

# Reader's Advisory and Bibliotherapy: Helping or Healing?

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## *Abstract*

*Reader's advisory, helping library patrons find books to read based on their prior reading preferences, is a common endeavor for most librarians. Bibliotherapy, using books to promote healing, is a special kind of reader's advisory. This article traces the origins of these two concepts and examines their underlying assumptions. It addresses the process through which stories may aid in healing and the process librarians should follow if they decide to engage in bibliotherapy. It concludes that librarians must know the difference between advising and counseling on both a professional and personal level and that they should be wary of letting the power inherent in the reader's advisory role endanger their professionalism.*

**Keywords :** *Bibliotherapy; Reader's advisory; Stories; Healing; Power of reading*

Once, many years ago, a young couple was walking through the forest on a warm, misty morning. They were very much in love and would stop occasionally on their walk to hold each other and look into each other's eyes...oh, how their eyes glowed. On one such moment, a cool breeze stirred the mist, and it parted, revealing a gypsy caravan, and an old woman crouched by the fire, stirring a large kettle. "Let's go have our fortune told by that old gypsy," said the young man. The girl agreed, hesitantly. They approached the old woman and waited for her to acknowledge them. "So, it's a fortune you want from me, is it?" asked the old woman, "Very well! As you wish. Come inside." The old gypsy picked up her great kettle, climbed the three steps into her caravan, and disappeared inside. The two lovers followed more slowly.

Inside the caravan was a marvelous chaos: books, herbs, pots and pans, and clothing were strewn all around. The old woman was sitting by a small table on which she had placed the kettle. "Come children," she said, "sit down." As they did, the gypsy began muttering under her breath and waving her old hands gently through the steam from the kettle. Slowly, the steam began to glow, dimly at first, then brighter and brighter, until a picture began to form in the vapor.

Pictured there was another couple, also very much in love, dancing through a field of flowers and holding hands, their laughter echoing from the surrounding hillside.

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Then the old woman waved her hands through the steam a second time, and the image changed.

There was the same couple, older now, with two children crying in the background. Their mood had changed; they were arguing. Then their tempers flared and they began to shout...

A third time the old gypsy waved her hands, and again the image altered.

The old couple were sitting in rocking chairs across a small carpet, glaring at each other, silent, bitter, alone together.

Then the old woman quietly muttered again, and the steam coalesced, colors running into colors and forming rainbow drops that fell like tears onto the table.

The young woman looked at her lover, then turned to the old woman with tears in her eyes. "Old mother," she cried, "oh, must it be so?" "No child," replied the old woman, a gentle smile crinkling her cheeks. "I said I would tell you a fortune, not **your** fortune. This is the tale of two people who loved so deeply that they vowed never to let their love change; but change it must!" Then she reached out and took one young hand in each of her weathered ones. "Children," she said, "be gentle with your love, keep an open heart to its changes, look for your love in new ways and unexpected places. Remember, the acorn looks little like the mighty oak it becomes."

And with that, the old gypsy stood up and ushered the two out of her caravan. They walked off into the forest, the mist folded in behind them, and the caravan vanished. There they stopped and held each other tightly. When they searched each other's eyes, they found there, a deeper radiance.

This is a story similar in many ways to the folktales found in every library collection. It is a cautionary tale, yet one to which many people can relate. It is the kind of story therapists might use with patients who are struggling in their marriage or with a young couple in marital counseling, allowing them to experience the emotions of the story characters without having to live through the actual situation. It is, quiet simply, a healing story, and it might very well be the kind of story a librarian would recommend to a patron who liked this kind of tale.

