The narrator wonders if Eric's thesis would have been a contribution to society and culture once completed. The narrator laments all that might have been and now never will be. The narrator ignores the societal standard prohibiting men to cry; he has been assaulted and will cry.

The narrator assembles his family and instructs them that they must live the same as though Eric were still alive, holding Eric in remembrance. The Gospels do not console the narrator because he did not forget about resurrection. The narrator's hands and eyes must experience Eric's dead body in order to be truly persuaded of Eric's death. Eric's funeral gives rest to the narrator's soul. The narrator composes the liturgy that is used at the funeral; he also expresses appreciation at the end of the funeral for the outpouring of love and sings "For All the Saints." The narrator objects to extinguishing the resurrection candle at Eric's funeral. The narrator feels he buries himself when he buries Eric. The narrator is pained by formerly joyful reminiscences. He still delights in things, though his passion is cooled. The narrator is repelled by the ordinariness in stores and his office. He rejects a book on grief because it encourages him to turn away from death and pain, which he will not do because he owes it to God and Eric to remember. Sometimes, the narrator sees and hears Eric. The narrator thanks God for his five children but laments only for Eric. The narrator imagines a battlefield where he fails to protect one of the soldiers behind him.

The narrator regrets not appreciating, writing, taking time for Eric, and for not warning Eric against mountain climbing. The narrator will live with his regrets and accept them as a part of his life. His dialogue with God has changed, yet his faith endures. The narrator asks God to protect his family just as he asked God to protect Eric; his faith and lamentations are joined. When the narrator is asked if his character has changed, he acknowledges that he comprehends the suffering of the world more deeply than he did before Eric's death. The narrator sees the glory of God in the world; he is convinced that Jesus Christ is the son of God when he reads the New Testament. The narrator wonders why God allowed Eric to die in the first place. He will live the reality of Eric's death though his wounds remain. The narrator wonders how to receive his suffering as a blessing without the obscene thought that God jiggled the mountain in order to make



the narrator better. The narrator views Eric as an equal before Eric's death; it is necessary to restructure his family after Eric's death. The narrator, along with his family, visits Eric's grave a year later and imagines Eric inside the coffin. He wonders how it will go when God raises all of mankind from the dead. The narrator tells Eric goodbye until they meet again. He commissions Cary Ratcliff to compose a requiem in Eric's honor.

## Eric

Eric is the narrator's son who dies in a mountain climbing accident in Kaisergebirger, Austria when he is twenty-five years old. He writes JR about his desire to return to the mountains. Eric is born in New Haven and is buried twenty-five years later in June among the willows. Eric's cheek is hard and his spirit is gone; death takes his warmth and softness. Eric is a quick and bright child. He studies Art History in college as a Merit Scholar. Eric is a hard worker who is venturesome and lives intensely. He has a grateful eye and a great faith in God; he puts an "inscape" on things. Eric is lonely in his latter years as his friends move away and get married. Eric is loyal, principled, severe, stern and critical, yet he is also gentle and loving. Eric is excited for his brother to spend the summer with him in Munich. His love for the mountains leads to his death. The things in Eric's apartment speak of Eric but have no meaning without their owner. Eric prefers solitude in climbing if his friends are unavailable. He is lured to the mountains by the physical and mental challenge as well as the spiritual experience of facing God. He is also drawn by the menace and danger; Eric's deepest self draws him to the mountains. Eric is writing a thesis on modern architecture and spends many of his last hours in the library.

Eric is cut down in the peak of vitality. His things are left out in order to hold him in remembrance. Eric has a list of things he plans to do. Eric is irreplaceable to the narrator. The narrator lifts Eric from his cradle as a baby and also places Eric's corpse in his coffin. Only Eric's face shows in his coffin, and it looks as if he knows something that his parents do not know, reminding his father of a teenage "know it all." Eric's death is Eric's loss also since he will never see, hear, walk or be with his family again. Death chooses Eric to make special among the narrator's children. Eric's death pains God, though God can raise Eric like he raises Jesus Christ. Eric will talk to the narrator again during God's reign on Earth. Eric's younger brothers often turn to Eric for advice, and his parents see Eric as an equal; Eric's family must be restructured after his death. The narrator tells Eric goodbye until they meet again. The fourth part of the requiem hypothesizes on what Eric might say, expressing his faith in God.

