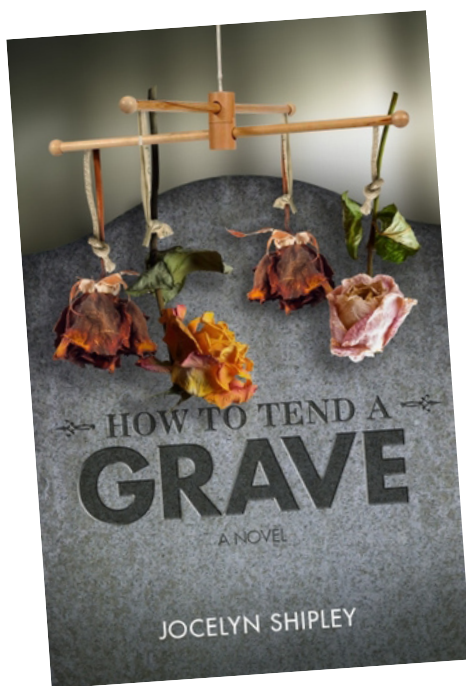




READERS' GUIDE



HOW TO TEND A GRAVE a novel by Jocelyn Shipley

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5.5" x 8.5", softcover
184 pages

WHEN LIAM'S mom dies, he thinks life can't get any worse. He's wrong. Forced to live with a grandfather he's never known, in a small town where Youth and Crime are king and queen of a hick-town gang, Liam only wants to be left alone. Not easy, considering the gang's favourite hangout is the cemetery where his mom is buried. A popular place, this cemetery, as there he meets Harmony, a gorgeous but unusual girl who records the names of all the babies buried there long ago. Like Liam, she has a secret.

The very different stories of these two grieving fifteen-year-olds interweave brilliantly in this fast-paced, engaging and unforgettable book about family, love and healing.

"Having just finished this amazingly heart-wrenching and tragic, yet hopeful story of two teens dealing with grief, I want to turn around and read it again." – Joanne, goodreads

From the author...

Dear Reader:

Thank you so much for reading *How to Tend a Grave*. I hope you'll like it, and find lots to think and talk about. I've been told it's a very emotional book, and want to reassure you that it's not deliberately tear-jerking. I intended instead to evoke deep feelings in a good way – a way that provides both comfort and insight. Despite the dark title and subject matter, this is not really a book about death. It's a book about life.

I started writing *How to Tend a Grave* way back in 2005. Ironically, I didn't set out to write about teens and grief. I was living in Kingston, Ontario then, and read in the local paper about teens vandalizing a historic cemetery. The vandalism wasn't an isolated event – it had happened several times. I did some research and learned that vandalism in cemeteries is a problem in many places.

I couldn't help wondering what would make a teen do something like that? Graffiti I can kind of understand – I think in some cases it's even an art form – but to desecrate grave-stones? At the time, I'd written three books from a first person female point of view, and was looking for a new direction. My youngest son had been a difficult teen, and I wanted to explore that, so I began to write, in third person, about a male character lost and angry enough to do some pretty bad stuff.

At first the book was just Liam's story, but it didn't have enough plot or depth. I didn't know how to develop it, so put the manuscript aside to work on other things. When I went back to it a couple years later, I realized that Liam needed a love interest to help him heal, and so I added a female character who was suffering as much as he was. Another newspaper article, this time about the unacknowledged grief women carry after a miscarriage, triggered Harmony's story.

I had had a miscarriage many years ago, when I was in my early twenties. I was four months pregnant when it happened, and no one gave me any information – all they would tell me was that nothing was obviously wrong with the baby – which kind of made it worse. I was just supposed to forget it and get on with my life. I guess that's why it felt like Harmony was dictating her story to me. Everything was already there, in my mind and heart.

My editor has said that more than anything *How to Tend a Grave* is about finding a way through hard times, and I totally agree. You just never know what will happen next, or who you might meet. If there is a message in the book, it's this: No matter what life throws at you or how bleak the future looks, there is always hope.

And speaking of hope, as I said above, I hope you'll like *How to Tend a Grave*. Once again, thank you for reading my book. I'd love to hear from you – questions and comments are always welcome.

Best,
Jocelyn

Contact the author through her website: <http://www.jocelynshiple.com>

Discussion Questions

1. Cemeteries, especially historic ones, can be lovely places to walk and explore the past, but many people are uncomfortable in a graveyard. Why are we so afraid of being around the dead, or even talking about death? Should cemeteries be used in a respectful way to celebrate life, say for weddings, picnics or concerts? Would this help us accept death as a natural part of life?
2. Grief takes many forms. What are the different ways Liam and Harmony deal with their grief? Is one more effective than the other? Is there a right way to grieve?
3. Harmony relates how her parents, who weren't able to have as many children as they wanted, convinced her to keep her baby. Do you think she made the right decision? How do you feel about them pushing her into motherhood for their own benefit? Should Harmony have told Jordan/Youth about the baby?
4. Women who miscarry are often told to try to get pregnant again as soon as possible. Should they be encouraged to take more time to mourn a lost baby? What do you think about funerals or other memorials for miscarried babies?
5. Miscarriage is a very difficult and sad experience. But if the pregnancy was unplanned and perhaps also unwanted, there can be a sense of relief, such as Harmony feels. Is this wrong?
6. How do you feel about Liam's mom? Should she have given up being an escort once her son reached a certain age? Should she have been a sex worker at all once she had a child?
7. It is easy to be judgemental of sex trade workers, but in many ways Liam's mom has been a good parent. Should Liam forgive her for not telling him about the money his father and grandfather sent? Should he forgive her for spending it all, rather than saving it?
8. Liam's response to vandalism is complex. He abhors it, but he also gets a rush from it. Does this make him more or less likeable? Is graffiti always vandalism or can it sometimes be art?
9. We've probably all felt like breaking something – smashing a plate or taking a hammer to our computer. Is this a basic human urge? Is it okay to destroy our own private property?
10. The 2011 Vancouver hockey riots involved many middle class kids with no previous criminal tendencies. What makes otherwise reasonable people join in with mob behaviour and trash public property?

Writer's Craft

1. What point of view and tense does the author use for Liam? For Harmony?
2. How do these choices help to create two different main characters?
3. The author also uses two different writing styles. How would you describe each style?
4. How do the two writing styles work together? What do they show the reader about Liam and Harmony?
5. What techniques does the author use to keep the book fast-paced?
6. How does the author develop the relationship with Liam and his grandfather?
7. What do you think the tomato plants symbolize?
8. How does the author create atmosphere in the cemetery and garden scenes?
9. How are the cemetery scenes different from those set in Gully's garden?
10. How does the use of both a garden and a cemetery give the book resonance?

About the Author

Born and raised in London, Ontario, Jocelyn graduated from York University and has attended The Humber School for Writers. *How to Tend a Grave* is her most recent YA novel. She is co-editor of *Cleavage: Breakaway Fiction for Real Girls*, and her other books for teens include *Seraphina's Circle*, *Cross My Heart* and *Getting a Life*. Her work has been translated into many languages for Stabenfeldt's GIRL:IT book club, and her award-winning stories for both adults and teens have appeared in anthologies, newspapers and magazines. She lives in Toronto and on Vancouver Island.

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