

Literary therapy and child mental-health advocacy in Clara Ng's stories

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KEYWORDS	ABSTRACT
Child Agency Children's Literature Emotional Advocacy Mental Health Therapeutic Narrative	Children's literature has great potential in supporting children's mental health. However, in Indonesia, the issue of children's mental health is still often considered taboo. This article aims to re-read Clara Ng's collection of stories, <i>Bagai Bumi Berhenti Berputar</i> (As If the Earth Stopped Spinning), as a form of advocacy for children experiencing mental health issues through a therapeutic approach to literature. This study uses a descriptive qualitative method with empathetic narrative reading techniques on five children's stories, namely <i>Pohon Harapan</i> , <i>Seribu Sahabat Selamanya</i> , <i>Kerlip Bintang di Langit</i> , <i>Jangan Lupa Aku Mencintaimu</i> , and <i>Yang Paling Istimewa</i> . The analysis was conducted in three stages: (1) identifying the emotional conflicts and inner dynamics of the child characters, (2) interpreting the symbolism and coping mechanisms that appear in the narrative, and (3) examining the forms of emotional advocacy built through the relationships between characters and the storytelling structure. The results of the study show that these stories: (a) validate children's emotions honestly without denial, (b) provide an emotional safe space through symbols, dialogue, and imagination that enable reflection and recovery, and (c) strengthen children's agency in dealing with traumatic experiences by attaching meaning to emotional experiences. In conclusion, this collection of stories not only represents children's psychological dynamics but also functions as a medium of literary advocacy that supports emotional recovery and encourages the surrounding environment to be more sensitive to children's mental health issues.

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Introduction

One of the strategic mediums in conveying life values to children is children's literature (Hafizah et al., 2022; Latuconsina et al., 2022; Rosid, 2021). As a form of aesthetic communication, children's literature not only serves as a means of education, but also as a vehicle for the formation of social and emotional awareness (Aminah, 2022; Nastiti & Syah, 2022; Yeum, 2024). In this case, the issue of children's mental health is one of the crucial themes that should be raised in children's literature, considering the increasing cases of psychological disorders in children in the modern era today (Adeyeye & Oboh, 2022; Mao & Yang, 2024).

Unfortunately, in Indonesia, the issue of children's mental health is still often considered taboo (Christiani, 2022; Hadhinoto & Oktavianti, 2020; Tulandi, 2021; Waryanti, 2024). The dominant narrative in society tends to ignore the emotional complexity of children (Darmawan & Agung, 2022; Rahmi et al., 2023). This stigma not only harms children, but also hinders the child's psychological recovery. In fact, according to the results of a national-scale household survey conducted by the Indonesia National Adolescent Mental Health Survey (I-NAMHS), in 2022 there will be 15.5 million Indonesian children with

mental health disorders. However, only 2.6% of them access counseling services. This phenomenon shows that children and parents still tend to feel neglected by the psychological recovery process.

In the realm of children's literature, the lack of mental health literacy in Indonesia is reflected in the scarcity of works that openly discuss children's mental health (Moruzi et al., 2022; Waryanti, 2024; Yaffe, 2021). One children's literature work that raises this theme is the short story collection *Bagai Bumi Berhenti Berputar* by Clara Ng. In her five stories, the author presents honest and empathetic narratives about children who experience loss, trauma, and emotional healing. The child characters in this collection are depicted as active subjects with agency in facing emotional experiences. Therefore, it is necessary to re-read this collection as a form of advocacy for children's mental health through a literary therapeutic approach (Latoo et al., 2021; Santosa et al., 2024; Yeum, 2024).

Previous studies on children's mental health in literature show that reading and storytelling play a role in supporting children's emotional development and psychological well-being Adeyeye & Oboh (2022; Matiz et al., 2024; Zubiri-Esnaola et al., 2023). Narrative engagement and dialogic reading have been shown to increase emotional awareness, strengthen coping skills, and expand mental health literacy in children. These findings are also consistent with studies on bibliotherapy and empathy-based literary approaches that use stories as a means of emotional reflection and affirmation of children's inner identity (Ambarwati et al., 2023). However, these studies generally focus on the benefits of reading and have not yet elaborated on how narrative elements themselves, such as symbolism, dialogue patterns, and relationships between characters, function as advocacy mechanisms that validate children's emotions within the text. In other words, children's literature as a space for narrative-based psychological recovery has not been widely explored.

