**Bibliotherapy: Can books heal the mind?**

*‘I don’t understand,’ said Laura, and she walked quickly out of the room into her own bedroom. There, quite by chance, the first thing she saw was this charming girl in the mirror, in her black hat trimmed with gold daisies, and a long black velvet ribbon. Never had she imagined she could look like that.* (The Garden Party by Katherine Mansfield)

People engage with English Literature for all sorts of reasons. For some it is to escape the familiar world and travel somewhere else; for others it is for academic purposes, such as exams at advanced level or degrees; for a third group it is to help ease the pain of existence, of being human. It is this third issue that I want to consider in this discourse. Does reading great and good literature improve our ability to deal with situations in life such as illness, death and divorce, and does it as a result improve our mental health? Blake Morrison’s article, ’The reading cure’, (Morrison, January 2008) is a useful introduction to the question and I will use further articles, books and parts of my own life history to answer it.

Blake Morrison in his article describes how reading groups on Merseyside used Literature as a cure: The Get into Reading Scheme led by Jane Davis used texts like *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, *Great Expectations* and *Rebecca* to assist those with a variety of physical, social and mental health problems. Morrison quotes one person as saying that they cut down on their medication since they joined the scheme and another who said it had helped her deal with the pain of rheumatoid arthritis. He says that those working with neurological patients described using George Herbert’s poetry to help them to unlock their speech. The history of the idea, he says, goes back to Plato who gave us the arts ‘as an aid to bringing our soul-circuit, when it has got out of tune, into order and harmony with itself’. Morrison goes on to say that the most convincing arguments for bibliotherapy come from writers themselves. George Eliot, for example, recovered from grief at losing her husband by reading Dante with a young friend, John Cross, who later married her.

‘When literature is working,’ Morrison says. ‘It offers an orderliness which can shore readers up against the lack of control that afflicts them.’

For severe unhappiness he recommends Gerald Manley Hopkins’s ‘terrible sonnets’ which he says ‘become a cauterising iron to burn away his pain and ours and to “leave comfort root-room” in which to grow’. Perhaps there is greater comfort , he argues to be found in poems like Wordsworth’s *‘The Prelude’*, where the poet speaks of ‘spots of time scattered everywhere’ in the lives of each man and woman that we can recover and which can help repair and renovate us.

Other articles and books that I have found describing the healing power of literature include ‘The Art of Medicine – Books do furnish a mind: the art and science of bibliotherapy’ in The Lancet (February 20th 2016). Professor Jonathan Bate and Dr Andrew Schuman give the example of Montaigne who after the death of his friend from plague decided that the only therapy that endures through life is the companionship of books. They also refer to Aristotle who said that ‘poetry and drama play out dangerous emotions and dark desires within the safe space of fiction’. They go on to say that by the early Twentieth Century libraries and librarians were increasingly important to the provision of care in psychiatric hospitals. During WW1 an Oxford University don was given the job of drawing up a fever chart, ranking the most beneficial reading for the wounded, and Jane Austen came out on top. They conclude by saying that: ‘one of bibliotherapy’s strongest cards is the personal narrative paper of those who have found that reading has made a difference to them’. I will provide examples of this.

A book I discovered containing an essay on the subject is Henning Mankell’s *Quicksand* (2014). In Chapter 31, ‘The way out’, Mankell writes that when he was first told he had cancer his first instinct was to pick up a book:

‘I have turned to books when love affairs have come to an end. When a theatre production has gone wrong or I failed to meet a deadline, my books have always been there.’

Mankell then says that his first choice to help him forget about his illness was *Robinson* Crusoe by Daniel Defoe. He describes how the shipwrecked Robinson Crusoe, alone on his desert island with only wild goats for company, is never really alone because the reader is always there by his side.

‘In Robinson Crusoe the reader is invited to take part. He lies there in the sand, just as much a castaway as Robinson.’

I other words, as George Eliot said in *The Natural History of German Life*:

‘Art is he nearest thing to life; it is a mode of amplifying experience and extending our contact beyond our fellow-men beyond the bounds of our personal lot.’

At times of distress, I would argue, that like Mankell we go to books to provide this.

An article that combines bibliotherapy with the ‘personal narrative’ of Bate and Schuman appears in Jay Griffiths’s ‘Poetry can heal and I needed it desperately’, The Guardian (June 18th 2016). She begins, with historical references to bibliotherapy. In Dante’s time, she says, books were sold in apothecary’s shops: ‘literature as medicine’. In the 19th Century, she adds, people in asylums were encouraged to write poetry, and that William Cowper (1731-1800) wrote that during his depression writing poetry was his ‘best remedy’. Griffiths, an award-winning British author, writes that during her illness, a severe episode of manic depression, she could only write poetry and that:

‘in the loneliness of depression it is the kindest companion when one is keening to be comprehended’.