## God

God feels the suffering of mankind. He will overcome death. The narrator and Eric have faith in God. Eric likes the mountains because he feels he is facing God. Mankind finds God in history, which is the reason that remembrance is so important. The narrator thanks God for Eric's life. God participates in mankind's brokenness through the sacrament of the Eucharist. God forgives the narrator's regrets and is pained by Eric's





death. God hides his face even while he speaks to man. Sin pains God, but he forgives mankind. The world declares God's glory. God is the father of Jesus Christ and raises his son from the dead; he is also able to raise Eric. God sufferings with mankind which may be the reason that looking upon God's face means death. God's tears console mourners. God is love and suffering. God works to deliver himself from suffering and the world from agony; when God's cup is full, redemption will be fulfilled. God will resurrect all mankind on the Day of Judgment. The first part of the requiem is a lament to God; the third part reiterates that God shares mankind's suffering, and the fourth part demonstrates Eric's faith in God by suggesting what Eric might say. The fifth part of the requiem is about the endurance of faith while the sixth part speaks of Christian hope in the resurrection of mankind.

## Jesus Christ

Jesus Christ is the son of God, according to the Christian belief. The narrator believes this when he reads the New Testament. God raises Jesus Christ from the dead, which makes the narrator have faith that God can also raise Eric. In the Beatitudes, Jesus Christ blesses mourners and claims they will be comforted. Mourning is a quality of character that belongs to Jesus Christ's realms. Jesus Christ is resurrected with wounds, which is a sign of mankind rising from their graves. Man is healed by Jesus Christ's wounds. By commanding men to "love thy neighbor as thyself," Jesus Christ condemns mankind to suffer.

## Mourners

Mourners have seen injustice and are more prepared for justice. They see the tears of God, which console them. Jesus Christ blesses those who mourn for they shall be comforted. Mourning is a quality of character that belongs to Jesus Christ's realm.

## Friend's son

The narrator's friend's son commits suicide a few weeks before Eric dies. The narrator wonders if the young man's death is easier on his parents since he wanted to die, but the narrator learns that this is not so when talking to his friend.

## Bernhard

Bernhard is the narrator's friend who meets the narrator in Munich. He goes to Eric's apartment with the narrator and travels to Kufstein with his friend to claim Eric's body.



## **Undertaker**

The undertaker in Kufstein advises the narrator against seeing Eric's mutilated body. He returns Eric's effects, boots and a backpack, to the narrator.

## **Claire**

Claire is the narrator's wife and Eric's mother. She insists upon seeing Eric's body in the coffin. At Eric's funeral, Claire reads the "Song of Hannah."

## **Friend with cancer**

The narrator composes a liturgy for his friend with cancer several years before Eric's death. This friend is present at Eric's funeral.

## **Cary Ratcliff**

Cary Ratcliff is the composer who the narrator and Claire commission to compose a requiem in honor of Eric.



# Objects/Places

## Munich

Eric's apartment is in Munich.

## Mountain Climbing Accident

Eric dies in a mountain climbing accident at age twenty-five in Kaisiergebirger while climbing alone.

## Eric's Apartment

Eric's apartment is in Munich. His father stops there before claiming his body in Kufstein. The narrator states that the objects in Eric's apartment speak of Eric, but they have no meaning without their owner.

## Remembrance

Remembrance is a vital part of the Christian and Jewish way of life. The narrator and his family must not forget Eric, but they still must live their lives the same as though Eric was still alive. They leave Eric's belongings on display as a memorial.

## Kaisiergebirger

Eric dies while climbing a mountain in Kaisiergebirger.

## Kufstein

The narrator travels to Kufstein to collect Eric's body and effects.

## Eric's Effects

When the narrator claims Eric's body, he also collects Eric's effects. The effects are boots and a backpack, which are unscathed from the fall; the narrator feels this is a mockery since Eric's body is mutilated from the fall.