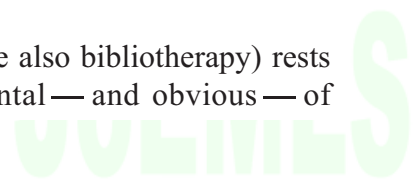
One of the principal transactions that occurs in libraries is the reader's advisory(RA) transaction in which librarians help readers find appropriate books—usually fiction—based on past experience and ongoing discussions with the readers about their reading preferences and histories. While similar in many ways to the reference interview and the information-seeking process, the RA transaction is perhaps even more difficult as it seeks to probe, not a specific information need, but a more nebulous and often intangible **feeling** about books, genres, and subjects. Similar issues surround both: ineffable desires, uncertainty, a perceived gap in the patron's knowledge, and an inability to move forward toward a desired state of comfort and

knowledge. Add to this an overlay of therapeutic intervention, and the situation becomes eminently more complex. As librarians work with emotionally troubled patrons where the reading need is more than recreational, are they simply promulgating good or “appropriate” books, or are they involved in the more complex, dangerous, and potentially life-altering process of healing?

The term “reader’s advisory” comes, etymologically, from the two root words “read,” and “advise”. “Read” can be traced back to the Sanskrit word **radh** meaning “to succeed or to accomplish”, while “advise” may be traced back to the Latin word **videre** meaning “to see”. Combining these two yields “to succeed in seeing”, a most appropriate origin for this process. In the RA transaction, the librarian uses questions, paraphrasing, and suggestions to begin to “see” the hidden wishes of the patron; he teases out of the patron her preferences, past reading experiences, and current reading practices to form a “picture” of the patron’s reading habits. With this picture in mind, the librarian then recommends several books that will complement this picture (either by following the picture’s design or sometimes by contrasting it to add new shades or textures). The desired end result is that the patron then “sees” the trends in her reading habits, “sees” the way(s) in which the recommended book fits into the picture, and leaves feeling as though the transaction has moved her forward in her reading life. The RA transaction then, is the act of rendering visible the patron’s internalized, prior reading experience,<sup>1</sup> and a **successful** transaction becomes, quite literally, a “successful seeing” by both librarian and patron.

This process, when conjoined with emotionally helpful (i.e., healing or therapeutic) motives on the part of the librarian, becomes “bibliotherapy”. First used by Christopher Morley in 1920<sup>2</sup> in his book, *The Haunted Bookshop*, bibliotherapy can be defined as “a form of supportive psychotherapy in which carefully selected reading materials are used to assist a subject in solving personal problems or for other therapeutic purposes.”<sup>3</sup> Etymologically, the word bibliotherapy derives from two Greek words: **biblio** meaning “book” and **therapia** meaning “healing”, in short, “books for healing”. There are, however, two possible types of bibliotherapy: hygienic, or that meant to retain health, and therapeutic, or that meant to regain health. Most of the literature on bibliotherapy addresses the latter of these possibilities, as the effect of literature on the maintenance of health is exceedingly difficult to document. Bibliotherapy, then, can be considered a particular form of reader’s advisory.

The concept of reader’s advisory (and therefore also bibliotherapy) rests on a variety of assumptions, the most fundamental — and obvious — of



which is that people can direct others to good or appropriate materials. Without this assumption, the entire process of book recommendation is impossible. An assumption more specific to bibliotherapy is that reading can be psychologically and emotionally “good for you”. Combining these two assumptions yields the principle that people can lead others to materials that are good for them, and it is at this level that one of the primary dangers of bibliotherapy lies. While the reader’s advisor suggests what the patrons say they want, the bibliotherapist suggests what he thinks the patrons **may need**. At issue here is the librarian’s professional competence, as he may be qualified to recommend books but not qualified to diagnose the need.

There are also some less obvious assumptions, without which bibliotherapy is impossible. These assumptions are:

- \* We know what we like.
- \* We know why we like it.
- \* We can express that opinion in words.
- \* We can communicate it so others understand and feel our intentions.
- \* We are willing to be directed in our reading.
- \* We trust the advisor’s judgment.

Analyzing these assumptions reveals the content, the process, and the attitudes necessary for successful “seeing” of the patron’s reading need. The content of the transaction includes the patron’s “likes”, “opinions”, and “intentions”. These are the data from which librarians construct the picture mentioned previously. The process involves asking “what” and “why” and learning to “express or communicate” our “understandings” and our “feelings” about our reading. Perhaps most important, however, are the attitudes with which to approach the transaction: “willingness” and “trust”. Librarians may have abundant knowledge of their collections, but without the patron’s willingness to be led and a trusting relationship (that develops over time and with continued success), neither reader’s advisory nor bibliotherapy is possible. It is, then, incumbent upon the librarian who chooses to practice bibliotherapy — as it is with any therapeutic intervention — to establish this relationship of trust first.

