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Healing Through Books:
The evolution and diversification of
bibliotherapy

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Abstract

Bibliotherapy, as a part of expressive therapy, involves the systematic use of books to help people cope with mental, physical, emotional, developmental or social problems. Together with some other similar practices, such as art therapy, dance therapy, music therapy, and play therapy, bibliotherapy emphasizes the idea of the healing, consoling power of art through its various forms. The manuscript will address bibliotherapy as a powerful way of applying literature in everyday life. It will claim that bibliotherapy is an effective tool in helping people to restore meaningful connections with themselves, each other and with the world around in the times of difficult transitions and physical, psychological, emotional and social challenges. The conceptual framework of the study will be built based on a thorough analysis of both theoretical and practical aspects of bibliotherapy, such as the definition of bibliotherapy, types of bibliotherapy, goals and objectives, methodology, evaluation, and the benefits and challenges of bibliotherapy. The manuscript will explore the transformative potential of literature and the complexity of a “book-reader” interaction as the psychological basis of bibliotherapy. After a brief historical overview of bibliotherapy from early records through the 20th century, the manuscript will provide a detailed description of recent theories and practices in bibliotherapy and identify factors contributing to its rapid development. It will suggest practical steps towards building a connection between literature and everyday life through the examination of the most recent bibliotherapy projects successfully implemented within clinical and non-clinical (creative) bibliotherapy. Special

attention will be paid to a self-help bibliotherapy approach and creative bibliotherapy schemes in the form of shared reading groups. The manuscript will also provide an overview of the development and implementation of the bibliotherapy programme for people living with HIV/AIDS that the author conducted at Nkosi's Haven Village in Johannesburg, South Africa.

Foreword

It is with pleasure that I write a brief introduction to this latest addition to the multidisciplinary field of bibliotherapy. And fitting it is that this valuable contribution to this body of work should be authored by a librarian, Dr. Natalia Tukhareli. Reading as a healing behaviour and a therapeutic practice found its first formal home in libraries, where as an intentional discipline it became part of the curriculum of Library Science. Because librarians are very often “book people” themselves as well as guardians and custodians of books, opponents of censorship and champions of freedom of information, they want to help their clients, share their enthusiasms, and guide their fellow readers.

Bibliotherapy or healing through reading obviously occurs even when therapy is not the primary or conscious goal of reading. Those who love reading will reap benefits from doing so. The fact that this affection and joy in reading can be harnessed as a health regimen must surely be welcome news that librarians and teachers can explain to everyone else. We must hope that health care professionals will soon join the ranks of those bearing this good news. As Ms. Tukhareli reminds us, a major benefit of bibliotherapy is the low cost of delivery. And a big part of this advantage derives from the enlisting of the patient/reader in his/her own healing. Patients who can help to heal themselves are much more economical to treat than non-compliant, depressed and passive patients, who do not respond well to being passive and poorly informed consumers.

The first few chapters of this book provide a survey that brings us from the early days of research into bibliotherapy up

to the present day. From the point of view of perspective and context, this is extremely useful showing us not only what there is in the research field but also providing a sense of continuity and development. The author pays close attention to the need for a terminology, such as “clinical” vs. “creative” to bring some welcome order to terms that have been in the past somewhat vague: self-help, non-fiction, instructional and narrative to give a few examples. She introduces us to the “Get into Reading” movement. Even more importantly she draws our attention to variables that are revealed in the research when attention is paid to bibliotherapy pursued in a group setting. I am not aware of any other attempt to date that puts the would-be student of this field so clearly in the “picture” as it were.

Ms. Tukhareli puts before us that bibliotherapy is measured as successful when it is able to lead the reader to a new sense of personal empowerment. When the reader feels renewed optimism, hope and energy, and when a feeling of increased control and agency is experienced, then many changes become possible. Diet, activity and social interaction can improve, and mood and energy increase.

The author of this book is not someone content to sit in the library or the lab. In 2010, Ms. Tukhareli took herself to South Africa to join the staff at a shelter for women, mothers and orphans living with AIDS in order to work with the modality of bibliotherapy, hoping that it might help to improve the conditions that challenged these patients. It is difficult to imagine how hopeless life must seem for many such people. In this front-line work for patient survival the author was able to observe many changes first-hand and every day. To her passion for the modality, she added her compassion for her patients, and by means of books, stories, group interactions, discussion and

kindness these patients changed. They grew and learned with their readings. They felt less alone, and their hope and optimism took hold. They expressed their gratitude and their appreciation in profound ways. Obviously this kind of experience changes therapists as well as patients. This book seeks to share and expand the practice of healing through reading and talking about the reading experience.

I am encouraged by Ms. Tukhareli's work. Bibliotherapy promises large returns in human well-being for a modest investment of resources. I hope to see this work expanded in many ways and in a wide variety of places.

