Dreaming Children, Caring Fathers: Reimagining Masculinity in Clara Ng's *Sejuta Warna Pelangi*

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Abstract

Children's picturebooks shape understandings of masculinity not only through what male characters achieve but also through how they care for others, exercise authority, and respond to vulnerability. This article reads two stories from Clara Ng's *Sejuta Warna Pelangi*, *Aku Bisa Terbang* and *Ambilkan Bulan, Yah!*, to examine how they portray male caregivers through imagination and relationships across generations. Drawing on Connell and Messerschmidt's account of hegemonic masculinity and Elliott's concept of caring masculinities, the study applies qualitative multimodal picturebook analysis to 22 double-page spreads, attending to narration, dialogue, visual composition, and the positions characters take in relation to one another. Two forms of masculine care emerge. In *Aku Bisa Terbang*, a grandfather uses his own ability to fly to affirm his grandson's doubted experience and to bring him into a shared flight. In Ambilkan *Bulan, Yah!,* a king who cannot reach the moon for his daughter shows his care through persistence, bodily clumsiness, and his reliance on the household staff who help him. Both stories loosen the link between masculinity and individual achievement, yet neither removes the hierarchies within which care takes place: the grandfather remains the knowing adult, and the king's effort rests on the labour of those beneath him. The study argues that Ng's stories redirect masculine competence toward recognizing and supporting others without dismantling existing relations of authority. Fantasy creates situations in which ordinary adult competence falls short, and the interplay of words and pictures shows both what this care makes possible and where it stops.

Keywords: caring masculinities; children's literature; fatherhood; gender representation; multimodality; picturebooks

Introduction

Picturebooks rarely announce their ideas about gender. More often, these ideas are carried by the ordinary business of the story: who looks after whom, whose decisions move the plot

forward, and which characters are allowed to show affection, authority, or weakness. This is especially relevant to masculinity, which has long been tied to independence, assertiveness, and competence, often at the cost of emotional openness and care. Because picturebooks tell their stories through both words and images, they make these relationships visible even when gender is not what the story is about.

A substantial body of research has documented gender inequality in children's literature. McCabe et al. (2011), surveying 5,618 children's books published across the twentieth century, found marked disparities between male and female characters in titles and central roles. Later studies show that the imbalance is not only a matter of numbers. Pownall and Heflick (2023) found that male characters in the Mr. Men and Little Miss series were more often linked to adventure and activity, while female characters were more often linked to domestic life and passivity. Lindsay (2024), examining picturebooks published between 2010 and 2020, likewise found that masculinity was still associated with aggression and provision, and femininity with housework and care. Adam and Harper (2023) report similar patterns in picturebooks commonly read in early childhood classrooms. Collectively, these studies suggest that the inequality lies not only in who appears on the page but also in who is given agency, who may express emotion, and who is expected to take responsibility for others.

These divisions are especially visible in depictions of parenthood. In an analysis of 203 picturebooks, Anderson et al. (2023) found that fathers were underrepresented and were often shown as less involved in daily parenting than mothers, whose activities centred on emotional care and domestic work. Even when fathers do appear, then, such books tend to reproduce a familiar split between paternal authority and maternal nurture. More recent picturebooks also offer other models. Biemmi (2026) identifies portrayals of fathers who take a greater part in family life than conventional expectations would suggest. These changes show that fatherhood is not depicted in a single way, but they also raise the question of how such changes should be read. A nurturing father may widen the range of behaviour available to men, yet emotional involvement on its own does not show whether the relations of authority surrounding fatherhood have changed.

Answering that question requires a view of masculinity that goes beyond sorting male characters into conventional and progressive types. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) understand hegemonic masculinity as a historically situated pattern of gender relations in which certain masculine practices are privileged over others. On this view, masculinity is not a fixed set of traits such as strength, independence, or emotional restraint; it takes shape in social relationships and in the unequal positions people hold within them. Elliott (2016) builds on this tradition with the concept of caring masculinities, which joins a rejection of domination with values of positive emotion, relationality, and interdependence. Care in this sense means more than men showing affection or taking up behaviour traditionally coded as feminine. What counts is how men recognize the needs of others, how they take part in relationships of dependence, and what they do with the authority they hold.

Whether care actually unsettles masculine power is still debated. Bridges and Pascoe (2014) show that men can adopt practices associated with femininity or with subordinated masculinities while keeping the advantages they already enjoy. Their notion of hybrid masculinities challenges the assumption that new forms of male behaviour automatically produce more equal relationships. Prattes (2022) makes a related point about involved fatherhood among privileged men, which can depend on the care and reproductive labour of marginalized workers. Both arguments direct attention to the conditions that make men's caregiving possible, and to the work of others that may go unacknowledged when men's care is celebrated. More recently, Wojnicka and de Boise (2025) have warned against treating caring masculinity as a character type defined by nurturing attitudes. In their view, the concept stays useful only if it keeps its original concern with power, social change, and the structural conditions under which care is given. For literary analysis, this means that a caring male figure should be judged by the relationships his actions create and sustain, and not by his affection alone.

Studies of masculinity in children's literature have raised similar concerns. Taylor (2019) argues that when male protagonists in picturebooks undergo personal change, the wider power relations that sustain masculine dominance are often left untouched. Potter (2024) observes that fantasy and comedy in children's literature can make room for empathy and sensitivity while still reproducing hierarchical ideas of masculinity. Both caution against equating unconventional behaviour in male characters with a rejection of hegemonic ideals, and both point to the part that narrative circumstances play in shaping how competence and emotional responsiveness relate to each other. A character may be willing to care while the social position from which he cares stays exactly as it was.

