

Reading for Good



Reading can make you feel better – and not just in a cosy, cup-of-tea-on-the-couch way. We mean really feel better: mindful and empathetic, inspired and connected. [Alicia Sometimes](#) explores what bibliotherapy is all about.

Alicia Sometimes is a Melbourne writer, poet and broadcaster. She has a passion for libraries and all things book related.

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illustration by Angharad Neal-Williams

Book therapy. Two words together that make me think all will be right with the world. I imagine an armchair, a hot cup of tea, novel in hand and talking out loud to Grace Paley, Ellen van Neerven, Yaa Gyasi or Jane Austen. In so many moments in my life, whether beset with melancholy or mild euphoria, the prescription of reading books has hit just the spot.

The word bibliotherapy is derived from the Greek words for book, *biblio*, and healing, *therapeia*. It's a broad term for the practice of reading for therapeutic effect. It can take on many forms, from being read to, to being in group or one-on-one sessions with a bibliotherapist practitioner, to participating in book clubs or literature courses. Anyone can benefit from being immersed in books.

For Dr Susan McLaine, bibliotherapist, researcher and podcaster, it's all about "using words in literature to serve the greater good".

"My way of describing bibliotherapy in the way I work," she says, "is the practice of using imaginative and poetic literature and storytelling to positively affect the wellness of individuals, families, communities and society."

McLaine says that bibliotherapy helps people deal with psychological, social and emotional challenges. It's not necessarily about finding the answers in books, but about engaging in empathy, and exploring a problem from a range of different perspectives.

"Bibliotherapy also assists highly vulnerable people who need support to move ahead in their lives by offering opportunities other than traditional therapy," she says. "[It's] supporting people to change by using literature as a pathway to thinking new thoughts and developing new insight and perspectives around personal difficulties."

Whether you are an avid writers' festivalgoer to someone who reads once a year, stories can help us navigate the world. "What I have found in my experience is that whether reading is enjoyed or not, when the imagination is engaged, healing happens through imagining how things can be different," she adds.

So how does it work? Every reader is different, and a consultation with a bibliotherapist is a highly personal affair. McLaine reiterates that so much of the process depends on the circumstances of the reader, and that getting to know them first is the priority. After talking through the person's needs, reading habits, and the challenges they face, McLaine prescribes books that will help them have what she describes as "the conversation they need to have with themselves".

"I choose books that will provide open-ended opportunities for insight and some different perspectives to consider. Books that help readers to be curious, reflective and explore new ideas. Books that offer comfort and a way to quietly dwell with possibilities."



...when the imagination is engaged, healing happens through imagining how things can be different.

BIBLIOTHERAPIST DR SUSAN MCLAINE

Recently, when suffering daily headaches after getting COVID-19, I couldn't reach for the TV or talk on the phone. The only thing I could do was listen to other people read. So I listened to McLaine's podcast *Bibliotherapy With State Library Victoria*. It was soothing, her voice warm and comforting, the stories soaking straight into my skin. Hearing Cate Kennedy's 'Puppet Show' or Tim Winton's 'Neighbours' helped me escape my all-too-curvy couch and the confines of relentless pain. These stories became close friends.

McLaine began the podcast in 2020, as a response to our collective isolation, when non-essential wellness services like face-to-face bibliotherapy were suspended. "My goal was to offer bibliotherapy in an accessible facilitated self-reflective digital format as a novel wellness innovation," she says. "In the podcasts, stories, poems, lyrics or poetic non-fiction are read aloud. Then, facilitation is provided to support the listener as they explore the themes and thoughts that present themselves."

The podcasts are a great way to connect with writing, language and ideas. Over the past two years many of my friends have reconnected with their vast book collections, trusted old novels, scintillating classics or new audio books as a way of coping.

Stella Glorie, writer, reviewer and host of the *Thirty Books* YouTube channel, says bibliotherapy has helped her – although she might not have known the term "bibliotherapy" at the time.

"In the early 2000s I was beset by a profound loneliness," Glorie says. "Reading Marilynne Robinson's books helped because her characters are by and large lonely, or live and embrace, or come to terms with or find moments of wonder, in a solitary life. But they have a rich interior life. It made me adjust to that



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IT'S TIME TO END HOMELESSNESS

and see that there's a blessing in solitude... She's showing the reader how to pay attention to the world."