Joseph Gold, PhD
Professor Emeritus
University of Waterloo

“In reality, every reader is, while he is reading, the reader of his own self. The writer’s work is merely a kind of optical instrument which he offers to the reader to enable him to discern what, without this book, he would perhaps never have experienced in himself. And the recognition by the reader in his one self of what the book says is the proof of its veracity.”

Marcel Proust

“Ideal readers do not reconstruct a story: they re-create it. ...For the ideal reader, every book reads, to a certain degree, as an autobiography.”

Alberto Manguel

Introduction

My experience with bibliotherapy went through different stages — from my personal experiences of the transformative power of literature, to an academic exploration of the art and science of bibliotherapy as a discipline, to first-hand observations of how literature can change the lives of a particular group of destitute people facing a terminal illness. Something that began as a personal interaction with literary classics, and continued as a scholarly exploration of the theoretical grounds of bibliotherapy, found a practical implication at the end of the journey.

A few years ago, while browsing shelves at the University of Toronto bookstore, I came across a book called *How Proust Can Change Your Life*, by Alain de Botton (1997). The title spoke to me immediately, triggering emotions similar to the “joys of discovery” that we experience at eye-opening moments. It described my own experience with Proust’s writings, particularly their transformational effect on my life. I remember holding the book in my hands and having a Proustian moment of “involuntary recollection” of a particular period from my past. I recalled the time I lived through Proust’s novels, applying his theory of memory and recollection to my own experience. This emotional journey helped me not only to revisit my past, but also to reconcile a few painful memories, have strong moments of gratitude for all the happy moments and, finally, to get a fresh perspective on my life at that point. This reading experience was very therapeutic, and it happened because of my encounter with the “right book” at the “right time”. Proust provided me with a tool that I would use throughout my life when approaching different situations and challenges.

I have always believed in the consoling and transforming power of a book. Since my childhood, I kept expanding a narrow circle of “friends” by adding the names of my favourite authors, such as Hans Christian Andersen, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, Gabriel García Márquez, Marcel

Proust, Rainer Maria Rilke, Leo Tolstoy, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Jorge Luis Borges, Federico García Lorca, Boris Pasternak, Vladimir Nabokov, and many other beautiful minds and spirits. By calling them *friends*, I acknowledged my deep connection with the writers, who not only influenced my intellectual, emotional, and spiritual development, but also were with me in times of joy and hardship. Like good friends, each of these writers left an imprint on my mind and soul. Throughout my life, I had a few very powerful moments of interaction with their books, while recreating narrative worlds and building intellectual and emotional connections with the authors and characters. Those moments often had a strong impact on my life, to the extent that they helped me live through challenging situations and open new perspectives and opportunities for myself.

As a scholar with broad interests in the humanities, I was keen to explore the transformational power of art and literature. My engagement with bibliotherapy started as an academic journey into a new discipline aimed at investigating the therapeutic potential of books and reading. During my recent involvement in library studies, a scholarly exploration of the theoretical aspects of bibliotherapy turned into a search for practical ways of applying the therapeutic power of books to everyday life, particularly in a public library setting. Finally, life brought me to the point where I had an opportunity to apply my newly acquired knowledge of bibliotherapy to the library project I conducted in Johannesburg, South Africa.

In 2010, I spent three months at Nkosi's Haven Village, an NGO serving people living with HIV/AIDS, in Johannesburg. During my stay and volunteer work at Nkosi's Haven, I established a library for the residents of the shelter and conducted a few educational and recreational programmes for children and adults, including an innovative bibliotherapy programme on HIV/AIDS. The bibliotherapy programme aimed to reach out and break the isolation of people living with HIV/AIDS, to increase their

awareness about the disease and to improve their well-being. The African Journal that I maintained during the three months I spent in South Africa documented powerful moments of interaction with literature that I observed in the Nkosi's Haven library.

When observing the consoling power of a book in action, I was struck by the realisation that a common expression, "books as a shelter", was more than an elaborate metaphor: Books not only console and help people to escape, books expand worlds, which was especially beneficial because, in most cases, the children at Nkosi's Haven were trapped in their physical and emotional problems; books educate and provide a sense of belonging; and, finally, they give pleasure. I asked a six-year-old boy who demonstrated a particular passion for reading, "What do you feel when you read?" He replied, "I feel happy."

Later on, the interview data collected through the Wall of Happiness project that I conducted with young residents of Nkosi's Haven revealed that approximately 38 per cent of the children (18 out of 48) mentioned books, reading and the library among the things that made them feel happy. Although I realise that books cannot protect the children at Nkosi's Haven from the reality from which, in the majority of cases, there is "no escape to a happy ending", I believe that they can help to build the coping skills the children need to survive in this harsh reality.