Based on these conditions, the research gap lies in the absence of studies that specifically place children's literature as therapeutic advocacy texts that build emotional safe spaces and strengthen children's agency in dealing with complex psychological experiences. The novelty of this research lies not only in the application of a therapeutic approach to literature in the Indonesian context, which is still rarely done (Kelly, 2022; Mao & Yang, 2024; Yulianti, 2022), but also on mapping the narrative structure in the collection of stories *Bagai Bumi Berhenti Berputar* (As If the Earth Stopped Spinning), and how symbols, dialogue, and the construction of emotional relationships in the stories form a space of cultural resistance against psychological marginalization (Baga, 2021; Sianipar et al., 2022; Sita et al., 2021).

This research is important because the stigma against children's mental health is still strong and often leads to neglect of children's psychological conditions (Latoo et al., 2021; Santosa et al., 2024; Yani et al., 2025). Therefore, more progressive efforts are needed to present children's literature that is relevant to the emotional experiences of young readers. This research contribution is both theoretical and practical. Theoretically, this research clarifies the concept of narrative-based emotional safe spaces in children's literature. Practically, this research offers an empathetic narrative reading framework that can be used by teachers, educators, and parents to help children recognize, express, and interpret emotions through guided reading and literary discussion activities. Thus, this research is expected to contribute to the development of more empathetic, inclusive, and psychologically restorative literacy practices in the context of families and educational institutions.

Method

This study is an interpretive qualitative study that aims to reread the collection of stories *Bagai Bumi Berhenti Berputar* using a literary therapeutic approach (bibliotherapy) through empathetic narrative reading techniques. This approach positions literary texts as a space for emotional and psychological healing for readers while interpreting the depth of emotions from an empathetic perspective, rather than merely a rational or aesthetic one (Hynes & Hynes-Berry, 1994; Kelly, 2022; Yeum, 2024). To provide a comprehensive overview of the procedural flow of this study, Fig. 1. presents a flowchart of the research method.

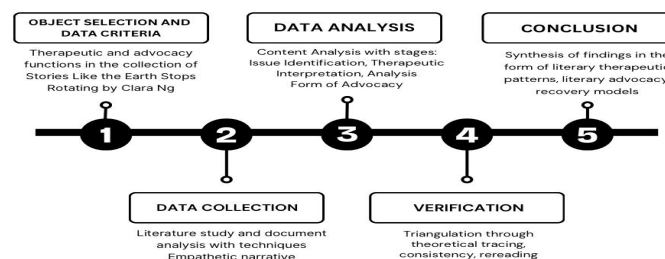


Fig. 1. Research Flow Diagram

Based on the diagram, the first stage of this research began with determining the data, namely five short stories in the collection *Bagai Bumi Berhenti Berputar* by Clara Ng, that is *Pohon Harapan*, *Seribu Sahabat Selamanya*, *Kerlip Bintang di Langit*, *Jangan Lupa Aku Mencintaimu*, and *Yang Paling Istimewa*. These five stories were chosen because they explicitly feature children's mental health issues, such as grief, loss, trauma, and recovery. The data collection technique is carried out through literature and documentation studies, namely by reading and examining the text in depth to identify narrative and symbolic elements related to children's emotional experiences (Bowen, 2009). To support this process, the technique of narrative-empathy reading is used, which allows readers to become emotionally involved with the emotional world of the characters (Keen, 2007; Kelly, 2022; Yeum, 2024). This technique is carried out through several stages, namely: (1) initial reading to understand the plot and context of the story; (2) recording of significant emotional events experienced by child characters; (3) marking symbols, images, and metaphors that contain psychological meaning; and (4) empathic reflection, which is placing oneself as a reader who feels and understands the emotions of the character deeply. This reading process aims to explore the layers of meaning related to trauma, recovery, and advocacy presented by the narrative.

