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MEMORY AND GRIEF IN BACKMAN'S *A MAN CALLED OVE*

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Abstract
This article investigates the interconnected themes of memory and grief in Fredrik Backman's A Man Called Ove by examining how these affective cognitive dimensions are constructed through narrative structure, character development and symbolic idiom. The novel within a broader sphere of grief literature and approaches the text through psychoanalytic, trauma studies and narrative identity frameworks, engaging particularly with Sigmund Freud, Paul Ricoeur and Judith Butler. The research explores how Ove's memories of his deceased spouse Sonja can both be an "operation of pain" as well as a "strategic use of memory", keeping emotional continuity intact and playing out the idea that a person's grief is not static rather evolving through interaction with others and everyday life. Current research suggests how Backman shows grief as a lived relation instead of an abstract state. Memory in the novel is subjective and materially grounded, often triggered by objects and places. The study also unlocks the way the novel undermined conventional masculinity by showing with time and effort, emotional vulnerability creates a route to healing. Ultimately, this research proves that this novel offers a rich and humanistic vision of grief as messily intertwined and vital to comprehending the human acts of resilience, love, and healing.

Keywords: Fredrik Backman, memory, grief, mourning, masculinity, trauma theory

Introduction
In Fredrik Backman's debut novel, *A Man Called Ove* (2012), the relationship between memory and grief forms the psychological backbone of the narrative. The story centers on Ove, a 59-year-old widower whose life has collapsed into a narrow routine dominated by memories of his late wife, Sonja. Through Ove's journey from isolation toward reconnection, Backman crafts a narrative that illuminates the complex interplay between memory, grief, and healing. This thesis examines how *A Man Called Ove* represents the processes of grieving and remembering, arguing that the novel illustrates contemporary theoretical understandings of memory and grief as interconnected psychological processes that require integration rather than resolution. Recent theoretical frameworks regarding grief have moved away from stage-based models toward more fluid conceptions that recognize grief as a form of learning and adaptation. The "grieving as learning" model posits that grief represents a cognitive process through which the brain must adapt to a fundamentally altered reality. As researchers note, "Standard features of human memory and learning can help explain the disorientation that follows the death of a loved one" (Seeley & O'Connor, 2022, p. 08). This perspective recognizes that the grieving brain must reconcile two conflicting realities: the semantic memory of the deceased as a permanent presence in one's life, and the episodic memories that confirm their absence.

Research on the Oxford Grief Memory Characteristics Scale (OG-M) provides valuable insight into how memory features correspond with prolonged grief. These studies indicate that "loss-related memory characteristics predicted future symptoms of PGD [Prolonged Grief

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Disorder]" (Smith, Wild, & Ehlers, 2022, p.17). identifying several key memory features in grief, including intrusive memories, distressing recollections, a sense of 'nowness' in remembering, and physical manifestations of memory related pain—characteristics that align closely with Ove's experience in Backman's text. When we first meet Ove, he is "driven to suicide by his memories and grief over Sonja". His grief manifests not only as emotional pain but as a profound disorientation in which his past with Sonja remains more vivid than his present without her. Throughout the narrative, Ove's memories of Sonja function simultaneously as comfort and torment. They preserve his connection to her while amplifying his awareness of her absence. As noted in critical analysis, "Ove attempts to make his memories of Sonja perform the same actions as she did while she was alive—motivating and inspiring him to do the right things—and though Ove's memories of Sonja are powerful, they aren't enough to pull Ove out of his grief".

The physical manifestations of Ove's grief, his daily visits to Sonja's grave, his preservation of their home exactly as it was when she was alive, and his continued coffee ritual—represent what grief theorists describe as "proximity seeking behaviors" that attempt to maintain closeness with the deceased. These behaviors reflect the brain's continued prediction of the loved one's presence despite evidence of their absence. As neuroscience research suggests, "After the death of a loved one, many of us fall very suddenly into a disorienting new reality, stripped of markers and routines that we once relied on to navigate our days" (Seeley & O'Connor, 2022, p.19). The brain's difficulty in updating its predictions explains why grieving people often report sensing the presence of the deceased or automatically preparing for their return. Through Ove's transformation from isolation to community engagement, Backman's narrative suggests that healing from grief involves integrating loss into one's life narrative rather than resolving or overcoming it. As Ove develops relationships with his neighbors, particularly with Parvaneh and her family, he does not forget Sonja or diminish his love for her. Instead, he finds ways to honor her memory through acts of kindness and connection that she would have valued. This portrayal aligns with contemporary understandings of healthy adaptation after loss, which includes developing "an updated mental model that comfortably accommodates both past and present" (Seeley & O'Connor, 2022, p. 21).

The novel's structure, which interweaves present action with memories from Ove's past, mirrors the cognitive processes of grieving—the constant dialogue between past and present that characterizes the bereaved mind. This narrative technique illustrates how memory functions in grief not as a linear progression but as an ongoing conversation between what was and what is. Thus, this novel presents grief not as a condition to be overcome but as a transformative process mediated by memory. Through its portrayal of Ove's journey from isolation to reconnection, the novel illustrates how grief requires an integration of memories into a new understanding of self and world rather than a resolution that leaves the past behind. By examining how Ove's memories both constrain and eventually liberate him, this study will demonstrate how Backman's narrative offers profound insights into the cognitive and emotional processes that shape our response to loss.