Once trust has been established, the recommendation has the chance of being accepted, and the materials may be read by the patron. What is it that causes the healing process, and how does it unfold? The literature on bibliotherapy is divided into two conflicting opinions. The librarians’ perspective is that the true healing occurs when the reader interacts with the story during the reading process; hence, they feel confident in leaving readers to the privacy of their reading interaction. Therapists, on the other hand, tend to believe that healing occurs primarily during the discussion that ensues

between therapist and patient. This division falls precisely along lines of professional competence: librarians place the emphasis on their training in materials and recommendation, while therapists focus on the debriefing and psychological exploration that is their forte. Both opinions are valid, as the truth is most likely that the reader's interaction with the text begins the psychological exploration of self, and discussion with a trained psychologist augments and enriches the potential discoveries.

Books are indeed powerful sources of healing, and they work on various levels to facilitate the process of self discovery. The most often mentioned level is that of vicarious experience, in which the reader undergoes a sequence of experiences based on a profound identification with a story character, situation, or emotion. The underlying premise of most of the bibliotherapy literature is that the reader identifies with a character who is caught in a situation similar to the reader's own, watches the character wrestle with that problem successfully, learns new coping mechanisms to apply to his/her own real-life situation, and feels a sense of emotional release that leads to a sense of empowerment and insight resulting in new growth and development. These "stages" are often labeled: identification, insight, catharsis, and growth. These stages form a unique acronym that recalls the "seeing" mentioned previously and reveals the culminating purpose of bibliotherapy: IICG or "I see, gee!"

This, however, is a rather simplistic view of a much more complex process, since there are many people who do not want to identify with their problems or even read about them. A bibliotherapist who espouses only this "identification therapy" runs the risk of alienating people when they are the most needful. Books have far more potential than this, and this potential has yet to be thoroughly explored. An alternative to identification is laughter. Rather than living into the problematic experience, sometimes it may be best simply to laugh it off. While psychologists may claim that this tactic is one of avoidance rather than growth, it seems to serve a valuable purpose in many healing processes. While clinical proof of the link between laughter and healing remains sketchy and somewhat anecdotal, there is growing interest in exploring this connection. Gina Barreca, a professor of English literature and feminist theory at the University of Connecticut claims, "Humor is more than a tool for survival — at its best, it becomes an act of redemption. Humor allows us to redeem moments that might otherwise have been lost to pain or despair. Being able to laugh is sometimes more about working through an issue than it is about avoiding or treating it lightly."<sup>4</sup> For the bibliotherapist, the question then becomes, "Does this patron need/want a book with which to identify, or a book that will bring

laughter and amusement to the problem?

There is at least one other option that further complicates the issue. Sometimes in the healing process, confronting the problem is not the best approach. This is not to advocate avoidance as a permanent solution, but to propose that avoiding a problem temporarily **is** a coping mechanism, a means of deferring the confrontation until the appropriate resources have been marshaled. Herein lies the value of four closely intertwined genres: fantasy, romance, horror, and tragedy. While realistic and historical fiction might serve the purpose of identification, and comics and other humorous texts might serve to promote laughter, these four genres promote escapism, though in two dramatically different ways. Fantasy and romance novels are often read with the unconscious mental construction, "I wish life were like this book." This is not identification, as the situation is not the reader's current, real-life one; instead it is wish-fulfillment, a desire to be like the character **instead** of who we are. Rather than learning coping skills directly by imitating the story character, the reader escapes the real-life situation and revels in a world of possibilities that are often completely unrelated to the reader's real-life situation. Horror and tragedy, on the other hand, may act in the reverse fashion, giving the reader the chance to say, "I'm glad life is better than this book." In this case, the escape is into a world of such terror or desolation that the reader unconsciously revels in returning from the reading experience to a world that is safer and more comforting than the book. There is also the intoxicating power of fear with which many of these books play, so that the reading experience is one of adrenalin and, therefore, desired.