The data analysis was carried out using qualitative content analysis which consisted of three main stages. First, identify psychological issues in the narrative that include dominant emotions, traumatic experiences, and the inner dynamics of the child character. Second, the interpretation of symbolism and recovery mechanisms, such as the use of metaphors, safe spaces in stories, supportive interpersonal relationships, and narrative imagery that facilitates the healing process and self-acceptance. Third, analyze the form of narrative advocacy, which is to examine how stories provide psychosocial support through plots, characters, dialogues, and viewpoints that validate children's emotions and encourage readers to empathize (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Schreier, 2012). This approach allows for an empathetic and comprehensive reading of the role of children's literature as a therapeutic medium and a form of literary advocacy that supports children's mental well-being in an inclusive and reflective manner.

In addition to these three stages of analysis, this study also involved a stage of verification and validation of findings. Verification was carried out through theory triangulation, which is matching narrative findings with concepts in bibliotherapy, child development psychology, and children's literature studies. In addition, peer debriefing was conducted with a second researcher to reduce subjective interpretation bias and ensure that the interpretations obtained were consistent with the data emerging from the text (Setiawan, 2018; Syahrani, 2023). This stage is important for maintaining the trustworthiness and validity of data in interpretive qualitative research.

The final stage is the preparation of conclusions, which synthesizes all of the findings of the analysis to formulate therapeutic patterns and forms of literary advocacy offered in the collection of stories *Bagai Bumi Berhenti Berputar*. The conclusions not only summarize the findings, but also emphasize the contribution of this research in expanding the perspective of children's literature as a space for emotional recovery and strengthening children's agency in dealing with mental health issues.

Results and Discussion

The analysis in this study focuses on five stories found in the collection *Bagai Bumi Berhenti Berputar*, namely *Pohon Harapan*, *Seribu Sahabat Selamanya*, *Kerlip Bintang di Langit*, *Jangan Lupa Aku Mencintaimu*, and *Yang Paling Istimewa*. These five stories were selected as the main data because they explicitly present issues of children's mental health and emotional recovery processes that are relevant to the objectives of this study. Thus, all findings presented in this section are the results of an in-depth interpretation of the five stories through an empathetic narrative reading approach.

Representations of Psychological Suffering and Traumatic Experiences of Characters

The children in the collection of stories *Bagai Bumi Berhenti Berputar* face a variety of emotional experiences such as loss, anxiety, guilt, emotional rejection, and stigma of disability. These experiences are not presented as deviations, but as part of the complexity of children's emotions that need to be validated, in line with the importance of family emotional support (Lambie et al., 2020; Mancini et al., 2023). The following is an explanation of the various emotional experiences of children represented in the collection of stories in *As If the Earth Stopped Spinning*.

a. Health Trauma and Emotional Displacement

"I became afraid when I heard the words, Sis... sick... cancer..." (*Bagai Bumi Berhenti Berputar*, p. 8)

The older sibling in the story *Pohon Harapan*, experiences emotional turmoil upon learning that his younger sibling has cancer. Fear and confusion are clearly depicted in the above statement. In addition to anxiety, she also experiences emotional displacement, which is the feeling of being emotionally excluded when her parents' attention is focused on her sick sister. This situation is in line with the findings of Frota et al. (2023) dan Nuraeni & Lubis (2022) that chronic illness in the family often changes the dynamics of attachment and causes emotional pressure on healthy siblings.

In this context, older siblings need emotional validation and tend to seek psychological support from their immediate environment (Ali et al., 2024; Yani et al., 2025). However, this experience of being left out is not portrayed as a weakness, but rather as part of the process of children understanding their emotional state. The author subtly guides readers to acknowledge that feelings of fear, jealousy, or loss of attention in family crisis situations are valid and human.

b. Social Loss and Cultural Bereavement

"Yuli felt upset, sad, angry, and disappointed. Yuli did not want to move and live in a strange country" (*Bagai Bumi Berhenti Berputar*, p. 33)

Based on this excerpt, Yuli, a character in the story titled *Seribu Sahabat Selamanya*, experiences cultural bereavement when faced with moving abroad. This reaction develops into emotional withdrawal, which manifests psychosomatically in the following excerpt.