Literature Review

A Man Called Ove has no previous literature review related to trauma and memory, so in this literature review references of different articles will be discussed in correlation with trauma and memory terms, and it shows how in different eras of literature this terminology used and

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how characters' lives affected by memories and how it leads to trauma in their lives. This novel also offers a compelling depiction of how traumatic grief and memory intersect in the life of its protagonist. In this literature review, key theoretical frameworks and scholarly discussions related to traumatic grief, memory, and their representation in fiction are being explored. Traumatic loss involves the loss of significant others in the context of potentially traumatic events. These consist of losses from homicide, suicide, accidents, natural disasters, as well as losses from war and terror. The death of loved ones is a frequently experienced traumatic loss "among those exposed to potentially trauma" (Norris, 1992, p. 410). Most people, it turns out, do survive traumatic loss. But for a significant minority, trauma death psychopathology (PTSD), major depressive disorder, and persistent, distressing, disabling grief. The phrase "traumatic grief," however, may be utilized as an umbrella term, covering the emotional distress that follows traumatizing separations. Such long-lasting, twisted and incapacitating grieving reactions are now diagnosed under a new moniker. It is characterized in the DSM-5 as 'persistent complex bereavement disorder (PCBD)' (a condition for further study that may be labelled 'other specified trauma and stressor related disorder' added 'prolonged grief disorder (PGD)' (WHO, 2018, p. 3) to the ICD-11. These labels can help root people in the reality that "they are in extreme pain after loss and to facilitate returns to appropriate treatment" (Lichtenthal et al., 2018, p. 13) provided that they are well matched.

Over the years, the European Journal of Psycho traumatology has published key papers on traumatic loss, illustrating how these have been beneficial for "science and clinical practice" (Olff, 2018, p. 1). Some papers in this journal include research agendas as Maercker and Znoj (2010) argued for an emancipation of disordered grief as 'younger sibling' of PTSD, blazoning prolonged grief disorder's entry into ICD-11. There is limited grief research in children due to the fact there was a desperate need for research in diagnosis and treatment (Rosner, 2015). The findings also contribute to forthcoming discussions among grief researchers on the utility of including maladaptive trajectories of grief in the development of stepped care approaches to grief, which involve effective and efficient preventive and curative interventions, with deeper understanding of the unusual phases of grief and the risk factors for psychopathology (Boelen & Reijntjes, 2016, p. 2).

At least since the year 1889, when Pierre Janet first spoke about a relationship between trauma and memory, it has been widely accepted that what we now call declarative or explicit memory was active and constructive. What you remember depends upon preexisting cognitive schemata. When an event or a given bit of information is absorbed into existing mental frameworks it ceases to exist as a discrete fact but is warped through both related experiences and the mood of the individual at the time of recall. "Memory as a function of the living personality may be understood", as Schachtel put it, "as a capacity for the organization and reconstruction of past experiences and impressions in the service of present needs, fears and interests" (Schachtel, 1998, p. 56). This indicates that the accuracy of memory depends on the emotional valence of an experience; studies of subjective accounts of highly personally impactful events mean their memories have been fairly accurate and stable, for the most part, over time.

Modernist fiction emerged in the early 20th century as a response to rapid changes in society and culture. Writers rejected traditional literary forms, exploring new ways to capture the complexity of human experience and the fragmented nature of modern life. Key features of modernist fiction include experimentation with form, stream of consciousness technique, and fragmented narratives. Writers like James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and William Faulkner pushed

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boundaries, delving into characters' inner worlds and challenging reader expectations. *The Lovely Bones* by Alice Sebold (2002) is narrated by Susie Salmon, a young girl who is brutally murdered. From the afterlife, Susie watches as her family struggles with the trauma of her death and attempts to move on. Sebold vividly portrays the deep grief experienced by Susie's family in the wake of her murder. Each family member processes grief differently, reflecting the emotional devastation that violent loss can bring. The novel also explores the possibility of healing and the ways in which grief can transform lives.

South Asian literature is a rich and diverse body of work that encompasses the literary traditions of countries in South Asia, including India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Bhutan. It reflects the region's cultural, historical, and political complexities, offering insights into colonialism, independence, migration, gender, caste, identity, and the immigrant experience. South Asian literature is written in numerous languages, including English, Hindi, Urdu, Bengali, Tamil, and more. Famous South Asian Writers R.K. Narayan (India), Salman Rushdie (India/UK), Jhumpa Lahiri (India/USA), Arundhati Roy (India), Kamila Shamsie (Pakistan), Bapsi Sidhwa (Pakistan), and Khushwant Singh. South Asian literature frequently reveals the themes of trauma and grief by exploring the region's complex history, marked by colonization, Partition, political upheavals, ethnic conflicts, and gendered violence. These themes are woven into personal and collective narratives, reflecting how trauma permeates individual lives, families, and entire communities. The God of Small Things by Arundhati Roy (1997) set in the Indian state of Kerala, the novel follows the lives of two fraternal twins, Rahel and Estha, whose childhood is shattered by the death of their English cousin and the societal consequences of a forbidden love affair between their mother and a lower-caste man. The novel explores how trauma affects individuals across generations. The twins' grief over the loss of their cousin and the collapse of their family is deeply intertwined with the social trauma caused by caste discrimination. The psychological impact of these events shapes the twins' lives, as they grapple with the weight of familial and societal expectations.

