

# Take our minds off

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Kitty Aldridge

A TRICK I LEARNED FROM  
DEAD MEN

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Lee Hart, the young protagonist of Kitty Aldridge's *A Trick I Learned from Dead Men*, never had any ambition to become an undertaker. This is what he finds himself doing, however, after the death of his mother makes him the sole breadwinner in a household unable to rebound from tragedy. His younger brother, Ned, who is deaf, and stepfather, Lester, whose bereavement has caused him to retreat from the world, need someone to look after them, and Lee is not one to shirk his responsibilities.

Our narrator is Lee himself, whose chattiness belies his struggle with his own loneliness and despair. Lee addresses the reader in a sort of shorthand, a young person's dialect characterized by quick, often ungrammatical sentences that tail off before reaching a proper conclusion: "Not to dwell, but"; "Take our minds off"; "A watched pot, etcetera". Clichés abound, as do Spanish and Italian phrases that Lee believes give him an air of worldliness. This quasi-conversational, quasi-stream-of-consciousness style of narrative takes a bit of getting used to, but, once attuned, the reader discovers a deceptively complex narrator who reveals more of himself than he realizes.

Aldridge is a skilled observer and the novel is full of detailed, sometimes strangely beautiful descriptions of the situations Lee encounters as he attempts to keep his family afloat. Our narrator's time is split between Shakespeare & Son Funeral Services, where he works as a trainee undertaker, and the former farmhouse where Lee and Ned watched their mother die of breast cancer. Lee attempts to replicate the calm and order of his workplace in his domestic environment, but this is beyond him; the physical realities of death may be easy to deal with, but there's no quick fix for its emotional fallout. "There is a peacefulness to this job. You come at the end, after the fact. I'm not cut out for illness, suffering. I prefer to step in when that's done", Lee says, early in the novel.

Moments of humour lift an otherwise sombre story: Lee is an inadvertent clown, a rather pathetic but charming figure who deserves better than he gets; the staff of Shakespeare & Son evoke the cast of *The Office*, with their good-natured but tired attempts at comedy. A number of surreal touches also bring light to dark scenarios. Lee's troubled brother Ned, for instance, always exits the house via his bedroom window, bouncing on to a trampoline in the garden. Here, again, Aldridge shows her eye for detail: there is joy to be found in the mundanities of day-to-day life.