

The Companionship of Books

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Abstract

In their book *Fulfilling the Potential of Your Doctoral Experience* (2018), Denicolo et al. speak of how experienced researchers talk about “the importance to discovery and innovation of serendipity” (p. 95), and although not an experienced researcher I will put myself forward as an example of how one thing can lead to another in one’s research journey. It began when I was conducting research for my 2020 WEA course, “The Poetry of Climate Change,” and my wife bought me a Christmas present, *The Ecopoetry Anthology* (2013). In the introduction by the poet Robert Hass I read that the word “ecology” was derived from the Greek word “oikos,” meaning “household.” This was altered by the German biologist Ernst Heikl to become oikology.

And then came the pandemic. “The Poetry of Climate Change” and all my other face-to-face courses were cancelled. Suddenly oikos or household was our refuge where we were locked down, unable to move out except for buying food and taking exercise. I had the space and time to look around and even try something different.

By sheer coincidence I had been teaching “The Short Story” to another class and had made contact through Twitter with a writer of short stories about the civil war in Syria, an issue that had engaged me deeply. The writer wrote for a group known as Authors Electric and I read some of their posts and submitted an abbreviated version of my 2020 ESREA paper for the conference “Activism in a Troubled World”, about how reading poetry and novels can help us through when things get tough. This was accepted. I submitted two further pieces to Authors Electric and was invited to write a monthly blog for them.

In *The Handbook of Autoethnography* (2013), the end product is described as taking different forms such as research reports, poetry, performative scripts, songs, films, and the performing arts. All these I have seen and heard during my

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experience of ESREA. When I began presenting ideas about “bibliotherapy” at an ESREA conference in 2017, my paper was very autobiographical, an attempt to prove from my experience of reading fiction and poetry that this activity was good for us. Following on from this and reading much of the literature I now encountered, such as Etherington (2004), Merrill and West (2009) and Hoult (2012), and others that I found myself like Picket and Wilkinson (2018), I produced four further papers on my developing ideas of “bibliotherapy.” Two of them were published as articles in research journals. It is this progression which produced the paper “The Companionship of Books.”

Analysis must follow description and there is further work to do, but meanwhile the story continues. In my recent Authors Electric blog I moved from describing other people’s literary endeavours to writing my own. In a story entitled “Oh Lucky Man,” I wrote about an experience from my childhood seen through the eyes of an invented character. This is my oikology.

Keywords

serendipity, “oikology,” household, autoethnography, autobiography, bibliotherapy

Introduction

I will begin with a quotation from George Eliot, as this is where my research into the importance of books in our lives begins. She says in *The Natural History of German Life* (1856, pp. 5987.1.) that, “Art is the nearest thing to life; it is a mode of amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellow men beyond the bounds of our personal lot.” It is a quotation which literary critic James Wood uses in part for the title of his book, *The Nearest Thing to Life* (2015) in which he looks at why literature is important to us.

In my study, “The Companionship of Books,” I want to investigate George Eliot’s claim that books, particularly literature, are important to us, and ask whether it can improve our physical and mental health in any way. On a personal level, and this is drawn from my own experience of writing and walking in the countryside just as Wordsworth and Coleridge did, reading poetry has helped me immensely. I will show evidence of this with autobiographical references. I will also add articles, books, and comments from students on courses I have run on the subject of “bibliotherapy.”

For the study I will be using autobiographical methods which I have met with at ESREA conferences, reading texts such as *Using Biographical Methods in Sociological Research* (Merrill and West, 2009) and *Adult Learning and la Recherche Feminine* (Hoult, 2012). In a recent work, *Research on the Education and Learning of Adults*, Bainbridge et al (2021, p. 2) state that “Biographical research offers

insights, and even signposts, to understand and transcend the often ignored or defended darker side of the human condition.” I think that literature is uniquely placed to be able to investigate this statement.

My acquaintance with the methods used by ESREA, which has been developing for the past six years, is neatly summarised in the final chapter of *Research on the Education and Learning of Adults* (2021). The authors say that their main objective is to chronicle the recent evolution of narrative and autobiographical methods in research on adult education and lifelong learning, and across the chapters in the book it is clear that most adult learning seems to happen while engaging with the Other. This Other, as I understand it, can mean another idea or paradigm, something that challenges our existence or balance. This can include personal struggles documented in the book, and how those authors try to recompose divergent aspects of their lives and learning, and greater understanding of the Other.