Picturebooks are well suited to examining these tensions because their meaning arises from the interplay of verbal text and illustration. Nikolajeva and Scott (2001) show that words and pictures may reinforce, extend, or contradict one another, so that each mode has to be read for what it contributes. Painter et al. (2013) explain how visual narratives build interpersonal relationships through gaze, posture, proximity, and the placement of characters within a frame. These resources matter for the study of masculinity because emotional engagement, dependence, and authority can be conveyed through gesture and spatial arrangement even when the narration says nothing about them. Elorza (2023), for example, examines how gender-inclusive picturebooks use verbal and visual means to construct different kinds of agency for male protagonists, and Moya-Guijarro (2024) shows how gaze, proximity, and interaction between characters portray caregiving and challenge conventional family stereotypes. Both studies demonstrate the value of multimodal analysis for understanding masculinity as something established in relationships, and not only in what the text says about a character.

In Indonesian scholarship, similar approaches have been applied to gender and visual meaning. Setiarini et al. (2021) found that in *Perpustakaan Intan* the greater visibility of female characters did not translate into greater narrative power, a reminder that a seemingly progressive text can keep unequal relationships in place once agency and authority are examined closely. Indonesian researchers have also studied multimodal representations of masculinity in texts produced elsewhere; Nauval and Marlina (2023), for instance, analysed masculine

attributes in digital picturebooks through the relationship between word and image. These studies are useful points of reference, but none of them treats caring masculinity as a relational practice in Indonesian picturebooks. The question here is not simply whether male characters display unconventional qualities, but how their actions organize care, recognition, and dependence among the characters around them.

Clara Ng's fiction for adults has drawn attention for its treatment of gender and male authority. Harum (2012) examines how patriarchal ideology shapes gender relations and maintains male domination within marriage in *Tea for Two*. Susanti (2014) discusses femininity, masculinity, and gender roles in *Tiga Venus*, showing how they shape women's positions at home and in public life. Oktarina (2017) traces persistent male domination in the short story *Barbie*, despite the female protagonist's efforts to resist it. These studies establish gender and power as central concerns in Ng's writing, but their focus is on patriarchal relations and women's experience. How male characters care for others and handle their authority within the family has received little attention.

Ng's books for children have been studied from other angles. Lukman et al. (2009) analyse the visual storytelling of *Aku Bisa Terbang* in the earlier *Cerita Pelangi* series, particularly how its illustrations convey movement, atmosphere, and information not given in the text. Yanti (2015) examines the narrative elements of *Sejuta Warna Pelangi* and the correspondence between its words and pictures, with a view to its use in teaching storytelling in primary school. Dewi (2018) reads Ng's fairy tales in terms of children's psychosocial development, including the experiences represented in *Aku Bisa Terbang* and *Ambilkan Bulan, Yah!*; her discussion of the latter stresses perseverance, cooperation, and the value of help from others. These studies establish the narrative, visual, and developmental interest of the stories, but they do not ask how male caregiving is built through relations of competence, emotional responsiveness, and authority. To say that the characters in *Ambilkan Bulan, Yah!* cooperate, for example, does not explain who provides the support, whose decisions direct the effort, or whose contribution is acknowledged at the end. Those questions are central to the critical literature on caring masculinities, which warns against taking emotional involvement as proof of more equal relationships (Prattes, 2022; Wojnicka & de Boise, 2025).

Sejuta Warna Pelangi (Ng, 2012) offers a fitting corpus for pursuing these questions. Two of its stories, *Aku Bisa Terbang* (illustrated by EMTE) and *Ambilkan Bulan, Yah!* (illustrated by Maryna), centre on relationships between children and older male caregivers, and both use fantastical situations that unsettle ordinary expectations of adult competence. They do so under opposite conditions. In *Aku Bisa Terbang*, a grandfather has an extraordinary ability that gains its meaning when he shares it with his grandson. In *Ambilkan Bulan, Yah!*, a father cannot do what his daughter asks, and his inability draws him into a long effort that depends on the help of others. Read side by side, the stories allow masculine care to be examined through both capability and limitation. Their different family arrangements, a grandfather and grandson in one and a father and daughter in the other, also keep the analysis from resting on a single model of paternal involvement.

This article examines how the verbal and visual narratives of the two stories construct practices of caring masculinity. It asks three questions: how masculine competence is negotiated in the stories' imaginative situations; how words and images construct relationships of care; and how these caring practices interact with existing differences in authority and responsibility. Drawing on Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) and Elliott (2016), as well as on later critiques of the caring masculinities concept, the article argues that Ng presents care as a relational practice that redirects masculine authority without removing existing differences in power and dependence. The article contributes to the study of caring masculinities in children's literature by distinguishing between care enacted through sharing an exceptional ability and care sustained through vulnerability and the support of others, and by setting out what each makes possible and where each falls short.

Methodology

The study uses a qualitative comparative design based on multimodal picturebook analysis. The two stories were selected purposively: both centre on a relationship between a child and a male caregiver, and both are built around a wish that seems impossible to fulfil. In *Aku Bisa Terbang*, Andre, a young hippopotamus, discovers that he can fly. When his companion Gege refuses to believe him and he fails to fly a second time, he is left in tears until his grandfather, Kakek ("Grandpa"), steps in. In *Ambilkan Bulan, Yah!*, a king, referred to throughout simply as Raja ("King"), is asked by his daughter, Putri (Princess) Sofi, to fetch the moon, and the royal cook, knight, and gardener are gradually drawn into his attempts. Because one story pairs a grandfather with a grandson and the other a father with a daughter, the two allow a comparison of masculine care across different positions of age, kinship, and authority.

