

CHILDREN'S BOOKS AND RESOURCES REVIEW

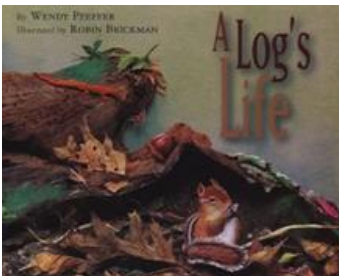
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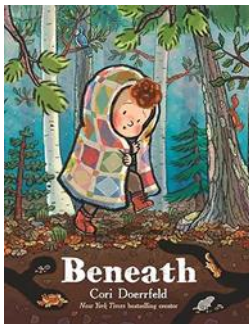
Death, Decay, and Decomposition: Book and Resource List

Death, decay, and decomposition are normal parts of life cycles in the natural world, such as when leaves wither and drop, flower petals wilt, or we find a dead insect on a walk. What lessons are to be learned about, in, with, and for nature when we lean into death, decay, and decomposition in a natural context? Understanding death in nature can help build social and emotional skills and resilience as we get to know the natural rhythms of life in our settings. Explore scientific elements, such as life cycles, food webs, ecosystems, living/nonliving, etc. Ultimately, we can build community, empathy, and connection through discovering life and renewal within death, decay, and decomposition. Here are a few books and resources that have been helpful for me on this journey.



A Log's Life by Wendy Pfeffer

Starting with the important biodiversity of an oak tree, carpenter ants begin to move in, followed by wood-boring beetles, mildew, mushrooms, and fungi. The oak falls to the forest floor and the larger mammals find new homes while ants, millipedes, spiders, slugs, fungi, and termites move in. The log becomes hollow over many years with time, weather and animal activity making it spongy. It eventually starts to look and feel like dirt until, eventual, an acorn starts a new tree.



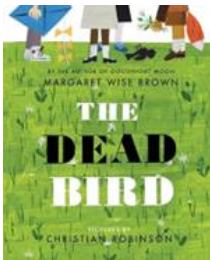
Beneath by Cori Doerrfeld

As a grandfather and child deal with loss, they explore the woods, contemplating what is beneath—the blanket, ground, water, bird, and chipmunk tunnels. The book reminds us that beneath what is falling apart is something starting to form as we see the new starts under the leaf litter. “Beneath appearances are experiences. Beneath actions are explanations.” Both have broken hearts to mend together beneath the night sky.



The Bug Cemetery by Francis Hill

When a dead ladybug is found, the children bury it with a painted rock tombstone, flowers on the grave, a moving speech, and pretend tears. Neighbor kids bring other dead insects for burial at a dime a dead bug, complete with lemonade stand. Unfortunately, when a friend's cat is hit by a car, the tears are real and the children have a real funeral, burying him in the Bug Cemetery, creating Buster's Garden where cats can chase insects. "Funerals aren't any fun when they're for someone you love."



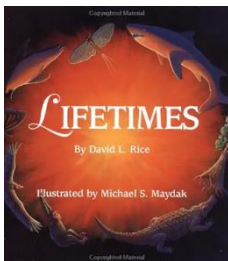
The Dead Bird by Margaret Wise Brown

Children at play find a dead bird, though "it was still warm and its eyes were closed." There was no heartbeat and the bird began to get cold and stiff, "the way animals got when they had been dead for some time—cold dead and stone still with no heart beating." The children bury the bird and plant flowers as they process their experience of loss in this classic story.



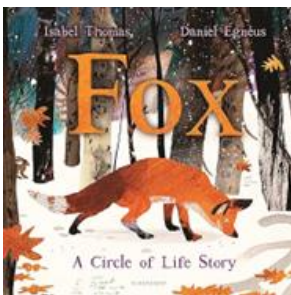
The Decomposition of Jack by Kristin O'Donnell Tubb

With a road kill scientist for a mother, Jack's social emotional health goes through similar stages of decomposition as he tries to figure out his parents' divorce. While this chapter book is geared for upper elementary readers, I thoroughly enjoyed learning about decomposition and finding new life through Jack's eyes. Great imagery and information on the applications of decay and roadkill.



Lifetimes by David L. Rice

This book can be read on different levels, with additional questions to investigate and dive more deeply—tell about it, think about it, look it up, and find out investigations. Discover how long various organisms live from mayfly (about 1 day) to a whale to a bacteria to humans. Appropriate for early elementary and up, though some preschoolers would enjoy parts as well.



