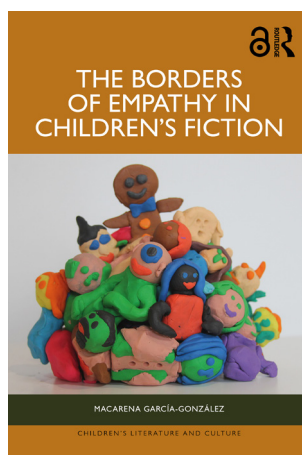


MACARENA GARCÍA-  
GONZÁLEZ

**THE BORDERS  
OF EMPATHY IN  
CHILDREN'S FICTION**

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(166 p.)



From the beginnings of children's literature, the Horatian maxim *docere et delectare* - to instruct and to entertain - has gone hand in hand with literary production for young readers. Whether children's fiction is, or should be, primarily aesthetic or didactic, and how pervasive the adult's authority is within it, remain ongoing discussions in the field. For decades, numerous scholars have examined these questions, focusing on how adults monitor and shape children's literature; from Jacqueline Rose's notion of the "impossibility of children's fiction," to Perry Nodelman's "hidden adult," and more recent approaches such as Clémentine Beauvais's "mighty child." Along similar lines, Maria Nikolajeva coined the term *aetonormativity* to describe the adult norm that governs literary production for children, determining what is considered suitable and valuable for young readers.

Adult mediation inevitably creates a complex dynamic when dealing with questions of affect, empathy, and taboo topics, not only determining which themes are considered appropriate for children, but also shaping how emotions are represented, framed, or even constrained. In *The Borders of Empathy in Children's Fiction* (2025), Macarena García-González addresses these tensions between aetonormative authority, the construction of emotional experience in books, and the balance between aesthetic and didactic imperatives. She does so by posing questions such as:

What kind of emotions do we allow in children's literature? Who decides which stories are appropriate for children? How do we approach difficult topics? Whom are we allowed to empathise with and feel compassion for? Why do we find such relief in claiming that children's literature fosters empathy in its readers? (2)

To explore these issues, García-González combines literary analysis with insights from empirical studies involving children, school-teachers, and other reading mediators. Her work draws on several theoretical frameworks, including Rita Felski's notion of postcriticism, posthumanist approaches, and Peter Hunt's childist criticism. The book is divided into nine substantial chapters in which the author moves between books, picturebooks, films, and empirical projects. The works analysed - published over the last two decades and with a significant impact on children's and young adult literature - primarily address emotions and challenging life experiences, from both an aesthetic and a didactic perspective. This approach allows García-González to reflect on the tensions between these two aims and on their implications for young readers.

The first chapter examines how picturebooks are currently conceptualised and used as tools for emotional education in early childhood education. García-González offers a productive overview of the picturebook market, with particular attention to Latin America, and then explores how picturebooks are understood in relation to empathy development. In this regard, García-González examines the Spanish picturebook *The Colour Monster* by Anna Llenas (2012), in which a monster is confused by its emotions and gradually assigns each emotion a colour and a specific name. García-González connects the picturebook's central idea to that of the Disney film *Inside Out* (2015), as both productions seem to be based on Silvan Tomkins' universalist theory of basic emotions. In both cases, negative emotions are seen as something that must be recognised but not allowed to govern us. Through these examples, García-González reflects on how many works of fiction, as well as educational programmes in general, emphasise the treatment of emotion through rationality and control, often without allowing a deeper and more individualised exploration of each emotional experience.

The second chapter turns to picturebooks about death and to the ways in which these narratives frequently are perceived as more troubling by adults than by children. While children's literature has traditionally been expected to offer comforting or happy endings, García-González demonstrates how an increasing number

of contemporary picturebooks - especially in non-Anglophone contexts - engage with difficult topics via open or unresolved endings. Drawing on an empirical study conducted in a Chilean school, she explores children's responses to a selection of so-called "challenging" picturebooks dealing with themes such as loss and death, such as *La madre y la Muerte* (The mother and the death, 2016) by Alberto Laiseca and Nicolás Arispe. The study reveals a clear tension between adult expectations, often shaped by concerns about age-appropriateness, and children's own ways of engaging with these narratives, which tend to be more open, complex, and at times marked by curiosity or fascination. The chapter thus questions adultist assumptions about children's emotional vulnerability and highlights how adult mediation may constrain the aesthetic and affective potential of these works.

The third chapter is devoted to the concept of necropolitics and to the picturebooks of Armin Greder. The discussion begins with the death of Alan Kurdi as a turning point in the visibility of the refugee crisis in Europe, and proceeds to analyse Greder's work as one of the most explicit engagements with xenophobia, migration, and global injustice in children's literature. Focusing mainly on *The Island* (2007), García-González explores, through another empirical study conducted in Chile, how children engage with the book in terms of affective and social responses. The chapter is completed with further references to *The Mediterranean* (2018) and *The Inheritance* (2021), which expand Greder's critique from local dynamics of exclusion to broader global systems of violence.