## **Eric's Thesis**

Eric writes a thesis on the origins of modern architecture mainly interested in the losers in the dispute of 1920, especially Paul Schultze-Naumberg. He does not finish this thesis before his death, and the narrator wonders if it would have been a significant contribution to culture and society.

## **Library**

Eric spends many of his last hours in the library in Munich.

## **Men's Tears**

Society scorns men's tears, but the narrator is assaulted and will cry. He feels that he may see things through his tears that he would not see with dry eyes.

## **Eric's Funeral**

Eric's funeral gives rest to the narrator's soul. The liturgy used is written by the narrator for his friend with cancer. A shroud and lilies are placed over Eric's coffin. The congregation and choir sing and celebrate the Eucharist.

## **Liturgy**

The narrator originally writes the liturgy used for Eric's funeral for his friend who is suffering from cancer. The liturgy thanks God for Eric's presence and expresses grief that Eric is gone.

## **Eucharist**

The Eucharist is a sacrament of God's participation in man's brokenness, which is performed at Eric's funeral.

## **Song of Hannah**

Claire recites the "Song of Hannah" at Eric's funeral.

## **For All the Saints**

The narrator sings "For All the Saints" at Eric's funeral.



## **Resurrection Candle**

The narrator objects to extinguishing the flame of the resurrection candle at Eric's funeral.

## **Grief**

Grief isolates griever from one another because each person grieves differently and is therefore unable to comfort each other.

## **Death**

Death is an enemy to peace, but God will overcome death.

## **Bible**

Due to the religious nature of "Lament for a Son," there are many references to the Bible throughout the book.

## **Requiem**

Eric's parents hire Cary Ratcliff to compose a requiem in honor of Eric. The requiem consists of six parts with different topics which are as follows: the awfulness of death, a lament, God's share in mankind's suffering, what Eric might say, the endurance of faith, and Christian hope.



# Themes

## Resurrection

Resurrection is one theme that is addressed throughout "Lament for a Son." The narrator wonders whether man carries only love, trust and faith into God's kingdom, or whether they carry culture as well. The narrator feels it necessary to hold Eric in remembrance in order to honor Eric and God. The gospels do not console the narrator because he does not forget about resurrection; even though he knows that Eric is in eternity, he cannot be with his son here and now. The fact that Eric's face in the coffin looks like he "knows it all" can be seen as his knowledge of the afterlife. The narrator objects to blowing out the resurrection candle at Eric's funeral because he feels the significance of the candle. Sometimes, the narrator feels as though Eric is only away, not dead; he can picture and hear Eric at times. Death is the enemy of peace, but according to Revelations, when God's reign begins, there will be no more death or mourning because the old order will pass away.

The narrator will live with his regrets, accepting them as a part of life and waiting for the Judgment Day to apologize to Eric; this proves that he deeply believes that this day will come. He emphasizes that love needs the hope of reconciliation. Because God raises Jesus Christ from the dead, the narrator knows that God can do the same for Eric. The next time the narrator speaks to his son, it will be during God's reign on Earth. Mankind lives with the dead until joining them. God will overcome death; redemption will be fulfilled when God's cup of suffering is full. Jesus Christ rising from the grave is a sign of mankind rising from their graves as well as a sign of their ability to rise from the graves of suffering love. Death wins if nothing good comes from the experience of death. The narrator will live the reality of Eric's death, but the narrator's wounds remain. Mankind is healed by Jesus Christ's wounds, but the narrator wonders if mankind's wounds ever heal. The narrator wonders what will happen when God raises mankind from the dead. When the narrator visits Eric's grave a year after Eric's death, he bids Eric goodbye until they meet again; this is a clear acknowledgment that he believes strongly in resurrection. The sixth part of the requiem discusses how the old things shall disappear and death will be swallowed up in victory when God's reign on Earth begins.