Effects of partition trauma done to characters and makes alterations in the characters life. Ayah is a prominent role in the story, in Ice-candy-man Ayah is enjoying life with her multi-culture friends. And of course, she travels, meets new people and fulfils all her wishes. And she has no tension, no worries, and takes no responsibility. So, from, she is happily living before the partition but the partition happens and riots have started and communal violence has risen to the sky high. She is kidnapped and confined in her lover's dungeon. Ice-candy-man is the one who helps some of the Muslim gang who are also roaming in seek of Hindus and Sikhs to kill them as a revenge kidnaps her. Heera Mandi is the Brothel houses area and she was brought to brothel in accordance with need of the Ice-candy-man who actually was a cunning man. This deliberate organizing crashes during partition, she gets turned into her killer by her lover, Lover instead of taking care of her, is dragging her against her will here, everything is planned beforehand as she lives a converging existence but, partition messes everything. Not this, she has to leave her religion and for that she is forcefully converted to Islam and new name of Mumtaz is given to her. Not only that she also lost her friends from the holiday home and the one who get attached to her because of the partition most of them like her buddy masseur got killed during the partition Hari the gardener and the one like her got converted to his religion because of what Hindus was doing at that time. He became converted to Muslim then he changed his name to Himat Khan and also got his private part circumcised. Good fun, the helper boy of Ayah in Sethi's ghar (Home) has a likewise conversion to a Christian to fashion himself into David. Ice candy man with her and does everything for her now also he

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is still a changed man now she also has to lose her one good friend also because of partition. So, the partition effect manifests itself through Ayah's character not just in Ayah but also in everyone that has been associated with Ayah.

Toni Morrison tackles the darkest stuff of life—in *Beloved*, from tracking an escaped slave to focused on the slaughter of her innocent child. The warped mother daughter dynamics of *Beloved* can be fitted with slavery's splintering effect on the human mind. What makes Morrison's invocation of this phenomenon radical is that she allows the psychological effects of slavery material form, resurrecting a figure to take on the secondaries of the living. As a corporeal manifestation of the bifurcated selves of Sethe and Denver, Beloved arrives at a false zenith in the protagonists' lives. Beloved bears the heavy burden of trauma as it unfolds in the psychological crises of Sethe, Beloved, and Denver. The family's trauma is a generational one, a familiar beat that runs through slave narratives; The very narrative of Sethe herself, whose mother cares only for herself without a thought for the other infant children she abandons, suggests that "Sethe's own infanticide is prefigured by that of her own mother" (Morrison, 1987, p. 114). Sethe thought of her mother asking about her with a sense of estrangement; "Sethe loved her mother, but knows very little about her, and what she knows is marred by a long history of fear and lack of affection" (Cullinan, p. 90). But even Sethe can't break the cycle.

Sethe is unable to sacrifice her trauma for language; "Sethe's own effort to express her suffering...replicates the larger fictional narrative, rendered 'recognizable but undecipherable" (Boudreau, p. 455). Sethe never manages to pass on her own story at all. She does not have that kind of stability, that distance from her trauma, to talk about it. The people around Sethe's family know what really happened the night Beloved was killed; even Sethe, in her recognition of the new woman as her dead daughter, knows the murderer she is on some level. But while Sethe unconsciously knows she's a murderer, she can't bring herself to tell the whole story. The novel uses the phrase, "remembering seemed unwise" (Morrison, p. 18) to explain Sethe's actions. This idea serves to confront Sethe's history, and her rejection by her community. One reason Sethe cannot put her story into words is that she believes it is easier, even healthier, to forget her past than remember it. All of the women of this novel, beyond Sethe, suffer, due to Beloved's murder, so much pain and psychological damage that they cannot put it in any one kind of language (Boudreau, pp. 456–457). Morrison communicates this through the deliberate choice to switch perspectives many times throughout the book. Literary critic Hinson notes "Beloved's narrative crisis appears not only as a temporal or chronological collapse but also as a collapse of difference among narrative voice" (p. 158).

Furthermore, trauma and grief are prevalent themes in African literature, often rooted in the continent's complex history of colonialism, slavery, apartheid, war, and displacement. African writers frequently explore how these traumatic experiences affect individuals, communities, and nations, delving into both personal and collective grief. These themes also intersect with issues of identity, memory, political struggle, and postcolonial reality. *A Grain of Wheat* by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1967) set in the period leading up to Kenya's independence from British colonial rule, the novel explores the intersecting lives of several villagers, all of whom carry the trauma of the Mau rebellion and the struggle for freedom. Each character must confront their personal guilt and the betrayals that occurred during the war. The novel dives into the trauma of colonial oppression and the violent struggle for independence. Characters are haunted by their actions during the rebellion, and the novel explores how grief over lost

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comrades and the psychological scars of war continue to shape their lives. Ngũgĩ presents a nuanced portrait of the collective trauma of a nation in transition.

Similarly, *Season of Migration to the North* (1966) by Tayeb Salih is novel that follows a Sudanese man who returns to his village after studying in Europe and encounters Mustafa Saeed, a mysterious figure with a traumatic past involving his time in the West. The novel explores the psychological effects of colonialism, displacement, and cultural identity. Mustafa's life embodies the trauma of colonialism and the alienation of living between two worlds. His relationships with European women, marked by violence and death, reflect his internalized grief and anger over colonial exploitation. The novel dives into the psychological scars left by the intersection of colonial and personal trauma.