We are often drawn to books with characters with whom we can identify or who maybe seem a little like ourselves. McLaine remembers prescribing a Manga book to a teenage girl with an eating disorder. "I suggested to the mother to ask her daughter to read aloud to her parents any bits that would help her explain how she was feeling," McLaine reflects. "She came in and read to them on three separate occasions in the first night. It was the first time they had ever been able to talk about it."

We are also attracted to books to escape. Sonya Tsakalakis, Melbourne-based bibliotherapist and co-author of the book *Reading the Seasons*, says that with so much to worry about in the pandemic world, the universe of books can become a welcome refuge.

"[People were] just being attuned to the endless news cycle and the worry of what was ahead, so they needed to be lost in a good story," she says. "People need fiction more than ever just so they can be immersed in something that would take them away from that reality. I love that idea of escapism and I do it all the time."

But bibliotherapy is not merely a personal endeavour. Increasingly, organisations are recognising the healing power of books. McLaine, who has designed bibliotherapy programs for Port Phillip Prison and the homelessness support service Prague House, says that bibliotherapy can be a really important way of bringing groups of people together to discuss complex topics in a way that feels supportive and constructive.

"It helps the cohort open up and to have genuine discussion about difficult things – all within a forum of feeling and being safe due to the narrative being about someone else – the voices and reflection of characters in the story," McLaine says. In these settings, a trained facilitator will work with the

group to guide the discussion, encouraging them to flesh out particular thoughts, feelings and ideas. "What is essential is for the institution or organisation and the bibliotherapy facilitator to have a clear understanding of the aim of the bibliotherapeutic activity."

Part of the reason why bibliotherapy can work so well is because we see diversity in books. We read about struggles, triumph, lived differences, every kind of experience and endless future possibilities. We begin to understand what other people, as well as ourselves, might be going through. This is one of the many reasons why accessibility is so important. Free access to books, programs, services and support is key. Public libraries – and librarians – are essential. Reading within the justice system is vital. Encouraging reading in schools is crucial.

I've always thought there shouldn't be any snobbery to reading, a sentiment that McLaine and Tsakalakis reiterate. Read graphic novels, literary fiction, sports memoirs, poetry chapbooks, comics, essays, genre fiction or any non-fiction you can get your hands on. Read slowly or speed read, read 10 books at once or savour a cherished book, re-read Brian Greene or Diana Gabaldon's *Outlander* series over 20 times during the pandemic. Did I say that last part out loud?

Let bibliotherapy be a part of your life no matter how big or small. Chances are, it already is. You may be part of a book club right now.

Tsakalakis says, "Book clubs are a great way of connecting meaningfully with others because that's what it's all about, that human connection. We all crave and desire to feel less alone in the world."

And that's it, isn't it? We all crave and desire to feel less alone in the world – and maybe reading a book can help bring us a little closer together. ■

Well Read

Melbourne-based bibliotherapist Sonya Tsakalakis prescribes some of her favourite titles for coping in the modern world.

Feeling angsty?

The Performance
by Claire Thomas

All the characters are doing battle with their own personal dramas. As we get a glimpse of their interiorities we feel a sense of solidarity, a recognition that we are not alone.

Disconnected?

The Last of Her Kind
by Sigrid Nunez

A story of an unlikely friendship that begins in college in New York of the 1960s. Also pays homage to the enduring influence of a great English teacher!

Broken hearted?

The High Road
by Edna O'Brien

Edna O'Brien captures the intensity of a broken heart with poetic flair in *The High Road*. Then hope arrives unexpectedly on a Mediterranean island.

In need of a bit of wisdom?

The English Teacher
by RK Narayan

I have always loved the elegance and wisdom of RK Narayan, particularly here. He gently prods us to fix our gaze to what matters the most when we're feeling derailed.

Or a life-affirming jolt?

Staying Alive: Real Poems for Unreal Times
edited by Neil Astley

This collection showcases poems covering the kaleidoscope of human experience, by poets from all over the world, and across time.