CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides the foundation for the current research. It outlines the research background, identifies the problems, explains its limitations and research questions, and discusses its theoretical and practical significance.

1.1 Research Background

Children's literature is not only entertaining but also educational. Writers from various cultures, including those in Indonesia, depict childhood as a time of innocence, joy, and adventure through stories about friendship and imagination. The *"Kecil-Kecil Punya Karya"* series (Mizan) and the *Si Kancil* folktales instill ethical values through stories like these.

Nevertheless, this idealized portrayal neglects the realities of childhood vulnerability. Children commonly face grief, loss, and emotional distress due to circumstances such as parental separation, bereavement, bullying, disability, or relocation. These issues are increasingly acknowledged in global discussions about youth mental health. Approximately one in seven children and adolescents (aged 10-19) experience a mental health condition; the most common are anxiety, depression, and behavioral disorders, with around one-third of conditions beginning before age 14 and half before 18 (World Health Organization, 2024). According to the Indonesia–National Adolescent Mental Health Survey (I-NAMHS), more than one in three Indonesian children and adolescents aged 10-17 years (34.9%) experienced a mental health problem within the past year, with anxiety the most common condition (26.7%). Among those reporting mental health problems,

around 65% experienced impairments in family relationships, such as difficulties communicating or spending time with caregivers, indicating that family interactions are a central domain affected by children's mental health challenges (Center for Reproductive Health et al., 2022). A study by Wasono et al. (2025) further linked parental divorce to long-term effects such as anxiety, depression, and social and academic difficulties in children. Although these data primarily track children and adolescents aged 10 and above, the inclusion of sophisticated emotional themes in books labeled for readers aged 7+ suggests an earlier engagement with these difficult truths. This creates a significant tension: while the narrative focuses on the vulnerabilities of older youth, it is aimed at a younger audience whose cognitive and emotional growth may still be developing. Such findings stress the importance of children's books conveying genuine emotional substance rather than merely moral idealism. In this context, the work of Clara Ng functions as a vital case study.

Clara Ng (b. 1973), a well-known Indonesian author who has written more than 20 children's books and won awards like the IKAPI Adhikarya for Best Children's Book (2006–2008) (Setiawan, 2019), meets this need. In her collection of illustrated short stories, *Bagai Bumi Berhenti Berputar* (2012), the main characters are children who must deal with difficult situations, such as moving to a new country, losing their mother, their parents' divorce, and learning about their sibling's disability. Ng's realistic stories demonstrate that children can also have a deep emotional understanding and empathy at a young age, both for themselves and for others.

For instance, in the story *Jangan Lupa Aku Mencintaimu*, a young girl named Donna wakes up to find her brother, Daniel, hiding after hearing their parents argue. When Daniel asks Donna why their parents fight, Donna replies, *"Mereka bertengkar karena berbeda pendapat."* (They argue because they have different opinions) (p. 81). This raises a critical question: does the story authentically represent a child's perspective, or does it reflect an adult interpretation channeled through a child character? The sentence is a fairly sophisticated logical abstraction. It is a form of generalization typically understood by adults or older children (teens). A child rarely offers such a "calm" and "philosophical" analysis of a conflict in the midst of a traumatic situation (while his brother is hiding in fear).

This tension prompts broader questions about children's experiences and intended readers. While the collection is labeled for readers aged 7+, certain emotional and psychological depictions, such as guilt over divorce when Donna wonders if her parents' divorce was her fault for being a "naughty daughter" (p. 95) or mature reasoning in family conflict (p. 81), may resonate more deeply with adult readers, particularly parents. As a result, the book falls somewhere between children's literature and adult literature *about* children.

The foundation of empathy lies in this emotional dimension. Empathy operates on two levels in children's literature: as a theme and as a narrative strategy. Narrative constructs children's emotional worlds through focalization and the narrator's voice. In this study, empathy is understood not as an empirically measured response from actual readers but as a textual construction produced through the representation of characters' emotional responses and the narrative

positions made available to implied readers. Relatable characters and emotionally resonant narratives may encourage young readers to reflect on their own feelings and broaden their understanding of others.

Bagai Bumi Berhenti Berputar (2012) becomes a compelling object of study for exploring how empathy is constructed and conveyed through narrative perspective and storytelling techniques. These stories depict the emotional world of child characters through internal focalization, while also incorporating traces of adult thought that shape representations of childhood vulnerability. This study examines the textual construction of empathy and childhood vulnerability in the collection, and how these depictions align with the book's age 7+ designation, which is accompanied by parental guidance as a mediating framework to help young readers understand its emotional and psychological complexity.

This study used narratology as its primary analytical framework to examine how narrative structures construct empathy and childhood vulnerability. Drawing on Gérard Genette's narratology (1980), the study analyzed three major categories: Tense, Mood/Focalization, and Voice. Tense concerns the relationship between story time and discourse time, including Order, Duration, and Frequency. Mood/Focalization examines the regulation of narrative information, particularly "who perceives" or "who sees", while Voice concerns the narrating instance, or "who speaks".

Together, these categories enabled the study to examine how the stories arrange events, position child perception, and construct narrative authority in their representation of empathy and childhood vulnerability. This framework is

especially relevant for identifying whether the collection sustains a child-centered perspective or embeds adult-mediated interpretation in its representation of emotionally complex experiences.

