

## The Open University History of Books and Reading (HOBAR) Research Group with the Institute of English Studies, School of Advanced Study, University of London

### 2019-2020 annual joint seminar series: [‘Reading and Wellbeing’](#)

Bibliotherapy is now a thriving discipline, both in the publishing world and as a form of clinical practice. Books such as Ella Berthoud and Susan Elderkin’s *The Novel Cure* (2013) and its sequel for children, *The Story Cure* (2016), have been bestsellers in multiple markets. Charities like The Reading Agency have championed participation in reading groups as powerful way of combatting loneliness and social isolation. In the fields of medicine and social care, meanwhile, bibliotherapy has also become increasingly prominent. In Britain, the Reading Agency’s ‘Reading Well: Books on Prescription’ programme has grown from a small pilot scheme to a nationwide programme operating in over 100 locations. A recent report by the think-tank Demos, entitled *A Society of Readers*, has seized upon the evidence of clinical success emerging out of these studies to argue that reading has the potential to combat social isolation and exclusion, as well as specific mental health conditions such as depression and dementia. Increasingly, educational institutions are supporting bibliotherapy programmes in an instrumentalised way to improve student wellbeing, retention and attainment. Meanwhile, the sub-genre of literature on reading for wellbeing continues to grow, generating revenue for publishing firms and retailers.



This 2019–20 HOBAR seminar series, ‘Reading and Wellbeing,’ asks what this ‘bibliotherapeutic moment’ means for contemporary reading culture and the book-trade. It will also trace the historical roots of the idea that reading and mental health are intimately connected. Drawing together a diverse range of speakers from Psychology, the Medical Humanities, Media and Publishing Studies, and literary history, as well practitioners in the field of bibliotherapy, the series will examine the various ways in which reading and wellbeing are connected, from the bibliotherapeutic principle that reading can contribute to healing to its corollary, the idea that reading might even be bad for one’s health.

**All seminars are on Mondays, 5.30-7.00pm in Room 243, Institute of English Studies, School of Advanced Study, Senate House, Malet Street, London WC1E 7HU**

### **3 February 2020 – Laura Blair (Queen Mary University of London)**

#### **‘Useful’ or ‘Objectionable’? Reading as a Treatment in the Nineteenth-Century Asylum**

As access to books and periodicals dramatically increased during the nineteenth century, the preoccupation with the impact of reading on the public’s health intensified. Commentators blamed books for damaging both the physical and mental health of their readers – from encouraging reckless behaviour and copycat suicides, to damaging posture. However, many of those tasked with curing ‘lunatics’ of the era believed that the power of books could be restorative as well as disruptive. This paper will explore the ways in which British asylum doctors of the period encouraged and facilitated reading for their patients’ wellbeing; the kinds of reading material thought most suitable for ‘lunatics’; and the influence of donors in building asylum libraries.

**Laura Blair** is a PhD candidate in the School of History at Queen Mary University of London. Her research interests lie primarily in the intersection between the histories of reading, disability, and mental health. Her PhD project, funded by the Wellcome Trust, examines the use of reading and writing within therapeutic regimes of nineteenth-century asylums.

### **10 February 2020 – Ella Berthoud (The School of Life)**

#### **Bibliotherapy at The School of Life**

Ella Berthoud started the bibliotherapy service at The School of Life with Susan Elderkin, back in 2008. Together they built this up into the worldwide service that it is today. Ella will explain how it all began, how they practice bibliotherapy one-to-one, and talk about new directions that it might go in.

**Ella Berthoud** is a bibliotherapist, writer and artist. She has been practising bibliotherapy for more than ten years and has written three books on the subject; *The Novel Cure* (co-authored with Susan Elderkin), *The Story Cure* (co-authored with Susan Elderkin), and *The Art of Mindful Reading*.