"Yuli immediately lost her appetite... Yuli was silent all night" (*Bagai Bumi Berhenti Berputar*, p. 34)

This shows the identification and release of initial emotions in the emotional adaptation phase of social loss (Hynes & Hynes-Berry, 1994; Peng & Li, 2023). Responding to this, through empathetic dialogue, the father character introduces the relational metaphor of "a thousand friends," which functions as cognitive reframing (Qiu & Shum, 2022) to rearrange the meaning of separation into an opportunity to expand social networks. This is in line with the findings of Ariani (2021) and Ambarwati & Wahyuni (2020) regarding the role of family communication in supporting children's emotional resilience.

c. Grief, Loss, and Symbolic Meaning

"Her cheeks were dry; she couldn't cry... Pipi stood there confused, not knowing what to do." (*Bagai Bumi Berhenti Berputar*, p. 58)

In the story *Kerlip Bintang di Langit*, Pipi experiences deep grief after her mother's death, but she is unable to cry or express it, as depicted in the excerpt. This condition indicates a form of frozen grief, which is grief that is not expressed verbally. Emotional recovery began to take shape when her father introduced the symbol of a star as a sign of her mother's presence, which was then manifested in the ritual of shining a flashlight at the sky. This symbolic ritual allows Pipi to safely express his grief through non-verbal actions, in line with (Brooks et al., 2022). This practice also reflects meaning-making, which is the reinterpretation of loss through symbols and imagination (Hogstad & Jansen, 2023; Ryan, 2023).

d. Divorce, Guilt, and Transitional Objects

"Mom, what did Donna do wrong that Dad left home?" (*Bagai Bumi Berhenti Berputar*, p. 85)

The character Donna in the story *Jangan Lupa Aku Mencintaimu*, experiences emotional confusion and guilt when her parents divorce. The above quote shows the tendency for children to internalize adult conflicts as their own fault. In this story, emotional recovery begins through direct validation from parents, when the mother affirms that the divorce is not Donna's fault. This validation is central to the process of emotional regulation in bibliotherapy (Dewan, 2022; Hanifah & Lestyanawati, 2023). Additionally, the father's gift of a heart-shaped necklace serves as a transitional object that helps the child maintain a sense of connection despite physical separation (Goldstein et al., 2020; Ogden, 2021).

e. Disability Stigma and Reframing Identity

"Nico doesn't want people to look at Mila like she's weird, Mom." (*Bagai Bumi Berhenti Berputar*, p. 113)

In the story *Yang Paling Istimewa*, the character Nico initially feels ashamed because of the social stigma surrounding his sister's disability. This feeling arises from his concern about other people's stares, as depicted in the quote. This shows the mechanism of internalizing stigma when children absorb negative social views as a threat to their self-esteem. Emotional recovery takes place through the reframing of identity carried out by the mother, when she emphasizes that her sister is special.

“Mila is not special because she is different. Mila is special because she is your sister.” (*Bagai Bumi Berhenti Berputar*, p. 111)

This reframing shifts the narrative from disability to value based on relationship, which is in line with the anti-stigma perspective (Latoo et al., 2021; Santosa et al., 2024). In addition, through the mother’s explanation of similarities in hearts, feelings, and dignity, this story applies a strength-based approach, which focuses on abilities, values, and the meaningfulness of relationships as the basis for forming a positive identity (Caiels et al., 2024; Rytioja et al., 2024; Sochos & Smith, 2024).

B. Therapeutic Mechanisms and Emotional Advocacy in Narratives

The findings in the previous subsection show that children’s emotional experiences are not represented passively, but rather form an inner space where readers can identify, express, and reinterpret their emotions. In this context, therapeutic reading becomes important because it does not stop at the depiction of emotions, but rather focuses on how stories function as a space for healing.

The space for healing in the collection of stories *Bagai Bumi Berhenti Berputar* is identified through reader-text theory (Rosenblatt, 1994) and the stages of bibliotherapy (Hynes & Hynes-Berry, 1994). In reader-text theory, therapeutic meaning emerges when readers take an aesthetic stance, relive the characters’ emotional experiences, and negotiate personal meaning, while the Hynes & Hynes-Berry (1994) model maps the process into four parts, namely 1) identification, which is when readers recognize themselves in the characters’ experiences; 2) catharsis, which is the release of emotions through safe symbolic experiences; 3) insight, which is the reinterpretation of events and restructuring of perspectives; and 4) universalization/action, which is the application of this understanding in real life. These four processes are illustrated in Fig. 2.

