

Bibliotherapy and Librarianship

Marissa Galloway

University of Southern Mississippi School of Library and Information Science

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Introduction

The American Library Association defines bibliotherapy as “the use of guided reading for therapeutic ends” (American Library Association, 2023, para. 1). Generally speaking, bibliotherapy is a process by which reading is used as a method for improving mental health and general wellbeing. Bibliotherapy is a multifaceted practice and somewhat of an umbrella term in that it can be administered both formally and informally and in a variety of settings and applications with qualifications to provide bibliotherapy being presently unclear (Lu, 2008, p. 47). Bibliotherapy can be divided into the following four types for the sake of clarifying the various applications: Reading, developmental, institutional, and clinical (Odiri, 2023, p. 5). Many readers have unknowingly engaged in their own version of bibliotherapy through the use of books as a source of comfort during challenging times or as a way to take a break from the general frustrations of life. In the book *Bibliotherapy: Books to Guide You Through Every Chapter of Life*, bibliotherapy is described as “the application of literature towards a therapeutic goal” and it is noted that more intentional applications of bibliotherapy have the potential to become “a catalyst for personal growth and also, sometimes, for societal transformation” (Masters, 2024, pp. 8-11). This paper will discuss the history and benefits of bibliotherapy, primarily focusing on reading and developmental bibliotherapy, as well as the role of librarians in providing these forms of bibliotherapy. The topic of how bibliotherapy can be applied in various library settings across different age groups will also be addressed. While bibliotherapy can be formally administered by health practitioners and in various medical settings, the key points of this paper will revolve around bibliotherapy specifically in relation to libraries and librarianship.

The Journey of Bibliotherapy

According to the recounting of ancient historian Hecataeus of Abdera, a library of Pharaoh Ramses II reportedly displayed the following inscription: “ψυχῆς Ιατρεῖον”, which is commonly translated to “the house of healing for the soul” (Lutz, 1978, pp. 36-37). The book *The Librarians Guide to Bibliotherapy*, written by Judit H. Ward and Nicholas A. Allred, suggests that bibliotherapy is not a recent development, presenting the argument that the concept might have been introduced in as early as 335 BCE by Aristotle (Ward & Allred, 2023, p. xiii). In Aristotle’s *Poetics*, which is considered to be one of the first formal analyses of literature, the renowned philosopher claimed that tragedies were capable of providing what was termed as “catharsis”, or a purification and release of emotions in relation to witnessing or outwardly experiencing the calamities of another (EBSCO, 2023, para. 11). In the book *Medical Inquiries and Observations Upon the Diseases of the Mind*, published in 1812, the American physician Benjamin Rush recommended that psychiatric patients engage in reading as part of the mental healing process (Levin & Gildea, 2013, para. 3). Moving forward, the term *bibliotherapy* emerged in 1916 when it was presented by a minister named Samuel Crothers in a satirical article published in the *Atlantic Monthly*; This is believed by many to be the first modern introduction of the term (Crothers, 1916). Sadie Peterson Delaney, chief librarian of the United States Veterans Administration Hospital from 1924 to 1958 and founder of the Disabled Veterans’ Literary Society, established a bibliotherapy unit to treat African American war veterans with much success (Sage, 2023). In 1939, library educator and psychologist Alice I. Brian published several articles on the topic of bibliotherapy as a science and its relation to psychology (Maack, 2024, para. 6). Bibliotherapy was then recognized as a legitimate mental health treatment in *Dorland’s Illustrated Medical Dictionary* in 1941 and, in 1966, an official definition was put forth by a division of the American Library Association, the Association of

Hospital and Institution Libraries (Juliet Alex-Nmecha C & Abdurrahman Bello Onifade, 2023, p. 67).