### **17 February 2020 – Paul Stenner (The Open University)**

#### **Hamlet in a Liminal Hotspot**

Why might reading and mental health and/or wellbeing be intimately connected? If indeed they are connected, it would be rash to assume any simple explanation (it enhances mental flexibility? It detaches one from life’s immediate worries? It teaches perspective taking and boosts empathy? It provides catharsis for bottled up emotions?, etc). Browsing the Reading Experience Database, for instance, I find it reported that Samuel Johnson read *Hamlet* when 9 years old and, terrified by the ghost scene, ‘hurried up to the shop door that he might see folks about him’. Who knows what damage was done! Indeed, a tragedy like *Hamlet* poses an extreme case for anyone aiming to link reading with enhanced mental health. Why should a gut-wrenching tragedy featuring mass murder, betrayal and revenge, morbid reflection on death, suicide and florid insanity... enhance mental health? I will suggest that if and when a reading experience genuinely transforms a life, this is likely to relate to an alteration afforded by the book in the reader’s capacity for sense-making. The book, we might say, serves as a symbolic resource to guide and enhance – under unusual circumstances that are abstracted from daily life – the reader’s sense-making in a manner that is transferable back to their daily life. From this perspective we might surmise that certain books might become particularly ‘influential’ under conditions when sense-making is unusually challenged, and when new sense needs to be made (because existing modes of thought, imagination and feeling will no longer suffice). But the book, of course, must be written in a way that can rise to the challenge, and by an author who has relevant experience and talent. If Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* rises to this challenge, this may be because it precisely thematises the situation of a man facing a catastrophe which destroys his prior means of making sense of the world, and

takes the reader/viewer through the liminal process that follows, staying – as it were – with the trouble. In making this case it is necessary to show *how* the play incites and acts upon the sense-making and affectivity of the reader. Here, the prior work of psychologists like Vygotsky and Winnicott may prove useful, especially since both were inspired by *Hamlet*.

**Paul Stenner** is Professor of Social Psychology at The Open University. His recent work has centered on affectivity and varieties of liminal experience. His most recent book is *Liminality and experience: A transdisciplinary approach to the psychosocial* (Palgrave, 2017). He is a fellow of the Academy for Social Sciences and Past President of the International Society for Theoretical Psychology.

## **16 March 2020 – Sreya Datta & Dima Chami (Leeds University)**

### **Reading Together: Bibliotherapy and the ‘Everyday’**

This talk emerges from our experience of conducting fortnightly bibliotherapy sessions with refugees and asylum seekers in Leeds. We will introduce our understanding of bibliotherapy within the context of migration, asylum seeking, and community, all of which are partially informed by our own subject positions as migrants in British academia. Over the years, our small group has experimented with different modalities of ‘reading together’, often extending outwards from reading literary texts towards a broader understanding of ‘reading-lives-in-community’. The well-established intersections between literature and community undergo a transformation when located within a context where both literature and community are severely challenged. The lived experiences, exigencies, and negotiations of everyday refugee life are conventionally conceptualised in terms of ‘services’ necessary for refugees and asylum seekers; as such, the quotidian, ‘normal’ activities of reading or socialising are deemed to be of secondary importance. Our talk addresses what a practice of ‘reading together’ might mean in this context. Drawing from our interactions with the members of our group, our talk addresses the everyday, ‘normal’, and quotidian conversations engendered by bibliotherapy as well as its affective, political, and social dimensions.

**Sreya Datta** is a third-year PhD student at the University of Leeds, pursuing a PhD on ‘community as philosophy’ in African literature. Her interest in bibliotherapy is informed by her own work on community and reflects her desire to think beyond the theoretical confines of academia. She wishes to continue this work in further directions in future, since she has learnt immensely from, and has spent many joyful moments with, the bibliotherapy group of which she is a part.

**Dima Chami** is a researcher at the University of Leeds where she has recently completed her PhD on biopolitics, migration and African literature. Along with Sreya Datta, Dima has been involved in the Bibliotherapy reading groups in Leeds which fostered reading and community amongst its members, most of whom are refugees and asylum seekers. Dima is now active within academic trade unions where she advocates for migrant rights within academia.

## **23 March 2020 – Josie Billington (Liverpool University)**

### **Reading for Life: Shared Reading and Mental Health**

Over the past decade, the Centre for Research into Reading, Literature and Society (CRILS, University of Liverpool) has worked with UK charity The Reader to study the latter’s unique model of shared reading aloud, and its value for people living with mental health difficulties (including depression, dementia, chronic pain, and self-harm). This paper will demonstrate some of CRILS’ significant findings using examples of real readers and specific reading moments. It will also seek to show how literature from across the ages, and literary reading and thinking in the present day, can help broaden the template and enrich the paradigm of human ‘wellbeing’ as it is customarily offered in contemporary medical and psychological discourses.

**Josie Billington** is Reader in English at the University of Liverpool. She has led multi-disciplinary studies on the value of literary reading for mental health in clinical, community and secure contexts, in partnership with UK charity The Reader and a range of health-care providers. Her recent publications include *Is Literature Healthy?* (OUP, 2016) and *Reading and Mental Health* (Palgrave, 2019).

