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FICTION, POETRY, ART & ESSAYS BY PERSONS LIVING WITH MENTAL ILLNESS

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HOW FICTION HEALS

Words are, of course, the most powerful drug used by mankind.

—Rudyard Kipling

The Prescription of Fiction for Life's Ailments

The notion of reading for therapeutic effect is known as bibliotherapy, the literal Greek meaning of which is “book healing.” The practice consists of selecting reading material relevant to a client’s life situation. Bibliotherapy dates back to the Ancient Greeks. Over the entrance of the library in Thebes, they inscribed a phrase that means “healing place for the soul.” Grecian libraries were seen as sacred places with curative powers. In the early 1800s, reading became one of the most commonly used therapeutic interventions, second only to physical exercise.

Since 2008, Ella Berthoud and Susan Elderkin have run a bibliotherapy service out of The School of Life in London, through which they prescribe books for their therapeutic effects to clients around the world. They call their book *The Novel Cure: From Abandonment to Zestlessness: 751 Books to Cure What Ails You* a medical handbook; the tools of their trade are books. Throughout the book, they match ailments to suggested reading cures.

Berthoud and Elderkin prescribe books for everything from a broken heart to a broken leg. Such ailments include the loss of a loved one, single parenthood, and fear of commitment. According to *The New Yorker* writer Ceridwen Dovey, who received her own bibliotherapy session from The School of Life, Berthoud says that the common ailments people bring to them are “life-juncture transitions,” including “being stuck in a rut in your career, feeling depressed in your relationship, or suffering bereavement.”

The Look and Feel of Books

For many, the physical act of reading is a pleasurable tactile experience. The weight, shape, and size of a book in one’s hands. The smell of the pages. “[Books] feel so good—their friendly heft. The sweet reluctance of their pages when you turn them with your sensitive fingertip,” says Kurt Vonnegut.

Avid readers also take pleasure in building a library, stuffing bookcases with titles and stacking books near their beds, on desks, and on coffee tables. Looking at a novel often feels like an invitation to an adventure, a journey to unknown places with unfamiliar characters. Crack open a book, and you’re off on a new beginning, with a fresh voice and thought-provoking ideas.

The Calming Sounds of Prose

In an interview with NPR, Susan Elderkin, coauthor of *The Novel Cure*, says that the rhythm of some books’ prose can have healing effects. She thinks the way words are arranged and presented can calm a reader’s restless mind. “Ernest Hemingway’s *The Old Man and the Sea* . . . totally stills me in some really beautiful fundamental way.”

In *The Year of Reading Dangerously*, Andy Miller writes that he didn't just love Douglas Adams's *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* for its ideas about science or philosophy, as appealing as they were, but rather for its words: "The humorous inflection, the rhythm and flow of his sentences, the glorious linguistic precision of his phrasing."

A wide body of research shows that prose can lull our brains into a trancelike state and cause our bodies to relax. The health benefits are like deep relaxation, writes Ceridwen Dovey in the article "Can Reading Make You Happier?" "Regular readers sleep better, have lower stress levels, higher self-esteem, and lower rates of depression than non-readers."

The Nourishing Experience of Reading

Spending time with a book allows you to be still and contemplative. It gives you permission to stop, slow down, and spend time with the thoughts and ideas of another person. Sometimes it doesn't matter *what* you're reading; just reading something can calm you down.

As we turn pages of a book, there's also a sense of movement and forward progress. In addition to the flow of reading a book, there's the satisfaction of completing it. Finishing a novel is an achievement that can provide a rush of accomplishment and make us feel proud.

Additionally, when you're engaged with a story, it's hard to ruminate on the past or anticipate the future. Reading, therefore, provides a respite not only from life but from our own busy minds. Anyone who has lost track of time while reading knows that books can serve as a distraction from reality.

A good book removes us from the endless chatter of our minds and allows us to press pause on desire, to step outside ourselves, and to transcend our egos. For some, playing cards, board games, or sports can provide the same benefit.

Fiction Takes Us on a Journey, Transports Us to Other Worlds

According to Jonny Cooper's article in *The Telegraph*, bibliotherapist Susan Elderkin says that in order for a book cure to work, it has to sweep up the reader and transport them. "There are studies that suggest when one is transported, one is more suggestible and open to learning experiences. It seems that the more you relate to the character in a story and the more you are taken up by the story, the more likely you are to have your behavior changed in the immediate aftermath."