Since the emergence of the concept of bibliotherapy in the field of librarianship, many librarians and other professionals have contributed valuable ideas that have helped further develop the understanding of the practice and how it might be applied in various library settings. In the book *Using Bibliotherapy: A Guide to Theory and Practice*, written by librarian Rhea Joyce Rubin in 1978, bibliotherapy was categorized into two different applications: clinical and developmental. Clinical bibliotherapy is described as the practice of using books with clients or patrons experiencing issues of a behavioral or emotional nature and typically involves both a medical professional and a librarian collaborating to provide treatment and recommendations. Developmental bibliotherapy is less formal in that it promotes “normal development and self-actualization, or to maintain mental health” (Rubin, 1978, pp. 4-5). Moving forward into the 21st century, the categories of bibliotherapy were further expanded into two classifications by Liz Brewster, a senior lecturer at Lancaster University. In the article *Medicine for the Soul: Bibliotherapy*, Brewster propounds that bibliotherapy administered in library settings can be considered either creative or self-help. Creative bibliotherapy is noted to have a greater basis in “fiction, poetry, biographical writing, creative writing and communication about texts”, while self-help bibliotherapy is substantially based on works of non-fiction that focus on a patron’s unique mental health needs (Brewster, 2008, pp. 115-116).

Bibliotherapy as a Process

Bibliotherapy can be applied in formal and informal settings and can be administered with varying degrees of intention depending on the unique circumstances in which it is applied. In the previously mentioned book, *The Librarians Guide to Bibliotherapy*, two different models

of bibliotherapy are proposed that provide insight into how bibliotherapy may be broken down into a more intentional process and provide an understanding of the underlying mechanics of bibliotherapy. The first model, referred to as the “Three-Step Model of Bibliotherapy”, separates bibliotherapy into the three following steps: Identification, catharsis, and insight. The first step, identification, refers to how a reader identifies something relatable or engaging in a text and may have an emotional response. The second step, catharsis, is when a reader has an opportunity to identify their personal feelings, thoughts, and relatable experiences in response to the text that they have engaged with. The third and final step, insight, refers to how a reader might respond to what they have read in a way that is less emotional and more intellectual, considering and reflecting on the various perspectives and patterns presented in the material (Ward & Allred, 2023, pp. 9-11). The second proposed model, slightly more complex than the first, contains four total steps and was introduced by Arleen Hynes and Mary Hynes-Berry. This model is composed of the following steps: Recognition, examination, juxtaposition, and application to self. The first step, recognition, is similar to the three-step model in that it involves the reader finding something engaging and relatable, or something that speaks to their inner struggle on some level. In the second step, examination, it is suggested that the initial response that the reader had to the specific material in step one will be intensified in a way that prompts the reader to find out more in relation to the issue(s) that they might want to address. In the third step, juxtaposition, the reader is given an opportunity to compare initial response with new ideas, perspectives, and responses that they had while examining the material. The final step, application to self, is a chance for the reader to recognize and consider how the given material has impacted them through self-awareness and internal reflection (Ward & Allred, 2023, pp. 11-13). Fundamentally, the objectives of bibliotherapy include making the reader aware that they are not alone in their

struggle and that there are different solutions to any given problem, to assist the reader in understanding the motivations others, to make the reader aware of the value of the human experience, to assist with finding a solution, and to help the reader to realistically manage their personal struggles (Brewster, 2009, p. 402).

Benefits of Bibliotherapy

In order to convey the numerous benefits of bibliotherapy, the following segment will consider the benefits of bibliotherapy in various applications and age groups, beginning with how reading in general is beneficial to overall physical and mental wellbeing. It is suggested in the article *Psycho-Oncology Bibliotherapy Program for Improving the Emotional Wellbeing of People Undergoing Cancer Treatment* that reading has been shown to “produce higher levels of cognitive reserve which provides some physical protection for the brain from dementia” along with an increase in the connectivity of the brain and overall longevity. Research presented in this article also indicates that reading is an effective way to reduce stress, combat loneliness, and has been linked to a significantly reduced rate of decline in age-related loss of memory (Wells et al., 2023, pp. 271-272). It is also worth noting that reading has been shown to have positive effects on career success and development, as well as a person’s ability to adapt to change (Onwubiko, 2022, p. 6). Additional benefits of reading include increased vocabulary, knowledge, literacy skills, and discipline, along with benefits related to better stress management and improved quality of sleep (Abdulsalam, 2023, pp. 5-6). Considering the many benefits of reading, it is no stretch of imagination to consider how the act of reading might be used more intentionally as a form of therapy to improve mental health.