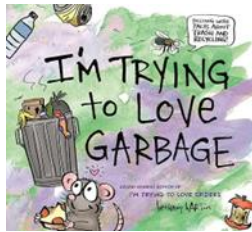
Fox: A Circle of Life Story by Isabel Thomas

A mother with playful kits teaches her children to follow scent trails and tests their skills as they grow. Unfortunately, she is hit by a car and the body begins to decompose with the help of insects, birds, and fungi. The old particles of fox find a new place for rebirth in the spring. "Life is everywhere. Death is not just an end, but a beginning." Backmatter includes information on the building blocks of life, what is death, what is decomposition, the cycle of life, and how death is not just an end.



Fungi Grow by Maria Gianferrari

This book, dripping with sound and action words, can be read on different levels with simpler text or more detailed explanations of fungi. The colorful illustrations show the world of fungi above the ground as mushrooms and under the ground as mycelium. The backmatter includes a glossary, how fungi heal and help, fungi facts, fungi life cycle, and additional resources.



I'm Trying to Love Garbage by Bethany Barton

This speech bubble based introduction to nature's garbage collectors (scavengers, detritivores, decomposers) shares the importance of dealing with our waste in the natural world. It also shares why we need to reduce our inorganic waste, such as plastic toy or running shoes that take 1,000 years to break down. Options include reducing, reusing, and recycling.



The Invisible String by Patrice Karst

An often recommended book to help deal with separation anxiety and loss, sharing about the invisible string made of love that connects us to our loved ones. The string even reaches all the way to Uncle Brian in heaven.



Jake's Bones by Jake McGowan-Lowe

Beginning at age 7, Jake shared the bones he found and how he cleaned them. Jake also shares the 7 golden rules of bone collecting, including do no harm. This non-fiction book geared for elementary children (though preK would like the variety of pictures) chronicles Jake's bone collecting journey, teaches us about bones and skeletons, and documents his bone cleaning process. With plenty of personal narrative and great pictures, this is a winner. Find out more about Jake and his process at jakes-bones.com.



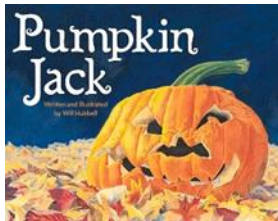
Living Things and Nonliving Things: A Compare and Contrast Book
by Kevin Kurtz

One of the few living/nonliving books, I've found that deal with the complexity of what is alive/not alive, such as things that used to be alive but are now dead (like a mummy). The book claims if a thing breathes, drinks water, takes energy and nutrients from the environment, reproduce, and grow and change, then it is probably a living thing. With words like most, probably, and some, there is room for (and some examples) the nuance and conversation around what is alive and not.



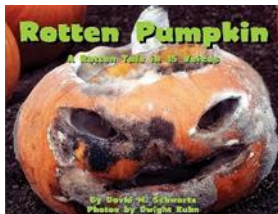
Pumpkin Circle by George Levenson

A visit to a pumpkin patch encourages us to explore the life cycle of a pumpkin. These detailed photos illustrate the planting of a seed, the growing plant, delicate blossoms, and pumpkins to harvest. We also see the change in the jack-o-lantern as it begins to decay and eventually becomes a new place for seeds to grow. Fun movement to the words as well!



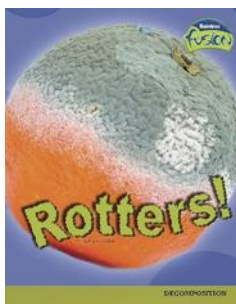
Pumpkin Jack by Will Hubbell

A young boy watches his jack-o-lantern decompose in the garden over time as mold covers the pumpkin and it gets flatter. In spring, new life emerges from the seeds of his carved pumpkin. The boy follows the journey of the pumpkin plant, sharing his pumpkins with others. Many classrooms have been inspired with their own Pumpkin Jack, putting a jack-o-lantern in a jar in the classroom, observing the changes, and watching it eventually sprout with the addition of a bit of dirt.



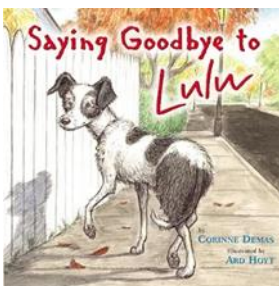
Rotten Pumpkin: A Rotten Tale in 15 Voices by David Schwartz

Follow the journey of a jack-o-lantern as it decomposes, with mice nibbling away, a squirrel visitor, slugs, flies, and more. Black rot, reddish fungi, and bread mold also move in. Learn about life that interacts in the decomposition of the pumpkin! Better suited for mid elementary, though the pictures are interesting for all.