She talks about how during her convalescence she walked alone on the Camino across Spain, and about how her friends composed an anthology of poems for her that would cherish and console. She bought Neil Astley’s anthologies, one of which, *Staying Alive* (2002) is subtitled ‘real poems for unreal times’, so she could read one a day. This is a good example of bibliotherapy in action. Griffiths has written a book, *Tristimania* (2016), relating to her depression and mentions how writers like Les Murray and Winston Churchill use the metaphor of ‘the black dog’,p52, to explain the condition.

On a lighter but no less serious note, the idea of bibliotherapy can be found in a book called *The Novel Cure* (2013) by Berthoud and Elderkin, which contains a wide variety of afflictions from Abandonment to Zestlessness and books recommended to deal with them. Opening the book at random one might find – ‘jump ship, desire to’ – and the suggested novel reading cure, *Rabbit Run* (1960) by John Updike. The lesson from the novel, the authors suggest, is that if you jump out of the ship of your marriage you might land in the sea. It would be far better to plug its holes and redirect its course. If you want a book to cure depression, the authors give a list of the ten best novels to cheer you up, featuring Stella Gibbons’s *Cold Comfort Farm*, and Nick Hornby’s *Fever Pitch,* and for the ‘very blue’ Kundara’s *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* and Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* are suggested. Bibliotherapy is shown here to have a wide template and I will now move on to write a case study, using myself s an example of someone who benefited from it.

**An autobiographical narrative**

I will now give some examples from my own life. In her book, *Becoming a Reflexive Researcher* (2004) Kim Etherington suggests that one can create a voice for oneself by ordering our experiences to form stories, p9. She goes on to say that in reflexive research one can use the self and that it is important to have a personal connection with the topic being researched. She gives examples of how one can obtain data from narrative enquiry, including research journals, diaries, paintings and poems. Similarly, in his book *Narratives and Fictions in Educational Research* (2002) Peter Clough suggests that one can use an invented autobiographical narrative in educational research to provide data. Using the work of these writers as a starting point, the story which follows is my data, given in the form of an autobiography. Through this ‘fiction’ the data is created, and I am now thinking of how Clough found Nick through his imagination:

‘It doesn’t matter whether what I wrote about Nick took place in fact; it takes place in an act of imagination driven by profound symbols’, p.17.

My symbols are the ‘epiphanies’, derived from reading, that occurred, and still do occur frequently in my life and these symbols could be said to link with the phenomenological nature of Clough’s theory, p88.

My experience of bibliotherapy began in Liverpool in the 1950s. My father was suffering severely with multiple sclerosis and to escape I sought refuge in books: the first one, memorably, was *The Coral Island* by R.M. Ballantyne which fulfilled my need to escape the narrow world of his illness. The fact that it was about three boys shipwrecked on a desert island and having to fend for themselves made it eminently suitable reading for a nine year old boy.

‘If there is any boy or man who loves to be melancholy and morose, and who cannot enter with kindly sympathy into the regions of fun, let me seriously advise him to shut my book and put it away. It is not meant for him.’

Ralph Rover says this in the preface to the book and I wholeheartedly entered those regions only to be pulled away by my mother importuning me to ‘set the table for tea’.

After my father’s death when I was 12 the next phase of my ‘bibliotherapy’ was when I reached the 6th Form at The Liverpool Institute. I found that there was a sudden and almost miraculous change in style from the previous five years of schooling. Putting aside their

sticks and black gowns, teachers, like the Welsh ‘Ollie’ Evans, talked about books with genuine interest and love. Under this teacher’s influence I followed the tale of Eve in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, the love of *Othello* for Desdemona in Shakespeare’s play, and the story of Tom Jones’s pursuit of the lovely Sophia in Fielding’s novel. Although, I barely knew what these things meant, I sensed that it was a world where I wanted to be and about which I wanted to know more. Opportunities for this came thick and fast. In 1966 I attended Broad Green hospital for a routine cartilage operation, where I met a student teacher of English, who introduced me to T.S. Eliot and Dylan Thomas*. The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* and *The Force that through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower* resonated with me in a ward filled with rugby and soccer casualties, where nurses hid inside patients’ beds ‘for a laugh’.