Recent research indicates that bibliotherapy has had many positive effects on children and young adults. The article *Building Self-Esteem in Elementary School Students: The*

Promising Benefits of Bibliotherapy presents the results of a study which used bibliotherapy as an intervention with the intent of enhancing and promoting self-esteem in elementary school students. The results of the study indicate that self-esteem was significantly increased in participants, with 87% variance contributed to bibliotherapy in boys and 71% variance in girls (Ahmadi et al., 2024, p. 127). It is suggested in the study that these results might be related to “Bibliotherapy’s focus on promoting reading and self-reflection can help individuals develop a positive self-image and improve their overall well-being” (Ahmadi et al., 2024, p.138). In consideration of the negative impacts of the recent pandemic on the mental health of children, the article *Bibliotherapy: Using Literature to Support Children’s Mental Health*, written by Robin A. Moeller and Kim Becnel, implies that children’s literature can teach children how to cope with stressors, handle anxiety, and increase their resilience. It is emphasized in this article that topic-specific children’s literature is available for a wide range of issues that young readers may be struggling with, such as mental health, domestic issues, and medical conditions (Moeller & Becnel, 2025, pp. 1-2). This information suggests that literature can be chosen specifically to address the unique needs of the individual in order to have the most effective impact and reach a desired outcome. For children and adolescents in grades 6 through 12, bibliotherapy in the form of graphic novels may be an effective approach. The article *Caring Through Comics – Graphic Novels and Bibliotherapy for Grades 6-12* suggests that graphic novels geared toward this age group frequently feature difficult and challenging topics that students may be experiencing in their personal lives. The author of the article, Karen Gavigan, currently a professor at the School of Information Science at the University of South Carolina, writes: “Although graphic novels for young adults are not a panacea for solving the challenging issues that teens face, reading about

comparable experiences through the lives of fictional contemporaries can help to alleviate teenagers' angst and let them know that they are not alone" (Gavigan, 2012, pp. 78-80).

Aside from the numerous benefits that come with simply reading, bibliotherapy as a treatment has been shown to have many benefits for adult recipients. The article *A Closer Look at Bibliotherapy* highlights several meta-analyses that consider the effectiveness and potential benefits of bibliotherapy in treating various issues including depression and alcohol addiction. According to the meta-analyses mentioned in the article, bibliotherapy was most successful when treating mild to moderate mental health issues, when coupled with other treatments, and in instances where treatments for mental health may not be readily available such as in rural areas. The information presented in this article implies that bibliotherapy can increase the patient's "sense of responsibility" and findings show that this service is best applied in those who have an existing sense of motivation (Jones, 2006, p. 25). Further benefits of bibliotherapy are highlighted in the article *Reading and Writing for Well-Being: A Qualitative Exploration of the Therapeutic Experience of Older Adult Participants in a Bibliotherapy and Creative Writing Group*, which considers the impacts of bibliotherapy across three reading and writing groups geared toward adult participants, implemented with the intention of improving overall well-being. These groups were found to promote healthy self-relationships, along with reduced isolation and loneliness, with participants reporting feeling "acknowledged, accepted, challenged and inspired" through their involvement in the group (Malyn et al., 2020, p. 722). Other benefits for adult recipients of bibliotherapy are mentioned in the article *Librarian and Health Worker Collaboration: Optimizing the Efficacy of Bibliotherapy for Healing in Mental Hospitals*, which presents the results of a study on how bibliotherapy developed through collaboration between librarians and healthcare professionals might increase the overall efficacy of bibliotherapy.

Results from this study show that bibliotherapy can bring improvements to overall emotional health, lessen symptoms of depression and anxiety, and assist patients with developing stronger coping mechanisms (Permana & Sayekti, 2024, p.17) In the abovementioned book, *Bibliotherapy: Books to Guide You Through Every Chapter of Life*, Molly Masters presents this poignant statement concerning the positive impact of bibliotherapy, “Our world is built on diverse perspectives and lived experiences, and bibliotherapy is a powerful tool not only for self-discovery and emotional healing but also for broadening our intellectual and cultural horizons” (Masters, 2024, p. 9).