The corpus consists of 22 double-page spreads, eleven from each story. *Aku Bisa Terbang* occupies pages 30–51 of the collection and *Ambilkan Bulan, Yah!* pages 172–193. The double-page spread was taken as the unit of analysis because meaning in picturebooks is often produced by the combined arrangement of text and image across facing pages (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2001). Individual lines of dialogue, gestures, and interactions were read within these larger compositions so that the link between narrative sequence and visual layout was kept in view. Cover illustrations were consulted for context but were not included in the numbered corpus.

The analysis combines close reading with attention to multimodal meaning. Following Nikolajeva and Scott (2001), it considers how words and pictures reinforce, extend, or complicate one another, and it draws on Painter et al.'s (2013) account of visual narrative resources to examine gaze, posture, spatial position, and interpersonal distance. Each spread was recorded in an analytical matrix covering the verbal text, relevant visual details, the relationship between word and image, and what these elements suggest about masculine care and authority. Particular attention was paid to emotional expression, characterization, dialogue, bodily movement, shared activity, and the way actions and responsibilities are divided among the characters.

The analysis proceeded in two stages. A first close reading of each story identified depictions of competence, emotional responsiveness, vulnerability, authority, imagination, and

interdependence. These categories were derived from Connell and Messerschmidt's (2005) account of masculinities and Elliott's (2016) theory of caring masculinities, although the reading remained open to patterns arising from the texts themselves. A second, comparative stage traced how these elements develop across successive spreads and how the two stories handle similar concerns in different ways.

The comparison was organized around the three questions set out in the introduction, which correspond to the three parts of the discussion below (Sections 3.1–3.3). In line with critical work on caring masculinities (Prattes, 2022; Wojnicka & de Boise, 2025), tenderness or emotional responsiveness was not taken as evidence that domination had been rejected. The analysis asked instead how care is practised within the relationships depicted, and whether authority becomes more responsive to others or continues to rely on unequal arrangements of support.

As a textual study, the research is confined to the verbal and visual content of the selected stories. It does not examine how children read these stories or whether they shape readers' understandings of gender. The findings therefore concern the meanings the picturebooks make available, not their reception or social effects.

Results and Discussion

The comparison reveals two distinct but related forms of masculine care. In both, the male caregiver faces a situation in which the usual markers of adult competence, such as knowledge, strength, and status, are not enough to answer a child's experience or desire. Each caregiver, however, responds under different conditions. Kakek's exceptional ability matters because of what it makes possible for Andre, whereas Raja's commitment as a father is shown through repeated attempts that expose his physical limits and his need for help. Caring masculinity therefore cannot be identified by a fixed list of nurturing traits. It takes shape in particular relationships, where competence, recognition, and authority are exercised and negotiated. The interplay of words and pictures makes these practices visible, and it also reveals the unequal positions that persist within relationships that appear caring.

1. Fantasy and the Negotiation of Masculine Competence

Both stories question the idea that a male caregiver's worth lies in what he can achieve on his own, but they approach competence from opposite directions. *Aku Bisa Terbang* opens with an extraordinary ability that belongs to the child and is then called into doubt, so the grandfather is responding to something Andre has already experienced. *Ambilkan Bulan, Yah!* opens with a wish the father cannot fulfil, and Raja has to confront the limits of his own capacity. In each case, the adult's involvement takes its meaning from how he responds to the child's point of view, not from how much authority he can display.

In *Aku Bisa Terbang*, Andre's first flight needs no one's approval. The illustration places his large hippopotamus body among much smaller birds, suspended above the plants, while the narration records his delighted cry, “Aku bisa terbang!” (“I can fly!”) (Ng, 2012, pp. 32–33). The

contrast between his heavy form and the ease of his movement establishes flight as a real possibility within the story world. At this point, his experience is not treated as a problem to be explained or corrected. The story simply lets the child be capable of something his body would seem to rule out.

This certainty is shaken when Gege doubts Andre's account. By insisting that hippopotamuses cannot fly, Gege brings in an expectation about what Andre's body should be able to do (Ng, 2012, pp. 34–37), and flight turns from something Andre has experienced into a claim he must prove. His attempt to repeat it fails, but word and image do not quite agree about that failure. The narration states that he cannot fly, while the illustration catches his body at a moment of apparent suspension above a tree stump, leaving the difference between jumping and flying unresolved (pp. 38–39). The gap between the two modes shows how little a single performance can settle about what someone is able to do.

The emotional cost of this demand for proof becomes clear in the next spread. Andre's lowered posture, his isolation on the stump, and his tears stand in sharp contrast to the free movement of the earlier illustrations (Ng, 2012, pp. 40–41). He is upset not only because he seems to have lost an ability but because someone has refused to believe what he experienced. The story does not present Gege's objection as an enforcement of masculine norms, and Gege's gender is never clearly specified. Even so, the episode raises a question relevant to masculine competence: what happens to a person whose experience is measured against someone else's idea of what he can do. Connell and Messerschmidt's (2005) view of masculinity as constituted through social relations is useful here, even though the scene does not stage an open conflict over masculine identity.

