

Literature for Living: New Directions in Bibliotherapy

*'The sweet daily bread of language.
Smell it rising in its given warmth
taste it through the stink of tears and yesterdays and
eat it anywhere with any angel in sight.'*
(The Goose Bath Poems, by Janet Frame 2008).

Historically, the idea of bibliotherapy – using literature to heal – goes back to ancient times. When the Greeks recognised the healing power of reading, and often placed inscriptions over library entrances, which translated, meant 'Place of Healing for the Soul'. The practice of bibliotherapy, although not commonly known by that term, developed into an important method of psychotherapy. Libraries were established in most of the better mental hospitals of Europe by the end of the eighteenth century, and in America by the middle of the nineteenth. From 1950 to 1970, a resurgence of interest and activity occurred in this field.

Bibliotherapy practices carried out in Australia in the late twentieth century had a clinical viewpoint, offering health and well-being information in the form of brochures and self-help books. Psychiatrists involved in narrative therapy have dominated Australian bibliotherapy practices up to recent times. The current usage of the term 'bibliotherapy' in Australia is narrow. There are more ways of using books therapeutically than just reading to gain knowledge about physical and mental health issues, spending time in psychotherapy, or making possible an escape into another world.

When it comes to young people, studies indicate 'that one in five children have some sort of mental, behavioural, or emotional problem. Among adolescents, one in eight may suffer from depression.' (World Health Organisation, 2005) Young people are facing enormous challenges especially in today's context of single and blended families and with 'complex diseases such as asthma, diabetes, overweight and obesity, intellectual disabilities, and particularly psychological problems such as depression/anxiety, suicide and eating disorders.' (<http://www.youthbeyondblue.com/health-professionals/>)

Young people need programs with positive messages around well-being. Programs around reading aloud and talking about good literature can involve therapeutic relationship development with individuals and communities, increase self-esteem and lower social isolation – all of which support a way to live with, or recover, from problems of living in an ever increasingly stressful society.

Dr Leanne Rowe AM, Deputy Chancellor Monash University, a Beyondblue Board Member and General Practitioner, believes sometimes antidepressants are over-prescribed to treat depression in young people. As Dr Rowe says; 'Hundreds of thousands of prescriptions for antidepressants are written each year and that number is increasing. They are not recommended for people under eighteen. Cognitive behaviour therapy is

the gold start treatment.' (<http://www.youthbeyondblue.com/health-professionals/>) Bibliotherapy based initiatives can play a major part in offering an alternative to medication by offering new ways of coping through encouraging different well-being skills.

A collection of people, led by myself, interested in the possibilities of bibliotherapy based initiatives have come together to form a research group. Dr Jacinta Halloran, General Practitioner, comments, 'Often people with anxiety and depression feel isolated and different from others. Reading memoir and fiction about people who have struggled with similar problems can help sufferers feel less isolated and more connected and give them a greater insight into the nature and course of depression and anxiety.'

Dr Gregory de Moore, Psychiatrist has observed that, 'Capitalism exploits young people, such as the early sexualisation of girls in modelling etc; both sexes for access to children's money; how parental roles are being usurped by commercialism; the impact of the 'Nintendo/internet' world upon children's capacity to relate to one another as social beings.'

Alan White, Counsellor in private practice says, 'In my role as a counsellor and involvement in volunteer related health fields, even though there has been increase in self help books in the last twenty years, the effectiveness of these books is undecided. The use of particular books to be suggested by therapists for their clients would require a change of thinking for all involved.'

Jeannie Campbell, professional editor for some years feels, 'Books play one of the most, if not the most, important aspects of my being (be-ing). The most important aspects of bibliotherapy are sharing books with a group of people, quietly reading aloud and creating a still, quiet centre in which individuals can find words, and hearing language, a source of strength, comfort and later joy and a new hope.'

Jeff Prentice, Workplace Trainer at the Northern Melbourne Institute of TAFE, is clear on the benefits of bibliotherapy. 'Workplace training has to meet the needs of learners as they attend more and more professional development courses relevant and meaningful in a complex work environment. The emphasis in the delivery of courses is focused on an inclusive learning culture such that people are valued and respected for who they are and not excluded.'

Michael Hyde, Victoria University, has firsthand experience working with young people. He says, 'I have seen the benefit of good literature. Stories heal, enlighten, allow us to delve deeper into the weird concept of being alive on a planet with possibly only a small idea of what we're doing here. I think that while it can help specifically with social issues – depression, suicide, coming out, sexism and racism, if it's true that no community of humans existed without stories then I suspect they play a more important part other than diversion and entertainment (although nothing wrong with the latter).'

As one of the 2009 judges of the Children's Book Council of Australia Crichton Award, the writer of this article was moved by the 2009 award winning book *Mending Lucille*. Selling out in the first week of release shows the need for good literature for young people dealing with subjects such as single and blended families, grief, loneliness and bewilderment. Good literature (stories for all ages) has the power to reach out and befriend and strengthen our feeling of understanding and belonging.

Bibliotherapy practices in the United Kingdom include self-help reading; reading groups designed to promote well-being using creative reading methods, and Books on Prescription schemes. Practices such as this are being evaluated in the UK, and evidence is building that reading can help to keep people well. This evidence is attracting increasing attention from primary care practitioners as a way of reducing demand on the UK National Health System.

Bibliotherapy is yet to be as well developed in Australia. The research group is exploring potential new approaches to bibliotherapy practice through developing partnerships that will work effectively to make language live. Some new initiatives include: Victoria University lecturers, Michael Hyde, Susan McLaine and John Weldon are creating a new subject around the role of stories. This subject will look at stories in multiple ways and will include a section on narrative as healing – to be developed using bibliotherapy research. This new subject will be targeted to undergraduate students of education, psychology and social work. A pilot children's program 'Reading With Your Eyes Shut' will air on Melbourne's 3MBS Saturday morning 'Classic Kids' show. It will encourage young people to focus on the beauty of the sounds made by classical music matched to the language in literature.

Development of a network to support the growth of research programs to help build a sound basis for our belief that bibliotherapy-based initiatives can be beneficial, disseminate information, raise the profile of bibliotherapy and support bibliotherapy-based initiatives. A pilot program reading group for young people will be developed using plays; both classic and contemporary. This reflective sort of reading encourages different well-being skills through a quieter, more internal way of thinking.

Despite the significance of technology in our lives today, many of us still do not live very well. With an increased use of technology and the social networking phenomena, (350 million people who facebook) technological advances will continue to erode our time for actual physical relationships. 'The things that divide us are far less important than those that connect us'. (*Kitchen Table Wisdom: Stories That Heal*, Rachel N Remen MD, Riverhead Books, 1996) New bibliotherapy-based initiatives offer a way to connect us.

Susan McLaine, Victoria University