It is also vital to realize that the context of the reader-book-librarian/therapist is only one of many that exist and unfold simultaneously. During any particular RA transaction, myriad processes are engaged to various degrees, and to understand the needs and desires of that particular patron requires addressing these other contexts. For example, the information-seeking process is part of all RA transactions, and the uncertainty, knowledge gaps, motivations, and focusing strategies inherent in this process are all engaged during reader's advisory.<sup>5</sup> If the patron is actively trying to change his or her life, then the elements of change theory are relevant.<sup>6</sup> The patron is also learning new materials and possibly new coping mechanisms<sup>7</sup> and, depending on the problem, possibly grieving.<sup>8</sup> All of these contextual factors may influence the RA transaction or the bibliotherapeutic exchange.

It is dangerously simplistic, then, to say that bibliotherapy involves merely the pairing of a reader's life situation with that of a story character. It is more appropriate to say that it involves giving the right patron the right



book at the right time. This phrase has been associated with reader's advisory for decades, but it takes on much deeper meaning when it is paired with bibliotherapy and healing. The bibliotherapeutic process then becomes:

1. Figure out what patron **wants**.
2. Try to understand what the patron **may need**.
3. Examine the various **contexts** at work during the transaction.
- 4a. **Match** the story situation to the patron's situation or issue; or
- 4b. **Contrast** the story situation to the patron's situation or issue.
5. As with any RA transaction, let the patron choose from a variety of sources (some that match and some that contrast), and then learn about the patron's needs by what he or she chooses.

One final element of the bibliotherapeutic exchange must be mentioned. The stories that people read are powerful, but so are the stories they tell. The patrons have personal stories that are equally evocative and useful in the RA transaction. Their stories tell of past encounters, changes undergone, opportunities missed, and wishes unfulfilled. They bring a deeply personal element to the exchange that often offers clues to their background issues, information needs, and prior reading choices. While these clues may be subtle, they are nonetheless important in developing a detailed picture of their reading habits. As the trust between the librarian and the patron grows, the stories usually become richer and more personal. Librarians who are willing to meet these stories with an eager ear will find resonances within them that most patrons could never express explicitly in response to a direct question. Together patrons and librarians involved in an RA transaction co-create a story, a verbal picture, which enables each to understand the other more profoundly.

This deep trust must be treated with great care, and librarians must remember that most of them are **not** trained counselors or clinicians. The power of that bond with patrons can sometimes overwhelm librarians, and they suddenly find themselves keepers of knowledge that is beyond their training and ability to address. It is vital that librarians define these limits for their organization and for themselves. Know the boundary between advising and counseling. Patrons deserve the best librarians can offer, but librarians must not let hubris overcome humility. Librarians should not engage in therapy without a qualified license, and they should remember that the librarians' word for therapy is "referral"!

## Notes

1 D. Smith (personal communication, April 23, 2003).

2 Bibliotherapy. *OED online* (2nd ed.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press). Retrieved April 3, 2003,

from <http://dictionary.oed.com/>

3 Bibliotherapy. *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (4th ed.) (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000). Retrieved April 3, 2003, from <http://www.yourdictionary.com/>

4 M. McGuire, *LOL—Laugh Out Loud—as U Conn Health Center explores the connection between laughter and healing* (University of Connecticut Health Center, 2001). Retrieved April 3, 2003, from <http://www.uhc.edu/ocomm/newsreleases01/august01/gina.html>

5 For a variety of information-seeking models see:

N. Belkin, "Anomalous states of knowledge as a basis for information retrieval," *Canadian Journal of Information Science*, 5(1980), 133-143;

T. D. Wilson, "On user studies and information needs," *Journal of Documentation*, 37 :1 (1981), 3-15;

J. Krikelas, "Information-seeking behavior: Patterns and concepts," *Drexel Library Quarterly*, 19(1983), 5-20;

M.B. Eisenberg, & R.E. Berkowitz, *Information Problem-solving: The big six approach to library and information skills instruction* (Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing, 1990);

C.C. Kulthau, *Seeking Meaning: A process approach to library and information services* (Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing, 1992).

