

***Nothing Lasts Forever:* A Children Book About the Loss of Attachment**

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ABSTRACT

The loss of an attachment figure, whether a person, pet, or place, is a profound challenge that destabilizes a child's sense of security. This paper explores the creation of *Nothing Lasts Forever*, a series of five picture books designed to help children navigate grief using magical realism and John Bowlby's attachment theory. The work demonstrates that loss manifests functionally as protest (anger and denial) and despair (withdrawal), which are necessary distress signals. By utilizing a creative practice-based methodology, the project illustrates how a caregiver's support as a "safe haven" and "secure base" allows children to form continuing bonds. Grounded in psychological principles, this series serves as a therapeutic tool for fostering emotional resilience.

Keywords: children picture book, continuing bond, loss of attachment, magical realism, separation distress

INTRODUCTION

From their earliest moments, children build their world upon a foundation of emotional bonds, or attachments, to the people, pets, and places that make them feel safe. These relationships are more than just connections; they are the very architecture of a child's security, shaping their understanding of themselves and their expectations of the world. Consequently, the loss of attachment is a deeply challenging experience that can destabilize a child's world, leading to a cascade of distressing emotions such as confusion, fear, and profound grief (Ferow, 2019). This creative project steps into that challenging space by proposing a collection of stories designed to help children and their families navigate the complex landscape of this specific loss. Despite the inevitability of loss, age-appropriate resources in the Indonesian children's literature landscape that focus on internal psychological processes remain scarce. Currently, a large portion of local children's stories focuses on teaching moral lessons, such as obedience or religious duties, which rarely address the internal world of a child struggling with deep emotional pain.

To address this gap, this project utilizes the picture book as its chosen literary medium due to its unique compatibility with a child's developmental needs during a time of emotional vulnerability. The combination of vivid images and simple, patterned text creates an experience that is both predictable and easy to grasp. More than that, the act of reading a picture book together allows a parent or caregiver to become what attachment theorists call a "safe haven," providing physical closeness and comfort that helps a child manage difficult feelings as they arise (Simpson et al., 2021). This shared experience, grounded in honest language and simple, repeatable actions, naturally provides the key elements of effective support following a loss: naming the loss, involving caregivers, and introducing gentle habits that can guide the healing process (Ferow, 2019).

Building upon this supportive medium, the project employs the specific literary genre of magical realism to structure its narrative. Unlike traditional fantasy, which often creates separate magical worlds, magical realism weaves a single extraordinary element into a familiar, realistic setting, presenting it with a calm, matter-of-fact tone (Rudge, 2004). Otherwise, each allows the story's central metaphor to feel grounded and usable in children's lives, giving a tangible shape to emotions that are otherwise too big and overwhelming to hold. For example, a flower that winks or a scent that lingers acts as a "feeling container," externalizing internal states (Rudge, 2004).

To enhance the effectiveness of this genre, the stories are set in the countryside of Indonesia. This decision is based on the same principles of magical realism identified by Karimov (2022) regarding the integration of the "miraculous" into daily life. In many rural or countryside settings, folklore, nature spirits, and the unseen world are already woven into the fabric of everyday reality (Karimov, 2022). By using this setting, the magical elements in the stories can be accepted with a matter-of-fact tone by the characters, making the metaphor for healing feel more natural and less jarring than it might in a purely secular, urban environment.

Moreover, this approach has been demonstrated successfully in beloved children's books that combine gentle metaphor with meaningful actions. For example, Britta Teckentrup's (2013) *The Memory Tree* visualizes the concept of continuing bonds, emphasizing a transformed relationship with the one who is gone (Clabburn et al., 2019). Similarly, Patrice Karst's (2000) *The Invisible String* offers a simple metaphor for connection that helps children endure separations. These stories align with modern grief guidance that favors remembering and reorganizing over forgetting (Clabburn et al., 2019). Therefore, grounded in these frameworks, this project explores the effects of losing an attachment on five child protagonists—Wira, Mei Lin, Liana, Clara, and Ryan—and investigates how they find support to resolve these effects.