Though Fredrik Backman's *A Man Called Ove* is well-known for its poignant storytelling and emotional resonance, relatively few academic sources of scholarly literary analysis engage with the novel. Little of the discussion about the novel has gone beyond popular reviews, book club chats or surface-level appreciations that tend toward its humor, emotional tone and more or less broadly about themes of loneliness and redemption. But when it comes to the psychological and emotional nuances of the narrative — especially through the prism of memory and grief — there is a surprising shortage of rigorous academic study. Furthermore, while the novel discusses the protagonist's mourning and his nostalgic sentiments toward a deceased wife, few critical readings have focused on how those aspects operate structurally and symbolically within the narrative. Grief theory and memory studies have been unable to analyze the relationship between personal memory, loss, and the assembling of identity. Moreover, the novel's representation of male grief (frequently underrepresented or stereotyped in literature) provides fertile grounds for academic discourse that has yet to be plowed. This paper aims to fill this gap by presenting a close literary reading focused on how memory and grief intersect with one another to develop Ove's psychological state and affect and to develop the growth of his character. In this way, it also seeks to engage in broader literary discourse surrounding depictions of grief in contemporary fiction, especially within what the dominant narratives convey as the experience of healing and emotional transformation after losing someone dear.

Theoretical Framework

This article draws on a qualitative, interpretive research design that is grounded in literary analysis. The study is based on interpreting literary aspects like character development, narrative structure, motifs, symbols, and emotional tone in order to generate conclusions. This construction yields greater insight into the emotional core of the novel and enables the researcher to access subtle meanings embedded in the narrative/character interplay.

Kubler-Ross Stages of Dying and Subsequent Models of Grief

Kubler-Ross and others later extended her model to the experience of loss in multiple settings, grief and other major life transitions among them. Although the stages are often seen in such a narrow way, with a presumption that patients will pass through all of them in order, Kubler-Ross insisted this was not her argument and that different patients could express each stage differently. The model serves as a heuristic for ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving typical in the context of terminal illness that might otherwise seem atypical. Facilities that grow these patterns can guide healthcare providers to show empathy and compassion to patients, families and team members that may have bewilderment and frustration regarding these patterns. The 5 Stages of Dying according to Kubler-Ross;

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Firstly, Denial is a common reactions people use to shield themselves from the reality of the situation. After the initial shock of receiving a terminal diagnosis, Kubler-Ross found, patients tended to deny the reality of the new information: Patients might reject the diagnosis outright, blame faulty tests or an incompetent doctor, or change the subject to something less threatening during conversations. While persistent denial may be detrimental, a phase of denial is entirely normal in the setting of terminal illness and can actually be helpful in processing difficult information. Secondly, anger is a universal feeling through which patients react as they accept the reality of a terminal condition. It might be aimed at blaming medical providers for not adequately preventing the illness, family members for contributing to risks or for failing to be supportive enough, or spiritual providers or higher powers for the injustice of the diagnosis. Thirdly, bargaining usually takes the form of patients looking for some control over their disease. The negotiation might be internal, or it might be medical, social or religious. The bargains the patients offer in return can be principled, for example promising to follow treatment recommendations or to allow their caregivers to help them. Fourthly, depression is likely the most readily comprehensible of Kubler-Ross' stages; it manifests in patients in dismayingly familiar symptoms: sadness, fatigue, anhedonia. Staying in the first 3 stages may be an unconscious attempt at protecting oneself from this emotional pain. The patient's intervention may be comparatively easier to interpret and yet may stand in stark relief to behaviors that stem from stages 1-3. As a result, caregivers may need to actively re-infuse compassion that may have diminished when caring for patients advancing through stages 1 through 3. Fifthly and lastly, acceptance means acknowledging the reality of a challenging diagnosis while no longer railing or fighting against it. Patients may concentrate on savoring the remaining time and considering their memories. They may start to prepare for death in practical terms, by arranging their funeral or assisting to ensure that a loved one has sufficient funds or emotional support. It's commonly depicted as the final entry in Kubler-Ross's list and a prize to be sought in the process of dying or grieving. It is worth noting that although these stages may be less emotionally burdensome for caregivers and providers, that does not make this stage any healthier than the others. As with denial, anger, bargaining and depression, the idea of stages has less to do with advancing a set progression than with anticipating what patients might experience so that more empathy and support can be offered for whatever they go through.

Data Analysis

This section presents a close textual reading of Fredrik Backman's *A Man Called Ove*, exploring the intertwined themes of memory and grief as they interlace the protagonist's inner world, guiding the arc of the narrative. By closely analyzing language, structure, and the development of character, the analysis seeks to unravel the means through which Ove's memories, specifically those connected to his deceased wife Sonja, act as vessels of grief, resistance, and, eventually, metamorphosis. Backman's novel is brimming with such moments, where the past melds into the present, establishing how memory serves not just as recollection, but also as an emotional and psychological place where grief is contained and worked through. The text often shifts back and forth between flashbacks and present-day scenes, allowing readers to witness Ove's internal struggle and eventual healing process. In this chapter, I explore how these shifts in the temporal landscape, as well as the repeated use of symbols and narrative techniques, culminate in a nuanced representation of grief, isolating loneliness, and redemption through connection. Through close reading of select passages, it will be shown that grief in *A Man Called Ove* is not represented as a finite, isolated occurrence, but rather as a

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dynamic, effervescent reality that suffuses quotidian life. In so doing, the chapter examines what these journeys reveal about the larger emotional topography of the novel, and how memory operates as both a burden and a bridge to renewal.

