

Negotiating Loss and Letting Go: Grief, Continuing Bonds, and the Kübler-Ross Model in Dustin Thao's *You've Reached Sam*

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Abstract: Contemporary young adult literature increasingly addresses death and bereavement through narratives that foreground the psychological, relational, and developmental experiences of adolescent characters. Dustin Thao's *You've Reached Sam* (2021) offers a distinctive representation of adolescent grief by combining a conventional narrative of bereavement with a speculative premise: following the sudden death of her boyfriend, Sam Obayashi, seventeen-year-old Julie Clarke discovers that she can communicate with him through his former telephone number. This article examines Thao's representation of grief through Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's categories of denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance while placing the model in dialogue with the theory of continuing bonds developed by Dennis Klass, Phyllis Silverman, and Steven Nickman. Through qualitative close reading of Julie's emotional responses, avoidance strategies, memories, interpersonal relationships, temporal disruptions, supernatural communication, and eventual decision to release Sam, the article argues that *You've Reached Sam* invokes the emotional vocabulary associated with the Kübler-Ross model while simultaneously challenging the assumption that grief develops through a fixed sequence. Julie repeatedly revisits earlier emotional positions as her understanding of loss changes, making her grief recursive, relational, and nonlinear. The article further argues that the supernatural telephone is not merely a fantastical narrative device or a symbol of Julie's refusal to let go. Rather, it functions as a dynamic literary mechanism through which Thao externalizes the continuing bond between mourner and deceased. Its function changes from enabling denial and imagined reunion to facilitating emotional confrontation and eventual release. Consequently, acceptance in the novel does not mean forgetting Sam or severing attachment; it means transforming an impossible dependence on his presence into a sustainable relationship with memory. The article therefore proposes that *You've Reached Sam* reframes mourning not as a movement from love to detachment but as a movement from dependence to integration.

Keywords: Young adult literature; grief; bereavement; Kübler-Ross; continuing bonds; adolescent grief; Dustin Thao; *You've Reached Sam*.

Introduction: Death creates a fundamental paradox for literature: it produces an absence that nevertheless remains emotionally and psychologically present in the lives of those who survive. Narratives of bereavement consequently develop imaginative strategies through which the dead continue to exist in memory, language, dreams, objects, relationships, and symbolic forms.

This tension between absence and presence becomes particularly significant in young adult (YA) literature, where narratives of death frequently intersect with identity formation, emotional development, interpersonal attachment, and the transition toward adulthood.

Contemporary YA fiction increasingly represents young

protagonists as active negotiators of loss rather than passive recipients of tragedy. Death, bereavement, trauma, illness, and separation often become catalysts through which adolescent characters reconsider their identities, relationships, expectations, and imagined futures. Such narratives are especially significant because adolescence is itself a transitional period. A young person confronting death may simultaneously be negotiating independence, education, friendship, romantic attachment, and the construction of an adult identity. Bereavement can therefore disrupt not only the present but also the future that the adolescent had imagined.

Dustin Thao's *You've Reached Sam* (2021) offers a particularly productive example of this intersection between grief and development. The novel follows Julie Clarke, a seventeen-year-old girl whose boyfriend, Sam Obayashi, dies suddenly in a car accident. Unable to accept the finality of his death, Julie withdraws from her family, friends, and ordinary routines. Her grief becomes complicated by an extraordinary event: when she calls Sam's old telephone number, he answers. The telephone thus appears to establish communication across the boundary between life and death.

The supernatural premise is central to the novel's representation of grief. A telephone ordinarily connects people separated by physical distance; in Thao's narrative, it connects a living adolescent with someone who has died. The device consequently transforms an ordinary object into a liminal space between presence and absence. Julie can hear Sam and speak with him, but she cannot restore the life they previously shared. The telephone therefore provides communication without reunion and presence without physical return.

This contradiction is essential to the novel's treatment of mourning. Julie initially treats communication with Sam as an opportunity to resist the finality of his death. Yet the conversations gradually force her to confront the limits of what communication can accomplish. She can speak to Sam, revisit memories, and express unresolved feelings, but she cannot restore the relationship to its former form. The telephone therefore changes meaning as Julie's grief develops.

