

WORD POWER

Bibliotherapy – the ability of poetry and prose to teach and transform – can be useful to all of us, in all facets of society.

WORDS BY CHERIE GILMOUR

If you're a voracious reader or even a recreational one, you already know the therapeutic benefits that come from immersing yourself in books. You can reach new heights of bravery with characters overcoming insurmountable challenges or walk through the complex lands of moral ambiguity with others. You can feel the rush of falling in love all over again or grieve with characters facing heartbreak and loss. Story gives us a framework for understanding our lives and relationships, not to mention the bliss of escaping into another world for a time. Books are a "uniquely portable magic" as Stephen King once said. In fact, the oldest known motto in an ancient Egyptian library is translated as 'House of healing for the soul'.

Enter bibliotherapy. The term 'bibliotherapy' was coined in 1916 by minister and essayist Samuel McChord Crothers who wrote a tongue-in-cheek article for *The Atlantic* about a doctor friend who

was prescribing books to his patients suffering from 'existential troubles'. Crothers took this idea to its logical extreme, recommending books for all kinds of emotional turmoil. The idea was further developed and exploded in the 1960s and 1970s when people latched onto it as a legitimate form of therapy.

Sister Arleen Hynes pioneered the use of bibliotherapy in hospitals, creating the first comprehensive training guide on how to use it with patients. She set up the National Association for Poetry Therapy in 1980.

Australia and New Zealand have a more recent history, with bibliotherapy only emerging around 2010. Susan McLaine was Australia's earliest pioneer, setting up a programme in Prague House, a facility of St Vincent's Hospital in Melbourne, that partnered with the Victorian State Library. Prague House is a refuge for homeless people with a variety of chronic mental illnesses and cognitive impairments, often from substance

abuse. McLaine says she intentionally chose a challenging environment to show how effective bibliotherapy could be.

She would introduce a text and read it to the group, which would then engage in a discussion around its themes and often the participants' own lives and experiences. McLaine emphasises that there was no pressure for anyone to share, and this was an important part of the experience and the style of bibliotherapy she's developed.

A TOOL FOR REFLECTION

"Whatever somebody needs at that time – if it's just a bit of distraction and to relax a bit, that's what they need. If it's a tool for them to become reflective, then that's what they need," she says. She is passionate about the healing power of literature and quotes American poet Mary Oliver at the beginning of her thesis: "There is nourishment in books ... fires for the cold, ropes let down for the lost, something as necessary as bread in pockets of the hungry".

The power of literature is its ability to become a mirror for our lives in a non-confrontational way. We can place our emotional quandaries outside of ourselves and examine them through characters. "Fiction is the simulation of selves in interaction," wrote Keith Oatley, novelist and professor emeritus of cognitive psychology at the University of Toronto. "It can be thought of as a form of consciousness of selves and others that can be passed from an author to a reader or spectator, and can be internalised to augment everyday cognition." Oatley talks about how reading fiction can improve the 'theory of mind', a concept developed by psychologists to measure how well someone can understand what another person is feeling.

There are various theories surrounding bibliotherapy and how it's defined. One school of thought is that of prescribing self-help books as cognitive behaviour therapy: to

"A READER LIVES A THOUSAND LIVES BEFORE HE DIES. THE MAN WHO NEVER READS LIVES ONLY ONCE."

GEORGE R.R. MARTIN

receive practical advice on changing negative thought patterns in the day-to-day, for example. But other theories, which focus on fiction and poetry texts, emphasise the experience of reading as a form of therapy itself. This is sometimes referred to as 'creative bibliotherapy', when a text may mean different things to different people. Rather than being prescriptive, it is open enough to interpretation, a shape-shifter constructed in part by the reader.

Liz Brewster and Sarah Nichol identify three typical stages of the bibliotherapy process: identification, catharsis, and insight. Put simply, identification is when the reader sees themselves in a character. They might recognise the character's motivations and understand their behaviours. Secondly, catharsis occurs when the reader begins to experience similar feelings to the characters – more than simply identifying with them, they start to feel their emotions by proxy. This can be therapeutic when a reader has had similar experiences to the character or characters. Finally, insight, followed by integration, is when a reader is able to apply the lessons learned through a story to their own lives. They might see themselves more clearly and understand their own motivations, perhaps being able to better intellectualise situations

and react differently. This can be particularly potent when dealing with buried memories or emotions, and it can set off a positive chain reaction of healing.