Analysis of Memory and Grief in Backman's *A Man Called Ove*

Fredrik Backman's *A Man Called Ove* is a poignant exploration of love, loss, and human connection, told through the life of a curmudgeonly widower navigating the world without his beloved wife. Central to the novel's emotional depth is the interplay between memory and grief—two psychological forces that not only shape Ove's behavior but also illuminate the transformative power of healing. Through the lens of grief theory, particularly Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's five stages of grief and contemporary models of continuing bonds, Ove's journey reflects a deeply human struggle: how to live meaningfully after profound loss. Simultaneously, Ove's vivid memories of his past—especially those involving Sonja—act as emotional anchors, suggesting that memory is not simply a mechanism for recalling, but a vital part of maintaining identity and enduring love. This thesis will examine how grief and memory are interwoven in Ove's character development, revealing how the past both hinders and heals in the search for new purpose.

Chapter 1 of *A Man Called Ove*, titled "*A Man Called Ove* Buys a Computer That Is Not a computer", immediately introduces the reader to Ove's gruff personality, but beneath his irritation and strict ways lies a deep sense of grief and attachment to the past. The themes of memory and grief are subtly woven into this chapter, manifesting through Ove's actions, thoughts, and worldview. At the start of the novel, Ove is depicted as a rigid and irritable man, annoyed by modern conveniences and society's shift away from practicality. His visit to an electronics store to buy a computer he doesn't fully understand is not just a comedic moment—it highlights his frustration with a world that has changed too much for his liking. Ove's frustration is not only about technology; it reflects his struggle to adapt to a world that has moved on without Sonja, his late wife. The underlying message is that Ove resents change because it reminds him of all that he has lost. Ove clings to old-fashioned values, which act as a link to the past, particularly to Sonja. He sees the modern world as overly complicated and unnecessary—just as life itself feels unnecessary without her. In this chapter, Ove's visit to the store is not just about buying a computer—it symbolizes the clash between his past and the present. The way he interacts with the sales assistant highlights his deeper struggles. The young sales assistant represents a new generation that Ove does not understand or relate to. The fact that he has to buy a "computer that is not a computer" frustrates him, just as he is frustrated by how his life has changed since Sonja's passing. Ove prefers things that are straightforward and functional—like his old Saab car, his fixed routines, and his traditional values. These things remind him of a time when Sonja was alive, and life made sense. "No, what I mean is that the computer does not have a separate keyboard. You control everything from the screen" (p .3).

Its advancement of technology where everything can control without separate keyboard but Ove clings to old-fashioned values, which act as a link to the past, particularly to Sonja. He sees the modern world as overly complicated and unnecessary—just as life itself feels unnecessary without her. "Ove had, as usual, gotten up ten minutes earlier. He could not make head nor tail of people who overslept and blamed it on "the alarm clock not ringing" (p. 5). Memory as a Lens for Judgment in 3rd chapter where Ove walks through the neighborhood, he makes sarcastic and disapproving remarks about his neighbors, especially the younger generation. His judgments are more than just cranky opinions—they're based on memories of how things used to be. He Measures Others by the Standards of the Past, Ove's disapproval of

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people who don't follow rules, drive the wrong kind of car, or use electronics is a reaction to how far society has drifted from the values he and Sonja lived by. Longing for a Lost Time and His harshness masks nostalgia. He misses the days when people were dependable, straightforward, and respectful qualities Sonja valued and helped nurture in him. Ove's inspections give structure to his days. After Sonja's death, maintaining routines is his way of holding on to stability in a world that feels meaningless. His daily rituals are how he manages his grief. Ove's obsession with order is a reaction to the emotional chaos caused by Sonja's passing. If he can keep his neighborhood in order, perhaps he can prevent his own inner world from unraveling. "He was the sort of man who checked the status of all things by giving them a good kick" (p.6).

This line humorously captures Ove's practical, no-nonsense style, but it also reflects how he's trying to test and reinforce the world around him—seeking something solid in a life that's been shattered. Ove's anger at his new neighbors (Parvaneh, Patrick, and their children) appears comical, but his intense reaction is a reflection of his grief and loneliness. With Sonja gone, he no longer has the emotional buffer that helped him relate to people with kindness and patience. His irritation with the neighbors is more about disruption—disruption to the peace and routine he clings to in the absence of Sonja. "Ove had never liked people who couldn't back up with a trailer" (p .16). This line is humorous, but it also reveals how Ove values competence and order—things that were part of the life he had with Sonja. Their absence in others irritates him because it reminds him of how the world now feels unfamiliar and frustrating. The flattened mailbox can be seen as a symbol of Ove's life after Sonja—something that was once standing firmly, now crushed by unexpected change. "He stood there looking at the mailbox as if someone had just died" (p.16).

This line is a clear metaphor for grief. It may be funny on the surface, but it also shows that Ove sees loss and disorder everywhere because he is still grieving deeply. The mailbox is just one more thing that's broken—like his life. Ove's description of his morning shows again that he very much values doing things for himself rather than relying on technology or other people. "He unlocked the Saab, also with a key: the system had always worked perfectly well, there was no reason to change it" (p.24). He continues to distance himself from his neighbors by refusing to wave, and still seems stuck in the past as he remembers what his neighborhood was like long ago. His distrust of people who break rules, his loyalty to Saab, his rigid sense of right and wrong—all of it comes from memory. These memories shape his entire personality and the way he deals with the world. "It's been six months since she died. But Ove still inspects the whole house twice a day to feel the radiators and check that she has not sneakily turned up the heating" (p.31).