The Role of Librarians in Bibliotherapy

Although bibliotherapy is practiced in many fields and employed in various presentations, bibliotherapy specific to librarianship is considered by some to be a contentious topic, which may be due to how the term itself alludes to formal treatment provided by licensed medical practitioners. In the previously mentioned article *Helping Children Cope: What is Bibliotherapy*, it is highlighted that librarians are in a unique position to provide literature and other resources that are specific to patrons’ personal challenges and that promote healing. Regarding the different perceptions of who is qualified to step into the role of administering bibliotherapy, Lu states, “In the end, Librarians do not need to focus solely on the medical aspects of bibliotherapy. Instead, our attention should be drawn to the potential healing power inherent in reading and through participation in relevant library activities” and suggests that a librarian should refer to individual library policy and other professional guidelines when seeking assistance in determining how to offer support to patrons (Lu, 2008, p. 48). The report *Navigating Mental Health and Wellness in Communities: A Review of the Literature and Implications for Libraries, Librarians, and Library Workers* emphasizes what a crucial role

librarians and library support staff have in promoting mental health in their communities and it is suggested that librarians should familiarize themselves with how bibliotherapy might be integrated into programming and practice. The author of the report, Neil D. Grimes, provides suggestions for how bibliotherapy might be applied in library settings, including prescribing self-help and/or nonfiction titles related to a patron's specific issue, or incorporating elements of bibliotherapy into personal interactions with patrons and in library programming; For example, providing feedback on a patron's writing, one-on-one assistance, or instituting reading groups and creating target displays throughout the library (Grimes, 2024, pp. 94-95).

In the article *Systematic Literature Review of the Bibliotherapy Practices in Public Libraries in Supporting Communities' Mental Health and Wellbeing*, common library services such as readers' advisory and reading groups are described as "bibliotherapeutic services" because of their ability to assist patrons with various personal issues through the use of books or book recommendations. The authors of this article note that bibliotherapeutic services have proven to have diverse applications in topics such as parenting, self-improvement, stress, anxiety, obsessive-compulsive disorder, depression, relationship issues, as well as other matters of emotional, mental, social, and physical nature. Further, the article makes valuable suggestions for creating more intentional bibliotherapy programming, such as considering existing models of bibliotherapy across the globe and reviewing literature related to the practice of bibliotherapy as applied in various domains (Zanal Abidin et al., 2021, pp. 124-130). Given this information, it is clear that libraries, librarians, and library support staff are capable of significantly enhancing the health of their communities in their existing roles and through services that are already being offered on a regular basis; services which might be further developed and adapted to be more bibliotherapeutic when the need arises or in response to community needs assessments. In

relation to this topic, the following segment will provide specific examples of how bibliotherapy has been used in different library types and will include any relevant recommendations for how to incorporate bibliotherapy in various library settings.

Applications for Bibliotherapy in the Library

Bibliotherapy has a long-recorded history of practice in hospital libraries, with the previously mentioned work of librarian Sadie Peterson Delaney treating war veterans at the Tuskegee Veterans Hospital being a notable and early contribution to the field in the 1920s (Sage, 2023). In her article considering the topic of bibliotherapy in the United Kingdom, Liz Brewster mentions several useful suggestions for hospital librarians to introduce bibliotherapy programs in hospital settings. These recommendations include collaborating with medical practitioners in order to create a list of condition-specific reading materials, acknowledging the weight of the emotional aspects of patient conditions, and hosting reading groups in the hospital setting. These groups have been shown to have a positive impact on overall mental and emotional wellbeing and can be tailored to help patients with a wide range of issues aside from just mental health, such as anger management, grief, post-surgery adaptation, and other chronic medical conditions (Brewster, 2009, pp. 399, 405-406). To achieve optimum levels of success in reaching desired outcomes for patient patrons, librarians acting as bibliotherapists in hospital settings should have skills such as a concrete understanding of relevant literature and how it may be applied most efficiently depending on the patient's unique circumstances, along with empathy and solid communication skills (Permana & Sayekti, 2024, p. 7). Three important factors to consider when prescribing a text or involving a patron patient in a bibliotherapy program include patient background, current symptoms, and their individual therapeutic needs, as in what the patient would ideally gain from their participation (Ward & Allred, 2023, p. 22).