In the fourth chapter, García-González introduces testimonial narratives that deal directly with real experiences of border crossing. These texts are situated in contrast to the dominant tendency in Western children's literature to construct migration through narratives of hospitality and hopeful integration, where the "home-away-home" pattern often resolves displacement into belonging. Instead, the author analyses three works that approach migration from different genres and positions in relation to testimony: Yuyi Morales' *Dreamers* (2018), Warren Binford's *Hear My Voice / Escucha mi voz* (2021), and Valeria Luiselli's *Tell Me How It Ends* (2017). Particular attention is paid to how each work constructs voice and authorship, and how questions of translation, mediation, and authenticity shape the representation of migrant childhoods.

The fifth chapter addresses cultural productions situated within memory studies of Augusto Pinochet's dictatorship in Chile. García-González analyses *La composición* (*The Composition*, 2005) by Antonio

Skármeta and Alfonso Ruano, *Niños* (Kids, 2013) by María José Ferrada, *Un diamante en el fondo de la tierra* (A diamond in the ground, 2015) by Jairo Buitrago and Daniel Blanco, and *Bear Story* (2014) by Punk Robot. She demonstrates how these works approach violence, disappearance, and repression through metaphor, allegory, and especially through gaps and silences. Drawing on affect theory, García-González emphasises the importance of material and aesthetic elements – such as the interplay between the verbal and the visual – which makes these texts “elusive”. This elusiveness, she argues, invites more democratic classroom readings and opens up for future research that continues to explore the non-verbal and non-discursive aspects of the works themselves.

The sixth chapter examines the depiction of Frida Kahlo in biographies aimed at children and young readers, after an overview of how female biographies have been approached in recent decades. García-González analyses *Frida Kahlo para chicos y chicas* (Frida Kahlo for boys and girls, 2015) by Nadia Fink and Pitu Saá, *Frida Kahlo* (2014) by María Isabel Sánchez Vergara and Gee Fan Eng, and *Frida Kahlo: An Illustrated Life* (2016) by María Hesse in order to examine how Kahlo becomes a “biographiable” subject. The analysis reveals a clear tendency to construct her as a resilient, strong, and inspirational figure, where suffering is central but mainly in terms of overcoming and artistic success. In this process, more conflictive, powerful, and structural dimensions of her life are minimised, resulting in narratives that prioritise an exemplary and pedagogical reading of her life.

In the seventh chapter, García-González draws attention to children’s and young adult narratives that engage with the climate crisis and water scarcity, situating them within broader debates on the Anthropocene and post-anthropocentric thinking. Drawing on concepts like hyperobjects and slow violence from environmental humanities, she questions to what extent these narratives can represent the political and social origins of ecological damage. She contrasts anthropocentric and instructional narratives such as *Why Should I Save Water?* (2001) by Jen Green and Mike Gordon with more complex ones like *Ohne Wasser geht’s nicht!* (Without water, nothing works!, 2020) by Christina Steinlein and Mieke Scheier, and *We Are Water Protectors* (2020) by Carole Lindstrom and Michaela Goade. Nevertheless, she observes that even these more complex texts often remain framed by narratives of hope that tend to avoid deeper structural critiques. As a more disruptive example, García-González highlights the film *Abuela Grillo* (Grandmother Cricket, 2009) by Denis Chapon, which introduces water scarcity as a site of conflict,

injustice, and epistemological struggle, thereby opening space for collective resistance and alternative forms of knowing that move beyond the dominant politics of hope.

The eighth chapter focuses on the entanglements between social inequality and practices of reading promotion. García-González examines the notion of “reading mediation” to describe the work of teachers, librarians, and community mediators who aim to connect children with literature. She discusses a project she carried out together with her colleagues Soledad Véliz and Jacinta Jiménez in a Chilean NGO, in which a selection of books was chosen for a programme “meant to challenge normative ways of reading and feeling with books” (133). Over time, however, this programme turned to more normative approaches and was ultimately displaced, in part due to urgent material concerns such as access to electricity. This experience leads García-González to question the fundamental assumptions underlying reading promotion, including the belief in books as transformative tools. Instead, she argues that the value of books might lie in the social and affective spaces they help to create: “the agentic force of books may not be related to the stories they tell, but to the ones we weave with and around them” (134).

In the final chapter, García-González turns to child-authored writing in order to examine how authorship is produced through practices of selection, recognition, and institutional validation. By analysing initiatives such as school programmes and collaborative projects, she shows how children are positioned as writers within adult-framed systems that tend to both enable and regulate their authorial voices. The chapter concludes with a call for new methodologies that decentralise “adult ways of understanding creativity” (148) and rethink the intergenerational power dynamics that continue to structure these practices.

Overall, *The Borders of Empathy in Children's Fiction* constitutes a highly insightful contribution to the field of children's and young adult literature criticism. García-González challenges the very notion of age-appropriate ways of addressing difficult topics, and she invites the reader to reconsider the child's position in society, as well as the role that cultural productions play within it. The book's scope may appear somewhat broad: while it follows a clear conceptual thread, it engages with a wide range of works and thematic concerns, which inevitably affects the depth with which each case can be addressed. Nevertheless, the study successfully answers the questions it sets out to investigate, and its breadth also creates opportunities for future research to pursue particular strands in greater detail. In this

sense, the book's expansiveness can also be seen as one of its major strengths. Rather than offering definitive answers, García-González calls for a renewal of children's literature criticism – one grounded in childist perspectives, more closely aligned with young audiences, and attentive to expanding the understanding of reading practices and literary experiences.

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