In the conclusion to the book, Bainbridge et al go on to indicate that the telling of one’s life story can illuminate something greater and how narrative enquiry can enable us to cross boundaries of time and reconnect with the past or discuss possible futures. They mention the almost irreconcilable conflict between The Holocaust and the struggle of the Palestinian people, which is referred to in the introduction. This reminded me of a book, *The Apeirogon* (2020, McCann). The book, named for a shape with an infinite number of sides, is a fictionalised account of the real story of how two fathers from the Israeli–Palestinian divide come together over the deaths of their daughters and resolve to change things. The book is an example of how literature can work to change our ideas.

Bainbridge et al (2021) then explain how the ESREA network has sought to create a space which is different from historically dominant university cultures. It is more inclusive, a space where many can thrive. They give examples of their own struggles, drawing attention to ethical issues, vulnerability, and the search for safety and security in narrative engagement with a variety of what may be deeply personal issues. This is something I have been able to relate to closely. The six papers I have now delivered for ESREA have touched, for example, upon the early death of my father and my own issues with the depressions that followed.

Their research methodology is complex and various examples are given about how this might affect findings and exclude certain people who are not listened to because of class, gender or other marginalising attributes. In the end they ask, “What is a good life?” Narrative methods can look into this, they say, and “generate deep insight into individual and collective experience” (2021, p.225)

I found this methodology helpful for my proposed study, “The Companionship of Books.” I came into this research field thinking that my experience of reading literature from a young age was likely to have some effect on my ability to deal with the various ups and downs of death, illness, divorce, and other life-changing events that have occurred. Beginning with the self, I extended it to my students, did a copious amount of reading, and talked and gave papers about my ideas as they evolved. I wanted to investigate this developing paradigm of how reading books can help us to live a better life. The title is inspired by a comment made by the philosopher Montaigne who lost a close friend to The Plague in in the 16th century, and discovered that the only comfort he could find was in books.

Lifelong Learning and Research

I have always believed through my own experience that learning has a social purpose and should be lifelong. This idea is not a new one and can be traced back to the founding of groups like the WEA in 1903; a group for whom I now teach, and whose principles I have enthusiastically absorbed. Laurence Goldman, in an essay in the book *A Ministry of Enthusiasm* (Ed. Roberts, 2003), refers to the WEA students taught literature by R. H. Tawney in 1929. One says, “Then R.H.T. reads to us Walt Whitman’s “When lilacs last in the dooryard bloomed”; this moves a student to give his favourite passage from another source: “Pioneers! O Pioneers!’ . . . And for some of us as we sat listening a new door opens” (p. 49).

This door should be an opening to lifelong learning in the UK, and that it hasn’t proved as such is the fault of successive governments. In a recent article Mel Lenehan, principal of Fircroft adult education college, reminds us of the importance of education to a functioning democracy and refers to a 1919 report on adult education produced by the Ministry of Reconstruction (Lenehan, 2019). In the report, the same R.H. Tawney is said to argue that adult education is “a permanent national necessity, an inseparable aspect of citizenship, and therefore should be both universal and lifelong” (p. 2).

A door has been opened for me personally by my WEA teaching and, since 2017, by attending ESREA conferences. Through ESREA I have met a range of open-minded and accessible academics, either in person or online. I have read work by Elizabeth Hoult, Linden West, and Kim Etherington, amongst others. Hoult’s work, *Adult Learning and la Recherche Feminine* (2012), which I read enthusiastically, had a profound effect on me. In her study of what constitutes resilient adult learners and their learning, Hoult includes detailed studies of literary texts and her own autobiographical writing. Her

book resonated with me and has given me the freedom to think and write in a research style that is more conducive to my own way of thinking than the traditional masculine research style that she mentions in her book. Another work that has influenced my thinking is a series of essays in *The Handbook of Autoethnography* (Ed. Holman Jones et al, 2013), which looks at the importance of storytelling and personal narrative in social research. In the essay "A History of Autoethnographic Enquiry," Douglas and Carless (2013) suggest that we can learn about the general through exploration of the personal. They say that the personal often challenges theories, categories, and interpretations, and that auto-ethnographers use a number of genres to explore their experience such as poetry, memoir, and diaries. This idea is something I have previously met with in the work of Etherington (2004), who says that telling one's own story helps a person create a sense of self and meaning. I also read Clough (2002), who takes a radical view of research methodology and assembles stories from the data he collects in order to make his point.