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's model of denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance provides a

familiar vocabulary through which Julie's responses can be examined. However, the model must be approached cautiously. Kübler-Ross's original work was concerned primarily with terminally ill patients rather than with establishing a universal sequence of bereavement. As researchers have noted, Kübler-Ross's enormous impact must be acknowledged—her work drastically altered the care and treatment of dying patients—but it does not follow that the stages are adequate representations of what grieving people go through. Its later popularization as a five-stage model of grief has consequently attracted substantial criticism. Contemporary scholarship cautions against treating the stages as a fixed chronological progression through which every bereaved person must pass. The model is therefore more productive in this article as a heuristic literary framework than as a psychological prescription.

This distinction becomes particularly important because Julie's experience does not follow a stable sequence. She may intellectually recognize Sam's death while emotionally resisting it; moments of acceptance may be interrupted by renewed longing; and her desire to move forward may coexist with a fear that doing so would diminish the importance of her relationship with Sam. The novel therefore transforms the five categories into recurring emotional positions rather than completed stages.

The theory of continuing bonds provides a productive framework for understanding this complexity. Klass, Silverman, and Nickman challenged the assumption that successful mourning necessarily requires the mourner to sever emotional ties with the deceased. Instead, continuing-bonds theory recognizes that relationships with the dead may persist through memory, symbolic connection, internal representations, rituals, and other forms of ongoing attachment. This perspective is particularly relevant to *You've Reached Sam*, where the continuation of Julie's relationship with Sam is literalized through the telephone.

However, the novel does not simply celebrate continued attachment. Julie's supernatural communication initially provides comfort but also isolates her from surviving relationships. Her dependence on Sam's voice prevents her from fully participating in the lives of people who are also grieving. Thao therefore introduces an important

distinction between continuing a bond and remaining dependent upon the original form of the relationship.

This article argues that *You've Reached Sam* uses the emotional vocabulary associated with Kübler-Ross's model while simultaneously exposing the limitations of a linear conception of grief. Through the supernatural telephone, Thao externalizes Julie's continuing bond with Sam and transforms that bond from an initially isolating form of denial into an integrated relationship with memory. The telephone consequently functions as a dynamic narrative mechanism through which the novel stages a movement from impossible presence to sustainable memory.

The article further argues that acceptance in *You've Reached Sam* should not be understood as emotional detachment. Julie does not recover by forgetting Sam or eliminating her attachment to him. Instead, she learns to relinquish her dependence upon his physical or supernatural presence while preserving the meaning of their relationship. Her movement is therefore not from love to detachment but from dependence to integration.

The study contributes to scholarship on YA grief narratives in two ways. First, it demonstrates that Kübler-Ross's model can function as a critical vocabulary without being treated as a universal psychological sequence. Second, it places the model in dialogue with continuing-bonds theory to show how Thao's novel reconfigures the conventional opposition between "holding on" and "letting go." In *You've Reached Sam*, remembering and moving forward are ultimately presented not as contradictory actions but as mutually compatible forms of adaptation.

Literature Review: Grief, Stage Theory, Continuing Bonds, and Young Adult Literature

Theories of grief have changed significantly over the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Earlier approaches to mourning frequently emphasized detachment from the deceased and the gradual withdrawal of emotional investment from the lost relationship. Within this intellectual history, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's *On Death and Dying* (1969) became one of the most influential texts associated with denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Although Kübler-Ross originally developed these categories through work with terminally ill patients, the

five-stage model was subsequently generalized in popular culture to explain bereavement.

The continuing popularity of the model has made it an influential cultural framework, but its application to grief has also generated criticism. Scholars have questioned the assumption that mourners necessarily experience five distinct emotional states in a predictable sequence. The model can become reductive when it is treated as a universal map of emotional recovery because grief varies according to individual circumstances, relationships, cultures, forms of loss, and social contexts. As Kübler-Ross and Kessler later acknowledged, the responses do not always occur in the same order, and individuals may visit certain stages repeatedly. This caution is echoed by researchers who argue that most bereaved people adjust to their loss in their own manner (not through stages) over the course of time, and that placing expectations on bereaved people about needing to experience stages of grief can be harmful.

