

Seeing Empathy in Contemporary Japanese Picturebooks

Japanese picturebooks elaborate an entire suite of pro-social dispositions; among these empathy (*omoiyari*) receives special emphasis because it is deemed crucial to friendship (*nakayoshi*), Japan's cardinal childhood virtue. But just how do books represent and elicit empathy, and what are the stakes? To develop answers to these questions, in this paper I examine millennial picturebooks about friendship with particular attention to how they make empathy *look* and *feel* right. My discussion unfolds in three stages: first, I demonstrate that millennial illustrators are employing distinctive strategies such as perspective changes and close-ups to invest visual representations of empathy with emotional drama and cognitive appeal. Second, I show that these strategies are imbricated within an aesthetic politics wherein a distinctive, naïve painting style positions picturebooks at the “artistic” (*geijutsuteki*) rather than the mass (*taishū*) end of a continuum posited by critical discourse. Third, I argue that this dynamic has become more significant in the context of rightist shifts in educational policy under the multiple administrations of Japan's current prime minister, Shinzō Abe. That is, as the state extends greater control over moral education in the new millenium, visual style is becoming a means to finesse—and also to refuse—neo-conservative visions of how empathy, interpersonal relations, and morality ought to work in the lives of children.