## Death

Death is a recurring theme in this book. The focus of the book is on the narrator dealing with the death of his son Eric who dies in a mountain climbing accident. Death takes the warmth and softness of Eric's body, leaving his cheek hard and spirit missing. Eric's love of the mountains causes his death. Due to Eric's death, when his family gathers, they are not all together. The never factor of the things that Eric can never do or see is painful to the narrator. The narrator believes it is wrong to bury children because children are the future. Eric's unscathed boots and backpack seem a mockery to Eric's mutilated body to the narrator. Eric is unable to finish his thesis due to his death. The



narrator and his family mourn because they are unable to say goodbye to Eric. Death is seen as the great leveler, but many people often neglect to mention that each death is unique and everyone mourns differently. The narrator and his family leave Eric's belongings out as a memorial or remembrance. Death becomes the enemy by taking Eric, and nothing fills the void that Eric's death leaves. Claire insists upon seeing Eric's body because one's hands and eyes must experience the dead body to be truly persuaded of their loved one's death. Eric's funeral gives rest to the narrator's soul, though the narrator feels that he buries himself when he buries Eric. The narrator is at a loss for words trying to decipher what Eric's death means. Because each man is part of the whole of mankind, each death diminishes the whole. Eric's death is Eric's loss since he is never able to see, hear, walk or be with his family again.

One faces malevolence in death. The narrator skims a book on grief, but the book offers ways to turn away from death and pain, and the narrator refuses to look away. At times, it seems to the narrator as though Eric is not dead; he pictures and hears his son occasionally. All the narrator's children are special, but death chooses Eric to make more special. The narrator imagines being in the front of a battlefield with his father dead; the narrator fails to protect one of the soldiers behind him. There is no way to live at peace with death because death is the enemy of peace. A quotation from Revelations discusses how there will be no more death or mourning when the old order passes away after God claims his kingdom on Earth. Paul reiterates God's ability to overcome death. God is pained at Eric's death. The narrator is confused with the contrasting ideas of God as an instrument of death compared to God being unable to stop death. A quotation in the book shows C. S. Lewis' anger at God over the death of his loved one. There is no technology that can overcome death. The narrator wonders why God let Eric die. Mankind is surrounded by death; they live with the dead until they join the dead themselves. The fact that God wants to experience death with mankind proves that there is something more than death awaiting mankind. Death is the mortal enemy of peace, but it is necessary to understand mortality in order to appreciate life. The first part of the requiem reflects on the horror of death.

## Faith

Faith and religion are constant factors in this book. There are many references and allusions to the Christian Bible; several of these are Job 7: 9-10, Job 14:1, Isaiah 40, Isaiah 45:15, Psalms 18:36, Psalms 42, Psalms 116: 15, and Psalm 126:2. A reference to Revelations mentions that during God's reign on Earth, there will be no more death or mourning for the old order of things will pass away. When the narrator first learns of Eric's death, he has three seconds of peaceful resignation when he feels like he is offering Eric to someone. Eric has a great faith in God. One reference to the Bible mentions that the flower withers while the effects remain; this alludes to Eric's mutilated body compared to his unscathed boots and backpack. Eric's love of the mountains is spurned by the feeling of a spiritual experience of facing God while climbing mountains. The narrator wonders about what mankind carries into God's kingdom with them. Remembrance of the past is important in the Christian and Jewish way of life because in history, man finds God. The gospels do not console the narrator because he does not



forget God's promise of resurrection, and he is sure of Eric's presence in eternity. The liturgy performed at Eric's funeral thanks God for Eric's presence while expressing grief over Eric's absence. The Eucharist is celebrated at Eric's funeral and is a sacrament of God's participation in mankind's brokenness. During Eric's funeral, Claire reads "Song of Hannah," and the narrator sings "For All the Saints." The narrator objects to extinguishing the resurrection candle at Eric's funeral. The narrator feels that he owes it to both Eric and God not to turn away from death but to remember Eric's life. The narrator thanks God for all five of his children. The narrator will not cease rehearsing his regrets because he knows God forgives him.