The theoretical framework for these stories is strictly grounded in John Bowlby's attachment theory, specifically centering on separation distress and the concepts of the safe haven and secure base. Bowlby (1980) identified an adaptive sequence of responses to loss: protest, despair, and reorganization. The initial phase of protest is characterized by intense crying, anger, and denial, which are direct manifestations of the child's distress (Simpson et al., 2021). If the attachment figure does not return, the child moves into despair, marked by withdrawal and sadness (Simpson et al., 2021). This model provides a clear framework for understanding "negative behaviors" not as random misbehavior, but as predictable symptoms of a secure bond being broken.

Furthermore, the project investigates how children find support to resolve these effects through the functional intervention of a caregiver acting as a safe haven and secure base. The safe haven provides the comfort needed to resolve distress, while the secure base supports exploration (Simpson et al., 2021). An effective caregiver must fluidly shift between these roles: validating the child's anger or denial (safe haven) and then encouraging small steps of re-engagement (secure base). This dynamic process of co-regulation is the mechanism through which a child eventually learns to self-regulate (Fletcher et al., 2016). By repeatedly experiencing a caregiver who validates their distress and then encourages exploration, children internalize these supportive patterns.

Ultimately, the resolution of each story focuses on the concept of "continuing bonds," demonstrating that the bond of love is not erased by loss but can be transformed (Clabburn et al., 2019). The project creates narratives where the child engages in a new activity or uses a new object, facilitated by the caregiver's secure base support, to maintain a relationship with what was lost. The project concludes that psychologically grounded children's literature serves as a vital therapeutic tool, reframing distress and offering a pathway to emotional resilience. By translating clinical concepts into narrative art, the work aims to provide practical, enduring support for children navigating the universal experience of loss.

CONCEPT OF CREATIVE WORK

Theme

The subject matter of this creative work is the loss of attachment. The theme shows that the loss of attachment in children may bring positive outcomes when they accept it. The five stories explore how children emotionally and behaviorally respond to the profound distress of this loss and how they navigate the path to healing. As their attachment systems cycle through protest and quieter despair, small habits and steady adult language help their internal working models shift toward safety. The

resolution of each story is focused on the concept of reorganization (Ince & Balon, 2024), demonstrating that the bond of love is not erased by loss but can be transformed into a "continuing bond" (Clabburn et al., 2019) that the child learns to carry forward.

Plot

Since the creative works span over five picture book stories, five different plots are created.

Wira and the Star Flower

Wira lives with his parents in a small apartment where his room's calm center is a glowing tank and a bright betta fish named Bintang. One morning the water is still, and Wira's mother softly explains that Bintang is gone. Wira reacts with anger, knocking the glass and pushing breakfast away. Later, on the balcony, they choose a pot to remember Bintang. Wira pours water over a white pebble at the same time he used to feed the fish. After a rainstorm, a tiny orange star-shaped flower sprouts. It does not fix the empty tank, but it gives Wira's love a new place to go as he keeps a watering log and shares memories with the bloom.

Mei Lin and the Scent of Jasmine

Mei Lin's life is defined by the warmth of a "hug sandwich" and the predictable smell of her mother's jasmine perfume. When her parents must leave for a sudden, urgent business project in Singapore, she stays behind with her relatives, Om Han and Tante Ling, to maintain school stability. She initially pushes back by rejecting Tante Ling's cooking, claiming it is not like the porridge her mother makes. Everything changes when Tante Ling gives her a wooden box containing a bottle of Mama's jasmine scent. This magical smell connects her to her parents across the ocean. By drawing hearts on a calendar for weekly video calls, she finds a new routine that keeps her love alive while she waits for their return.

Liana and Kiki the Doll

Liana's days run on little rituals with Kiki, a threadbare stuffed monkey who guards her toast and rides in her backpack. In the park, a dog shakes Kiki until the seams give way and stuffing explodes like confetti. When repairs fail, Liana wails that he is broken forever and hides the pieces under her bed. On Saturday, she decides Kiki is not broken, but "too tired" and ready for retirement. She draws their best day, lines a shoebox, and sets Kiki inside on a high shelf. That night, she dreams of Kiki waving happily from a jungle vine. Knowing Kiki is resting comfortably allows her to move forward and learn new skills, like stitching, on a different toy.

Clara and the Rambutan Seed

Clara often spends weekends at Oma and Opa's countryside house where the big rambutan tree throws round shade and the kitchen smells of baking. When the house is sold, Clara sits by her city window stacking stones, refusing to play and wanting only to go back. Opa visits and presses a dark rambutan seed into her palm, telling her it "remembers the sun." Clara plants it in a pot on her windowsill and keeps a growth chart. When the first leaves open, a soft scent like Oma's baking fills the room for a second. The seedling becomes a living connection to the home she missed, growing steadily in her care.

