

Letting Go and Moving on

A review of the film



The Lovely Bones

(2009)

Peter Jackson (Director)

Reviewed by

[Ngoc H. Bui](#)

“We weren’t those people, those unlucky people to whom bad things happen for no reason,” says Suzie Salmon, protagonist of *The Lovely Bones*. Unfortunately, the Salmon family becomes one of those people. Director Peter Jackson’s adaptation of the best-selling novel by Alice Sebold, *The Lovely Bones*, portrays a family’s attempts to cope with the loss of a loved one, learning through the tragedy to let go and move on. Moreover, the movie presents a disturbing account of the phases of serial killing and portrays how serial killers also deal with “loss.”

Jack Salmon (Mark Wahlberg) and Abigail Salmon (Rachel Weisz) appear to have the perfect suburban family life, raising three children in Pennsylvania in the 1970s, including their oldest daughter, 14-year-old Suzie (Saoirse Ronan). As the film’s narrator, Suzie foretells of her imminent and untimely death. She is murdered by a man in her neighborhood, George Harvey (Stanley Tucci).

Despite this foreboding information, the viewer watches breathlessly as Harvey lures Suzie into his self-made underground room built in a cornfield in order to kill her. Even then, we hope in vain that somehow Suzie will survive her own prediction of death. We at first believe that her death is averted, as we see Suzie climbing out of the underground room and running toward her house. However, the audience and Suzie soon realize that she is already dead and her spirit is just discovering the “in-between”—a place between earth and heaven. This “perfect world” in which Suzie is trapped is a place from which she is able to see her family and her killer but is not able to leave until she accepts that she has died.

The film’s main plot of Suzie’s murder also includes three subplots, all with one underlying theme. The three subplots, all dealing with loss and letting go, include Suzie’s realization that she must accept her own death and let go of staying in the “in-between,” her family’s grief and attempts to let go and move on after Suzie’s death, and the serial killer’s attempts to deal with the loss of his latest victim and his plans to find another.

Loss after the death of a loved one can be explained through the dual process model of bereavement (Stroebe, Schut, & Stroebe, 2005), which explains that there are two sets of stressors that the bereaved persons oscillate between: loss-oriented stressors and restoration-oriented stressors. Loss-oriented stressors involve the primary stressors in losing a loved one, including grief work, which is the depression and loneliness that the bereaved person must “work” through, positive reappraisals of the death (e.g., relief that the deceased person is no longer suffering), negative reappraisals of the death (e.g., obsessing and longing for the person), and attempts to understand the world without the deceased. It also includes the urge to cry and search for the lost loved one.

Suzie goes through the loss-oriented process of understanding the world without her in it and dealing with the sadness and loneliness of not being with her family. The Salmons also exhibit much of this first set of stressors in their dealing with Suzie’s death, with Jack Salmon obsessively launching his own investigation of potential suspects in her murder. Ray Singh (Reece Ritchie), a boy who had a crush on Suzie, also experiences the loss-oriented stressors in his disbelief of her death and his sadness at never having had a chance to really tell her how he felt.

In Stroebe, Schut, and Stroebe’s (2005) model, the restoration-oriented stressors include denial and avoidance of grief and dealing with the psychosocial changes or transitions in regard to identity or roles that accompany the loss. For example, the family must deal with being “one of those unlucky people to whom bad things happen for no reason” and accept the fact that Suzie is not coming back.

Abigail Salmon cannot deal with her grief and eventually leaves the family for a period of time to get away from Jack’s obsession with finding the killer and from the constant reminders of Suzie. However, her inability to deal with Suzie’s death, which demonstrates the restoration-oriented stressors of denial and avoidance of grief in the dual process model, is not unusual for grieving mothers (Wijngaards-de Meij et al., 2005). Parents who lose their child through traumatic circumstances (e.g., murder, accident)

experience more grief than do parents losing their child to illness or a disorder, and mothers tend to report feeling more grief and depression than do fathers over the loss of their child (Wijngaards-de Meij et al., 2005).

Another aspect of the dual process model of bereavement focuses on the bereaved person's ability to oscillate, or move between, these two sets of stressors and processes, learning how to deal with loss and focusing on what remains. Stroebe, Schut, and Stroebe (2005) suggested that eventually the bereaved will concentrate more on the restoration processes of attending to life changes and acceptance. For example, Suzie's mother eventually returns to her family and is able to finally say good-bye to Suzie. Also, Lindsey (Rose McIver), Suzie's younger sister, helps the family get some closure by finding out the identity of Suzie's killer.

As stated earlier, the film appears to have the underlying theme of loss and letting go, even for the serial killer George Harvey. However, his experience of loss has more to do with that of a killer who misses his victim and is motivated to fulfill a psychopathic urge to search for and murder another victim. Next he sets his sights on Lindsey Salmon.

According to Beauregard, Stone, Proulx, and Michaud (2008), sexual murders of children tend to be premeditated, and the victims are usually dismembered and hidden. Although no sexual scenes are shown in relation to Suzie's murder, Harvey's behaviors fit those of a sexual murderer (Beauregard et al., 2008). Harvey carefully plans the ways in which to trap his victims, noting every detail in his journal. He ends up cutting up Suzie and putting her in a safe in his basement, which is ironic in that parents who watch this movie will worry about the ways to keep their own children "safe" from serial killers like Harvey.



According to Keppel and Walter (1999), George Harvey also fits the profile of an anger–excitation rape–murder offender. This type of killer plans to rape and kill for pleasure, does not leave any signs at the crime scene, and often buries or dumps the body in a location familiar to him. The typical anger–excitation rapist–murderer also is skilled at working with his hands, is compulsive and organized, and keeps souvenirs of his victims.



Harvey is skilled at construction, keeps to himself, and is meticulous about details. After her death, Suzie finds out that Harvey has killed six other women and girls in similarly violent ways. Moreover, Harvey keeps Suzie's lock of hair, part of her bracelet, and even her body as constant reminders of his deed. But even Harvey feels a sense of loss in not having a victim to obsess over and begins a new obsession to kill Suzie's sister, Lindsey. Although he is not able to lure Lindsey, he continues to try to lure other women to kill after he leaves town to avoid the authorities.



I won't compare this film with its source material, as many reviewers who loved the novel have done, because the movie should be taken for what it is, not what it should be. I appreciate Peter Jackson's attempts at presenting life and loss from different perspectives. His use of computer-generated images to create Suzie's "in-between" world add to the beauty and mystery of the afterlife. However, some could argue that these effects become a bit distracting from the movie's main points about dealing with life after death. Although

Suzie and her family had a hard time letting go, the film's main message seems clear: Celebrate life, however short-lived, and learn to move on.

References

Beauregard, E., Stone, M. R., Proulx, J., & Michaud, P. (2008). Sexual murderers of children: Developmental, precrime, crime, and postcrime factors. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, *52*, 253–269. doi:10.1177/0306624X07303907  

Keppel, R. D., & Walter, R. (1999). Profiling killers: A revised classification model for understanding sexual murder. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, *43*, 417–437. doi:10.1177/0306624X99434002  

Stroebe, M., Schut, H., & Stroebe, W. (2005). Attachment in coping with bereavement: A theoretical integration. *Review of General Psychology*, *9*, 48–66. doi:10.1037/1089-2680.9.1.48  

Wijngaards-de Meij, L., Stroebe, M., Schut, H., Stroebe, W., van de Bout, J., van der Heijden, P., & Dijkstra, I. (2005). Couples at risk following the death of their child: Predictors of grief versus depression. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, *73*, 617–623. doi:10.1037/0022-006X.73.4.617 