Critics have drawn attention to the dangers for bereaved people of prescriptive interpretation. The stages, it is often said, were meant to be descriptive; however, they have been taken to be prescriptive. Caregivers mention clients worrying because they are not experiencing the stages in "the right order," and a not-uncommon reason for seeking professional help is a failure to experience one or more of the stages of grief. Whatever the intention, the theory promotes the idea of an orderly progression through distinct periods of grief and grieving, ones which can be identified and described by particular features.

These limitations are particularly relevant to literary analysis. Fictional narratives do not necessarily reproduce psychological processes in a clinically measurable manner. Authors organize emotional experience through characterization, symbolism, narrative structure, repetition, temporal disruption, and metaphor. Consequently, the value of Kübler-Ross's categories for literary criticism lies in their ability to illuminate recurring emotional patterns rather than establish a rigid sequence.

This article therefore adopts a deliberately critical use of the model. Denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance are treated as interpretive categories through which Julie's emotional experience can be

examined. The novel itself determines how these categories interact, overlap, and recur.

The theory of continuing bonds provides an important alternative to a strictly detachment-based understanding of mourning. Klass, Silverman, and Nickman's *Continuing Bonds: New Understandings of Grief* (1996) challenged the assumption that successful adaptation necessarily requires the elimination of emotional ties with the deceased. Their work recognizes that mourners may maintain meaningful relationships with deceased individuals through memory, symbolic practices, internal dialogue, and continuing identity. The continuing bonds perspective offers a framework in which recalling and memorializing the part that has been lost is an active process, one which creates an ongoing bond that the surviving part may carry with them into their future in whichever way suits them best.

Continuing bonds are not necessarily uncomplicated or uniformly beneficial. A continuing relationship with the deceased may provide comfort, identity, and emotional continuity, but it may also become problematic when attachment prevents adaptation to changed circumstances. Research has explored how continuing bonds expressions serve various functions: some providing temporary comfort in times of emotional need, and others acting as a guiding presence as the individual navigates their grief. This ambivalence is particularly important in *You've Reached Sam*. Julie's continuing connection with Sam initially gives her comfort but simultaneously prevents her from engaging fully with the living world.

The concept is therefore especially useful for interpreting the telephone. Julie's conversations with Sam represent an extreme fictionalization of continuing attachment. Unlike ordinary memory, the telephone gives the bond an apparently reciprocal form. Sam answers, responds, and participates in conversations. The novel thus transforms the psychological desire to maintain a relationship with the deceased into a literal narrative relationship.

Scholarship on young adult literature further emphasizes the significance of death and bereavement narratives for representations of adolescent identity. YA literature frequently uses experiences of loss to explore emotional maturation, resilience,

interpersonal relationships, and the transition toward adulthood. Bereavement can be especially disruptive during adolescence because it may coincide with the development of independence and the formation of future-oriented identities. Recent scholarship has reconceptualized adolescent grief as a gendered, relational, and culturally scripted process shaped by intersecting expectations around femininity, maturity, emotional regulation, and institutional control.

In *You've Reached Sam*, this developmental dimension is inseparable from Julie's grief. Sam is not only someone Julie loves; he is connected to her expectations about the future. His death therefore removes both a person and an imagined future. Julie must reconstruct her identity at precisely the moment when the future she expected has become impossible.

Existing discussion of *You've Reached Sam* has recognized its representation of grief, memory, healing, and letting go. A stage-based reading of the novel has identified denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance in Julie's experience. Such scholarship establishes the usefulness of Kübler-Ross for interpreting the novel but leaves room for a more complex question concerning the literary function of the supernatural connection.

The present article therefore shifts the focus from identifying grief stages to examining how the novel transforms the meaning of those stages through continuing attachment. The central concern is not whether Julie successfully passes through five psychological stages but how Thao's narrative uses stage-like emotional patterns to dramatize the changing relationship between the living and the dead.

Research Gap and Critical Intervention

Existing readings of *You've Reached Sam* provide valuable attention to grief, emotional development, memory, and the process of letting go. A stage-based interpretation, for example, identifies Julie's experiences in relation to denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Such a reading demonstrates the relevance of Kübler-Ross's categories but risks leaving the novel's speculative mechanism under-theorized.