6 For models of behavioral change, see :

W.R. Miller & S. Rollnick, *Motivational Interviewing: Preparing people to change addictive behavior* (New York : Guilford, 1991);

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B.K. Tones, "Making a change for the better: The health action model," *Healthlines*, 27(1995), 17-19.

7 For models of the learning cycle, see:

R. Karplus, & H. Thier, *A New Look at Elementary School Science* (Chicago: Rand-McNally, 1967);

D. Kolb, I. Rubin, & J. Osland, *Organizational Behavior: An experiential approach* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ : Prentice Hall, 1991).

8 For a model of the grieving process, see: N. Shah, *The Grieving Process* (2002). Retrieved April 3, 2003, from <http://www.phoenix-method.com/Grieving.htm>

## Further Reading

### Online Resources

Myracle, Lauren. "Molding the minds of the young: The history of bibliotherapy as applied to children and adolescents," *The ALAN Review*, 22 :2(1995). [available online at:

<http://borg.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/ALAN/winter95/Myracle.html>]

Silbajoris, Christie. *Bibliotherapy: A pathfinder*, (1998). [available online at: <http://ils.unc.edu/~silbc/pathfinder.html>]

Aiex, Nola Kortner. *Bibliotherapy. ERIC digest*, (1993). [available online at: <http://eric.indiana.edu/ieo/digests/d82.html>]

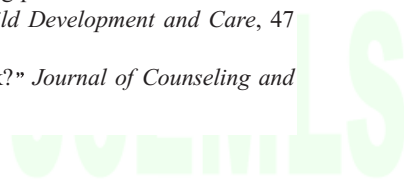
### Print Resources

Doll, Beth. *Bibliotherapy with Young People : Librarians and mental health professionals working together*. Englewood, Colo. : Libraries Unlimited, 1997.

Ouzts, Dan T. "The emergence of bibliotherapy as a discipline," *Reading Horizons*, 31 :3(1991), 199-206.

Pardeck, John T., & Jean A. Pardeck. "Bibliotherapy: A tool for helping preschool children deal with developmental change related to family relationships," *Early Child Development and Care*, 47 (1989), 107-29.

Riordan, Richard J., & Linda S. Wilson. "Bibliotherapy: Does it work?" *Journal of Counseling and Development*, 67:9(1989), 506-508.





Smith, Alice G. "Will the real bibliotherapist please stand up?" *Journal of Youth Services in Libraries*, 2 :3(1989), 241-49.

**Webliographies**

Bibliotherapy (Internet School Library Media Center)

<http://falcon.jmu.edu/~ramseyil/bibliotSicrapy.htm>

Bibliotherapy with preschoolers (ERIC digest)

<http://www.indiana.edu/~eric rec/ieo/bibs/bibl-pre. html>

Bibliotherapy with elementary schoolers (ERIC digest)

<http://www.indiana.edu/~eric rec/ieo/bibs/biblele.html>

Bibliotherapy with secondary schoolers (ERIC digest)

<http://www.indiana.edu/~eric rec/ieo/bibs/biblsec.html>

Helping children with books (Eugene (OR) Public Library)

<http://www.ci.eugene.or.us/Library/staffrei7therapy.htm>

Bibliotherapy (Washburn University Curriculum Resource Center)

<http://www.washburn.edu/mabee/crc/biblio.html>

Bibliotherapy booklists (Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh)

<http://www.carnegielibrary.org/kids/booknook/bibliotherapy/>

Bibliotherapy booklists (Logan (UT) Library)

<http://www.logan.lib.ut.us/booklist/children/index.htm#therapy>

Bibliotherapy booklists (Hamilton (CA) Public Library)

<http://www.hpl.ca/kids/parents/booklist.shtml>