The narrator waits for Judgment Day to be reunited with Eric. He is sure God will overcome death. God is pained by Eric's death because God is a suffering God. The narrator is confused by the different images of God as an instrument of death compared to God being unable to stop death. The narrator spies God in the light but is unable to see him in the darkness. The narrator's dialogue with God has changed, but his faith endures. The narrator asks God to protect his family just as he asked God to protect Eric. The narrator's faith and lament are joined. The Christian gospels tell more of the meaning of sin than of suffering because sin belongs to man and pains God, but God forgives man's sin. The world declares the glory of God, and the narrator is convinced that Jesus Christ is the son of God whenever he reads the New Testament. The narrator's faith is a footbridge, and he cannot dispel the sense of conducting his inspection of the world in the presence of God. Because God raised Jesus Christ from the dead, the narrator knows that God can resurrect Eric as well. The narrator will talk to Eric again during God's reign on Earth. The narrator wonders how faith can endure among suffering, but he sees God as suffering and envisions God crying. He believes perhaps it is death to look at the face of God because God's face reflects the suffering of all of mankind. Each suffering person adds to God's suffering. The narrator is only beginning to understand what it means that God suffers. In an allusion to the Beatitudes, Jesus Christ blesses mourners who shall be comforted. God's desire to experience death with mankind proves that something more than death awaits mankind. Mourners are consoled by the tears of God. God is love and suffering. Man and God exist together in the history of the world. God's work to deliver himself from suffering is also his work to deliver mankind from agony; redemption will be fulfilled when God's cup of suffering is full. Jesus Christ is resurrected with wounds. The narrator wonders how to receive his suffering as a blessing without the obscene thought that God jiggled Eric's mountain to make the narrator a better person. The narrator wonders how it will go when God raises all mankind from the dead; the narrator says goodbye to Eric until they meet again. The second part of the requiem is a lament to God, the third part describes how God shares in mankind's suffering, the fifth part exerts the endurance of faith, while the sixth part professes Christian hope.



# Style

## Perspective

The author of *Lament for a Son* is the father of a young man who is killed in a mountain climbing accident. He is the father of five children, but he loses one son. The author writes in order to express his grief over the death of his son, Eric. The author sees death as the enemy who steals his son away from his family prematurely. *Lament for a Son* is written in the first person and is a collection of short anecdotes and quotations that follow the author's journey of grief after Eric's death. The book is highly philosophical and expresses great faith in God. The author sees God as also suffering because of Eric's death. The author plans to continue his life without Eric until they are reunited when God resurrects all of mankind on the Day of Judgment.

The author states in the preface that he writes *Lament for a Son* in order to deal with his grief caused by Eric's death. He decides to publish the book in order to comfort others in similar situations. The book is about dealing with the death of a loved one and striving to continue life despite the struggles of mourning. Although not explicitly stated, this book is also an alternative to the common books on grief which the author scorns as attempting to teach mourners how to look away from death. The author believes that remembrance is the only way to honor those whose lives have been lost, and *Lament for a Son* reinforces this belief repeatedly.

## Tone

The tone of the book is very mournful as the author laments the death of his son. Simultaneously, the author expresses great faith in his religion as he turns to God for comfort. The author refuses to renounce God and Christianity despite his friend's suggestion that he do so. The author intends to hold his son in remembrance in order to honor his son's memory, and *Lament for a Son* serves as a memorial to Eric's memory. The author also uses the book to encourage others who are going through similar situations that there is hope. The book is hopeful in terms of hoping for the reunion that will occur on the Day of Judgment. The author seems to look forward to being reunited with his son.

The tone of the book is very subjective since it deals primarily with the grief the author experiences over his son's death; however, much of the book is slightly more objective since the author reiterates the individuality of grieving. The author attempts to share personal information about his grief over Eric's death at the same time that he consoles others in similar situations that everyone grieves differently. The many varying quotations and anecdotes also serve to highlight the various forms that grief can take. The tone of the book makes a reader feel with the author, both mournful and hopeful. The intent of the tone is to inspire hope and to reassure readers that a reunion is imminent; it succeeds quite well in its purpose.