The significant gap lies in the relationship between stage-based grief and continuing bonds.

The novel's central contradiction is that Julie must both

maintain and relinquish her relationship with Sam. The telephone enables her to preserve a form of connection after death, yet continued dependence on that connection prevents her from fully re-entering the world of the living. The novel therefore cannot be adequately explained through either complete detachment or unrestricted continuation.

This article addresses this gap by examining the telephone as a dynamic narrative mechanism. Rather than treating it simply as a symbol of Julie's refusal to let go, the analysis traces how its function changes:

telephone as denial → telephone as bargaining → telephone as emotional confrontation → telephone as transition toward sustainable memory.

This shift produces the article's principal critical intervention. The supernatural telephone does not merely symbolize continuing bonds; it narrates the transformation of a continuing bond.

The article consequently proposes that Thao's novel does not reject attachment in order to achieve acceptance. Instead, it distinguishes between preserving the emotional significance of the deceased and remaining dependent upon the deceased's continued presence.

This distinction allows the novel to redefine acceptance as integration rather than detachment.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative literary methodology based on close textual analysis of Dustin Thao's *You've Reached Sam*. The analysis focuses on characterization, dialogue, memory, temporal structure, interpersonal relationships, emotional responses, avoidance strategies, and the recurring motif of telephone communication.

Kübler-Ross's five categories are used as a heuristic interpretive framework rather than a clinical diagnostic model. Julie's experiences are examined for moments corresponding to denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance, but these categories are not assumed to occur in a fixed order.

The analysis is organized around the changing function of grief rather than merely around the completion of five stages. Particular attention is given to the relationship between Julie's emotional responses and the telephone motif, as well as to her changing

relationships with surviving characters.

The study is interpretive rather than empirical. It does not claim that Julie represents a psychological case whose experiences can validate grief theory scientifically. Instead, psychological theories are employed to illuminate the literary techniques through which Thao gives narrative form to grief.

Denial and the Refusal of Finality

Julie's initial response to Sam's death is characterized by avoidance and withdrawal. Rather than immediately incorporating the death into her understanding of reality, she distances herself from people, places, objects, and activities associated with Sam. Her refusal to participate fully in ordinary mourning practices demonstrates that she is unable to accept the relational consequences of his death. As the novel's plot summary notes, Julie isolates herself from friends and family, avoids memorials, and discards Sam's belongings in an attempt to erase reminders of him. This denial manifests as a profound shock, as Julie had not expected her boyfriend's death to result from an accident.

The novel's temporal structure reinforces this condition. Thao moves between memories of Julie and Sam before the accident and scenes following Sam's death. The recurring movement between past and present destabilizes chronological time and reflects Julie's own inability to experience the past as completely past.

Memory therefore becomes paradoxical. It preserves Sam's presence while simultaneously confirming his absence. Julie's memories are not simply comforting recollections; they repeatedly expose the distance between what existed and what can no longer be recovered.

This tension complicates the meaning of denial. Julie knows that Sam has died, but she cannot accept the disappearance of the relationship they shared. Her denial concerns not merely the fact of death but the transformation that death imposes upon intimacy.

The telephone literalizes this resistance.

When Julie discovers that Sam answers his old number, the novel temporarily suspends the boundary between absence and presence. Julie can speak with Sam, hear his responses, and recover an apparently reciprocal

relationship. The supernatural connection consequently gives narrative form to the wish that death has not produced complete separation.

Yet the telephone does not actually reverse death. Sam remains physically absent. The connection therefore produces a paradoxical form of presence: Julie can communicate with him, but she cannot resume ordinary life with him.

The telephone thus becomes an external representation of denial. It permits Julie to postpone full confrontation with the finality of death while simultaneously forcing her to confront the limits of what communication can restore.

Anger, Guilt, and the Unfinished Past

Julie's anger emerges from the suddenness and apparent injustice of Sam's death. His death interrupts the future she expected and leaves their relationship incomplete. There are memories that cannot be expanded into new experiences, plans that cannot be fulfilled, and conversations that cannot occur in ordinary circumstances.

