

For Young Readers: *Introducing Death*

By SHEILA R. COLE

Death

Continued from Page 8
adults as well as children.

Death is discovered early. Children find a dead animal; a relative, family friend or pet dies. Then there are grief and questions — questions most grownups have pushed out of their minds because the answers are hard to accept, even for them. Why did it die? Will it come back? Is it afraid? What will happen to it now? And then the really difficult ones: Will you die? Will I die too?

If the questions aren't hard enough to deal with, there are the emotions: sadness and guilt, the feelings of loss, of regret and of anger which usually accompany the death of someone or something close to us. Most religions provide answers, but still the sorrow must be lived through. And there are many people for whom religious answers are unsuitable.

Death is not a usual theme in contemporary children's literature. It does occur as part of the action in many stories for older children, but it is hardly ever mentioned in stories for the younger child. In recent years, a small group of books (five new titles appear this season) have been written to introduce the topic to young children.

Many of the books reflect the uncertainty felt by adults who are put on the spot by a child's questions. Rarely do the books provide direct answers or confront a child's most vivid fears, instead the authors choose a story with emotional distance, which is supposed to quiet fears and put an end to the questioning as quickly as possible. The consequence of this approach is irrelevance. Yet it doesn't have to be that way.

In Sandol Stoddard Warburg's "Growing Time," published by Houghton Mifflin in 1969, most of the questions are answered in a very simple, straightforward and moving way. A small boy has a collie, named King, who has been his companion ever since he can remember. When King dies, Jamie feels sad, lonely and angry.

Jamie is helped to live through his sorrow by Uncle John who says that "for all living things and all living creatures that grow in this world... death is not a going away. It's a going back to the earth, which is our home." And by Granny who tells him: "What's buried up there under the apple trees is nothing to King anymore. The spirit of something you really love can never die. It lives in your heart. It belongs to you always, it is your treasure."

Although other books about death for young children have been published before and since "Growing Time," that book is still notable for its directness, honesty and power to affect (*Continued on Page 10*)

Sheila Cole is a former newspaperwoman with a special interest in education.