Kakek's arrival changes the terms on which Andre's ability is judged. He makes no attempt to decide whether Andre is telling the truth. When Andre tells him what happened, Kakek is not surprised; he smiles and asks, “Jadi kamu sudah tahu rahasianya, ya?” (“So you already know the secret, do you?”) (Ng, 2012, pp. 42–43). Instead of testing the child's claim, he confirms it and treats flight as knowledge the two of them share. He then demonstrates the possibility of flight himself (pp. 44–45). The difference between adult and child competence remains visible. When Kakek rises into the air, the illustration places his larger body above Andre and Gege, giving him a prominence that could easily reinforce the authority of the experienced adult. This arrangement does not last. In the next spread, Andre joins his grandfather in the air, and Kakek's words make the purpose of his ability explicit: “Ayo, Andre! Terbanglah, ikuti Kakek!” (“Come on, Andre! Fly, follow Grandpa!”) (pp. 46–47). The illustration shows the two bodies side by side instead of leaving Andre below as a spectator (Figure 1). The words issue an invitation, and the picture shows it being taken up. Kakek's greater ability thus becomes a means of drawing the child in.



Figure 1. Kakek and Andre flying together: the grandfather's competence becomes shared participation. Source: Ng (2012, pp. 46–47); illustration by EMTE.

This is the key point for the representation of care. Kakek does not give up his ability or step down from his position of authority; what changes is the use he makes of them. He recognizes Andre's experience and uses his own ability to restore the child's confidence, without asking Andre to prove his worth first. Elliott's (2016) account of caring masculinities applies here because Kakek's response is built on recognition, positive emotion, and engagement with another person. His authority becomes supportive because it is directed toward Andre's needs. The story thus presents a caring masculine practice without suggesting that the adult must give up his seniority or greater competence for care to be possible.

Ambilkan Bulan, Yah! sets up a different relation between competence and care. Sofi asks Raja to fetch the moon, something his position as king does nothing to bring within reach (Ng, 2012, pp. 174–177). His explanation, "Karena bulan itu tinggi sekali" ("Because the moon is very high") (pp. 176–177), marks the limit of his practical knowledge, but it does not end her wish. Sofi proposes other ways of reaching the moon, including piling up cushions to gain height, and the illustration of her experiment shows the initiative coming from the child before her father joins in. Her imaginative proposal puts Raja in a position where knowing what is physically possible is no longer an adequate answer. What is tested is his willingness to take up her idea, not his ability to cover the distance.

When Raja tries to reach the moon by jumping, the illustrations set his royal status against his bodily limits (Ng, 2012, pp. 178–179). His elaborate robes and high rank do nothing to close the distance between him and the object Sofi wants. Sofi's encouragement, "Lebih tinggi lagi, Yah!" ("Higher, Dad!"), accompanies a picture of the king caught awkwardly in mid-jump, arms flung upward (Figure 2). The exaggerated movement of his body introduces comedy, but the humour does not drain his effort of emotional weight. Raja keeps trying; he neither dismisses the request nor withdraws from the game. His persistence shows a commitment to his daughter's imaginative experience even though he knows the outcome is beyond him. The image of a king jumping in vain makes masculine competence look limited, while Sofi's encouragement keeps the attempt something the two of them do together.



Figure 2. Raja attempts to reach the moon as Sofi encourages him to jump higher. Source: Ng (2012, pp. 178–179); illustration by Maryna.

At this point, the two caregivers diverge. Kakek has the ability needed to turn Andre's uncertainty into a shared flight, whereas Raja cannot fulfil Sofi's request by his own effort. The father nonetheless shows his involvement through the attention and physical commitment he gives to the task. The contrast suggests that caring practices do not depend on completing the task at hand. They can also consist in a willingness to enter another person's experience while knowing one's own limits. Raja's care lies not in overcoming every obstacle to his daughter's wish but in letting that wish shape what he does.

The two stories thus unsettle the familiar link between masculine worth and achievement in different ways. In *Aku Bisa Terbang*, exceptional competence becomes relational because the grandfather shares it. In *Ambilkan Bulan, Yah!*, limited competence becomes the very means through which paternal commitment is expressed. Neither story simply swaps capability for tenderness, and neither treats masculine vulnerability as a virtue in itself. Kakek's ability would be no more than a personal distinction if it served only to set him apart from Andre, and Raja's determination would say little about care if it were judged only by its physical results. In both stories, care acquires meaning through the relationships built around these abilities and limits. This reading fits with work on changing paternal identities that recognizes men's involvement in emotional and domestic life beyond the roles of provider and authority figure (Biemmi, 2026). Ng's use of fantasy allows these questions to be explored in situations where ordinary adult knowledge and physical strength offer no easy solution. The fantasy does not do away with competence as a masculine value; it shifts attention to how competence is used in response to someone else's experience.

2. The Visual and Relational Construction of Care

In both stories, care is conveyed largely through the interaction between the narration and the visual arrangement of characters. As Nikolajeva and Scott (2001) note, illustrations can say more than the text does, and Painter et al. (2013) show how gaze, posture, and composition construct social relations. These resources are especially important in Ng's stories, where care is more often shown through shared attention, physical closeness, and joint activity than described outright. The illustrations show not only what the male caregivers do but also where their actions place the children within the relationship.