## Structure

The structure of *Lament for a Son* is ambiguous. The book contains one hundred and eleven pages. It begins with a short preface from the author addressing the reason that he has written and published this work. The remainder of the book is filled with untitled anecdotes about dealing with the pain caused by Eric's death. There are no chapters or separations in the stories. The book is also interspersed with famous quotes that relate to the various anecdotes in some way. Quotations from the Bible are used heavily, which serves to reinforce the religious faith that is necessary for the author to deal with his lamentations. The last several pages of the book are a requiem in six parts; each part deals briefly with the main topics that the book addresses, though the book does not address them nearly so concisely or as well organized.

This format is useful since it appears disorganized, which seems to mimic the emotions that pervade the author's senses at the death of his son. The requiem is especially useful as it organizes the topics that are addressed throughout *Lament for a Son*. The downfall to this format is that it can be extremely confusing as it jumps from topic to topic. It may have been more useful for the author to place the requiem at the beginning of the book and then reiterate the individual parts of the requiem before organizing the anecdotes into chapters that reflect upon the specific topic that the requiem addresses.



## Quotes

"That loss determines my identity; not all of my identity, but much of it. It belongs within my story. I struggle indeed to go beyond merely owning my grief toward owning it redemptively. But I will not and cannot disown it. I shall remember Eric. Lament is part of life." Preface, Page 6

"For three seconds I felt the peace of resignation: arms extended, limp son in hand, peacefully offering him to someone- Someone. Then the pain- cold burning pain." Page 9

"We took him too much for granted. Perhaps we all take each other too much for granted. The routines of life distract us; our own pursuits make us oblivious; our anxieties and sorrows, unmindful. We do not treasure each other enough." Page 13

"I didn't know how much I loved him until he was gone. Is love like that?" Page 13

"When we gather now there's always someone missing, his absence as present as our presence, his silence as loud as our speech. Still five children, but one always gone. When we're all together, we're not all together." Page 14

"The flower withers, the 'effects' remain." Page 18

"Beauty pure from the hand of God, untouched by human hand. And deepest, perhaps, climbing was for him a spiritual experience. To go into the mountains was to face God." Page 19

"Turn it back. Stop the clock and turn it back, back to that last Friday, that last Saturday. Let him do it over: get up late this time, too late to climb, read a book, wait for his brother. Let him do it right this time. Let us all do it right. It won't stop; it keeps on going, unforgiving, unrelenting. The gears and brakes are gone. There's nothing I can do to make it stop. Farther back and father yet, back into the dimming past. The gap begins to gape." Page 23

"Death is the great leveler, so our writers have always told us. Of course they are right. But they have neglected to mention the uniqueness of each death- and the solitude of suffering which accompanies that uniqueness. We say, 'I know how you are feeling.' But we don't." Page 25

"I shall look at the world through tears. Perhaps I shall see things that dry-eyed I could not see." Page 26

"All around us are his things: his clothes, his books, his camera, the things he made- pots, drawings, slides, photos, notes, papers. They speaked with forked tongue, words of joyful pride and words of sorrow. Do we put them all behind doors to muffle the sorrow or leave them out to hear them tell of the hands that shaped them? We shall



leave them out. We will not store the pots, not turn the photos. We will put them where they confront us. This as a remembrance, as a memorial." Pages 28-29

"His death is things to do not done- never to be done." Page 30

"Nothing fills the void of his absence. He's not replaceable. We can't go out and get another just like him." Page 32

"Not even the best of words can take away the pain. What words can do is testify that there is more than pain in our journey on earth to a new day. Of those things that are more, the greatest is love. Express your love. How appallingly grim must be the death of a child in the absence of love." Page 34

"Seeing and touching was also a way of taking leave. Not a full leave-taking- not one in which two persons said good-bye to each other. But still, a leave-taking. For though we aren't our bodies, yet of nothing on earth do we have more intimate possession than these. Only through these do we dwell here. I knew Eric through his body. In touching the place of his dwelling, I took leave of him- just as in touching him in his crib, I welcomed him to life. Greetings and leave-taking go best, I think, when we do them with our hands." Page 36

"What does it mean, Eric dead, removed from our presence, covered with earth, inert? Or is such shattering of love beyond meaning for us, the breaking of meaning- mystery, terrible mystery?" Page 43