Grief is not front and center, but it is quietly shaping Ove's emotional world. His father's death is his first major loss, and the values passed on through memory become a kind of emotional inheritance. These memories define Ove's identity, and they set the stage for the deeper, more complex grief he will face after losing Sonja. His resistance to change, strict values, and emotional distance all trace back to this moment. "People said Ove saw the world in black and white. But he was certain that the world had been black and white in the past, and that it was in color now, and he questioned whether it was really supposed to be" (p. 39). This quote reflects Ove's deep sense of disconnection from the modern world. When people say he sees things in black and white, they mean he's rigid, stuck in his ways, and unwilling to adapt. But from Ove's point of view, the world *used* to be black and white—clear, straightforward, guided by solid values like honesty, responsibility, and respect. Now, he sees the world as being

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in color, full of complexity, ambiguity, and blurred lines. To him, this shift isn't progress—it's confusion. The quote shows that Ove isn't just stubborn or old-fashioned; he genuinely believes the world has changed in a way that doesn't make sense anymore. It also hints at his grief—without Sonja, the world feels unfamiliar and disordered, and even though everything seems brighter or more colorful, it's not better. The structure and certainty he once had are gone, and he's left questioning if this new world is one, he even belongs in.

But Ove's principles and sense of duty prevented him from killing himself up until now. This implies that his principles are more important to Ove than his sense of family, Ove seems to feel that by dying he'll be able to keep up his family relationship with Sonja and that their connection will remain intact in the afterlife, but he's not willing to bend his self-imposed principles to facilitate this. We learn that Sonja was kind, loving, and active in her community. We're also shown that the community is preventing Ove from dying, even if he's not actively engaging in it." Not that Ove thinks about the possibility that the youth might be fixing the bike for someone else. Once more, this demonstrates how untrusting Ove is of people in his community and how, frankly, he very much anticipates that they will not look out for, or help, one another. Ove assumes that everyone is doing things the way he is and that he is very much alone in the neighborhood. "Ove just wants to be able to die in peace. Is that so much to ask? Ove does not think so. Okay, he ought to have done this six months ago. Immediately following her funeral" (p. 40).

Ove sits down on his stool. His heart is pounding too hard and he cannot catch his breath. He muses about his so-called early retirement and examines a photo of himself and Sonja 40 years ago on a bus tour in Spain. Ove remembers how Sonja would fold her fingers into Ove's large hands, and thinks that's the thing he misses most about her. He rises, sets his hook, re-dons his suit jacket, and shuts off his lights. He uses his hook to tie a noose in a piece of rope and then loops the rope around his hook. Ove climbs onto the stool, puts his head through the noose, and kicks away the stool. From the outset, it is clear from the novel's premise that memories are inescapable and integral to knowing who a person is. Almost half the book is made up flashbacks of Ove's life, covering everything from his childhood up until the day his boss forced him into retirement the day before the novel starts. This form of writing helps the reader to understand Ove through the lens of his memories, and reveals how Ove creates his notion of the world through memories. For instance, Ove recalls memories of his father's kindness and honesty, and uses this as a guide for how to act as he lives his life. He remembers what people said about his father, and tries to conduct himself in a way that will lead people to talk about him that way. Through Ove's other memories, some of them tremendously sad, we learn he isn't just mean for its own sake. Instead, Ove is often unkind because he is lost in grief and sad memories, and is haunted by all the times people tricked and humiliated him. Ove and Rune's friendship was forged in their loyalty to and eagerness to please Sonja and Anita. In many ways, this speaks to the strength of their relationships with their wives, as Ove and Rune alike seem similarly principled and solitary. The arguments over heating systems and cars imply that their strongly held convictions didn't match up. "A Man Called Ove Bleeds a Radiator," the story returns to the present-day storyline, where Ove is once again interrupted from his attempt to end his life. His new neighbors, particularly Parvaneh, ask him to help bleed a radiator in their house. At first, he's reluctant, gruff, and irritated, but eventually he agrees. This seemingly simple act carries emotional weight. Ove isn't just helping with a radiator—he's stepping into a role of usefulness again, even if reluctantly. His grief has made him feel invisible and unnecessary, especially since Sonja's

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death. But every time someone asks for his help, he is gently pulled back into the world. Fixing the radiator reminds him of who he used to be: someone capable, responsible, and dependable. Though Sonja is not mentioned directly in this chapter, her presence lingers through Ove's values and behavior. The way he shows up for people, even when he's annoyed or pretending not to care, is very much tied to the life he shared with her. In that sense, his actions are shaped by memory, and his resistance to change is also a form of grief. Fixing things was how he loved—and now, even in his grief, it's how he begins to reconnect. So, while the chapter is about a radiator on the surface, it's really about Ove's slow return to life through small, human moments. His grief hasn't gone away, but it's being nudged, little by little, by people who remind him that he still matters.