FORGING CONNECTIONS

McLaine, now the Victorian State Library's resident bibliotherapist, hosted a podcast in 2020 during the initial COVID-19 lockdowns and into mid-2021 using the creative bibliotherapy model. She reads short stories and poems, like 'Invictus' by William Ernest Henley, 'If' by Rudyard Kipling, and 'Warning' (better known as 'When I Am Old, I Shall Wear Purple') by Jenny Joseph.

There is a shift in McLaine's podcasts from season one to season two. "For the first season, what I wanted people to do was lean out a little bit and think about the support we were giving each other in the community. For season two, I wanted people to lean in and think about how that time had affected them and some of the things they may need to think about coming out of it," she says. Each text is carefully curated to achieve these directions of thinking that McLaine wants her audience to go down.

McLaine believes in the importance of reading out loud: "The creative bibliotherapy practice of reading aloud in a group offers a different experience; an invitation to dwell more deeply on what is emerging from the words, within each individual and in the group as a whole," she says. Reading is often a solitary activity, so reading aloud to someone is a gift; an invitation into a new world with another. For those who may not identify as readers, being read to in a group is an easy way to access the same benefits as well as the added layer of creating meaning together with other people.

McLaine used this style of bibliotherapy in a prison, working alongside a psychologist with a group of inmates to develop a program exploring various themes, like unconditional love, mateship, and kindness. The inmates gave her a card to express their gratitude and she's treasured it ever since as a reminder of the power of her work. One inmate told her, after talking about unconditional love, that he would reconnect with his mother on his release.

A SHARED LANGUAGE

The strength of McLaine's work and that of others working in the same field lies in the connection between reading and community, in making books accessible even for those who may have never picked one up. It's bridge-building into other people's minds.

Stories, particularly fiction, can get past people's defences and plant the seeds of self-reflection and healing. Humans have been wired for stories since the dawn of time, they are a language we all share, so it makes

BOOKMARK THEM

Susan McLaine's recommendations for books that speak to our present moment.




Fiction: *Still Life* by Sarah Winman; *Dark as Last Night* by Tony Birch.

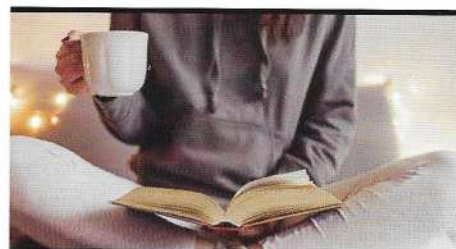
Non-Fiction: *Phosphorescence: on awe, wonder & things that sustain you when the world goes dark* by Julia Baird; *Sounds Wild and Broken* by David George Haskell; *What Makes Us Human?* by GPT-3, Iain S. Thomas and Jasmine Wang.

Self-help: *Reasons Not to Worry: How to be Stoic in chaotic times* by Brigid Delaney; *Ideas to Save your Life: Philosophy for Wisdom, Solace and Pleasure* by Michael McGirr.

Poetry: *How to Love the World* edited by James Crews.

sense that this is our primary mode of understanding ourselves and others. In a time of so much global uncertainty, we need the healing power of literature more than ever. The reading process can never be replaced by the never-ending rolling ream of news, Twitter soundbites, or Instagram influencers. We must fight to keep our attention spans in order to have the experience of transformation that comes from reading. We can think more broadly about literature and its uses in the community and be inspired to set up or join programmes for people who would benefit most from them.

When we immerse ourselves in the worlds of others' imaginations, our empathy for others and ourselves grows, like a beautiful tree providing shelter for those around us. We can have rich, rewarding lives by looking through a million different eyes. As George R.R. Martin of *Game of Thrones* fame says, "A reader lives a thousand lives before he dies. The man who never reads lives only once." 



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