Hoult's idea, which I see as having a connection with my own study, is that a feminine research style can replace the more accepted or masculine academic style, and this is an idea which, as a new researcher, I found challenging but also freeing. Her book is about how adults acquire learning resilience, and she combines the autobiographical with evidence from her students and her family to show how learning can be transformative. In the final chapter of her book, she reminds us of her metaphoric use of ecdysis, a snake shedding its skin, to characterise her own transformation from an academic to a poetic or feminine researcher. She says that she is not arguing for the end of impersonal empirical study but for a style of research that deliberately marries the scholarly with the poetic. She refers to Helene Cixous, who says in her essay "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1976), referencing Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* (1931) and Molly Bloom's "yes I said yes I will Yes" at the end of Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), that feminine writing is more affirmative and that *through imaginative writing the system can be overthrown* (1976, pp. 885–6).

The radical approach of Cixous work is followed in Hoult's book by her advocacy of the juxtaposition of empirical data, literary analysis, and creative writing in her research. Aspects of the researcher's autobiography, she says, can be included, and experiences outside academic texts are taken seriously and allowed into the research work. To underline this idea Hoult uses a metaphor of rocks crystalising to represent feminine research. Just like the way metamorphic rocks are formed, so research texts will be transformed as different readers view them.

Reading and writing, she says, is itself a form of enquiry in which we can find new ways of knowing, which draws on the ancient wisdom of stories, the communities of which we are a part, and our own vulnerabilities (2012, pp. 190–1).

I, too, like to use metaphor. In *Using Biographical Methods in Social Research* (2009, p. 96) Merrill and West ask, “Are there are particular metaphors that attract you in considering aspects of your life history?” I have used metaphors in the presentation of the ESREA papers I have delivered, and I like the idea of a mosaic to describe my work. The paper which I presented in Norway in 2019, for instance, I called “Norwegian Wood, the Language of Poetry and Song.” “Norwegian Wood” for me was a metaphorical concept which embraced revolutionary ideas. It was also a mosaic of ideas, referencing the country in which I was delivering my paper; its connection to Ibsen, Fosse, and other ground-breaking artistic figures; its link with The Beatles song, “Norwegian Wood,” which had inspired a Murakami novel, *Norwegian Wood* (2000). The novel is set amidst the revolutionary fervour of 1960s Japan. In the paper I connected this to other revolutionary episodes, showing how we might use poetic language to challenge the travesties of justice that have occurred in our communities both past and present. I referred to Shelley’s disquieting commentary on the Peterloo Massacre in his poem *The Masque of Anarchy* (1832) and American poet laureate Tracy Smith’s poems on how black lives matter. The paper was published in *The International Journal for Talent Development and Creativity* (2019).

Bibliotherapy

One of the main problems with my research ambition to discover whether literature could help us to deal with life’s mental and physical difficulties was the gathering of evidence to prove something that was as yet ill defined, more a feeling. I was asking whether reading books could help us with hardship, distress, and even happiness during our lives and whether there was such a thing as what is now called “bibliotherapy”. Apparently, this term was originally coined in an *Atlantic Monthly* article published in August 1916 by Samuel McCord Carruthers. It is also used by writers like Paula Byrne of relitfoundation.org (2016), a website dealing with the subject. We learn that during World War 1, reading Jane Austen was used to help soldiers recover from their experiences, an example of bibliotherapy in action.

Relating to this, in a paper presented by Edmund King and Shafquat Towheed (Open University), Isaac Rosenberg is shown recovering from his wounds in Bury St. Edmond’s Military Hospital. “I am still in the hospital . . . Just now I don’t know

where I can keep books. I have with me Donne's poems and Brown's 'Religio De Medici' and must carry both in my pocket. I have drawn some of the chaps in the hospital and can see heaps of subject matter all over." This is a particularly good example of my title, "The Companionship of Books," and also links well to the art therapy mentioned in *Creative Health: The Arts for Health and Wellbeing* (2017), which I discuss below.