A 2011 study published in the *Annual Review of Psychology*, based on an analysis of fMRI brain scans of participants, shows that when people read about an experience, they display stimulation within the same neurological regions as when they go through that experience themselves. "Psychologists and neuroscientists are increasingly coming to the conclusion that when we read a story and really understand it, we create a mental simulation of the events described by the story."

This imaginary experience is the work of what are called "mirror neurons," brain cells that allow us to feel what others are experiencing as if it were happening to us. When we see someone cry, our mirror neurons fire for crying. Likewise when we witness anger or joy in another person. It's been hypothesized that mirror neurons evolved to help us better infer what others know in order to explain their desires and intentions.

"We don't just mirror other people. We mirror fictional characters too," writes Lisa Cron in *Wired for Story*. "In fact, when people are undergoing an fMRI while reading a short story, the areas of the brain that lit up when they read about an activity were identical to those that lit up when they actually experienced it."

The 2011 study shows that readers mentally simulate each new situation encountered in a narrative. Details about actions and sensation are captured from the text and integrated with personal knowledge from past experiences. These data are then run through mental simulations using brain regions that closely mirror those involved when people perform, imagine, or observe similar real-world activities.

Reality Simulation that Saves Time

What's so useful or healing about going on a journey to an unfamiliar land? By mentally traveling to a fictional place, we can explore an unknown, making it less frightening and more familiar. For this reason, Alain de Botton calls literature the ultimate time-saver.

In The School of Life's video "What is Literature For?", de Botton says that literature "gives us access to a range of emotions and events that it would take you years, decades, millennia to try to experience directly. Literature is the greatest reality simulator—a machine that puts you through infinitely more situations than you can ever directly witness."

And why's this important? Neil Gaiman believes that "once you've visited other worlds . . . you can never be entirely content with the world that you grew up in. Discontent is a good thing: discontented people can modify and improve their worlds, leave them better, leave them different."

Identification, Catharsis, and Integration

In "Bibliotherapy for Hospital Patients," Paula McMillen and Dale-Elizabeth Pehrsson discuss the use of bibliotherapy by clinicians and mental health professionals for hospital patients. Books helped address the emotional needs of patients who were dealing with fears, confusion, embarrassment, sense of lost control, and increased vulnerability.

The authors present a psychodynamic model by which literature achieves its therapeutic effect. "Readers are encouraged to identify with significant characters in the story . . . to experience emotional catharsis as the story characters express themselves . . . and then to gain some insight into themselves and their situations."

McMillen and Pehrsson cite a study by Laura J. Cohen, MA, RN, PhD, who has written extensively on the therapeutic mechanisms by which literature works. In the study, readers were going through difficult periods of their lives. Regardless of the literary genre, Cohen found that "identification with the characters and/or situations in the selected literature was acknowledged by virtually all readers as the key to experiencing positive effects."

This identification between a patient and a characters' situation is essential to the patient deriving the maximal benefit, according to McMillen and Pehrsson. As you read and see yourself in fictional characters, emotions may arise, particularly negative ones. A real benefit "of reading can be seeing how others have dealt with problems or survived difficult situations," according to the authors.

The Promotion of Empathy Through Identification with Characters

In "A Feeling for Fiction," Keith Oatley writes that reading a book is a passive experience only in the physical sense. Emotionally, it is quite an active experience. As we read, "we join ourselves to a character's trajectory through the story world. We see things from their point of view—feel scared when they are threatened, wounded when they are hurt, pleased when they succeed."

Fictional narratives are simulations that allow impartial readers to play out imaginary situations with characters who do and say imaginary things. As we read, we ask, “If I were there, in that moment, with those people, what would I do or say or believe? How might I handle the loss of a sibling? What if I lost a child? Would I have the courage to seek help?” As a result, literature gives us practice for different situations. These imagined scenarios expand our own range of possibilities.

Unlike watching a play or a movie, reading fictional prose allows the reader direct access to the interior thoughts of characters. The author can clearly state what the character is thinking or feeling. By experiencing what a character thinks and feels, we “become sensate,” writes Lisa Cron in *Wired for Story*. More importantly, we can understand what these thoughts and feelings *mean* to the character whose mind we are temporarily inhabiting.