Ambilkan Bulan, Yah! establishes Raja's involvement as a father through everyday routines. The narration states it plainly: “Raja membantu Putri Sofi menggosok gigi, memakai piama” (“Raja helps Princess Sofi brush her teeth and put on her pyjamas”) (Ng, 2012, pp. 172–173), and the opening spread also shows him telling her a bedtime story. These actions tie his identity as a father to ordinary care, while his royal clothing continues to mark his position of authority. The illustration places his domestic and public roles in the same frame without suggesting that one excludes the other; Raja is still a king while he attends to his daughter's needs. The same image, however, also includes household attendants. Paternal involvement is visible, but it takes place in a household that others help to run, which makes it hard to read his care as entirely his own work.

The next spread builds the father–daughter relationship around a shared object of attention. It is Sofi who calls her father to the window and points out the moon, and the narration notes that the two of them sit gazing at it, enchanted (Ng, 2012, pp. 174–175). The illustration shows them seated close together, seen from behind, both turned toward the moon (Figure 3). This arrangement conveys an intimacy that precedes Sofi's request and helps explain why Raja goes along with what follows: the wish to reach the moon arises within a relationship already marked by mutual attention. Moya-Guijarro (2024) shows how eye contact, proximity, and the positioning of characters contribute to the visual depiction of caregiving in picturebooks, and something similar is at work here. The illustration conveys Raja's emotional engagement without any statement of his affection, and only once this shared attention is established does the dialogue turn it into a request: “Ambilkan bulan, Yah!” (“Get me the moon, Dad!”).



Figure 3. Raja and Sofi share their gaze toward the moon before Sofi’s request.
Source: Ng (2012, pp. 174–175); illustration by Maryna

In *Aku Bisa Terbang*, the visual construction of care begins from a different emotional situation. Kakek arrives after Andre has been upset by the dispute with Gege, and his first act is to acknowledge the children's distress. The narration records his question, “Ada apa, anak-anak? Mengapa kalian bersedih?” (“What's wrong, children? Why are you sad?”) (Ng, 2012, pp. 42–43). The illustration gathers the characters beneath a tree, where Kakek's larger body marks the difference in generation, but his posture and expression suggest attention rather than confrontation (Figure 4). He leans in toward the children at close range and listens before

showing them anything of his own ability. The dialogue expresses concern, and the composition makes that concern visible in the way he approaches them. Adult authority appears here as a readiness to engage with a problem the children could not solve by themselves.

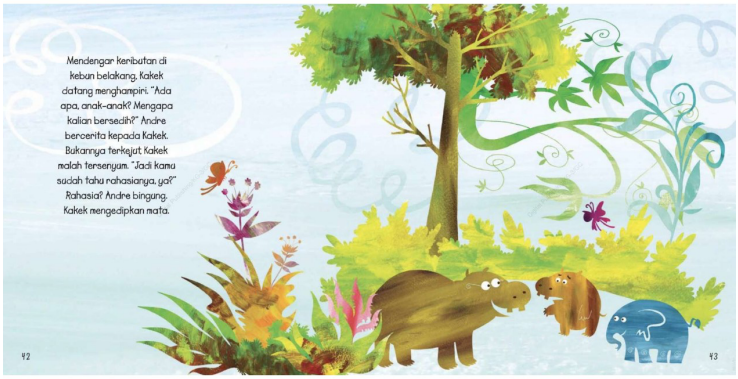


Figure 4. Kakek approaches and listens to Andre and Gege, bringing adult authority into a caring encounter. Source: Ng (2012, pp. 42–43); illustration by EMTE.

The flight sequence develops this relationship through changes in spatial position. Kakek's first demonstration places him above Andre and Gege, emphasizing his greater capability (Ng, 2012, pp. 44–45). In the following spread, Andre flies alongside his grandfather and their outstretched limbs mirror each other; the narration confirms that when Andre opens his eyes, he finds himself "di samping kakeknya" ("beside his grandfather") (pp. 46–47; Figure 1). The shift from vertical separation to shared flight signals a change in the relationship that cannot be reduced to the successful performance of flight. The adult begins as the one who knows and can, but the child is then brought into the experience and is no longer left watching an achievement he cannot repeat. The verbal invitation and the change in spatial arrangement work together to give the episode its caring meaning.

The contrast with Raja is instructive. In *Aku Bisa Terbang*, the movement from separation to closeness expresses care through the sharing of an ability that is already there. In *Ambilkan Bulan, Yah!*, physical closeness is where the father's involvement begins, but the story then draws that involvement into increasingly demanding action. Raja's repeated attempts put his body into awkward and unfamiliar positions, so that his willingness to take part is registered through visible effort. The illustrations thus depict two kinds of bodily involvement: the grandfather makes shared movement possible through an extraordinary capacity, while the father exposes himself to physical difficulty by staying with his daughter's imagined project. The final spread makes his physical support concrete. Raja carries Sofi on his shoulders and lifts her closer to the moon, though neither of them can take hold of it (Ng, 2012, pp. 192–193; Figure 5). Care is located here in the adult body that holds up the child, even though the moon itself stays out of reach.