While I have found the term "bibliotherapy" useful, it can also be restrictive. What were the texts that could help us? Were they purely literary like Austen or Donne or could non-literary texts be included? I think the autoethnographic approach that I used, where I include evidence from myself, my students, and fellow academics, does indicate that other texts could be used. For example, at the 2021 ESREA conference in Wroclaw from which this article arises, one of the delegates gave a paper about the working life of his two grandfathers, the story of working-class men in search of a better life. As this has a bearing on my research, I will quote from it at length. One of the delegate's grandfathers had given him a gift of Ladybird books:

I would lie on my bed and read of birds that travelled from Africa and the Arctic and that had beautiful songs that could fill the woods. I studied the pictures and committed them to memory – only opening the books to expose the side with the image before checking the name and description on the left. But the real joy, the joy that lasts a lifetime, takes place when the book comes to life. This happens when I see a chaffinch, or hear a blackbird singing in the same place at the same time every day – just like the book said.

This was clearly an important experience and the generic term "bibliotherapy" is now used for how reading books can lead to feelings like happiness, sadness, or even be a way of explaining things to the self. I recently published a piece for Authors Electric called "Dealing with the Dog" in which I attempt to define what "bibliotherapy" means. It describes my own attempts as an adolescent to use the reading of literature in a therapeutic fashion:

My earliest recollection of this healing process was when as a boy I watched footage of the Aberfan pit disaster and couldn't make any sense of it except by looking at a poem by Dylan Thomas called "Once it was the colour of saying," and the lines "With a capsized field where a school sat still/And a black and white field where girls grew playing," which although it had nothing to do with the disaster told me something about the power of poetry to heal my troubled thoughts.

I concluded the article after a number of further examples. I mentioned the poet Les Murray and argued that “bibliotherapy” had helped me then and continues to assist me now as an adult. “Get sick enough and you’ll use any remedy you’ve got,” he says in *Killing the Black Dog* (1997, p. 49).

Further Evidence

The Student Group

Following these initial thoughts on “bibliotherapy,” I would like to add that at the 2021Wroclaw conference referred to above, one of the other delegates had voiced the opinion that this conference was “a space that allowed and celebrated confusion”. It was “a space full of questions rather than answers,” he continued. “This is what academia should be, a place to think difficult thoughts together and to ask difficult questions.”

This was a kind of breakthrough moment, a feeling that one could open up to new research possibilities. In their book *Fulfilling the Potential of Your Doctoral Experience* (2018), the authors say, in a chapter entitled “Potential Resources and Opportunities,” that “Researchers who discuss their research with a wide variety of people are more likely to find a connection or a collaborator that will help shape their research into something unforeseen” (Denicolo et al., 2018, p. 95). Considering how these connections had worked for me, I thought I would use the story of a student poetry group that I had taught continuously for five years in my research. This would be followed by a number of articles and books that I had discovered during the “research journey,” another metaphor referred to in Merrill and West (2009, p. 96).

I had inherited the poetry group from another WEA Tutor in 2014 and found that numbers were falling. There were 14 students, most of whom were retired or not working for other reasons. I decided to teach them a number of poetry courses where the emphasis would be on reading aloud, something that I had found through experience that adults enjoyed doing with literary texts. The basic idea was that students would read and discuss selections of poems together in small groups and then read one or two of the best that they had chosen to the main group for further discussion.

At the same time the WEA had introduced an extra element in the SLRs (Student Learning Records), namely asking whether the course had any effect on their health and wellbeing. The emphasis on wellbeing was also highlighted in a supplementary form called *Tell Us About It*. Both forms were completed after the course had finished, and in the room where it had taken place. For the purposes

of my study, I discussed this with both my line manager and with the students and was given their agreement to refer to these records. This set of comments is taken from students' responses to my course, *An Introduction to Modern Poetry*.

On the *Tell Us About It* forms, over half the class said that it had improved the health and wellbeing of both themselves and the class. This is a selection of comments from the SLRs:

Reading aloud and group discussion of poets' work and biographies aided understanding to a very great degree.

Excellent – exciting, informative – quite a lot of interaction which the class gains from . . . love reading aloud.

It has given me more confidence, especially joining in the group readings. It has been great for my wellbeing in general . . .

[I] thoroughly enjoyed the class. I am not very good at joining in discussion in large groups but that's just the way I am and what I prefer. I still appreciate being part of such an inspiring course.