Anger is directed both outward and inward. Julie struggles with the circumstances surrounding Sam's death, but she also questions her own actions and decisions. This inward direction introduces guilt and counterfactual thinking into her grief. As Kübler-Ross and Kessler explain, those in the anger stage may brood and blame themselves, feeling guilty for experiencing too much sadness and wishing they could do anything to return their loved ones to normal.

The question of what might have happened differently connects anger with bargaining. If a different decision could have altered the past, then the past appears temporarily negotiable. Julie's imagination consequently creates alternatives to a reality that cannot actually be changed.

The novel also demonstrates that anger is relational. Julie's emotional withdrawal affects her interactions with the people around her. Her inability to communicate her grief makes it difficult for others to support her and creates distance between her and surviving friends. This distancing is characteristic of the anger stage, where mourners may isolate themselves from family and friends while they process events, shutting themselves away alone for extended periods.

This aspect of the novel is important because it prevents grief from becoming purely psychological. Julie's grief exists within a social network. Her behavior affects other mourners, and their responses gradually challenge her assumption that Sam's death belongs exclusively to her private emotional world.

Anger therefore becomes an expression of attachment. Julie is angry because Sam mattered, because the relationship remains unfinished, and because death has imposed a boundary she cannot negotiate.

Bargaining and the Fantasy of Reversal

Bargaining is the emotional category most directly transformed into a narrative event through the supernatural telephone. Conventional bargaining may involve hypothetical questions about what could have been done differently. Thao literalizes this desire by allowing Julie to communicate with Sam after his death.

The telephone therefore embodies the desire to negotiate with an irreversible reality.

Julie can ask questions, revisit memories, express feelings, and temporarily experience Sam as present. Communication becomes a substitute for physical reunion. Yet the limitations of the connection become increasingly apparent.

Sam cannot return to ordinary life.

Julie cannot resume their relationship as it existed before his death.

The telephone can provide voice but not physical presence.

This limitation is central to the symbolism of the device. It connects Julie and Sam while simultaneously confirming their separation. Every conversation creates intimacy while reminding Julie that the conditions of that intimacy are abnormal and temporary.

The supernatural therefore performs a psychological function. Julie's internal desire to speak with Sam becomes external dialogue. Questions that might otherwise remain internal are transformed into conversations, allowing the narrative to dramatize grief as an active process of negotiation.

The telephone consequently becomes more than a magical object. It is a literary representation of the mourner's desire to maintain reciprocity with someone who can no longer participate physically in the

relationship.

Yet the connection also exposes the limits of bargaining. Julie cannot negotiate Sam back into life. What she can negotiate is her own understanding of the relationship.

This is the first major transformation of the telephone's function.

Depression, Isolation, and the Lost Future

As Julie confronts the limits of communication with Sam, the emotional weight of his absence becomes increasingly difficult to avoid. Depression in the novel is represented through withdrawal, disrupted routines, emotional exhaustion, and the collapse of the future Julie had imagined. This phase is marked by profound sadness, emptiness, and loneliness.

The future is particularly significant because Julie's grief is not limited to memories of the past. Sam's death also destroys an imagined future.

Julie had expected to continue growing with Sam. His death therefore creates what might be described as a double loss: she loses the person who existed and the future that she associated with him.

This dimension makes the novel particularly relevant to YA literature. Julie is approaching adulthood at the same moment that her imagined adulthood has been disrupted. She must construct a new future while still mourning the future she believed was already taking shape.

The novel also gradually broadens Julie's understanding of grief through her interactions with other characters. Her relationship with Sam's brother and her strained friendship with Mika reveal that Sam's death has produced a network of grief rather than a single individual experience.

This recognition is crucial to Julie's development. At first, her relationship with Sam isolates her from surviving people. Gradually, Sam's memory becomes a means of reconnecting her with them.

The direction of the continuing bond therefore begins to change.

Initially:

Sam's memory separates Julie from the living.

Eventually:

Sam's memory reconnects Julie with the living.

This transformation is central to the novel's representation of healing.

The Telephone and Continuing Bonds

The telephone is the most significant symbolic device in *You've Reached Sam* because it materializes the persistence of attachment after death.