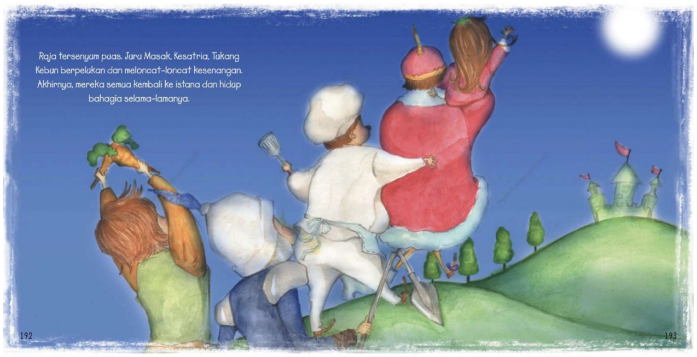


Figure 5. Raja carries Sofi, providing physical support even though the moon remains out of reach. Source: Ng (2012, pp. 192–193); illustration by Maryna

In both relationships, the children retain considerable agency. Andre flies before Kakek ever appears, stands by his experience against Gege's disbelief, and later takes part in the group flight. Sofi draws her father's attention to the moon in the first place, suggests the cushions, urges him on, and later believes that the moon has fallen (Ng, 2012, pp. 174–179, 188–191). The children's actions shape the care that develops around them. Neither story presents them merely as recipients of benevolent adult intervention; their wishes and perspectives create the situations to which the caregivers respond.

This shared agency matters for a relational understanding of caring masculinities. Elliott (2016) places interdependence and the recognition of others at the centre of care. Kakek's response has meaning because Andre takes part again, and Raja's involvement grows out of his readiness to follow Sofi's ideas. The children's contributions do not erase the difference between adult and child, but they keep the caring relationship from running in one direction only. The male caregivers remain responsible for meeting the children's needs, yet those needs are worked out through continuing interaction.

The relationship between words and pictures adds a further layer. The ambiguity noted earlier in Andre's failed attempt, which the text calls a failure but the picture leaves suspended between jumping and flying (Ng, 2012, pp. 38–39), prepares the ground for Kakek's response. The grandfather offers no explanation that would settle the dispute. He invites the child into an imaginative experience that does not need proof. In *Ambilkan Bulan, Yah!*, the relation between the two modes works differently: the narration keeps the attempt to fetch the moon going, while the illustrations keep showing the distance between Raja's body and the moon. The value of his participation therefore cannot be measured by whether he literally succeeds.

These examples show how multimodal storytelling can complicate what masculine competence and care mean. Visual closeness does not by itself create an equal relationship, just as affectionate narration does not show that masculine authority has changed. What the interplay of words and images reveals is how care becomes recognizable through attention, movement, recognition, and support. The children remain active participants, and the male caregivers keep different forms of responsibility and authority. These differences matter most

once the analysis moves beyond the encounters between caregiver and child to the wider conditions that make care possible, which are not shared equally.

3. Caring Masculinities, Authority, and the Unequal Distribution of Support

The emotional responsiveness of the male caregivers in both stories offers an alternative to the familiar association of masculinity with emotional distance. The presence of care, however, does not mean that relations of authority have been transformed. Elliott (2016) makes the rejection of domination a defining feature of caring masculinities, and Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) insist that masculinities be understood in relation to power. Wojnicka and de Boise (2025) add that caring masculinities should not be reduced to a category of men who display positive emotions; attention belongs instead on the practices through which care is carried out and the structural conditions that shape them. This distinction is particularly useful for reading Ng's male caregivers, whose nurturing takes place within quite different relations of ability, social status, and dependence.

Kakek's response to Andre shows how authority can be exercised through recognition without the generational difference disappearing. The grandfather has an ability that Andre could not reproduce when challenged, and his first flight gives him visual prominence over the younger characters (Ng, 2012, pp. 44–45). The story neither denies this difference nor makes light of it. Instead, Kakek's subsequent actions change what it means. By inviting Andre to fly with him, he uses his ability to restore the child's confidence, not to underline his failure. This is adult authority grounded in responsiveness, with no demand for obedience or proof. His question about the children's sadness (Figure 4) and his invitation to fly (Figure 1) provide both verbal and visual evidence of this supportive use of seniority. His adult competence does not vanish; it is put to a different purpose.

The relationship widens as the flying group grows. Once Andre is flying beside Kakek (Ng, 2012, pp. 46–47), Gege and other animals join them, and the grandfather's exceptional ability becomes the starting point for a shared imaginative experience (pp. 48–49). The inclusion of bodies of different sizes and shapes changes the composition of the illustrations: the single prominent adult gives way to a group taking part in the same activity. Not all of these characters should be read as masculine, since the story does not establish their gender. Their participation nonetheless matters for the kind of authority Kakek exercises. His competence no longer works mainly as a difference that sets him apart from the children. It becomes a capacity that lets others enter an experience they had thought impossible.

This portrayal does not amount to the dissolution of masculine hierarchy, and the story offers no basis for claims about wider change in gender relations. Taylor (2019) warns that the personal transformation of male protagonists in picturebooks may leave the structures supporting hegemonic masculinity largely unexamined, and Potter (2024) notes that empathy in children's fantasy does not necessarily undermine conventional masculine ideals. Both concerns apply to Kakek, whose position as the experienced adult remains secure throughout. What distinguishes his intervention is not a rejection of hierarchy but a relational use of authority that supports the

child's agency. His conduct is consistent with caring masculinities, while broader questions of gendered power lie largely outside the story's concerns.