Ryan and the Paper Airplane

At his old school, Ryan knew the map by heart, but the new school feels like a different planet where he sits on a lonely bench at lunch. He draws a picture of his old friends laughing and, spotting another lonely boy across the yard, folds it into a paper airplane. A secret puff of wind lifts the plane, landing it in the boy's shoes. The boy, Leo, unfolds it and gives a slow nod. The next day, Ryan sends

a plane with the word "hi," and Leo catches it and waves. Soon, they are flying planes back and forth, and Ryan draws a new picture of two boys by the fence. The planes become a new map, making the school feel like his.

Characters

Main Characters:

Wira, 7 years old, is a quiet, introspective boy who finds comfort in the predictability of his routines. He lives with his parents in a small apartment and enjoys the companionship of his pet fish, Bintang. Wira is particularly sensitive to changes in his environment and, while not shy, tends to avoid noisy or chaotic situations. His deep attachment to Bintang makes the loss of his pet especially difficult. Though initially angry and withdrawn, Wira's gentle nature allows him to find healing through small, repeatable rituals that help him carry the bond forward. His quiet, reflective demeanor makes him resilient, and over time, he learns that love can endure in new forms.

Mei Lin, 8 years old, is a thoughtful and curious girl who finds her greatest security in the close presence of her parents. Her "safe haven" is the comfort of bedtime stories and the familiar scents of her childhood home. When her parents travel to Singapore for a sudden project, they decide she must stay behind because she is too young for such a big move. They also want her to stay in her current school to avoid disrupting her education and friendships. Consequently, she moves in with her nearby relatives, Om Han and Tante Ling, which triggers a deep feeling of confusion and abandonment. Through the consistent support of Tante Ling and the magical jasmine keepsake, she slowly learns that love can exist even across great distances. This journey helps her grow from a state of protest into a new, resilient version of herself.

Liana, 9 years old, is a determined and imaginative girl who finds comfort in her stuffed monkey, Kiki. Kiki has been a constant companion, offering Liana a sense of security and calm. After an accident leaves Kiki damaged beyond repair, Liana is devastated and initially refuses to accept the loss. Her deep attachment to Kiki drives her to try and fix the toy, but when that fails, she withdraws, holding onto the pieces. Over time, Liana chooses a path of reverence and creates a small ceremony to honor Kiki's place in her life. Her emotional resilience is shown as she learns to let go, finding new ways to cherish her memories while making space for new relationships and experiences.

Clara, 7 years old, is a sensitive, observant child who finds comfort in familiar places, especially her grandparents' house and the large rambutan tree in their garden. When the house is sold, Clara feels a profound sense of loss and struggles with the transition to a new environment. She initially clings to the tree, unable to accept the changes. Clara's ability to heal is catalyzed by the gift of a rambutan seed from her grandfather. As she nurtures the seed, Clara learns that love and memories can be carried forward in a new form. Her ability to accept change grows as she cares for the seedling, and she finds a way to carry her old memories into her new life.

Ryan, 8 years old, is a friendly and energetic boy who thrives in the company of his friends. He is a natural leader in his social circles and finds comfort in shared play and laughter. However, after his family moves to a new city, Ryan feels displaced and out of sync with his new surroundings. At first, he resists joining in with his new classmates, overwhelmed by the unfamiliarity. Ryan's emotional growth occurs when he notices another lonely boy and, through a small act of connection (folding a drawing into a paper airplane) begins to bridge the gap between isolation and friendship. Through this small ritual, Ryan learns that new relationships can be built without erasing old ones.

Supporting Characters:

Wira's Mother, Adult, is Wira's primary caregiver and acts as the crucial "safe haven" in the wake of Bintang's death. She provides consistent emotional validation, absorbing Wira's initial anger and guiding his destructive protest into a constructive ritual. Her role is to gently introduce the new routine

of caring for the plant, thus scaffolding Wira's transition from despair to reorganization. She remains a predictable and comforting presence throughout his period of adjustment.