It is good to share comments in the small groups organised by [the tutor] and I'm enthused to look into poets and their work more at home.

Looking at these comments, it is clear that this group benefited greatly from the interaction they experienced. Expressions like "Reading aloud . . . aided understanding of poets work," "love reading aloud," and "great for my wellbeing in general" echoed the aims I had. The statements, "I am not very good at joining in discussion in large groups" and "it is good to share comments in the small groups" indicated that the way I had organised the reading aloud was appropriate.

After two further poetry classes with this group, I was keen to explore the idea that our emotional health could benefit from reading and discussing novels and poetry, and that this could directly affect our wellbeing. Mark Edmondson in *Why Read?* (2004) says that we can construct ourselves from novels, poems, plays (p. 86) and that, like Proust, writers can get the reader to feel what they feel (p. 107). I decided to set up a project to test the idea that readers could benefit in health terms from reading literature. I asked the poetry group to help me plan the course. After a number of discussions in which I shared with them the ideas that I have been presenting at ESREA conferences, particularly why reading imaginative work is so important, we came up with the following rationale:

Reading poetry/novels can lift us out of our everyday experience, and offer us pleasure, mental stimulation, a sense of wellbeing and company. How do words and imagery affect us, enhance our sense of connection and hearten us, encourage us to express ourselves and empathise with others?

It would be called *Reading Can Enhance Our Lives* and funded through the WEA's collaboration with the *Leicester Ageing Together* project. It would run over five weeks at our normal poetry venue and would be free for participants. I would produce a reflective recording each week about who was involved, what happened, my thoughts and feelings about this, comments from those who had benefited, implications for the next step, and what I would do for this.

I kept a reflective journal of the project as requested by my supervisor. I tried a very informal teaching and response approach which I had developed with the original group and which newcomers collaborated with. We discussed a variety of books on different subjects, all chosen by the group. When I asked them in a final course discussion to say why reading *literature* mattered to them, I wrote down their responses. This is a selection:

It was an opportunity to step inside another mind.

It brought you out of yourself into a different world.

You were able to see things from a different perspective.

It improved your focus on other things.

It gave you things you hadn't thought about before.

It can make someone who belonged nowhere belong somewhere.

I found the last of these comments particularly important, making me think of an immigrant arriving on our shores. *The Beekeeper of Aleppo* (2019) is such a story. It is the tale of Syrian refugees travelling to the UK, and it relates to the war there, which I will refer to further in the next section.

Articles and Books

The next evidence is a number of articles and books by writers. I will give a brief summary of a selected few and show how each is connected to my theme: The first is from an interview with Tasmanian author Richard Flanagan. He is discussing his latest novel, *The Living Sea of Waking Dreams*, with Cherylin Parsons, director

of the San Francisco Bay Area Book Festival. She found it to be, “one of the most profound moving novels I have ever read, a true masterpiece” (2021, p. 2)

Flanagan tells her that it was not the book he intended to write when he went to Maatsuyker Island. He abandoned his initial idea as it seemed too boring. He quotes Auden in 1939, when the world was on the brink of World War 2, who said that poetry makes nothing happen but “It survives”. Flanagan says that he was trying to find a language about the grief that many people were currently feeling due to the pandemic and the hope that we will survive this. In writing the book, he says, he realised that it was a beautiful world and that, although it is rational to feel despair, hope is the essence of what it is to be human. “Novels are one form that can help restore a necessary sense of wonder and, with it, humility and gratitude.” (Flanagan, R. in Parsons, C., 2021, p. 7)

In the same interview, Flanagan also emphasises the importance of storytelling, something that I have found a useful tool for the kind of research I am undertaking. Storytelling was emphasised from the start of my acquaintance with ESREA delegates such as Linden West et al. The autobiographical, storytelling approach taken by researchers like Kim Etherington, Peter Clough, and Elizabeth Hoult is fundamental to my own research.

In my second example, the author Kerry Hudson reminds us of the importance of libraries. In an article remembering a librarian in *The Guardian* she describes finding sanctuary at nine years old “asking not just for a book but for a way out, a path forward, for hope and an introduction to the bright future I might have if I only held on, if I didn’t give up”. The librarian’s understanding that books could be like a medicine or therapy that helped to make difficult home life more bearable and her sharing of this, Hudson continues, are things for which she will be forever grateful. Hudson is now successful as a writer, particularly with *Lowborn* (2020), her autobiographical account of growing up and escaping poverty.