"Something is over. In the deepest levels of my existence something is finished, done. My life is divided into before and after. A friend of ours whose husband died young said it meant for her that her youth was over. My youth was already over. But I know what she meant. Something is over." Page 46

"Sorrow is no longer the islands but the sea." Page 47

"Loss is his as well. How very strange! Yet I feel it acutely. His sudden early death is not just our loss but his: the loss of seeing trees, of hearing music, of reading books, of writing books, of walking through cathedrals, of visiting friends, of being with family, of marrying, of going to church, and- dare I say it- of climbing mountains." Page 49

"In death one faces not love but malevolence." Page 50

"What is it that makes the death of a child so indescribably painful? I buried my father and that was hard. But nothing at all like this. One expects to bury one's parents; one doesn't expect- not in our day and age- to bury one's children. The burial of one's child is a wrenching alteration of expectations." Page 57

"Death has picked him out, not love. Death has made him special. He is special in my grieving. When I give thanks, I mention all five; when I lament, I mention only him.



Wounded love is special love, special in its wound. Now I think of him every day; before, I did not. Of the five, only he has a grave." Page 59

"My wound is an unanswered question. The wounds of all humanity are an unanswered question." Page 68

"I have changed, yes. For the better, I do not doubt. But without a moment's hesitation, I would exchange those changes for Eric back." Page 73

"Faith is a footbridge that you don't know will hold you up over the chasm until you're forced to walk out onto it. I'm standing there now, over the chasm. I inspect the bridge. Am I deluded in believing that in God the question shouted by the wounds of the world has its answer? Am I deluded in believing that someday I will know the answer? Am I deluded in believing that once I know the answer, I will see that love has conquered? I cannot dispel the sense of conducting my inspection in the presence of the Creating/Resurrecting One." Pages 76-77

"We live among the dead, until we join them." Page 79

"Suffering is a mystery as deep as any in our existence. It is not of course a mystery whose reality some doubt. Suffering keeps its face hid from each while making itself known to all." Page 89

"God is love. That is why he suffers. To love our suffering sinful world is to suffer. God so suffered for the world that he gave up his only Son to suffering. The one who does not see God's suffering does not see his love. God is suffering love." Page 90

"Slowly I begin to see that there is something more as well. To believe in Christ's rising and death's dying is also to live with the power and the challenge to rise up now from all our dark graves of suffering love. If sympathy for the world's wounds is not enlarged by our anguish, if love for those around us is not expanded, if gratitude for what is good does not flame up, if insight is not deepened, if commitment to what is important is not strengthened, if aching for a new day is not intensified, if from the experience of death comes nothing good, then death has won. Then death, be proud." Page 92

"All living is dying and all celebration is mortification too." Henry Nouwen, A Letter of Consolation, Page 95

"Suffering is the shout of 'No' by one's whole existence to that over which one suffers- the shout of 'No' by nerves and gut and gland and heart to pain, to death, to injustice, to depression, to hunger, to humiliation, to bondage, to abandonment. And sometimes, when the cry is intense, there emerges a radiance which elsewhere seldom appears: a glow of courage, of love, of insight, of selflessness, of faith. In that radiance we see best what humanity was meant to be." Page 96

"In the valley of suffering, despair and bitterness are brewed. But there also character is made. The valley of suffering is the vale of soulmaking." Page 97



"His younger brothers had begun to ask him for advice. To Claire and me he had become an equal, no longer a child to be cared for. Now he's gone, and the family has to restructure itself. We don't just each have a gap inside us but together a gap among us. We have to live differently with each other. We have to live around the gap. Pull one out, and everything changes." Page 99

"OK. So goodbye Eric, goodbye, goodbye, until we see." Page 102



## Topics for Discussion

Justify the author's view of God as a suffering God.

Why does the author object to the idea of God participating in Eric's death?

How does the author view death?

Why is the resurrection of Jesus Christ so important to the author?

How does the author continue to believe in God, despite Eric's death?

What is the difference in the author's family before and after Eric's death?

Why is it impossible for grievors to comfort one another? Who can comfort them and how?