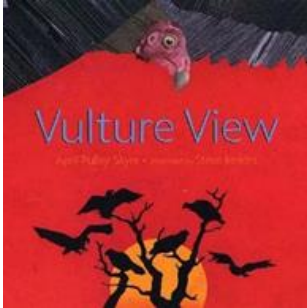
Rotters by John Townsend

This older nonfiction book explores the many organisms, such as microbes, bacteria, and fungi, that help plant life decompose. Text features, like bolded vocabulary words, guiding questions, and definitions, help explain what happens as plants and bodies decay. "Rotten fact! One teaspoon of soil can contain over a billion microbes. There are tiny insects, grubs, and worms in there, too." Geared for elementary readers.



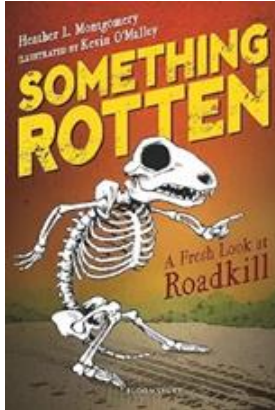
Saying Goodbye to Lulu by Corinne Demas

A girl loves her dog, Lulu; however, the dog eventually starts declining due to old age eventually leading to her death. "We put Lulu in a box with her favorite toys and a sock from each of us that smelled like us. We covered her with my blue sweater. We buried the box in the backyard." The girl goes through the grieving process as she missed Lulu, finally saying goodbye in spring at the cherry tree marking Lulu's grave with the hope of new beginnings. Heart touching story.



Vulture View by April Pulley Sayre

With short rhyming phrases, interactive options and cut paper illustrations, learn about turkey vultures and how they interact with the world around them. One of my long time favorites, this was a spark book for finding out more about death, decay, and decomposition. Turkey vultures have a keen sense of smell, use air vents to glide, are careful with their preening habits, and like to eat rotten dead stuff! “Those fragrant flowers? No, no. That spicy smoke? No, no. That stinky dead deer? Yes, yes!”



Something Rotten: A Fresh Look at Roadkill by Heather Montgomery

I could not put this book down! Geared for upper elementary, this narrative nonfiction takes us on a roadkill journey as the author explores a variety of applications of dead animals. Heather interviews biologists studying disease, explores the discovery of a new bird species from a wing, dissects a snake, and chats with a boy about his bone cleaning and rebuilding skills. Montgomery reminds us that death is just the beginning of the process, with much life along the way, as we learn right alongside her. I now find myself tallying roadkill on my commute! “Warning: This book is *not* for the squeamish.”

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

But Why? Why do people die? Questions about Death. Podcast episode. (2017)

This episode starts with a warning to preview it, giving practical terms and information about what is death.

<https://www.vermontpublic.org/programs/2017-10-13/why-do-people-die-questions-about-death#stream/0>

Warden, C. (November 2019). ***Creating a place to place to explore interconnectedness of the earth. Community Playthings.***

In this article, Warden recognizes that children innately are curious about the life cycles around them, including death and decay. Sharing stories illustrating the concept in the early years, Claire asks us to make space for “curated decay” and cultural approaches to death.

<https://www.communityplaythings.co.uk/learning-library/articles/creating-a-place-to-explore-the-interconnectedness-of-the-earth>

Born, D. P., & Schonfeld, D. J. (2019). ***Life and Death in Nature.*** *YC Young Children*, 74(2), 68-77.

Practical tips for teachers in having conversations around death while also sharing examples and stories of how classes have explored the concepts on their own as they found a vole in the corn bin which launched a thoughtful discovery and inquiry process.

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/26808915>

Mister Rogers' Neighborhood: Death of a Fish Episode.

In this episode, Mr. Rogers notices a dead fish in the tank. He tries to revive it with salt and ultimately buries it when he recognizes the body of the fish is dead. The episode takes a sensitive approach to how we deal with the feelings around the death of a pet.

<https://www.misterrogers.org/episodes/death-of-the-goldfish/>

Blagojevic, B., Grotton, V., Polk-Hoffses, S., & Thomes, K. (2016). **The Rotten Truth—Discovering Decay!** *Teaching Young Children*, 10(1), 8-11.

This NAEYC article illustrates how one class explored decay through watching a pumpkin rot, exploring living and nonliving things, talking to a mycologist, and creating a decay museum with help from the parents. Additionally, the authors started a website to house additional materials and resources around decay.

Article: <https://www.naeyc.org/resources/pubs/tyc/oct2016/rotten-truth-discovering-decay>

Website: <https://sites.google.com/site/discoveringdecay/>

Acknowledgments:

A special thanks to like-minded educators, such as Megan Gessler and April Zajko, who share additional resources when I start down a rabbit hole!