Later at university I developed my theory of literary ‘epiphanies’, like those ‘spots of time’, mentioned by Morrison which renew and restore. In James Joyce’s *Stephen Hero* Stephen collects epiphanies or ‘sudden spiritual manifestations’ and I wanted to do the same. The first ‘epiphany’ I recall was when I was revising intensely for finals. I was reading Wordsworth’s *Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey*, and suddenly the whole poem seemed to enter into and pass through me. It renewed and restored me enough to complete those finals, which I had failed the previous year, and pass my degree.

Other instances occurred in my life where I needed those epiphanies. During the inflation hit Britain of ‘The Seventies’ my marriage failed and I suffered severe depression. Like Jay Griffiths I found help in poetry - reading and writing it. I published two poems in *Iron* (1980) One of these, *Settle,* was about setting off on a journey, full of hope, and then losing the way. The other, *Standing in the Smoke*, was about a man who had died from the same illness as my father. After the publication of these poems I joined a musician’s workshop as their resident poet and began to compose humorous verses that would fill the breaks while the players queued for beer. Eventually the audience began to listen as I expressed, through humour, my anger and inner sadness about the world I had lost. Poetry ‘wants pain to speak’, as Jay Griffiths says, and I think performing the poems was a kind of epiphany which restored me.

Reading novels was more difficult. There was a period of two years where I could read nothing, not even a newspaper or magazine article, just poetry. And then quite by chance I picked up a copy of *Victory* by Joseph Conrad. Just as Henning Mankell had found that he was lying on the sand with Robinson Crusoe, looking for survival, I found that identifying with Axel Heyst, who escapes failure by departing with Lena to a desert island, enabled me to confront my own demons caused by the solitude of depression and move forward.

Following this and my success with poetry reading, I went to see Roger McGough, one of the Liverpool Poets, in a performance of *Gig.* In conversation with him after the reading, he suggested that to further my writing I might try attending an Arvon Poetry Course at Lumb Bank in Yorkshire. I did so and there, under the tutelage of three writers I wrote and performed my poem *The Mill Chimney*. As an exercise the writer, Martin Booth, had asked me to go and locate an old mill chimney and to stand inside it and shout. Booth had previously alluded to an idea that stone can absorb and retain sound just as a tape recorder will. When I had found it I tried shouting but at first had no success. It was only when I returned later to repeat the activity that it worked and experienced an epiphany where it seemed that the spirits of the ancient voices who had worked there came out and encouraged me to speak. The poem was written and was received well by the other students.

The course itself was an adult education experience and its effect on me was transformative. The transformative nature of adult education is articulated in Elizabeth Tisdell’s article Themes and Variations of Transformational Learning (2012, pp 27-28). Tisdell’s reflections on Moses’s experience of God’s calling him through the agency of the burning bush, put me in mind of the ‘epiphanies’ that I had found scattered throughout my life. These were related to my experience of English Literature, and they were transformative in that they caused me to reflect as a prelude to action. Tisdell suggests that transformation can come through love and death, giving the example of her own falling in love, and later death of her parents, events which led her to the big question of what is life all about? (p. 26). I think that through my experiences of love and loss I was open to suggestion of how I could restore and renew myself, and when a friend, who was principal of an adult education college, suggested that I use my skills and knowledge of English Literature to teach adult education courses in the school holidays I welcomed the opportunity. As a boy I had been a great lover of the Sherlock Holmes stories and taking Holmes as the main character, I devised a course, which is explained in *The Detective in Fiction* (2012) I used the course to show that Holmes and other great fictional detectives like Wimsey, Marlowe and Poirot could be defined by the features they had in common such as their appearance, their personality, and their habits and interests. I went on to teach a range of courses at Grey Friars such as *The Romantic Novel*, *The Short Story*, and *Middlemarch*.

In an article in The Lancet, (11th June 2016) it was stated that about 5.3% of the world’s population live with a disabling hearing loss and that many of these people ‘in both resource-poor and high income settings do not seek or receive hearing health care.’ The article goes on to say that the problem was worsened by the stigma attached to wearing hearing aids and the difficulty in navigating the hearing healthcare systems. I began to lose my hearing in my thirties. When I changed my job, teaching in a different school and asking pupils’ names, I couldn’t always make out the reply. It was only when the school head suggested that I might have my hearing tested at the same time as the pupils that things began to fall into place. Further tests led to a diagnosis of hearing loss that had been caused by nerve damage. The weakness was in the higher register, hence the difficulty with the voices of children. I was fitted with hearing aids but the sound impact was shattering. Just the noise of water running in the sink was almost unbearable. Even worse was the embarrassment of wearing contraptions that felt like elephant’s ears. After a couple of weeks the hearing aids ended up in a bedside drawer. As I approached 40, however, I began to see the wisdom of getting some auditory help. At considerable expense I bought digital aids.