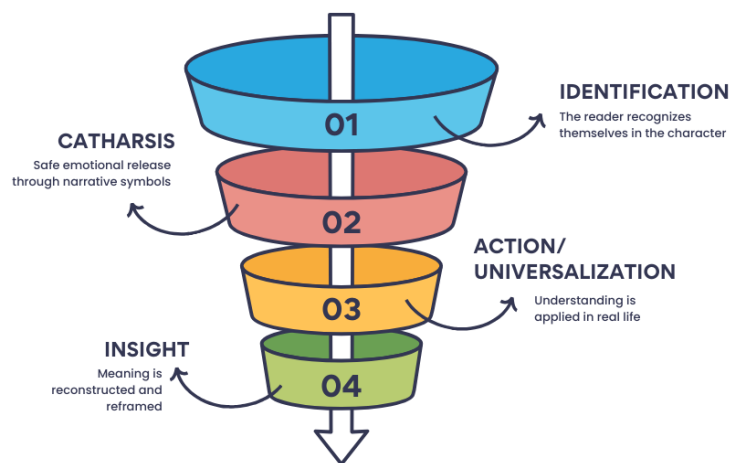


Fig. 2. Stages of Emotional Healing in Narrative Bibliotherapy

Through these stages, the emotional recovery mechanism in each story can be mapped out more clearly. In the story *Jangan Lupa Aku Mencintaimu*, Donna undergoes an emotional transformation from fear to acceptance after receiving validation from her parents. This process reflects the bibliotherapy flow, namely identification of family conflicts, catharsis through safe dialogue, insight through honest explanations, and action through the presence of a transitional object (heart necklace) that stabilizes attachment (Goldstein et al., 2020; Ogden, 2021). This aligns with Frota et al. (2023) that parental emotional support enhances emotional competence, as well as Andalibi & Garcia (2021) and Ferrajão (2020) on the importance of validation in processing psychological stress. In reader-text theory (Rosenblatt, 1994), parental support allows readers to enter an aesthetic attitude that absorbs emotional value through experience, not dogma.

Furthermore, the story *Pohon Harapan* shows that writing letters and caring for the tree of hope are symbolic cathartic mechanisms that transform emotions into visual forms. Children identify feelings of marginalization, vent their emotions through writing, gain insight that hope can grow, and then internalize optimism through the ritual of care. This approach is reinforced by Dong et al. (2024) regarding the effectiveness of expressive writing in processing complex emotions. Within reader-text theory (Rosenblatt, 1994), the symbol of the tree becomes a bridge between emotional experience and a healing process that can be touched and seen growing.

Additionally, the metaphor of “a thousand friends” in the story *Seribu Sahabat Selamanya* works as a cognitive reframing tool that transforms loss into an expansion of social connections. The bibliotherapy stage appears as the identification of grief, catharsis through emotional acknowledgment, insight that shifts the meaning of experience, and action in the form of acceptance of a new environment. These findings are in line with Ambarwati et al. (2020) and positive psychology Theodoratou & Argyrides (2024) which emphasize strengthening resilience through meaning restructuring. From an aesthetic transaction perspective, metaphors allow readers to negotiate the meaning of separation as part of growth.

On the other hand, the story *Kerlip Bintang di Langit* presents the strategy of shining light into the sky as a form of ritual meaning-making that enables a non-verbal catharsis process in dealing with death. Children are not forced to understand grief rationally, but through the symbol of light as an emotional language (Hogstad & Jansen, 2023; Ryan, 2023). The stages of bibliotherapy are evident in identification, symbolic catharsis, insight into the continuation of emotional relationships, and action in the form of repeated rituals. In reader-text theory (Rosenblatt, 1994), imagination becomes a safe space for processing loss in a way that is gently acceptable to children, without verbal pressure or heavy rational explanations.