A conventional telephone overcomes physical distance. Thao extends this function beyond physical geography into the boundary between life and death. The telephone therefore becomes a liminal object: familiar in its physical form but impossible in its function.

Its meaning, however, is not static.

At the beginning, it enables denial.

During bargaining, it enables negotiation.

Later, it facilitates emotional confrontation.

Finally, its disappearance makes possible a different form of continuing bond.

This progression is important because it prevents the telephone from being reduced to a simple symbol of inability to let go. The device itself changes meaning according to Julie's emotional development.

The telephone initially allows Julie to preserve the relationship in its original form. She can hear Sam's voice and interact with him directly. But continuing attachment in this form becomes unsustainable because it prevents Julie from fully inhabiting her present.

The novel therefore distinguishes between continuing the bond and continuing the relationship in its previous form.

The first remains possible.

The second does not.

This distinction is the point at which continuing-bonds theory becomes especially productive. Julie does not need to eliminate Sam from her emotional world. Instead, she must find a form of connection that does not require his supernatural presence.

The telephone therefore functions as a transitional object between two forms of attachment.

Acceptance as Relational Transformation

Acceptance in *You've Reached Sam* is not represented as the disappearance of grief. Julie does not stop loving Sam, nor does his death cease to matter. Instead,

acceptance emerges when she recognizes that continuing her own life does not require restoring the relationship to its former physical form. At this stage, Julie realizes the need to accept her boyfriend's death as a permanent reality and reestablish herself in her previous life.

This is the crucial distinction between letting go of Sam and letting go of dependence upon Sam's presence.

Julie can preserve the emotional significance of their relationship while acknowledging that she cannot continue living as though Sam remains physically accessible.

Her movement toward acceptance is therefore an act of integration.

Sam becomes part of her history rather than the exclusive center of her present.

Memory becomes sustainable because it no longer requires supernatural communication.

This transformation also changes the meaning of the telephone. At first, Julie needs the telephone because she cannot tolerate Sam's absence. Eventually, she must relinquish the telephone precisely because she has learned that Sam's significance can survive without it.

The transition is therefore:

from external presence to internal memory

and:

from dependence to integration.

This understanding of acceptance is consistent with the continuing-bonds perspective. A continuing relationship with the deceased does not necessarily indicate an inability to adapt. What matters is whether the bond can coexist with participation in the continuing life of the mourner.

Julie's development demonstrates that it can.

Beyond the Five Stages: Grief as Nonlinear and Recursive

A purely stage-based interpretation of *You've Reached Sam* would impose a chronological structure that the novel repeatedly disrupts.

Julie does not complete denial and then permanently enter anger.

She does not complete bargaining and then

permanently enter depression.

She does not reach acceptance and become immune to longing.

Instead, earlier emotions recur.

Memories can reactivate denial.

Longing can produce bargaining.

Acceptance can coexist with sadness.

The novel consequently transforms the five categories from a sequence into a set of recurring emotional possibilities.

This is one of the central reasons why Kübler-Ross remains useful as a literary framework while simultaneously proving insufficient as a complete model of Julie's experience.

The model provides recognizable emotional categories.

The narrative demonstrates their instability.

Continuing-bonds theory explains why this instability persists. Julie's relationship with Sam continues even after his physical death, but the relationship must change form if she is to construct a viable future.

The novel therefore represents grief as a process of relational renegotiation.

The question is not simply:

How does Julie stop grieving?

The more appropriate question is:

How does Julie learn to live while continuing to carry the meaning of the relationship?

The answer is not forgetting.

It is integration.

Love, Memory, and the Ethics of Letting Go

The emotional force of the novel ultimately derives from the relationship between love and memory. Julie initially fears that moving forward would constitute a betrayal of Sam. If she stops calling him, experiences happiness, forms new relationships, or imagines a future, she worries that she is somehow leaving him behind.

The novel gradually dismantles this assumption.

Remembering Sam does not require remaining trapped in grief.

Moving forward does not invalidate the relationship.

Love does not have to be demonstrated through

continued suffering.

This distinction allows Thao to redefine the ethics of letting go.

Letting go is not the rejection of the deceased.

It is the acceptance of the conditions under which the relationship can continue.

