



A BOOK *for* EVERY AILMENT

Maybe the world feels like it's crumbling.
Or a relationship feels fraught.
Or you just need a little dose of perspective.
Find the fix—and solace, and inspiration,
and unexpected belly laugh at the exact
moment you need it—in a bookcase near you.
Catherine Hong shares how bibliotherapy
offers the novel cure you're after.
Photographs by Johnny Miller

I

'M NOT IN THERAPY THESE DAYS, but like many people, I have issues that could use some working through. Just ask my husband or my teenage daughter (but not my mother—please, not her!). In the past, I've seen compassionate, well-trained therapists who offered sound advice and plenty of tissues, but those weekly sessions never lasted for the long haul. They started getting expensive, and—for an introvert like me, who prefers to let other people do the talking—50 minutes of forced conversation began being something to dread.

The concept of bibliotherapy, therefore, struck me as not only practical but downright inviting. Bibliotherapy is the practice of reading books to help address

the everyday ailments of life, such as low-level anxiety, heartache, and midlife ennui. (Let's be clear: It's not intended to replace traditional therapy for severe conditions.) For any book lover, the appeal is especially obvious: Time spent pleasure reading can be guilt-free in the name of mental health and wellness. With little more than a stack of novels and a cozy chair, you could, in theory, heal thyself.

The belief in the salubrious effect of storytelling is nothing new. In ancient Greece, the entrance to the library of Thebes was inscribed with "healing place of the soul." Around the end of the 19th century, Sigmund Freud was using literature in psychoanalysis sessions. Later, during World War I, hospitalized patients were encouraged to read books as a means of recovering from trauma.

The term "bibliotherapeutics" is believed to date back to 1916, when the *Atlantic Monthly* reported on the goings-on at a Bibliopathic Institute, run out of a church basement, where a self-anointed specialist dispensed the works of Tolstoy, Shaw, and Thackeray like tinctures and tonics. The craze for literary clinics never took off quite like the practice of psychotherapy, but the term "bibliotherapy" has gained currency in recent years, due to the efforts of Ella Berthoud and Susan Elderkin. The two University of Cambridge-educated book lovers, who operate a bibliotherapy service out of London's School of Life, cowrote *The Novel Cure: From Abandonment to Zestlessness: 751 Books to Cure What Ails You*. "When we were students, we liked to joke that we could be book doctors," Berthoud says. "When one of us had a problem, the other would recommend a book to help the other through it."

Clients seeking their bibliotherapy services start out by answering a detailed questionnaire. Then they have a phone or video conference with a bibliotherapist to further discuss their reading habits and personal dilemmas. Several days later, clients receive an individualized "prescription" of about six books, as well as the therapist's explanation for why each one was chosen.

When Berthoud and I had our video chat, it was mid-March, in the early days of the Covid-19 crisis. I had dutifully completed her questionnaire, surprising myself by the passion with which I answered questions like "How would you describe your relationship to books?," "Which books and authors have you loved most?," and "What is missing from your life?" Perhaps because I was writing, not speaking, I laid everything out: my increasingly distant children, my



conflicted emotions regarding my mother, my AWOL career ambitions. Topping it all off, of course, was the new, high-pitched anxiety regarding face masks, distance learning, and my inability to purchase toilet paper.

Berthoud was warm and reassuring, and we bonded immediately over being isolated at home with teenagers. Having paged through *The Novel Cure*, I was inclined to like her anyway: The 751 books she and Elderkin recommend are heavy on literary fiction, light on the extremes of obscure highbrow or trashy commercial. They prescribe *Bel Canto* by Ann Patchett for unrequited love, *The Rachel Papers* by Martin Amis for cynicism, *American Psycho* by Bret Easton Ellis for shopaholism—all inspired pairings, in my book. And Berthoud won me over on the topic of children's literature, a lifelong passion of mine. "Children's books can offer wonderful inspiration and solace to adults," she told me. "I've recommended *The Giver* by Lois Lowry to clients who've felt a lack of wonder and joy in their lives. It's a book that reminds you how amazing life is, even when it's hard."

She tossed out a few recommendations, among them *Family Matters* by Rohinton Mistry ("It's all about aging

parents”) and a couple of titles to get me through the developing pandemic. *A Gentleman in Moscow* by Amor Towles, she promised, would be fantastic for quarantine because “the main character himself is confined to his hotel for 30 years.” *The Martian* by Andy Weir would be another ideal lockdown read, on account of the protagonist’s “self-resourcefulness and will to survive.” Within a minute of hanging up, I had ordered a half dozen paperbacks online and was eagerly awaiting Berthoud’s full prescription.

In the meantime, I did a little more research on the effects of reading. A study in 2000 showed that when people read about an event, they display activity in the same brain regions they would if they had experienced it firsthand. Other studies have found that people who read literary fiction tend to demonstrate increased empathy. Reading has also been shown to nurture a sharper mind and coax our bodies into a state of deep relaxation, not unlike meditation. Books, it seemed clear to me, could help people become happier and healthier, not to mention more emotionally attuned to others.