Tante Ling, Adult, is Mei Lin's kind, consistent, and patient temporary caregiver after her parents move overseas for work. She absorbs Mei Lin's active rejection and anger without retaliation, serving as a functional "safe haven" who does not give up on the displaced girl. She actively fosters a secure base by creating new rituals, such as the tea after homework and introducing the precious, scented keepsake. Bibi models sensitive responsiveness, providing stability Mei Lin needs to realize that attachment can still be trusted, even if it comes from a new source.

Mei Lin's Father and Mother (Papa and Mama), Adult, are Mei Lin's initial primary attachment figures whose absence constitutes the central loss in her story. Their love is characterized by warm, physical routines like the "hug sandwich," which Mei Lin desperately misses when they depart overseas for work. Although physically distant, they maintain their emotional bond through planned video calls, serving as a symbolic, enduring attachment figure for Mei Lin. Their actions justify Mei Lin's initial despair but also provide the foundation for her later belief that love transcends physical separation.

Liana's Father, Adult, is Liana's main caregiver who provides the necessary emotional space and support following the sudden, traumatic destruction of her comfort object, Kiki. He initially tries to "fix" the problem with tape and later buys a new toy, showing an understandable but ineffective attempt to solve grief externally. He ultimately shifts to providing a true "secure base" by patiently teaching Liana a real-world skill (stitching) and assisting her in the ritual of creating Kiki's retirement box. His acceptance of the permanent loss is crucial for Liana's move toward reorganization.

Oma (Clara's Grandmother), Elderly, is the emotional anchor of the countryside house and is characterized by the warmth and sensory memory of her baking (cinnamon and cloves). Her presence represents the predictable comfort of the past that Clara loses when the house is sold. Though she is not physically present in the city, her memory and the feeling of her care remain strongly associated with space, influencing Clara's deep sadness and denial. The scent that appears later in Clara's room is a magical reflection of Oma's enduring attachment to the place and to Clara.

Opa (Clara's Grandfather), Elderly, is Clara's attachment figure who facilitates the transition from denial to reorganization after the family moves. He acts as the clear "secure base" when he recognizes Clara's profound sadness over the lost house. His practical wisdom and grounded action are key: he gives Clara the single rambutan seed and the simple instruction to care for it. This act encourages Clara's necessary exploration back into the present reality, transforming her attachment to a lost place into a manageable, active project.

Leo, 8 years old, is a peer who is also experiencing isolation and loneliness in the new school environment, mirroring Ryan's withdrawn state. He becomes the functional "new object or activity" that resolves Ryan's social loss. By simply acknowledging Ryan's paper airplane and returning the gesture, Leo provides the validation Ryan needs to break his denial and re-engage socially. Leo's existence and positive response restore Ryan's "secure base" function, showing that new, reliable attachments are possible even after a devastating social loss.

CONCLUSION

This creative work explores the development of a therapeutic picture book series by examining its foundation in attachment theory and its alignment with the project's purpose. The work shows that while the pain of loss which manifests anger, denial, or withdrawal is inevitable, the support of a caregiver acting as a safe haven can guide a child toward a resilient new reality. The stories effectively answer the statement of the problem by illustrating the diverse ways children experience attachment loss and demonstrating how they find support through the functional intervention of a caregiver. The resolution of the entire series successfully demonstrates the formation of the continuing bond, confirming that acceptance is reached not by severing the attachment, but by carrying the love forward.

Throughout the development of this thesis, a primary lesson learned is that theoretical accuracy does not require dry storytelling. The challenge was translating clinical concepts like "protest" and "secure base" into the tangible, emotional language of a child, such as a boy tapping on a fish tank or a girl refusing to eat. Another significant lesson was the power of the "secure base" in narrative structure; just as a child needs a secure base to explore the world, a story needs a grounded, realistic setting for the magical elements to feel impactful. Finally, the process revealed that resolution is not synonymous with fixing; the most powerful endings acknowledged the permanence of loss while offering a hopeful path forward.

Moving forward, the primary goal is to ensure that *Nothing Lasts Forever* serves as a practical resource for families and educators. Plans include finalizing the illustrations to create high-quality digital mock-ups and releasing them as open-source files to maximize accessibility. Additionally, the researcher intends to explore audiobook adaptations with calming soundscapes to support children with visual impairments. Future researchers are encouraged to explore the role of peer support in childhood grief and to investigate interactive media formats that could provide children with a more agentic role in the reorganization process.

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