

## **MULTICULTURAL PICTURE BOOKS' POTENTIAL TO PROMOTE PRO-SOCIAL EMOTIONS IN CHILDREN**

**Kumarasinghe Dissanayake**

*Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia*  
*k1.dissanayakemudiyanselage@student.qut.edu.au*

Literature's potential to promote pro-social emotions, such as empathy, has long been proposed. Following the introduction of the term 'empathy' into English as a translation of the German word *Einfühlung* in 1909, English novelist Vernon Lee (1913) attempted to theorize its relationship with aesthetic perception. However, the dominant modernist literary criticism prevalent at the time of Lee's writing hindered empathy's integration into a literary theory. Re-immersed in 1990s with moral philosopher Martha Nussbaum's works, studying the empathetic potential of narratives has now become a major interest of the emerging field of Cognitive Narratology. One aspect of this empathy debate is Narrative Empathy, which is understood as 'feeling with fiction' (Keen, 2007). Recently, an influential study by Suzanne Keen (2007) postulated what is termed 'empathetic narrative techniques' used by fiction writers to evoke empathetic emotions in readers. Does reading fiction make readers more empathetic, or encourage certain moral behaviours? If it does, how might children's literature embody such moral persuasions? The enculturating potential of children's literature means that it plays a vital role in contributing to children's understanding of cultural difference and fostering moral values and pro-social emotions that are essential for harmonious living in increasingly diverse societies today. Australian multicultural picture books address many aspects of self-other encounters from different perspectives, providing rich sources for research on narrative empathy. The research question for this study is 'how do contemporary Australian multicultural picture books draw on empathetic narrative techniques to encourage readers' empathy towards cultural difference?' Drawing from recent research on cognitive narratology, narrative empathy and semiotics, this research attempts to investigate the empathetic potential of recent Australian 'multicultural-themed' picture books. It is expected that the research findings will reflect the ways children's picturebooks embody, promote or inhibit pro-social emotions prompting further research on empathy in children's literature.