“That’s what readers came for,” writes Cron. “Their unspoken hardwired question is, if something like this happened to me, what would it feel like? How should I best react? Your protagonist might even be showing them how *not* to react, which is a pretty handy answer as well.”

After spending time in a fictional character’s mind, we return to our lives with references to help us better understand the people around us—their choices, their behavior, their beliefs. And when they misstep—“to err is human”—perhaps we can see things from their point of view—“to forgive is divine.” By witnessing the missteps of these imagined characters, perhaps we can avoid the missteps in our own lives.

Catharsis: Feeling Badly without Consequence

Two thousand years ago, Aristotle wrote in *Poetics*, his book on fiction, that while history lets us know what has happened, fiction is more important because it considers what *can* happen. Readers can go to literature to identify with characters, to self-reflect, and to gain insight into themselves without risking harm to themselves or other consequences.

In *Literature as Therapy*, Northrop Frye reminds us of Aristotle, who defined tragedy as a form that evokes emotions of pity and fear to affect a catharsis of those emotions. Frye says that literature presents readers with obstacles that elicit a catharsis (from *katharos*, which means clearing obstacles) that we might not have thought we needed.

“If these emotions of pity and terror are purged through catharsis, as they are in tragedy,” writes Frye, “then the response is a response of emotional balance, a kind of self-integrating process. That is, what we feel when we respond to a tragic action is, well, yes, this kind of thing does happen: it inevitably happens given these circumstances.”

Frye suggests that the purpose of tragedy is to allow us to injure ourselves before life does. Tragedy allows readers to play inside a “counter environment,” where we can purge feelings of pity and terror that we wouldn’t be able to bear in real life.

A Coherent Narrative

Fiction can also help provide our lives with a coherent story. Such an effect may be especially necessary when someone has experienced a trauma or tragedy that can produce a feeling of disbelief that this has happened. Flora Armetta explains this in “The Therapeutic Novel,” in which she writes: “People who have experienced loss or trauma may find healing if they are able to turn their life stories into a narrative that hangs together and makes sense.”

“Recent research suggests that developing a story from the events in one’s life—not necessarily a story with a happy ending, just a true and ‘coherent’ story, as opposed to a ‘fragmented’ one—can bring real relief from depression and anxiety.” And that’s what literature

provides, in Armetta's view. "Consider the vast body of great writing that is precisely about the process that psychotherapy evidently provides: the attempt to narrate a life story as a means of understanding it."

A Different Point of View

Normally, other people's minds are inaccessible. We might have a good idea what someone is thinking or feeling, but unless they tell us, we're only guessing. The ability to intuit the thoughts, feelings, intentions, and beliefs of another person is known as "theory of mind," and research shows that reading literary fiction sharpens it.

Psychologists at the New School for Social Research found that participants who read passages from literary short stories (as opposed to popular fiction) enhanced their ability to empathize with another person. After reading, each participant took the Reading the Mind in the Eyes Test (RMET), a test that asks participants to look at photos of subjects' eyes and identify what they're feeling (e.g., annoyed or scared). The participants who read literary fiction were better able to know what another person was thinking or feeling.

Following fictional characters offers a level of access that is hard to achieve in person, with real people. In an interview, author David Foster Wallace said he believed that serious fiction gave a reader imaginative access to other skulls. "If a piece of fiction can allow us imaginatively to identify with a character's pain, we might then also more easily conceive of others identifying with our own. This is nourishing, redemptive; we become less alone inside."

In this way, engaging in fictional worlds can encourage tolerance. Northrop Frye says that our own beliefs are also just possibilities; exercising our imagination with fiction allows us to see the possibilities in the beliefs of others. "Bigots and fanatics seldom have any use for the arts, because they're so preoccupied with their beliefs and actions that they can't see them as also possibilities."

The Words to Understand Our Own Feelings

In *How Proust Can Change Your Life*, Alain De Botton writes that we should read books to learn what we feel. Have you ever read something and thought, "Yes! I always knew that to be true, but I just didn't have the words for it"? Sometimes an author can express something we have felt but haven't been able to clearly articulate.