Benjamin Zephania is a notable author and performance poet; Levi Tafari is a Liverpudlian writer and musician. They came together for a performance at the 1993 Hay Festival of Literature, and gave a mesmerising performance of poems accompanied by music where the audience were invited onto the floor to dance in a background of words, rhythm and rhyme. I was trying out the new hearing aids and as I danced to the sound of Tafari’s *Duboetry* I felt the truth of his words ‘Duboetry is poetry…’ which could mentally set the world free – another epiphany.

**Triangulation**

Although it is clear from the paper so far that reading great and good literature can improve one’s ability to deal with difficulties in life as referred to in the question, I felt that some form of triangulation was needed. Cohen and Manion (1986) define triangulation as ‘an attempt to map out or explain more fully, the richness and complexity of human behaviour by studying it from more than one standpoint’ p254. I looked on line and came up with a number of ideas, one of which concerned Ella Berthaud, already mentioned in the paper. It referred to an interview with her on Channel 4 News *Why reading is good for your mental health*.

‘We’re not qualified medical therapists,’ she said, ‘… we come from a background of having read huge amounts of fiction. I feel that you can genuinely help people through life’s hurdles by reading the right novel, particularly at the right time.’

I then found a paper in The Indian Journal of Psychiatry, entitled ‘A writer’s look at literature and mental health’, which described in some detail how the writer, Shashi Deshpande, regarded literature as having a beneficial effect on herself and her readers.

She begins by talking about her own writing and why she does it, saying that it arose out of the conflict between the womanly roles expected of her and a self that could not accept these roles. She was able to move on from this, she said, after she had completed her novel *The Long Silence*. She then gave examples from literature where writers have confronted conflict, Dickens, for instance in *David Copperfield*, about his father, and Tolstoy in one of his plays about his wife. There is a difference though, she says, between writing fiction and writing autobiography. Writing about oneself can become self-indulgent and one should employ novelistic rigor. She quotes Virginia Woolf:

‘Writing must be formal. The art must be respected. If one lets the mind run, it becomes egoistic, personal.’

In the process of writing fiction, Deshpande says, she found her own novelistic voice. The reader, she sees as a partner in the telling of the story, and she talks about how the critic, Harold Bloom, saw this as liberating us from previous ways of thinking, opening our minds. She gives two further examples from literature: how we are able to sympathise with Lear, despite his ‘monumental folly’ because of Shakespeare’s ability to capture his human frailty; and Dostoevsky’s ability to take us into the mind of ‘the seemingly most unloveable people – a murderer and an alcoholic’ in *Crime and Punishment*. She goes on to say that the reader often sees themselves in particular novels and how someone had written to her, ‘This is my story…You have written my story.’ This, she says, is the reader’s recognition that ‘I am not alone in what I am going through. There are others like me.’ Finally, she says that a reader will over the years have experience of people and life which would not have been possible only through living.

**Conclusion**

Of course, books do not always have a positive effect on their readers. Jane Austen, herself, warns in *Northanger Abbey* (1803) of the dangers - the heroine, Catherine, almost comes to grief because of her indulgence in romantic fiction. Plato, too, referred to in Bate and Schuman’s article referred to above, said that poets should be banned from the ideal republic because they stirred up unhealthy emotions. Beth Bartlett, in a satirical piece in *The Huffington Post* (Bartlett, August 2014) warns of four bad side effects of reading fiction, including “a dis-satisfaction with reality” and “a stoking of the emotions” to make young men and women seek our better relationships. Recently, however, author Sally Vickers, referring to The Reader Organisation in an article in *The Guardian* (Vickers, November 2016) quotes these findings:

Reading books ‘improves self-confidence and self-esteem, builds social networks, widens horizons and gives people a sense of belonging.’

I am reminded of George Eliot’s words from *The Natural History of German Life* quoted earlier - If art can extend us and remove us from the narrow bounds of the life we are living daily, as she says, then it can also lift us out of the turmoil caused by mental illness. I think this is clearly evidenced in the articles, books, and the case study of my own experience referred to in this paper.

Peter Leyland 29/1/17

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