Finally, the mother's dialogue shifts the meaning of “disability” to “special because of loving relationships” in the story *Yang Paling Istimewa*, preventing the internalization of stigma and strengthening self-esteem (Latoo et al., 2021; Santosa et al., 2024). This process follows the stages of bibliotherapy, namely identification of shame, insight into human values, and action in the form of Nico's courage to explain to his friends. These findings are in line with the strengths-based perspective that focuses on relational strengths (Rytioja et al., 2024; Sochos & Smith, 2024). Within reader-text theory (Rosenblatt, 1994), this affirmation strengthens the empathetic transaction that allows readers to internalize the value of diversity positively.

By examining these five mechanisms, it can be seen that the process of emotional healing in the text is not individual or incidental, but rather a consistent narrative pattern throughout the story. This pattern reinforces the work's position as a structured emotional recovery space, not merely a representation of children's psychological experiences. This is in line with the findings of Ruban et al. (2024), who state that therapeutic storytelling has been proven effective in improving behavior and instilling moral values in children and adolescents, including in the context of special needs.

However, the findings in this study provide a critical response to the results of the Klim-Conforti et al. (2023) study, which states that interventions based on children's literature and cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) have not shown a significant impact on the development of coping strategies. On the contrary, the results of the analysis of the five stories in *Bagai Bumi Berhenti Berputar* show that literary narratives have the potential to stimulate self-acceptance, healthy emotional expression, and reinterpretation of traumatic life experiences through relevant and empathetic representations. These stories are not patronizing, but rather present transformative experiences that are affective and reflective, opening up space for emotional recovery for child readers.

Furthermore, this study also provides a counterargument to the findings of Crane et al. (2024), which state that most children's books are still ineffective in teaching key coping strategies. The narratives in the five stories analyzed show that the child characters not only experience psychological pressure but also display a concrete recovery process through open dialogue, emotional validation, and supportive interpersonal relationships. In this context, this study affirms the results of the study by Zubiri-Esnaola et al. (2023), that children's literature with a dialogical and therapeutic approach can support mental health literacy and build healthy social relationships from an early age.

Thus, the findings of this study confirm that the collection of stories in *Bagai Bumi Berhenti Berputar* serves not only as a representation of children's emotional experiences, but also as a medium for recovery and literary advocacy. Through the mechanisms of identification, catharsis, reinterpretation, and self-empowerment, the stories in it help children process their emotions in a healthy and inclusive manner. Children's literature in this context becomes an empathetic, reflective, and transformative space that strengthens children's agency while increasing environmental sensitivity to mental health from an early age.

Conclusion

The results of this study indicate that the collection of stories in *Bagai Bumi Berhenti Berputar* represents children's psychological experiences in a reflective and empathetic manner, covering health trauma within the family, social loss, grief over death, anxiety due to divorce, and the stigma of disability. This representation does not stop at depicting suffering, but shows the process of negotiating emotions through relationships, dialogue, symbols, and reinterpretation of experiences. The analysis was conducted through empathetic narrative reading and qualitative content analysis techniques, which showed that each story contained stages of emotional recovery as described in reader-text transaction theory and

bibliotherapy model: identification, catharsis, insight, and universalization/action. Thus, this work can be understood as a medium of mental health literacy that helps children recognize, express, and reorganize their emotional experiences. These findings have important implications for strengthening mental health literacy in education and parenting. Children's literature, as shown in this study, functions not only as entertainment but also as a safe space for children to process emotions symbolically and imaginatively, while providing a model of empathetic communication for adults in accompanying children. However, this study has limitations, namely that it did not involve children as direct readers to see how the therapeutic message was internalized in practice. Therefore, further research is recommended to involve child readers as receptive subjects, or to expand the object of study to more accessible local works, such as books produced by the National Literacy Movement (GLN). With these steps, the use of literature as a means of advocating for children's mental health can be developed more comprehensively and have a long-term impact.

Declarations

- Author contribution** : Wahda Rahma Laila was responsible for the entire research project. He also led the writing of the manuscript and collaborated with the second author. Ari Ambarwati participated in provided criticism and suggestions. She also revised the manuscript. Both authors approved the final manuscript
- Funding statement** : This research did not receive any funding.
- Conflict of interest** : Both authors declare that they have no competing interests.
- Ethics Approval** : Information on Ethics Approval and informed consent statements are required for all articles published in BAHASTRA since 2025.
- Additional information** : No additional information is available for this paper.

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