The words and deeds of fictional characters can give us the vocabulary to know what we're feeling. In *Persuasion and Healing*, Jerome Frank explains that words are the main tool we humans use to analyze and organize our experiences. The goal of all psychotherapies is to increase a patient's sense of security and mastery by giving names to experiences that seemed haphazard, confusing, or inexplicable.

"Once the unconscious or ineffable has been put into words, it loses much of its power to terrify," writes Frank. "The capacity to use verbal reasoning to explore potential solutions to problems also increases people's sense of their options and enhances their sense of control."

This is called the "Rumpelstiltskin principle," named after the fairy tale in which a queen breaks the power that wicked words have over her by guessing Rumpelstiltskin's name. In *The Mind Game* author E. Fuller Torrey, MD writes that a psychiatrist listens to a patient and helps them define their own experience. Just the naming is therapeutic, writes Torrey. A patient's anxiety lessens because a respected and trusted specialist has shown him how to understand the problem. Torrey believed that naming something was the first step in gaining control over it. The magic of the right word, so to speak.

Fiction Can Elicit a Sense of Solidarity by “Talking One’s Language”

When you experience illness or trauma, it’s not unreasonable to expect some level of self-involvement, a fixation on or even obsession with your malady or difficult situation. If you’re young or experiencing a troubling event for the first time, you might assume you are the only one to have ever dealt with such a problem.

In such instances, a fictional narrative may have healing properties because it follows characters who have been through what we have been through, seen what we have seen, or felt what we have felt. If a character walks like us and talks like us, they “speak our language.” More importantly, a character may be suffering from something we’ve suffered from, and to our surprise, they survive. In some cases, a character may be experiencing a more extreme situation than ours, allowing us to see our problems from a new perspective.

In *Persuasion and Healing*, Frank writes that distress from a crisis or breakdown is made worse by the feeling that no one else has ever been through a similar experience and therefore no one would understand. Engaging with a piece of fiction that contains characters like us can help us realize we’re not the only ones who have dealt with what we’re dealing with. Lisa Cron calls this “marveling in relieved recognition.”

Bill Wilson and Robert Smith, MD, the cofounders of Alcoholics Anonymous, realized that the best method for remaining sober was to engage in a ritualistic exchange of stories about alcoholism. They believed that narratives of addiction allowed members to imaginatively relive dramas from their past, but to do so within a space where there was a strong identification between storyteller and listener. In *Reading as Therapy*, they write that such sympathetic identification creates a sense of solidarity, “not merely with fictional characters, but also with other actual and potential readers who respond in a similar fashion.”

The Therapeutic Power of Expression

For centuries, the book club has allowed people to read a common book and discuss its ideas. In a group setting, people share what the story means to them and how it, or the characters within it, has informed their lives. In the short story “Grief” by Anton Chekhov, the protagonist, a man who drives a chariot, has lost his son. He tries to broach the subject with his riders, but no one seems interested. At the end of the story, he finally talks to an unlikely audience: his horse.

The reader doesn’t hear what the man says. We just know that he has said *something*, and we sense he is unburdened—he grieved. Chekhov signals to the reader that we can feel better if we express ourselves, even if just to an animal. The most important component of this lesson isn’t necessarily that we’ve talked but that we’ve been listened to.

Discovery of Our Shadowy Aspects

As previously mentioned, we don’t just experience positive emotions while reading. Fiction also allows us to engage with the negative, less pleasant aspects of personhood. In fiction, we can encounter darkness and sometimes entertain taboo, even criminal, thoughts.

It’s a sometimes disorienting fact that we have the choice to act out harmful thoughts. The Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard called this the “dizziness of freedom.” For example, the terror we feel at the edge of a cliff isn’t necessarily the fear that we will fall. Rather, it’s that we could throw ourselves off, if we wanted to. We have that choice.

In the article “Move Over Freud: Literary Fiction Is the Best Therapy,” Salley Vickers writes that reading about villains allows us to discover shadowy aspects of ourselves that we

have failed to acknowledge or recognize. Vickers writes that in the psychological novel *Crime and Punishment*, “Dostoevsky illuminates, through the example of his character . . . that our civilised selves may conceal a lethal armoury, potentially capable of atrocities.”

