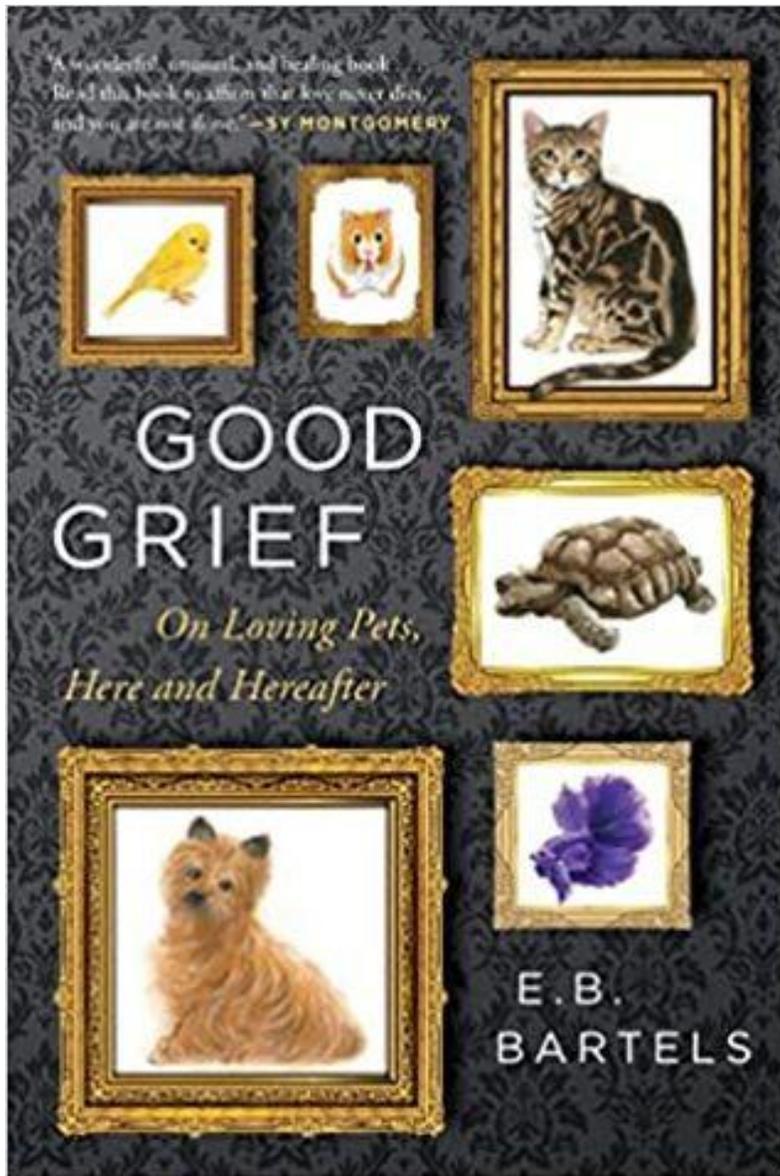


Good Grief: The Importance of Loving Pets in Life and Death
Author Interviewed by [Marc Bekoff, Psychology Today Animal Emotions](#)
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A historical, global view shows there's no best practice for mourning pets.



Source: Courtesy of E.B. Bartels, published by HarperCollins Publishers

Living with various companion animals often ends with the loss of our good friends. E.B. Bartels's new book *Good Grief: On Loving Pets, Here and Hereafter*, offers a personal collection of stories as well as historical and global perspectives about loving and losing these sentient beings and how to grieve them when they've moved on. It is a wonderful read that offers a number of valuable lessons, the central one being, "...there is no best practice when it comes to mourning your pet, except to care for them in death as you did in life, and find the space to participate in their end as fully as you can."

As I read *Good Grief*, I thought about another [interview](#) I did, with Rev. Sarah Bowen, about her book [Sacred Sendoffs: An Animal Chaplain's Advice for Surviving Animal Loss, Making Life Meaningful, and Healing the Planet](#). Both books go hand in hand.