The relationship between care and authority is more complicated in Raja's case. His emotional commitment to Sofi is clear from his persistence, yet his efforts come to depend more and more on the members of his household. The cook, the knight, and the gardener each bring a different strategy, drawing on objects and skills associated with their work (Ng, 2012, pp. 180–187): the cook improvises with carrots, the knight contributes his spear and his strength, and the gardener suggests climbing the tallest tree. Their participation widens the ways in which Sofi's request is pursued, and the undertaking can no longer be seen as Raja's effort alone, even though his relationship with his daughter remains its emotional centre. The link between care and command becomes explicit when the cook, hearing the commotion, hurries over to ask what the king is doing in the middle of the night. Raja answers, “Aku mau mengambil bulan. Ayo, jangan cuma berdiri, bantulah aku!” (“I want to get the moon. Come on, don't just stand there, help me!”) (pp. 180–181). In Figure 6, Raja points upward while the cook stands beside him. The order recruits help for a caring purpose, but it also makes the king's authority audible.

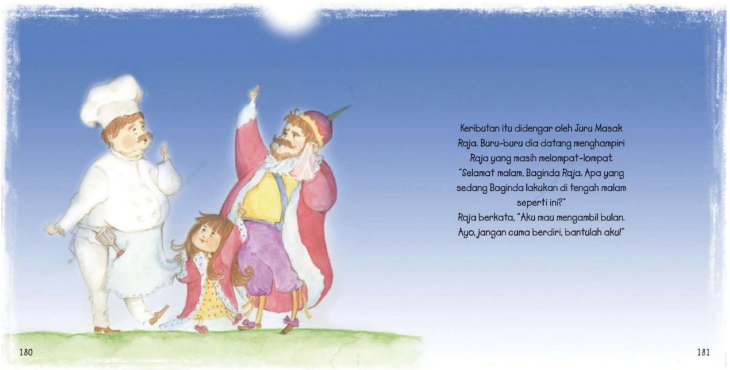


Figure 6. Raja instructs the cook to help, combining paternal concern with royal authority. Source: Ng (2012, pp. 180–181); illustration by Maryna.

The illustrations make this dependence especially visible through the way bodies are stacked. As the group tries to reach the moon, some characters bear the weight that allows others to climb higher (Ng, 2012, pp. 184–187). In Figure 7, the helpers are piled one above another, with Raja at the top reaching toward the moon; his apparent progress depends entirely on those beneath him. The vertical composition separates the figure whose wish organizes the activity from the figures whose physical effort makes it possible. What might otherwise read as a collective display of paternal devotion is also shown as an unequal distribution of physical burden.



Figure 7. Raja's attempt depends on the bodily support of his helpers, arranged vertically. Source: Ng (2012, pp. 186–187); illustration by Maryna.

Raja's social position sharpens this point. Kakek's authority rests mainly on age and exceptional ability, whereas Raja's rests on an explicitly hierarchical position as king. His attempts to please Sofi depend partly on his power to enlist his household. When he calls on the cook to help instead of standing by, the story makes his authority over those around him part of the caregiving process itself (Ng, 2012, pp. 180–181). The helpers' later contributions are inventive and necessary, but they do not change the differences in status that organize the shared effort. The contrast becomes clear when Kakek's concerned question to the children (Figure 4) is set beside Raja's instruction to his cook (Figure 6). The two relationships are not equivalent, since one rests on generational guidance and the other on royal command, and the comparison shows why expressions of care need to be read together with the particular positions of authority involved. Raja's case corresponds in part to what Bridges and Pascoe (2014) call hybrid masculinity: practices associated with care, often coded as feminine, are taken up while the position from which he commands others remains intact. The correspondence is only partial, since the story gives the helpers' participation a cheerful and willing character, but it shows how the adoption of care can coexist with, and even depend on, existing authority.

Prattes (2022) argues that praise for men's caregiving can hide the unequal labour arrangements that make privileged forms of fatherhood possible. Prattes writes about racialized reproductive labour in a social context very different from Ng's fictional royal household, but the argument offers a useful distinction between visible paternal care and the support on which it rests. Raja's affectionate involvement should not be dismissed because others help him, but his reliance on their help is relevant to any assessment of the care he gives. His determination to satisfy Sofi is personal and sincere, while the practical pursuit of her wish relies on a wider network of assistance.

This reading does not suggest that the helpers are unwilling or that the story presents their work as exploitation. Their inventiveness and continued involvement may well point to enthusiasm or a shared stake in the task, and the story offers no evidence about their motives beyond their actions. The illustrations do, however, clearly separate their physical contributions from Raja's central place in the emotional narrative. Care that is carried out collectively is not

necessarily care in which everyone holds an equal position or receives equal recognition. Raja remains the father whose devotion is foregrounded; the helpers make it possible for that devotion to be expressed.

The ending of *Ambilkan Bulan, Yah!* carries this tension between achievement, recognition, and dependence further. Sofi's belief that the moon has fallen interrupts the group's efforts, and Raja and his helpers tumble from the tree (Ng, 2012, pp. 188–189). The following spread reveals that what has "fallen" is the moon's reflection in the water, not the moon itself (pp. 190–191). The original goal is never reached, but Sofi's recognition of the reflected moon gives the effort an emotional resolution. Raja receives his daughter's affection and praise even though he has not done what she asked. Paternal success is measured by the meaning Sofi gives to the shared experience, not by possession of the moon.

The resolution does not erase the other characters' contributions, but it keeps the emotional focus on Raja and Sofi. The helpers join in the final celebration, as the cook, the knight, and the gardener hug one another and jump for joy, while the central image places father and daughter together (Ng, 2012, pp. 192–193). As already seen in Figure 5, Raja carries Sofi on his shoulders as she stretches her hand toward the moon above them. This arrangement echoes the earlier spreads in which Raja relied on other people's bodies to gain height. In the final image, he is the one who provides the support. His body is no longer directed toward his own attempt to reach the moon; it serves to bring Sofi closer to what she wants. The image therefore resists any reading that reduces Raja either to a self-sufficient hero or to a passive beneficiary of other people's labour.