In *Persuasion and Healing*, Frank writes that unpleasant emotions can lead patients to search actively for relief, which is an added benefit of exploring the shadowy aspects of ourselves. “Intense emotional experiences . . . may break up old patterns of personality integration and facilitate the achievement of better ones.”

It’s also worth noting that no human is perfect. Most of us feel guilty about something. A bad habit or an uncouth aspect of ourselves, perhaps. As readers, it’s hard to relate to a perfect character, which is why fiction writers are taught to give their characters flaws, especially their protagonists. As readers, some natural guilt or self-loathing may subside momentarily when we relate to a character with less-than-admirable qualities. We realize that perhaps the unlikable aspects of ourselves aren’t major failings after all.

A Cure for Loneliness

In the video “What is Literature For?” produced by The School of Life, author Alain de Botton claims that books are a cure for loneliness. Since we can’t always say what we’re really thinking in civilized conversations, literature often describes who we genuinely are more honestly than what ordinary conversation allows.

“In the best books, it’s as if the writer knows us better than we know ourselves—they find the words to describe the fragile, weird, special experiences of our inner lives. . . . Writers open our hearts and minds, and give us maps to our own selves, so that we can travel in them more reliably and with less of a feeling of paranoia or persecution.”

According to Marcel Proust, reading also offers us company without discrimination. In his 1905 essay, “On Reading,” Proust writes that we can stop and start books at our leisure and enter fictional worlds on our own time, without all the messiness that accompanies human relationships.

Laughter: The Best Medicine

Some books are just fun to read. They make us laugh, and we feel better because of it. A great deal of research has shown that humor is good for our health. Researchers have proven that people with certain types of humor have higher self-esteem, greater self-competence, more positive affect, more control over anxiety, and perform better in social situations.

For readers who may be struggling, Northrop Frye writes that literature can combat melancholy by providing amusement and lighthearted pleasure. He recommends literature that employs the “deliberate creation of hope and other positive emotions, particularly laughter, subscribing to the principle that ‘a merry heart doeth good like a medicine.’”

What is it, in books, that makes us laugh? “Nothing is funnier than the sudden escape of the exact truth of any situation,” writes Frye. He cites Milan Kundera who said, “The great comic geniuses are those who have discovered or uncovered for their audiences the comic aspects of what those audiences have not previously thought of as comic.”

Why does laughter have a healing effect? Frye notes that a comic character can uncover a funny aspect of life and restore balance in those for whom that aspect has been repressed. He cites Aristotle’s catharsis. A joke—in this case, “a sick joke”—“expresses forms of pity and fear which achieve something of a purgation of those emotions.”

But perhaps the healing effects are the result of the distraction that levity produces? As explained in *Anatomy of an Illness as Perceived by the Patient*, author Norman Cousins laughed his way to a cure for his autoimmune disease by watching funny movies. Cousins explained that funny movies distracted him, so his body's own internal healing mechanisms could do their work. "The art of medicine," wrote Voltaire, "consists of amusing the patient while nature cures the disease."

The Splendor of the Ordinary

Literature can expose us to images of beauty and help us appreciate the little things we so often overlook. In *How Proust Can Change Your Life*, de Botton says that Proust thought much dissatisfaction was the result of failing to see the beauty in the ordinary. Proust argued that fiction could open our eyes and make us notice the beauty that's all around us. For Proust, such appreciation could spark a spiritual transformation.

Proust once wrote an essay "in which he set out to restore a smile to the face of a gloomy, envious and dissatisfied young man." The essay urged this imaginary young man to appreciate the work of Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin, who painted mundane depictions of fruits, jugs, and loaves of bread. "Yet, in spite of the ordinary nature of their subjects, Chardin's paintings succeeded in being extraordinarily beguiling and evocative."

According to Proust, such an opulent depiction of mediocrity would dazzle this man and, if he took this encounter with art seriously, make him happy. Indeed, sometimes our unhappiness isn't a lack of material things but an improper appreciation for what's already around us. Exposure to art may be especially important in the case of illness, as sickness can hijack our focus and detract from our appreciation of our surroundings.