Here's what E.B. had to say about her deeply personal and thoughtful book.

Marc Bekoff: Why did you write *Good Grief*?

E.B. Bartels: I became interested in understanding more about rituals and practices surrounding pet death because I'm someone who has had a lot of pets, and, unfortunately, those pets always die in the end. *Good Grief* started as an essay I wrote about the betta fish I had in college. I workshopped it in my MFA program, and a friend in that workshop said kind of casually how it could be interesting to add research to the essay—how people in other cultures and communities mourn their pets, since there isn't one universal method to do so—and I started to look into the topic and fell into a black hole. I quickly realized this was a lot bigger than one essay. There are so many amazing, creative, and special ways that people grieve and celebrate their pets. This book is just the beginning.

MB: How does your book relate to your background and general areas of interest?

EB: As a writer, I love reading and writing nonfiction that blends memoir and research. I always want to know why a writer is drawn to a topic, and what their personal stake is in the subject. So blending my personal stories with reporting about the different ways people mourn their pets felt like a natural way to write *Good Grief*.

MB: Who is your intended audience?

EB: Everyone who has already loved and lost many animals, or someone who has just gotten a pet for the first time (like so many people during the pandemic!) and is nervous about what it will be like once that pet dies. I thought about the kind of book I would have wanted to read when my first [childhood](#)dog, Gus, died, and I felt very alone in my grief. I imagine this book as a love letter to people who have lost pets, reminding them that there is a whole community of people who feel these same feelings.

MB: What are some of your major messages?

EB: There are so many different approaches to dealing with pet death, and I continue to be amazed as I learn about new things people have done to grieve their animals. It's scary that there is no one universal way to mourn pets—that can be really overwhelming when your animal dies and you don't know what to do and don't have a guide to follow like if you are, say, Catholic and know right away when a human dies, OK, I call the funeral home, call the priest, plan a wake and a funeral, write an obituary, etc. But, at the same time, I think part of why there are so many unique and thoughtful rituals surrounding pet death is because there are no strict societal rules—you have the freedom to do anything!

I used my personal stories of pet loss as jumping-off points to explore different topics, and I could have written this book 20 times and covered entirely different subjects each time. There is just so much to say about pet death, so the personal stories helped rein in the research. For example, in the chapter about my childhood tortoise, Aristotle, running away, I use that story to explore why it's so helpful to have a tangible, physical object to hold onto after an animal's death—commissioning a pet portrait, getting a sweater knitted out of fur, having ashes pressed into a glass bead, or even having your pet's body taxidermied. In the chapter about the previously mentioned betta fish, I use her story to look at the ways we have funerals and ceremonies for our animals.

One of the overall messages of my book is that there is no one right or wrong way to grieve. As long as you are not hurting yourself or others, I think you should do whatever you need to do in order to help yourself mourn.

MB: How does your book differ from others that are concerned with some of the same general topics?

EB: I found a lot of the really excellent books about pet death often focus on one specific area: There are extremely thoughtful and kind books written by psychologists and psychiatrists that deal with how to cope with feelings of grief and [depression](#); there are super-smart academic texts about pet death rituals; and there are books that focus on losing one kind of animal—dogs, cats, horses.

Good Grief takes a broader overview of all these things—part [self-help](#) guide, part anthropological study—and covers a whole range of animals, especially because I am someone who has had so many different kinds of pets. I think of *Good Grief* as an encyclopedia you can turn to and use as a guide to then figure out what specific aspects you want to research more deeply.

MB: Are you hopeful that your book will help people who are suffering from the loss of a companion animal who haven't been able to cope with their grief?

EB: Yes! I hope so. I would have loved a book like this when I lost my pets—to feel like I had a whole community surrounding me during that time. I hope that *Good Grief* makes people realize that there are lots of people who have been there themselves. You are not alone!