In public, academic, and school libraries, there are many ways to incorporate bibliotherapy into existing services, as well as develop new bibliotherapy centered services geared toward patrons and students of all ages. Some public libraries in the United Kingdom have successfully implemented the “Get Into Reading (GIR)” model. This is a creative and literature-focused form of bibliotherapy that involves reading aloud in groups, primarily considering works of poetry and fiction (Brewster, 2009, p. 6). Essentially, this model is practiced in the form of an open reading group that incorporates discussion and built-in opportunities for participants to read aloud. Passive forms of bibliotherapy mentioned in abovementioned text, *The Librarian’s Guide to Bibliotherapy*, might involve creating “online reading lists, anthologies, LibGuides, and other supplementary material, all of which can be developed and updated during slower times during work hours and will complement endeavors requiring more active, ongoing staff commitment” (Ward & Allred, 2023, p. 42). Online presentations of bibliotherapy resources give readers the opportunity to browse collections, resources, and exhibits at their own leisure, and can be especially helpful for patrons who prefer not to visit the library in person or for those that are homebound. Bibliotherapy booklists and various forms of displayed recommendations, either digital or print, should be created with the desired patient outcome in mind, as in, these lists should be focused on both the specific emotional and intellectual needs of readers (Ward & Allred, 2023, p. 43). As for active bibliotherapy programming, this may take the form of readers’ advisory, varying sizes of group discussion, author presentations, read-alouds, and pre- and post-program events, all of which should be administered with a focus on wellness when provided in a bibliotherapy context (Ward & Allred, 2023, p. 47). As readers’ advisory is a primary function of the librarian, special consideration should be given to how this service can be adapted when introducing a

bibliotherapeutic approach. For example, while traditional readers' advisory focuses on how the reading material might appeal to the reader, bibliotherapeutic readers' advisory aims to find reading materials that resonate and engage with the reader in a way that promotes personal growth and problem solving depending on the circumstances (Ward & Allred, 2023, pp. 50-51).

Summary & Conclusions

In summary of the abovementioned key points, bibliotherapy is arguably not a new concept, with roots dating back to ancient times. Definitions of bibliotherapy have evolved over time depending on application and ranging from formal to informal. Formally, bibliotherapy can be described as “a form of therapy that uses structured reading material and is often used as an adjunct to psychotherapy for such purposes as reinforcing specific in-session concepts or strategies or enhancing lifestyle changes (Onwubiko, 2022, p. 2) Less formally, bibliotherapy can take the following characterization: “the systematic use of books to assist individuals in coping with mental, emotional, physical or social issues” (Zanal Abidin et al., 2021, p. 124). The topic is considered controversial due to the varying definitions, professional applications, and the debate on who is qualified to provide bibliotherapy. Bibliotherapy in librarianship focuses on providing patrons with reading materials that will better allow them to cope with personal struggles of a mental, physical, or emotional nature, as well as the general hardships that come along with the human experience (Zanal Abidin et al., 2021, pp. 124-130). Modern implementations of bibliotherapy in library settings indicate that the service can be simply classified as either self-help or creative. Self-help bibliotherapy primarily utilizes works of non-fiction, while creative bibliotherapy predominantly makes use of works of fiction and poetry (Brewster, 2008, pp. 115-116). In summary, the overall process of bibliotherapy in its varied presentations involves showing the reader that they are not alone and that they have options for solutions to their

struggles that they may not have previously considered, and also allows the reader to gain an understanding external motivations, the value of the human experience, as well as how their hardships can be managed in a realistic manner (Brewster, 2009, p. 402). There are many documented benefits to bibliotherapy on mental and physiological well-being. Some notable benefits include improved cognitive health, lessened depression, anxiety, and stress, as well as increased quality of sleep and resilience (Abdulsalam, 2023; Moeller & Becnel, 2025; Permana & Sayekti, 2024; Wells et al., 2023). Current examples of practice and relevant research indicate that bibliotherapy may be incorporated by librarians in both passive and active programming and in services with varying degrees of intention; Displays, booklists, one-on-one discussions with patrons, and book groups created with bibliotherapeutic practices in mind are all currently practiced examples that show the potential for how these services can be provided in different types of libraries (Grimes, 2024; Ward & Allred, 2023, p. 47).

In conclusion, bibliotherapy in the field of librarianship is relatively new in an officially recognized capacity, although the overall ideas comprised in the practice of bibliotherapy have been implemented for quite some time by librarians through their provision of books that have therapeutic effects on patrons. It seems as though much research remains to be done on the topic in relation to librarianship, particularly pertaining to certain types of libraries; However, the research that is currently available strongly suggests that bibliotherapeutic practices in the library have proven to be beneficial for patrons in all age groups. Bibliotherapy in librarianship has clearly grown over time and it is thrilling to consider what developments will be introduced in the future. Considering the beneficial qualities of bibliotherapy, the research presented in this report is intended to provide a general overview of the practice that might provide a useful starting point for libraries that are considering initiating their own bibliotherapy programming.

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