Motivated by the success of the bibliotherapy programme on HIV/AIDS, I decided to address a variety of other "living problems" through bibliotherapy to serve the needs of individuals and diverse groups of people within the Canadian community. In September 2011, I founded Read to Connect, a non-profit organisation in Toronto, Ontario, to provide creative bibliotherapy services to individuals and groups undergoing the effects of life crises and transitions. My experience working with people of different ages and cultural and social backgrounds has proven that creative bibliotherapy in the form of a read-

aloud reading group works, and that it is needed. It has also shown the possibility of integrating this particular bibliotherapy model into the conceptual and practical framework of “support groups” that have recently been well recognised by service providers and the general public.

Why did I decide to write this book? It has been almost 100 years since the term bibliotherapy was introduced to describe the practice of using literary materials to address mental health issues. Since then, the literature has provided numerous evidence-based and anecdotal stories of bibliotherapy applications that were developed with therapeutic, educational, and recreational purposes and implemented in both clinical and non-clinical sectors. While psychiatrists and counsellors share their positive experiences of using fiction and self-help materials in their private practices, public librarians report on the success of “Book on Prescription” schemes, and facilitators of creative bibliotherapy reading groups in community settings describe their benefits for diverse populations. Behind these academic reports and anecdotal stories are real people who were helped during difficult times in their lives.

On the other hand, throughout the history of bibliotherapy as a discipline, the discourse has been filled with discussions revolving around a few controversial topics, such as the problem of definition and confusion around terminology, the lack of evidence-based research and ethical concerns about practicing bibliotherapy beyond a medical field. I have to admit that my initial exploration of the theoretical grounds of bibliotherapy left me with many unanswered questions and doubts. However, my personal and professional experience of the therapeutic power of books, which added more successful stories of how “books can change one’s life”, motivated me to advocate for the further development and promotion of bibliotherapy to overcome barriers on its way to those who can benefit from creative interaction with books.

Within this context, the goal of this book is to dispel concerns around bibliotherapy and justify its practice by providing solid evidence of the effectiveness of bibliotherapy in addressing health-related and “living problems” of individuals within a variety of clinical and community settings. The book will provide a comprehensive overview of current theories and practices in bibliotherapy in order to identify trends in the development of the field in the 21st century, and examine how they fit into the broader picture of recent tendencies in the healthcare and social sectors. The book will suggest practical steps towards building a connection between literature and everyday life through the examination of the most recent bibliotherapy schemes run within two bibliotherapy models, clinical bibliotherapy and creative bibliotherapy. It will highlight the benefits and challenges of each particular model and describe different bibliotherapy schemes developed and implemented within each model.

The particular emphasis of the book is on reading groups based on the principles of creative bibliotherapy. I will argue that a reading group based on the creative bibliotherapy approach provides a safe and inspirational venue for self-exploration and social relationships. Emotional interaction with literary texts, enhanced by the unifying power of a reading group discussion, can have a transformational effect on individuals involved in this activity. The book aims to promote creative bibliotherapy to different groups of stakeholders, including health professionals, librarians, educators and service providers in the social sector. It will suggest that a shared reading group be viewed as a specific type of support group that involves the systematic use of texts and guided discussion around them to assist individuals in dealing with “life problems”. The book will provide a starting point for an investigation of the practical ways in which creative bibliotherapy can be integrated into the framework of support groups.

The conceptual framework of the study is built on a thorough analysis of the theoretical and practical aspects of bibliotherapy, such as the definition of bibliotherapy, the types of bibliotherapy, its goals and objectives, methodology, and evaluation. Chapter 1 will provide a brief historical overview of bibliotherapy from early records of guided reading to current bibliotherapeutic practices in North America and the United Kingdom. Chapter 2 will explore the transformative potential of literature and the complexity of a book-reader interaction as the psychological basis of bibliotherapy. Chapter 3 will address the problem of the definition of bibliotherapy and describe its classification. Chapters 4 and 5 will provide an extensive overview of contemporary bibliotherapy schemes developed and implemented within clinical and creative (non-clinical) bibliotherapy. The last chapter will provide an overview of the development, implementation, and evaluation of the bibliotherapy programme for people living with HIV/AIDS that I conducted at Nkosi's Haven Village, Johannesburg, South Africa, in 2010.

In conclusion, I hope that bibliotherapy, as the intentional use of the therapeutic potential of literature in a variety of clinical and creative schemes, will be widely recognised as a simple, accessible, and cost-effective way of addressing a variety of physical, emotional, psychological and social issues. I envision that self-help bibliotherapy will become an effective method of health education and promotion, enabling individuals to increase control over their health and well-being. I also hope that creative bibliotherapy, in the form of a shared reading group, will be recognised as an approach that holds great promise in helping individuals to better cope with the difficulties and challenges caused by the instability of modern life. My experience shows that creative bibliotherapy is an effective tool in helping people to restore meaningful connections with themselves, with others, and with the world around them in times of difficult

transitions and physical, psychological, emotional and social challenges.