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An Introduction to Bibliotherapy
by Helen Hoopes

From the early beginnings, man has understood the therapeutic effects of reading upon the human mind. It is written that in ancient Greece, over the entrance to a library in Thebes, was the inscription: "Healing Place of the Soul." The belief that reading may affect an individual's emotions, attitudes, and subsequent behavior is as old as the art of reading itself.

The printed word has had great power over people. Look at the effect of such works as Mein Kampf, The Communist Manifesto, Common Sense, and the Bible. The incidences of book burnings, the suppression of ideas, the opposition by dictators down through the ages to the present, and the censorship of books in the libraries and school systems of today, bear testimony to the explosive power of books.

Although books have been used for many hundreds of years to soothe and calm the troubled mind, there is little in the literature to indicate that anyone did much in the field of bibliotherapy until the beginning of the twentieth century.

Before we go any further, let us define "bibliotherapy." According to Webster's Third New International Dictionary (unabridged, 1971) bibliotherapy is defined as "The use of selected reading materials as therapeutic and adjuvants in medicine and in psychiatry;" also "guidance in the solution of personal problems through directed reading." According to the Thesaurus of ERIC Descriptors (11th Edition, 1987) bibliotherapy is the "use of selected reading and related materials for therapeutic purposes in physical medicine, mental health, and education."

In 1969, Harold A. Moses and Joseph S. Zaccaria compiled a list of ten principles that they felt have evolved for the use of bibliotherapy. They include the following:

1. One who uses this approach must understand the nature and dynamics of bibliotherapy, incorporating the theoretical aspects of bibliotherapy into a functional theory.
2. The "therapist" must possess at least a general familiarity with the literature which the student will use.
3. Bibliotherapeutic reading can be encouraged through the use of prompting techniques.
4. Readiness is an important factor to be kept in mind when considering the utilization of bibliotherapeutic techniques.
5. Books should be suggested rather than prescribed.
6. The practitioner should be sensitive to physical handicaps of the individual which may dictate the necessity of using special types of reading materials.
7. Bibliotherapy appears to be most effective with individuals of average and above-average reading ability.
8. The reading of the literature by the individual should be accomplished or followed up by discussion and counseling.
9. Bibliotherapy is an adjunct to other types of helping relationships.
10. Although bibliotherapy is a useful technique, it is not a panacea.¹

Many librarians and teachers feel that they have the experience and training and are therefore qualified to "prescribe" books for their students who are having behavior problems or who are experiencing conflicts in their lives. As will be shown, bibliotherapy is much more complex than that.

What qualifications must a person have in order to practice bibliotherapy? First, the librarian or teacher must know the people who need help: their reading level, their interests, and enough about their problems or insecurities to understand their behavior.

Louis A. Rongione has compiled a list of personal qualities, which, according to him, the bibliotherapist must possess or cultivate. They include:

1. A balanced personality which implies emotional stability, physical well-being, mature judgement, and the ability to channel personal feelings and to direct them to the best interest of those whom he desires to help.
2. The ability to work with people, including the competence to instruct, and the skill to supervise other personnel and associates.
3. The willingness to familiarize oneself with the community as well as the individual, and to empathize with the misfortunes and shortcomings of others, and to react with sufficient facility to be of help.

4. An understanding of the goal desired in each instance, together with a willingness to accept responsibility for the action taken, and the ability to assume, without reluctance and without arrogance, the authority necessary to meet each situation.²

This is quite a comprehensive list, but Ronigone goes on to say that the bibliotherapist should also have knowledge of the following:

1. Literature for children, young adults, and adults.
2. The biological sciences of anatomy and physiology.
3. Elementary psychiatry.
4. Psychology in so far as it pertains to:
   a. Techniques of diagnosis, guidance, and counseling.
   b. The physically handicapped and the emotionally disturbed.
   c. Different kinds of ethnic groups.
   d. Principles of motivation and remotivation.
   e. Techniques of testing, along with training and in interpretation of test results.
5. Sociology as it relates to:
   a. Medical and social problems of illness.
   b. Techniques of the rehabilitation of the aging.
   c. Training in statistics and report writing.³

After analyzing the foregoing qualifications, it becomes obvious that librarians or teachers are usually not completely qualified to practice bibliotherapy. The area in which they seem to be most lacking is in medical and psychological training. Even though most of the authorities feel that librarians and educators are not fully qualified, they do feel that they should serve a very definite function in connection with the actual practice.

Librarians and educators need to become involved with a type of reading guidance, but not so complex or scientific as bibliotherapy. They must know books and readers and the effects of bringing the two together. They can advise and recommend and consult with their patrons, but the in-depth therapeutic effort will have to be left to the medical profession. Selectively guiding the reading of students should not be misconstrued as serving as a bibliotherapist.


³Ibid.
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Following is an annotated list of readings that will be of benefit to both librarians and educators who have an interest in bibliotherapy and wish to learn more about how to use books to help youngsters in real need. (All of these sources come from the ERIC (Educational Resources Information Center) Index (1/83 - 12/89).


Provides a rationale for using bibliotherapy, then examines the proper way to administer it.


Suggests how parents, as key participants, can use bibliotherapy as an effective tool in helping teenagers solve their problems. Reports attitudes toward bibliotherapy and interactions among the parents and children of four families.


Argues that bibliotherapy can be used to help children develop reading comprehension skills and to use that skill to understand their own personal and social development in a better way. Provides a list of books suitable for bibliotherapy.


Suggests guidelines for selecting and using picture books exploring emotionally charged issues to help attain therapeutic goals and/or to foster emotionally enriching classroom experiences.

CHILDREN'S BOOK REVIEW 5

Presents an annotated bibliography of children's books which parents and teacher can use to help young children deal with separation anxiety and other feelings associated with the beginning of school.


   Discusses how to use literature to help children of alcoholics. Provides a list of appropriate books.


   Reviews literature concerning bibliotherapy and concludes that it can be of value to a child's overall emotional development and may help in breaking emotional barriers to learning. Discusses the role of the reading teacher in the bibliotherapeutic process.