Julie cannot preserve Sam's physical presence. She can, however, preserve the meaning of their relationship.

The novel therefore separates attachment from dependence.

Attachment can continue.

Dependence must eventually change.

This distinction is the foundation of Julie's transformation. Once she no longer requires Sam to answer, she can remember him without remaining suspended between life and death.

The supernatural telephone must therefore disappear from her emotional life not because Sam becomes meaningless but because his meaning has become internalized.

Discussion: From Impossible Presence to Sustainable Memory

The novel's entire grief narrative can be understood as a movement between different forms of presence.

At the beginning, Julie requires Sam to be present.

Through the telephone, she attempts to reproduce his physical presence through supernatural communication.

As the narrative progresses, she recognizes that this presence cannot be permanent.

Eventually, she learns to preserve Sam through memory.

This movement can be represented as:

Physical presence → supernatural presence → emotional dependence → relational transformation → sustainable memory

The significance of this progression is that it does not eliminate the bond. It changes the form of the bond.

This is precisely where the novel moves beyond a conventional Kübler-Ross reading. A stage-based interpretation can identify Julie's denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance, but it does not by itself explain why the relationship with Sam remains

meaningful after acceptance.

Continuing-bonds theory provides that explanation.

Julie does not recover by abandoning Sam.

She recovers by changing what it means to remain connected to him.

The telephone consequently functions as a narrative laboratory in which the novel tests different forms of attachment. Its initial form is unsustainable because it attempts to reproduce the relationship as though death had not occurred. Its eventual disappearance signals that Julie has learned to preserve the relationship without reproducing its original conditions.

The supernatural is therefore not an escape from psychological realism. It is a literary method for making the contradictions of mourning visible.

Conclusion

Dustin Thao's *You've Reached Sam* offers a nuanced representation of adolescent grief by combining recognizable emotional responses to loss with a speculative narrative mechanism that allows the deceased to remain temporarily present. Although Julie Clarke's experience corresponds at different moments to denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance, the novel does not present these categories as a fixed chronological sequence. Instead, Thao represents grief as recursive, relational, and transformative. Julie repeatedly returns to earlier emotional positions, demonstrating that acceptance does not eliminate longing and that grief cannot be reduced to a series of completed stages. Kübler-Ross's model therefore functions most effectively as an interpretive vocabulary rather than a universal psychological law. The theory of continuing bonds provides a necessary complement to this framework. Julie's attachment to Sam does not disappear when she begins to recover. Rather, the form of that attachment changes. What initially functions as an isolating dependence on supernatural communication gradually becomes an internalized relationship with memory. The telephone is central to this transformation. It begins as a mechanism through which Julie resists the finality of death. It then becomes a space for bargaining, emotional disclosure, and confrontation. Ultimately, the telephone's disappearance marks the point at which Julie no longer requires supernatural

access to Sam in order to preserve his significance. The article therefore proposes that the telephone should be understood as a dynamic narrative mechanism rather than a static symbol. Its changing function mirrors Julie's changing relationship with grief. This interpretation also revises the meaning of acceptance. Julie does not accept Sam's death by ceasing to love him. She accepts it by recognizing that love no longer requires his physical or supernatural presence. She can carry his memory while continuing to construct a future. The novel's movement is therefore not from love to detachment but from dependence to integration. This distinction is particularly significant within YA literature. Julie's grief is simultaneously a process of mourning and maturation. She must develop a new sense of self at the moment when the future she imagined with Sam has disappeared. Thao's novel suggests that adolescent recovery need not mean the disappearance of grief; instead, it can involve incorporating loss into an evolving identity.

Ultimately, *You've Reached Sam* moves from impossible presence to sustainable memory. The novel begins with Julie attempting to overcome death through communication and ends with her recognition that the significance of a relationship can survive without physical return.

Its most important contribution to representations of grief lies in this redefinition of letting go. Julie eventually lets go of the need for Sam to remain accessible, but she does not let go of the meaning he holds in her life. Continuing bonds and forward movement consequently cease to be opposing processes.

Thao's novel thus presents grief not as a problem that must be solved but as a relationship that must be transformed. Acceptance is not the end of attachment. It is the point at which attachment becomes compatible with continuing life.

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