To interpret the emotional meaning conveyed by these narrative structures, this study also employed Martin L. Hoffman's Theory of Empathy (2000) and Jean Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development (1969). Hoffman's theory was used to examine the forms of empathy represented within the stories, including characters' empathic development and the empathic positions constructed around vulnerable child characters. Piaget's framework served as a developmental benchmark to evaluate whether the narrative and emotional complexity in this collection of stories aligns with the cognitive capacities of its intended 7+ readership.

The combination of Genette's narratology, Hoffman's empathy theory, and Piaget's developmental framework enabled this study to analyze how Clara Ng's storytelling constructs empathy and to question whether the book's emotional complexity reflects a child-centered perspective, an adult-mediated narrative lens, or both.

1.2 Identification of the Problems

Bagai Bumi Berhenti Berputar (2012) by Clara Ng is a collection of illustrated short stories that explore the inner worlds of children grappling with grief, alienation, loss, and emotional pain. As discussed in the background, this work of writing subverts the conventional portrayals of childhood as a period of happiness and innocence by narrating about children who struggle to make sense of the suffering and vulnerability within their family and social lives. However, a

question remains as to whether the book's narrative reflects an authentic child's perspective or imposes an adult narrator's voice that may complicate its 7+ age designation.

For instance, Donna's sense of guilt over her parents' divorce may read either as a child's inner response to family conflict or as an adult-mediated interpretation conveyed through Donna's voice. Both possibilities invite questions about the book's psychological appropriateness for its intended child readers and about whether the emotional complexity depicted in the text corresponds to the cognitive developmental stage of a 7-year-old reader.

Therefore, this study examined how narratological techniques in *Bagai Bumi Berhenti Berputar* (2012) convey empathy and portray childhood vulnerability. It further examined whether these techniques correspond to the developmental maturity of young readers or suggest an adult-oriented approach to mediation. The study used Gérard Genette's narratology (1980) as the primary theoretical framework, supplemented by Martin L. Hoffman's Theory of Empathy (2000) and Jean Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development (1969) as interpretive lenses for examining how narrative voice and structural choices elicit emotional engagement.

1.3 Limitations of the Problems

This study is limited to a textual and narratological analysis of Clara Ng's *Bagai Bumi Berhenti Berputar* (2012), through a close reading of selected narrative moments most relevant to the development of empathy and vulnerability in childhood, rather than an exhaustive analysis of every narrative element in the text. It does not empirically involve child readers and therefore does not describe the

actual emotional or cognitive responses of children aged 7+. Considerations regarding age appropriateness rely on narrative mediation and textual complexity, rather than on an assessment of the readers' actual developmental levels.

Furthermore, while this study uses Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development, it is applied solely as a reference point for evaluating the cognitive demands implied by the text, not as a psychological assessment of the intended audience. This study also does not aim to examine the illustrations, determine the author's intent, or assess the moral truth or educational value of the stories. It is important to point out that all analysis of empathy in this study is limited to intra-textual development and expression between characters. Hoffman's framework is used solely to analyze character dynamics, not to theorize or measure actual reader response.

1.4 Research Questions

The writer formulated the following research problems:

1. How are empathy and childhood vulnerability constructed through narrative and storytelling techniques in *Bagai Bumi Berhenti Berputar* (2012)?
2. How does this construction relate to the cognitive development stage of the intended 7+ readership?

1.5 Objectives of the Study

1. To analyze how narrative and storytelling techniques construct empathy and portray childhood vulnerability in *Bagai Bumi Berhenti Berputar* (2012).
2. To examine how this construction relates to the cognitive development stage of the intended 7+ readership.

1.6 Significance of the Study

1.6.1 Theoretical Significance

By analyzing how the narrative perspective and storytelling techniques in *Bagai Bumi Berhenti Berputar* (2012) construct empathy and childhood vulnerability, this study contributes to the field of children's literature within English literary studies. It situates the text between child-centered narratives and adult-mediated narratives, while highlighting the role of narrative structure in shaping emotional meaning. By employing Genette's narratology and Hoffman's theory of empathy, the study strengthens interdisciplinary discussion between literary form and emotional representation while maintaining a narratological focus.

The findings also contribute to debates on age designation in children's literature by showing how narrative mediation and emotional complexity may complicate the book's 7+ age classification, even without relying on empirical reader-response data. By incorporating Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development, this study provides a developmental framework that shows how text-based emotional complexity may exceed the expected cognitive maturity of its target readership. In this respect, this study contributes to the scholarly understanding of empathy as a narratively constructed mechanism rather than merely a psychological outcome.

1.6.2 Practical Significance

Practically, this study provides insight for writers, educators, and scholars in evaluating children's literature beyond thematic content, particularly regarding narrative voice, emotional mediation, and implied readership. By examining how

Bagai Bumi Berhenti Berputar (2012) frames children's emotional experiences, the study offers a critical lens for assessing how literary texts balance emotional depth with age suitability. For the researcher, the study develops analytical competence in close reading and narratological analysis, thereby supporting a more critical engagement with the ways in which children's texts negotiate narrative complexity, emotional framing, and intended readership.