Ove is an obsessive man, and he feels the need to create laws for himself, a sense of order. The narrator claims he "just had a sense of their needing to be a bit of order in the greater scheme of things." Still, the book gives readers multiple routes to rethinking rules and order, by using three different systems as food for thought: Ove's unyielding system, which works mostly from his own self-interest; the systems of government bureaucracy and the "white shirts" (bureaucratic workers), another inflexible system, but one that seems to directly oppose Ove's system; and Sonja's system, flexible and adaptive, which mainly works for others.

So, Ove makes systems for himself that help him feel safe and secure. He dinner every night is the same and his daily routine allows no margin for error, tardiness or surprises. This system encounters bureaucracy for the first time when Ove's childhood home is engulfed in flames. (it's on an ambiguous municipal border) the fire department requires permission and permits from several governmental bodies to be able to save the blazes' structure so they instead merely watch it burn—and keep Ove himself from putting it out. Ove is soon booted from the military due to a congenital defect in his heart that leaves him ineligible for service. In both cases, the "white shirts" offer the same reasoning to Ove: "rules are rules." Though every person in a white shirt who shares this explanation makes Ove despise him or her a little more, Ove's own love of and respect for rules allows him to see and accept the logic of this explanation. Raised by a father who slips into the routine of a new job as an accountant, these experiences engender a distrust of bureaucracy, and of those he refers to as "white shirts" government employees who adhere to the letter of the law even when it won't help anyone. "Rules are rules, the man in the white shirt explained in a monotone voice, when Ove protested" (p. 80).

The narrator claims that Ove started to live when he met Sonja. Sonja may understand Ove's love of rules and order, but she loves things that don't have clear guidelines. She loves the humanities (which Ove despises because there are no right answers), she loves dancing which Ove thinks of as "haphazard and giddy." Ove may find comfort in rules and systems, but Sonja forces Ove to see that there's also value in being spontaneous, in living your life to its fullest and not spending your days focused on rules and regulations. However, their relationship where Sonja loved the spontaneous and things that would strike Ove as foolish also sees them try to stick to the "proper" way as they have their family. When Sonja announces that she's expecting, she and Ove get married and settle into a row house because they think that is just where children should grow up. But following the rules isn't enough to defend against life's randomness: the bus accident that leaves Sonja no longer able to use her legs and results in the miscarriage of her unborn child drives home that any order humans impose on their lives is both fragile and illusory. Instead of using the accident to make this realization, Ove uses the bus flash forward to fuel his grief and compensate for it by writing

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complaint letters in which he tries to hold the white shirts responsible for the bus accident and all that ensued. When Ove writes these letters, though, they change nothing and only add to his general rage. Eventually, Sonja tells Ove to stop writing them. She realizes that his insistence on leaning on the bureaucratic system to correct things is not going to help them, and only serve to reinforce his anger. "Ove dislikes that kind of behavior in a cat. He rubs his temples and digs his feet in. The cat glances at him, realizes he is unwanted, and continues licking itself. Ove waves his arms at it. The cat doesn't move an inch" (p. 81).

Ove's struggle to tolerate joy in a world where the person he loved most no longer exists. His grief has made him intolerant of lightness, not because he hates happiness, but because it reminds him of what he's lost. His inability to laugh with the others, or to even entertain the idea of being cheered up, is part of his emotional paralysis. Though memory is not explicitly foregrounded in this scene, it lingers in the background of Ove's reactions. He's a man carrying the weight of a life lived with Sonja—full of structure, meaning, and mutual understanding. A clown like Beppo stands for everything that's strange, irrational, and unfamiliar in Ove's post-Sonja world. Without her, joy feels alien. Laughter feels like betrayal. The chaos of Beppo's world is a sharp reminder that Ove has lost the order and love that once gave his life purpose. So while the scene is comedic, it's also a poignant window into how grief dulls joy and warps perspective. Ove isn't just angry at the clown—he's grieving in a world that won't stop laughing. In the chapter "A Man Called Ove and a Woman on a Train", Fredrik Backman presents a pivotal moment in Ove's life—his first meeting with Sonja. "She had a golden brooch pinned to her dress, in which the sunlight reflected hypnotically through the train window" (p. 107).

This scene is recounted not simply as a romantic memory, but as the emotional foundation upon which Ove's entire sense of self was built. It is a moment of light in a life otherwise marked by loss, isolation, and quiet suffering. As such, this chapter functions as a cornerstone in understanding how memory becomes Ove's emotional anchor, and how grief emerges as a natural consequence of deep, life-defining love. The train ride is significant in both literal and symbolic terms. Literally, it is the place where Ove meets Sonja, who will become the most important person in his life. Symbolically, the train represents movement and transformation—the shift from a gray, lonely existence into one filled with color, companionship, and purpose. Sonja's presence on that train doesn't just change Ove's path; it gives him a reason to travel it at all. This makes the memory of that moment sacred, a point in time Ove continually returns to in his mind after her death.

In "A Man Called Ove and a Delayed Train," a deeply emotional moment in Ove's life—a scene where the weight of grief confronts the pull of memory, and where a suicide attempt unexpectedly becomes an act of salvation. Though the action centers around a delayed train and Ove's interrupted suicide plan, the emotional resonance of this chapter lies in how grief and memory collide, shaping both Ove's inner world and his external choices. Ove arrives at the train platform intending to end his life, burdened by the ongoing grief of losing his wife, Sonja, the only person who ever truly understood and softened him. His decision is not driven by sudden despair but by prolonged sorrow and a deep sense of purposelessness. Since Sonja's passing, Ove has felt unanchored. The routines they once shared now feel hollow, and the world seems absurd, broken, and without moral clarity—an echo of the emptiness left behind by her absence.