There is the story of another library in a very different world in Delphine Minoui’s book, *The Book Collectors of Daraya* (2018). Minoui is writing about the brutal civil war in Syria. Her book describes how Ahmad Muaddamani, a young Syrian fighter living in Daraya during the bombing by Assad’s forces, is shown a pile of books in the ruins of the damaged town. Encouraged by friends, he picks up a book about self-awareness from the rubble and begins reading. He then finds others on Arabic and international literature, philosophy, theology, and science and begins to collect them together. He is joined by volunteers and soon they have 15,000 books which they catalogue and store alphabetically in the basement of an abandoned building.

“These young Syrians cohabited with death night and day,” Minoui says in her *Guardian* article about the book, “Syria’s Rebel Librarians” (2021). “Most of them had already lost everything – their homes, their friends, their parents. Amid the chaos, they clung to books as if to life, hoping for a better tomorrow, for a better political system.”

In the article, Minoui continues with more examples of how this young man and his friend, Abu el-Ezz, who had been severely wounded by a barrel bomb, began to believe in the good that books could do them. Abu el-Ezz chose books analysing political Islam, books of Arabic poetry, and books of psychology. “Books set us free,” he says. “They don’t mutilate; they restore. Reading helps me think positively, chase away negative ideas.” He talks about the most popular book in the library, *The Alchemist*, by Paul Coelho, a book about the journey of self-discovery. “Books,” says Minoui, “were helping transport these young Syrians somewhere else.”

Personal Stories

Although I have chosen literary examples here, a library contains all sorts of books, not just fiction. As I showed in the example from the delegate at The 2020 Wroclaw Conference, “The Companionship of Books” is not just about reading literature but can be extended to other reading forms. During the “Reading Can Enhance Our Lives” course that I refer to, when asked what book they would give to a friend, students’ suggestions ranged from a book about maps in relation to politics, a tale about a shepherd’s life, a novel by Josephine Tey about Richard III, a letter from Oscar Wilde to Lord Alfred Douglas, and a book exploring the divinity of Christ. This was much more diverse than I had expected and confirmed my developing idea that this “book effect,” for want of a better expression, can be found in all sorts of places.

The personal narrative, however, is another place to find evidence. An article that combines “bibliotherapy” and personal story appears in Jay Griffiths’s “Poetry can heal, and I needed it desperately” (*The Guardian*, 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 another good example of "bibliotherapy" in action. Griffiths has written a book, *Tristimania* (2016), relating to her depression and mentions how writers like Les Murray, already mentioned here, use the metaphor of "the black dog" to explain the condition.

Ann Cleeves, creator of the detective Vera Stanhope, says in a Guardian article that stories have always been healing so she is funding bibliotherapists. She describes how during a severe psychotic episode suffered by her husband, Tim, she escaped into the reading and writing of fiction. She also mentions how she had previously set up reading and writing groups in prisons and for men in pubs in the Yorkshire Dales, how libraries supported her as a writer and how important they were. She had worked for Kirklees library some years ago and had noticed how three part-time "therapists" attached to GP practices worked with patients with mild to moderate depression. The therapists prescribed books to give advice or information and later when Tim died unexpectedly, books that were suggested for her as an escape were thrillers, comedies, and gentle romances.

Studies in Therapy and the Arts

A detailed investigation of the concept of "bibliotherapy" is Kelda Green's *When Literature Comes to Our Aid* (2018). Green's thesis "investigates ways in which literature creates therapeutic spaces in which to do personal thinking." I read this in depth and annotated it before its publication in book form and found it referred to Montaigne, Wordsworth, and George Eliot, all important to my own study. Green also looks at Seneca and the link between stoicism and modern-day psychological therapies. I have not studied Seneca myself but see this as a fruitful area for further investigation. Seneca's ideas I noticed were being used in a bibliotherapy course by Bijal for which Green is an acknowledged consultant. Out of interest I completed Bijal's course and learned that the first use of "bibliotherapy" can be traced back to the Ancient Greeks who "built libraries holding both entertainment and educational books," and Aristotle, "(whose) literature was considered medicine for the soul." Bijal too mentions its effect on soldiers during World War 1. After this introduction the course asks what kind of issues could be treated with "bibliotherapy"? Among the answers were that shared reading groups could deal with depression caused by grief and loss, something

that I wished to explore further. A key area of Bijal's course was using the novel to explore aspects of our lives that we cannot easily do in reality. I have read *The Novel Cure* (2013) by Berthoud and Elderkin, which endeavours to do this just this. To navigate being widowed, the authors suggest one might read *The Same Sea* by Amos Oz, which is the tale of Albert Danon whose wife has died of cancer: "In times of grief and loneliness," the authors say, "we must take life moment by moment and this is how Oz proceeds . . ." (2013, pp. 431–3).