“I talk about books with my shrink all the time,” a friend told me. “She loves reading, so it’s something we connect on. You should talk to her!” A couple of days later, I was on the phone with Ruth Burtman, PhD, a psychologist in New York City. “For my patients who love to read, discussing novels or memoirs can be really helpful, maybe more so than self-help books,” she said. One of the benefits of reading fiction, she explained, is that the lessons and themes are rarely explicit. “Novels reach us on a deep, implicit level, which is how we learn most of our behavior.” And stories tend to stick with us. “You might easily forget a set of facts, but you don’t easily forget a place,” she said. “Reading a novel is like visiting a place.”

The tricky part, Burtman acknowledged, is that not everybody interprets a book the same way. “Different people naturally focus on different aspects of a novel, depending on their point of view,” she said. We stumbled on this in our own conversation, when she told me that one book she had recommended to patients who were lamenting a “loss of lightness and sense of humor” was *Where’d You Go, Bernadette*, Maria Semple’s comic novel about a misanthropic former architect who mysteriously disappears.

READING Rx

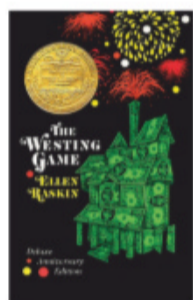
Six writers recall the books that felt the most like therapy.



“In the summer of 2017, I had retreated to Turin, Italy, to work on my novel and was struggling to write about the darkest of subjects: domestic violence. I came across *Look*, Solmaz Sharif’s collection of poems, and read it in one sitting. ‘It matters what you call a thing,’ she writes. She forces the reader to engage with how language is used for and against us. It’s a good book to read now, as we face unbearable loss.”

Angie Cruz

AUTHOR OF *DOMINICANA*



“At least once a year I engage in self-therapy by rereading Ellen Raskin’s *The Westing Game*. Yes, it’s a middle-grade novel, around 200 nearly perfect pages of puzzle mystery. But its themes of compassion, forgiveness, and charity inspire me to be a better human being—plus, it’s pure, all-ages fun.”

Juliet Grames

AUTHOR OF *THE SEVEN OR EIGHT DEATHS OF STELLA FORTUNA*



“After working on my third novel and completing a 30-city book tour, I was mentally and creatively exhausted. I felt I had nothing left inside to sustain me through the writing of another book. In this depleted state, I read *Becoming Jane Eyre* by Sheila Kohler, a beautiful novel about Charlotte Brontë and the writing of her great opus. I was transported to the Yorkshire moors where Charlotte persisted despite an ill father, an opiate-addicted brother, poverty, and failure. The book inspired me to visit the Brontë home in England and tapped a small tsunami of passion inside of me. I was soon at work again. I often suggest this book to someone who feels beleaguered by life, burned-out at work, or simply in need of creative rekindling.”

Sue Monk Kidd

AUTHOR OF *THE SECRET LIFE OF BEES* AND *THE BOOK OF LONGINGS*



“One of the first books I remember reading as a kind of therapy is *The Age of Grief* by Jane Smiley, which includes a story about a husband who suspects his wife is having an affair. He falls into deep sadness while they continue to go about their daily lives as a couple and as parents. I was single and living in New York when I first read it, and there was something so moving about the details of married life, the intimacy of it, how you could know someone so well and love them so much and still be crushed by that love.”

Laura Zigman

AUTHOR OF
SEPARATION ANXIETY

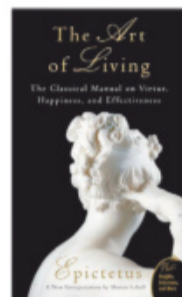


“As an author who also happens to be a therapist, I love to ‘prescribe’ my patients books that I think will hold up a mirror to them and help them through their struggles. I have favorites for everything from depression to addiction to narcissism, but one universally relatable book I recommend often is Joan Didion’s *The Year of Magical Thinking*. On the surface, it’s about the year

of grief following her husband’s sudden death from a heart attack. But really it’s an achingly gorgeous, thought-provoking, and even quite funny memoir about an extraordinary marriage, a rocky mother-daughter relationship, and the terror and beauty of loving so deeply.”

Lori Gottlieb

AUTHOR OF *MAYBE YOU SHOULD TALK TO SOMEONE*



“The book I’ve relied on most to help navigate difficult times is *The Art of Living: The Classical Manual on Virtue, Happiness, and Effectiveness*, Sharon Lebell’s translation of the teachings of Epictetus. He claimed that human beings cannot control life, only their responses to it. When I was going through a very public divorce, at first I felt quite defensive, and I was angry—apoplectic, really—for months. But I got tired of being upset, because it was draining me of other things that made me feel good. I took my power back.”