Literary Incitements

In the article "Books Should Send Us into Therapy: On the Paradox of Bibliotherapy," James McWilliams argues that literature can help us heal by shaking us out of complacency. "Ever have a novel sneak upon you and kick you in the gut, leaving you staring into space, dazed by an epiphany? Yes. Novels do this." In his own group therapy, McWilliams gives members books not to solve problems, as bibliotherapy is intended to do, but to *create* problems. He argues that certain books can present problems we didn't think we needed and that overcoming these problems elicits catharsis.

It was Proust who thought of books not as "conclusions" but as "incitements." In *How Proust Can Change Your Life*, de Botton writes that readers often want authors to provide answers. But authors can really only provide readers with the *desire* to look inward and better understand themselves by figuring out what they think and feel.

Examination of Values in the Face of Death

While discussing suicide and death may seem like a grim activity, thinking about the shortness of life can help us live more fully by encouraging us to focus on how we use our time.

If there is an existential fear of death, Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* may help us manage it. By all accounts, it seems Ivan has lived "the good life": an enviable career with a great reputation. But as his health declines, he wonders: "What if my whole life had been wrong?" In light of his impending death, Ivan's "successes" seem shallow. He realizes that perhaps he married too quickly; he was often preoccupied with money and professional advancement. "His professional duties and the whole arrangement of his life and his family and

all his social and official interests might have been false. He tried to defend those things to himself and suddenly felt the weakness of what he was defending. There was nothing to defend.”

In *The Road to Character*, David Brooks writes that the story invites readers to examine their own lives. How would we feel if we were dying right now? Did we live lives true to ourselves? Have we ever thought like Ilyich: “Maybe I did not live as I ought to have done”?

We all want external success, however we define it, but Tolstoy’s short work of fiction urges us to monitor ourselves, to make sure that our drive for success doesn’t result in a spiritual poverty. “It’s probably necessary to have one foot in the world of achievement but another foot in a counterculture that is in tension with the achievement ethos,” writes Brooks.

The novella also reminds us of our own mortality. The story encourages us to live like we are dying, which, of course, we are. Ivan dies with pity and forgiveness for everyone around him. De Botton writes, “In writing about Ivan, Tolstoy wanted us to see his life as representative of all human potential, if only we could wake up to it before it is too late.”

Writing as Therapy

Many authors build worlds for readers to inhabit and learn from, but oftentimes the writing itself confers a benefit to the author. In an increasingly complex and bewildering world, many authors are writing as a form of therapy, seeking to create fictional works that gave meaning to their lives and helped vaccinate themselves against future troubles. “And so I write this to heal myself. To heal you,” Richard Burton writes in *The Anatomy of Melancholy*.

As we have seen, fictional narratives offer more than just distraction, entertainment, or a temporary relief from our lives. Books are counselors, teachers, elixirs for the mind and spirit. “Literature has the function of delighting and instructing us, but also, and above all, save our souls and heal the state,” said George Stuart Gordon.

Even if a book doesn’t provide a complete remedy for what ails us, at the very least literature might fulfill the role of the physician as defined by John Berger and Jean Mohr in their classic book, *A Fortunate Man: The Story of a Country Doctor*: “To cure sometimes, to relieve often, and to comfort always.

Dustin Grinnell writes, “Several years ago, when doctors couldn’t find an explanation for my mysterious physical symptoms, including back pain, aching joints and tingling limbs, I went on a quest to uncover the root causes. My journey took me from physical therapists to psychiatrists, from chronic pain to repressed emotions, from existential crisis to posttraumatic growth. In 2019, I wrote about this brush with psychosomatic illness for the journal *Perspective in Biology & Medicine*. Continuing to explore my interests in storytelling and medicine, I wrote an essay about the therapeutic uses of fiction for Hektoen International and attended the 2019 Narrative Medicine Workshop at Columbia University Irving Medical Center. My creative nonfiction has appeared in such outlets as the Washington Post, Salon, Vice, the LA Review of Books, Writer’s Digest, the Boston Globe, and New Scientist, among others. I am the author of two science fiction novels, *The Genius Dilemma* and *Without Limits*, and have published short fiction in medical journals. I hold a BA in psychobiology from Wheaton College (MA), an MS in physiology from Penn State, and an MFA in creative writing (fiction) from the Solstice program in Chestnut Hill, MA. I work as a staff writer for Brigham and Women’s Hospital in Boston.”