



Lessons About Life and Death Learned From Glee

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By Lauren Schneider

The launch of Glee's fall season was complicated by actor Cory Monteith's unexpected death in July. Television executives were faced with the challenge of honoring his death in real life and in the series so that fans, cast and crew could mourn fully. By respecting the grieving process and creating a tribute episode, their decision will ultimately change the course of the show as well as teach viewers the benefits of an open dialogue on grief and loss.

Monteith was the latest in a long line of actors who have died during the course of a television series. Responses to this lifecycle event have been as varied as the shows themselves.

A quick survey of television's history in the last 40 years revealed no less than 20 programs which each experienced the death of a major character and with varied responses by the networks. A few series, such as Cheers, News Radio and Monk, developed plot points explaining the death of the fictional character thereby allowing surviving cast members to grieve in ways that fit their character. Several programs decided to eliminate the character for a fictitious reason rather than using the actor's actual cause of death. In Dallas, the Jock Ewing character's death was not revealed until the last episode of the season. He was simply "away" until his character's sudden demise was written into the episode.

On the other hand, Sesame Street took advantage of a teachable moment when actor Will Lee, who played shopkeeper Mr. Hooper, died. In true Sesame Street form, the death was dealt with in an age-appropriate manner allowing young audience members the opportunity to learn about death in a non-threatening manner.

Alternatively, when John Ritter died early in the season of 8 Simple Rules, the program was put on hiatus for two months out of respect for the mourners. When it returned, the first episode was devoted as a tribute to John Ritter. For the remainder of the season, viewers watched as his characters' wife and children mourned the death of John's character, serving as role models for adult and child grief. This treatment above all others showed a true understanding of the impact this death had on both the cast and viewers. The tribute episode provided an opportunity for the viewing audience to collectively grieve and honor the memory of John Ritter and the character he had developed.

In a moving tribute to Cory Monteith, Glee viewers bore witness to a powerful depiction of shared grief that was all too real. Cast members mourned in ways consistent with their character's personalities but their tears were authentic. At OUR HOUSE Grief Support Center, we are grateful for this honest and tasteful depiction of a community touched by grief. We hope that it sparks frank discussions amongst fans of the show. While the cause of Finn's death remained unnamed, the episode was followed by a public service announcement by cast members encouraging viewers plagued by addiction to seek help while they still can. TV has lost a beloved character but showed that art can imitate life and not disappoint.

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