The relation between these two arrangements gives a more complex picture of masculine strength than a reading focused only on paternal affection. Earlier, Raja's elevation depended on the physical labour of his helpers; at the end, Sofi's elevation depends on Raja's willingness to carry her. The recurring link between height and support changes the meaning of physical capability over the course of the story. Masculine strength becomes visible as help offered to someone else, yet the father's earlier reliance on his helpers remains part of how he arrives at this final position. The story presents care as a practice that can turn bodily competence toward another person's needs without detaching it from existing differences in social position and responsibility.

The ending of *Aku Bisa Terbang* offers a useful contrast. Andre's ability to fly is restored within the imaginative logic of the story, and the final spreads extend the experience beyond grandfather and grandson (Ng, 2012, pp. 48–51). The closing invitation to imagine flying keeps the experience extraordinary instead of explaining it away. A red balloon appears in the final illustration, but the story never presents it as the cause of Andre's flight. The ending privileges shared imaginative participation over any practical solution.

The two endings clarify the forms of caring masculinity at work in the stories. Kakek exercises his authority through an invitation that lets others share his exceptional ability. Raja's commitment is sustained through an effort that depends more and more on others, while the

emotional recognition of that effort stays within the father–daughter relationship. Neither story defines care by success, but their differences undermine the assumption that the same kind of masculinity appears whenever a male character shows tenderness. As Wojnicka and de Boise (2025) argue, the concept of caring masculinities loses its critical edge when it is applied simply to men with nurturing attitudes. Ng's male caregivers are better understood through the practices that make their care recognizable within particular relationships. Kakek shows how greater competence can be turned toward another person's participation; Raja shows how a father's commitment can depend on help organized through existing hierarchies. Both make room for emotional responsiveness and interdependence, but neither gives grounds for claiming that the social relations surrounding masculine authority have been fundamentally changed.

Fantasy contributes to these portrayals by creating situations in which conventional masculine competence cannot answer the children's experiences and wishes. Andre's flight resists the demand for proof, and Sofi's request lies beyond anything Raja can physically do. In both cases, the male caregivers have to respond through recognition, participation, and dependence instead of relying on knowledge, strength, or status alone. The importance of the fantastic elements lies in the relational practices they bring to light. Care does not come from fantasy itself; it comes from how the characters respond to one another in the circumstances fantasy creates.

Overall, the findings suggest that Ng's picturebooks present caring masculinities neither as stable identities belonging to unusually affectionate men nor as simple alternatives to conventional masculine authority. What they show are distinct practices through which competence and vulnerability take on meaning in caregiving relationships. The grandfather's exceptional ability supports recognition and shared participation, while the father's limitations lead to a sustained involvement that others make possible. Both broaden the representation of masculine care, and both leave differences in authority, responsibility, and dependence in place. The stories thus show how care can redirect masculine competence without dissolving the social relations within which that competence is exercised.

Conclusion

This article has examined how Clara Ng's *Aku Bisa Terbang* and *Ambilkan Bulan, Yah!* construct caring masculinities through imaginative situations and relationships between generations. The two stories offer different forms of masculine care, and both unsettle the conventional link between masculinity and individual achievement. In *Aku Bisa Terbang*, Kakek's extraordinary ability gains its meaning from his recognition of Andre's experience and his readiness to bring the child into a shared flight. In *Ambilkan Bulan, Yah!*, Raja's failure to fetch the moon does not weaken his commitment as a father. His care shows instead in his sustained responsiveness and in a collective effort that exposes his physical limits and his dependence on others. In both stories, masculine competence matters because of how it answers the needs and experiences of others, not because of what one man can do alone.

The comparison also shows that caring practices do not necessarily remove differences in authority. Kakek remains the knowledgeable adult, although he uses that position to encourage the child instead of making him prove himself. Raja is an affectionate father whose involvement relies on the support of his royal household, and the illustrations show that this support is unevenly distributed. The stories therefore cannot be read as straightforward depictions of egalitarian care. The findings support an understanding of caring masculinities as relational practices that have to be read alongside the conditions of power and dependence in which they occur.

The interplay of narration and illustration is central to these portrayals. Shared gaze, shifts in bodily position, physical proximity, and arrangements of support convey aspects of care that the words do not always state. The movement from Kakek's solitary flight to a shared one, and the changing distribution of bodily support in Raja's attempts to reach the moon, show how visual storytelling shapes the meaning of masculine competence and authority. Fantasy supplies the circumstances in which these relationships are explored, but its significance lies in how the characters respond to experiences and wishes that ordinary adult capability cannot resolve.

By comparing these two forms of care, the study contributes to research on caring masculinities in children's literature. It distinguishes care enacted through shared capability from care sustained through vulnerability and collective support, and it shows how both can redirect masculine authority while leaving unequal relations of status and responsibility in place. Because the analysis is limited to two picturebook narratives, it cannot say how children interpret these portrayals or whether they influence readers' ideas about gender. Reception studies with child readers, and analysis of a wider range of Indonesian picturebooks, would be natural next steps toward understanding how Indonesian children's literature uses care, authority, and multimodal storytelling to shape representations of masculinity.

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