However, Ove's plan is interrupted when he notices a young man on the platform who appears suicidal. Without thought, Ove steps in and pulls the man away from danger. "Fair

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enough that Ove no longer wants his life. But the sort of man who ruins someone else's by making eye contact with him seconds before his body turned into blood paste against said person's windshield; damn it, Ove is not that sort of man. Neither his dad nor Sonja would ever have forgiven him for that" (p. 120).

This moment is a subtle but powerful turning point in the narrative and in Ove's emotional journey. In saving someone else, Ove unknowingly reawakens the part of himself that still responds to life—the part shaped by love, duty, and compassion, all of which were nurtured during his years with Sonja. This moment of intervention is not just an act of morality—it is an embodiment of memory guiding action. Though Sonja is no longer physically present, her influence continues to live inside Ove. She was a woman who believed in kindness, who always saw the humanity in others, and who brought warmth into Ove's otherwise structured and stubborn life. By reacting to another's pain, Ove is not only acting on impulse—he is, perhaps unconsciously, channeling the values Sonja instilled in him. His memory of her continues to shape his instincts, even in the midst of grief. The memory of the truck and the forest scene encapsulates a pivotal truth about Ove: his grief is inseparable from his identity. He doesn't speak of emotions, but his actions are laced with love and loyalty to those who shaped him. His respect for tools, order, honesty, and hard work are extensions of the father he lost, and thus, even decades later, his grief manifests in his strict worldview and his aversion to change. "Sonja was very beautiful, as the people around her seemed to find it so important to keep telling her. Furthermore, she loved to laugh and, whatever life threw at her, she was the sort of person who took a positive view if it" (p. 124).

Backman uses the cat not only as a symbol of connection, but also as a test of empathy, a bridge between Ove's grief and the world he's slowly re-entering. The fact that Ove, a man obsessed with control, allows this small disruption is significant. It shows that grief, while isolating, cannot entirely extinguish the memory of love—and that memory can lead to healing, even in the most reluctant heart. In A Man Who Was Ove and a Bus That Never Got There, Fredrik Backman revisits one of the most formative and emotionally devastating moments in Ove's life: the bus crash that left Sonja paralyzed and resulted in the loss of their unborn child. This chapter is critical not only for understanding the depth of Ove's grief but also for tracing how memory continues to shape his character and emotional worldview. Backman presents this memory not as a flashback for exposition, but as an intimate, emotional unveiling—an insight into how love, loss, and resilience become inseparable. "A doctor came in and spoke to ove in an indifferent, clinical voice about the need to "prepare himself for the likelihood of her not waking up again." Ove threw that doctor through a door" (p.165).

The "bus that never got there" is a haunting metaphor for hope cut short. Ove and Sonja were on their way to a holiday—a rare gesture of leisure and joy in their usually reserved, practical life. That moment, filled with anticipation, is abruptly shattered by the crash. This turning point in the narrative marks the beginning of Ove's long journey through grief. The literal crash becomes symbolic of how uncontrollable forces can alter the course of a life and leave behind emotional wreckage that cannot be repaired.

Last chapters serve as a turning point in Ove's transformation—from a man defined by loss to one slowly, reluctantly reintegrating into community life. While grief remains a constant undercurrent, memory evolves from a source of pain into a bridge between the past and present. Throughout last chapters, Ove is increasingly surrounded by the living—children, neighbors, even the persistent cat—and his interactions, though gruff, become infused with a quiet tenderness. His grief for Sonja still defines his worldview, but Backman shifts the tone from

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isolation to reluctant connection. Ove's consistent help to his neighbors—whether he's teaching driving, standing up for Mirsad, or defending Parvaneh—mirrors his past role as Sonja's caregiver. His memory of loving and being loved becomes a subconscious blueprint for how he now interacts with the world, even as he continues to mourn. For example, in Chapter 32, when Ove helps Adrian fix the bicycle, it recalls the earlier scene of Ove fixing a child's bike in Chapter 25. But now, it's more than symbolic—it's part of his re-engagement with life. Ove is still grieving, but he's no longer choosing total withdrawal. His actions become a form of remembering Sonja, who always saw the best in people and found beauty in kindness. Fixing things is still his love language, but now, it's reaching beyond his grief. In Chapter 33, Ove's confrontation with social services on behalf of his neighbor becomes a powerful expression of grief transformed into advocacy. He cannot save Sonja, but he can stand up for others.

Conclusion

This paper has provided an in-depth analysis of the themes of memory and grief in *A Man Called Ove* by Fredrik Backman as these deeply human experiences are interspersed into the narrative, character construction and emotional fabric of the text. In this study's chapters, researcher have undertaken to demonstrate how grief, very much grounded in memory, is not merely part of the tapestry of the plot, but instead is a leading agent in constructing the very fabric of the protagonist, Ove, and the text's overarching exploration of the meaning of life, death, love, and human interconnectivity. This research provided a reading in which both sides provide psychological and emotional tenor for reminiscence toward the understanding of memory, and both sides inevitably negotiate the reality of loss. The research problem was framed in terms of how Backman employs literary techniques to build a portrait of grief that is individual and relational. The goals were to examine the ways in which memory and grief are constructed textually and how the implications of those themes are reflected in character and narrative resolution.

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