### **30 March 2020 – Liz Brewster (Lancaster University)**

#### **Experiences, Interactions and Interpretations: Bibliotherapy in Theory and Practice**

Throughout the long history of using books to help treat or manage mental health difficulties, the word ‘bibliotherapy’ has meant different things to different people. In this talk, I will outline some of the key disputes and disagreements, many of which have still not been solved, such as who is best placed to deliver bibliotherapy, and what kinds of texts should be considered therapeutic. I will introduce and outline four different ways that bibliotherapy may be seen to work in practice, with books providing emotional connection, escapism, social support and/or information. Presenting data from empirical work conducted in the UK, I will consider bibliotherapy from the position of a reader as well as from a bibliotherapist.

**Liz Brewster** is a senior lecturer at Lancaster Medical School, Lancaster University. Her research focuses on experiences of mental health and wellbeing, and particularly on how creative activities such as reading may affect mental health. In 2018, she co-edited the text *Bibliotherapy* with Dr Sarah McNicol.

### **6 April 2020 – Nick Canty (University College London)**

#### **Bibliotherapy in a University Setting. Are Publishers Meeting Demand?**

With the positive impact of reading for well-being now established, many universities offer bibliotherapy services to students. Books are offered in print or online across various issues which students can hire out either following a consultation with a therapist or using a self-help service. This talk will consider the most popular genres requested by students at a UK university and contrast this with the genres of books being published in the UK to understand whether publisher’s output matches up with student demand.

**Nick Canty** is a Lecturer on UCL’s MA in Publishing. Prior to joining UCL he worked in the publishing industry. His research interests include social media and academic publishing.

### **20 April 2020 – Sara Haslam (The Open University)**

#### **Literary Caregiving in the First World War: Networks, Professions and Precursors**

With close reference to the diaries and papers of Elizabeth Robins, suffrage campaigner, Ibsen actress, friend of Henry James and war-time ‘literary caregiver’, this paper will extend and re-contextualise work to date on the mainly female voluntary workers who took books to wounded and sick soldier-readers during the First World War. It will examine pre-war networks and professions and associated practices that helped generate and inform their work, including, for example, the Women’s Social and Political Union, the Women Writers’ Suffrage League, and, in the professional sphere, health visiting and social work. Where did British literary caregivers find their inspiration and in what early twentieth-century contexts were their practices rooted? This paper will seek to address these questions as it examines the women’s understanding of, and response to, the relationship between reading and wellbeing.

**Sara Haslam** is Professor of Twentieth-Century Literature at The Open University, where she is Director of Research Degrees in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. She has published extensively on the writer Ford Madox Ford (1873-1939), on modernism, and on the literature of the First World War. Since 2013 her work

on the war has focused on literary interventions and trauma, most recently on 'literary caregiving' (2018). Her edition of Evelyn Waugh's *Helena* (1950) is forthcoming from Oxford University Press.

## **27 April 2020 – Stefano Rossoni (University College London)**

### **Towards a Bibliotherapeutic Approach to Ageing Masculinities**

This talk draws on my experience as the research leader of 'Older Men's Forums: Discussing Ageing Masculinity through Arts & Humanities', a public engagement initiative organised in collaboration with a London-based charity, "Time & Talents". I shall explore the potential of narrative in understanding the challenges associated with ageing masculinity, its affective and social spheres. Considering art-based non-clinical interventions aimed at tackling ageing, I shall examine the ways in which the self-reflexivity enacted by reading fiction can represent an operational element to address well-being in older men and the specificities of this form of bibliotherapy.

**Stefano Rossoni** is a Teaching Assistant in Gender Studies at UCL, where he completed his PhD in Comparative Literature. Stefano explores the interconnectedness of ageing and gender from different disciplines, situating the health and psychosocial problematics of ageing within a narrative perspective.

## **4 May 2020 – Jenny Cattier (Anglia Ruskin University)**

### **The Place of Speculative Fiction in Bibliotherapy**

Using fiction and poetry as therapy is currently gaining much attention from a diverse set of audiences including the general public, clinical practitioners, and academic scholars. Since the First World War, when the term 'bibliotherapy' was first coined, the practice of therapeutic reading has evolved through many forms and in the last two decades it has begun to establish its validity and credibility as an adjunctive treatment for mental health issues including depression. This seminar talk will explore the therapeutic potential of science fiction, and fantasy fiction and how they could be ideally suited to speak to women with depression.

**Jenny Cattier** is a PhD researcher studying the efficacy of speculative fiction in the practice of bibliotherapy for women with depression. As a practice-based PhD her thesis will comprise a collection of short stories, as well as research exploring the self-reported experience of women who have achieved bibliotherapeutic effect from reading science fiction and fantasy stories.

#### ***Seminar series convenors***

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