Terry McMillan

AUTHOR OF *IT’S NOT ALL DOWNHILL FROM HERE*

“Really?” I couldn’t help interjecting. “I don’t see that one for someone looking for lightness. I would have said it was perfect for someone struggling with creativity or their loss of ambition.”

She paused.

“Maybe this is something you’re grappling with,” she responded. (Damn—she got me!)

The consolations of bibliotherapy also reminded me of one of my former English professors, Edward Mendelson, the author of *The Things That Matter*, which explores how seven classic novels probe different stages of life. He discusses what *Wuthering Heights* has to say about childhood, what *Middlemarch* tells us about marriage, what *Mrs. Dalloway* illuminates about love, and so on. I reconnected with Mendelson over email, and he affirmed his belief that art can help with healing. “Art and literature tell you truths about the world and about yourself that no one else can tell you,” he replied. “W.H. Auden once wrote: ‘The primary function of poetry, as of all the arts, is to make us more aware of ourselves and the world around us.’”

I pulled out Mendelson’s book to read his chapter on *To the Lighthouse*. He writes that Woolf’s 1927 novel is, among other things, “a study in the double nature of parenthood, its simultaneous impulses to hold back and push forward a child.” I unearthed my yellowed copy, and, over the course of a few nights, immersed myself in the Ramsay family’s home on the Isle of Skye. This time, I saw the way Mrs. Ramsay squelches her children’s and guests’ individuality in a quest to hold back time. “Life stand still here,” the character Lily Briscoe recalls the matriarch saying. In other words, the warm, maternal Mrs. Ramsay was also a smothering control freak.

Ding! Ding! Ding! That ringing in my head was what Aristotle called my moment of anagnorisis, or recognition. Because I *know* I should stop mooning over those old family photos that Shutterfly keeps emailing me, in which my kids are still pliable and chubby-cheeked. And I *know* I shouldn’t be trying to wrestle my 13-year-old into a forced cuddle as if he were still 6. “Don’t be like Mrs. Ramsay,” I told myself. “I cannot hold life still. Remember Mrs. Ramsay.” Lo, this was bibliotherapy in action.

Through the rest of March and the first weeks of April, the days and nights of social distancing rolled into one another: The kitchen was an endless cycle of damp chopping boards and errant onion skins, pots and pans piled in



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daughter guilt churning: “As long-held secrets and private sorrows begin to reveal themselves, they are forced to wonder: how well did they actually know the woman they called Mom?”

I did not derive pleasure, exactly, from *Please Look After Mom*, but I was sucked deep, deep inside. As I read it, all my concerns about the inanities of TikTok and my pantry’s lack of chickpeas fell away. The mother hobbling in the streets of Seoul in her broken blue plastic slippers! Her daughter, gabbing carelessly on a cellphone, eating gourmet street food, thinking only of herself! With these images in my mind, how could I ever show impatience to my own dear mother again?

When I finished the book, I knew I had to connect with my mother about it. I had to tell her how it shamed me into seeing my own selfishness. How I hadn’t shown appreciation for her. How sorry I was for not doing or saying more! But I also dreaded the conversation. So, chicken that I am, I sent her an email asking if she had read *Please Look After Mom* and what she thought. Here’s what she wrote back:

I was comforted to find out that only a mother can be so devoted and sacrifice for her children. Therefore I feel less sad about my mother’s misfortune and feel less guilty about my selfishness after reading this book.

the sink, the dishwasher churning and the dog begging for yet another walk. Whenever I could, I shut myself in my bedroom and plunged into my growing pile of novels recommended by Berthoud. (Bookstores, thank God, were still taking orders, and the post office was still delivering.)

I devoured *The Summerhouse: A Trilogy* by Alice Thomas Ellis, which includes a story about a young woman’s impending marriage to a man she does not love. “I thought of this for you because it is brilliant on mothers and daughters,” Berthoud had written me. Being a sucker for British domestic dramas set in grand houses where everyone is quietly seething or pining, I loved it. But it only offered the therapy of pure, diverting escapism, as the characters and relationships in the book felt far too removed from mine to be relatable.

I was looking for a book to wrestle with—a book with some thorns that might leave me, if not scratched and bruised, somehow altered. So I turned to *Please Look After Mom* by Kyung-Sook Shin, about an older woman from a rural Korean village who becomes separated from her family. The jacket copy alone turned my blood cold and got all my Korean-

I had to read it twice to understand that she wasn’t talking about me. As it turns out, when my mom read the book, she didn’t think about my shortcomings—she thought about how guilty *she* felt toward her own Korean mother. This came as such a relief to me that I could only laugh. Burtman was right again.

Writing this as my family continues social distancing, I’m still slowly making my way through the novels in Berthoud’s prescription, which include several meant to get inside a teenager’s head. As for the books about making it through the pandemic with sanity intact? I don’t think I need them. I’m feeling strangely calm and not a bit stir-crazy—maybe it’s all the extra time I have for reading.