I have also encountered a detailed report, "Creative Health: The Arts for Health and Wellbeing" (2017). This is not specifically about reading literature for health, but consuming the arts in general. The report was fronted by Grayson Perry, a notable artist; Professor Marmot, who had published *The Marmot Review* (2010), and who later wrote in *The Health Gap* (2015) that "education is not a bad proxy for empowerment" for those at the bottom of the health gradient; and Lord Layard who in *Can We Be Happier* (2020) talks about "the science of happiness" and stressed the importance of teachers' contributions to the happiness of children.

The report on "Creative Health" linked together a number of initiatives that had been taking place throughout the United Kingdom, linking people's health to a creative involvement with the arts. It consisted of ideas such as *Art on Prescription* to help people suffering mental health problems in Cambridgeshire; *Dance to Health* for older people in Cheshire, London, and Oxfordshire; *Poems on the Underground* created by Judith Chernaik to offer people a moment of quiet reflection; *Music Therapy*, an example being a collaboration between The Royal Philharmonic Orchestra and Hull Integrated Stroke Service; and *The Reader's Shared Reading Scheme* in the North West, which showed an enhanced life purpose amongst participants as they shared the classics of world literature.

Another report that links mental wellbeing to reading and writing and which references both this report and the work of Jane Davies on Merseyside is "Reading and Writing for Wellbeing" (Ramsey-Wade et al., 2020). This study provides a qualitative exploration of community-based reading and writing for wellbeing groups. It concludes that these bibliotherapy and therapeutic creative writing groups "support wellbeing in older adults by providing a unique space in which participants feel acknowledged, accepted, challenged and inspired." It is a further link between "bibliotherapy" and psychotherapy (p. 722).

Conclusion

In conclusion, George Eliot's claim at the beginning of this article is well supported by my research. I have found a number of links between our mental health and

reading: in ancient times it came to be understood that books had a beneficial effect on us, and I have traced this in the “Bibliotherapy” section and followed it with references to wartime and the use of libraries in our present troubled times, both in a war-torn country and in the life of a conflicted child, who eventually grew into a considerable writer. I have shown evidence that the technique has been successful in the present day with reference to a number of students I have taught. I have also gathered and made reference to a number of books and articles I have read on the subject, which reinforce my argument that reading can help us in times of crisis and even in times of happiness.

In my argument I see a very important element being that of “autoethnography,” that is a research method where the writer uses self-reflection to explore personal experience and connect this to wider, cultural, political and social meanings. Storytelling is important to my study as I think I have shown and so I will finish with a story of myself. I was walking in Scotland on a path surrounding a castle and suddenly lost my footing, plunging for 50 metres down a grassy slope within no sight of anyone. Luckily, I was not severely injured, although I did black out for a short while, but as I fell, I thought of Wordsworth’s lines when he was dicing with death ascending rocky heights in the Lake District:

The sky was not a sky of earth/and with what motion moved the clouds, . . .

Wordsworth wrote this in *The Prelude or, Growth of a Poet’s Mind* as he clung grimly to a precipice and I felt that as I fell. It was not fatal nor even a case for A&E but, still in shock, on the plane home I read right through Hannah Storm’s, *The Thin Line Between Everything and Nothing*. This recounted in a style known as “flash” or “creative non-fiction,” her experiences as a front-line war reporter. In connecting with her danger, I was able to neutralise the danger I had felt during my fall.

Further exploration of “bibliotherapy” is needed. I would like to explore Seneca and other works to find support for my argument. I would also like to look at psychology: Why did Wordsworth’s lines come into my head as I fell down that slope and why did reading Hannah Storm’s book on the plane home provide such comfort? These are questions that to my mind still need to be answered.

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