

# INTRODUCTION

This is a medical handbook - with a difference.

First of all, it does not discriminate between emotional pain and physical pain; you're as likely to find a cure within these pages for a broken heart as a broken leg. It also includes common predicaments you might find yourself in, such as moving house, looking for Mr/Mrs Right, or having a midlife crisis. Life's bigger challenges such as losing a loved one or becoming a single parent are in here too. Whether you've got the hiccups or a hangover, a fear of commitment or a sense of humour failure, we consider it an ailment that deserves a remedy.

But there's another difference too. Our medicines are not something you'll find at the chemist, but at the bookshop, in the library, or downloaded onto your electronic reading device. We are bibliotherapists, and the tools of our trade are books. Our apothecary contains Balzacian balms and Tolstoyan tourniquets, the salves of Saramago and the purges of Perec and Proust. To create it, we have trawled two thousand years of literature for the most brilliant minds and restorative reads, from Apuleius, second-century author of *The Golden Ass*, to the contemporary tonics of Ali Smith and Jonathan Franzen.

Bibliotherapy has been popular in the form of the non-fiction self-help book for several decades now. But lovers of literature have been using novels as salves - either consciously or subconsciously - for centuries. Next time you're feeling in need of a pick-me-up - or require assistance with an emotional tangle - reach for a novel. Our belief in the effectiveness of fiction as the purest and best form of bibliotherapy is based on our own experience with patients

## **bib•lio•ther•a•py**

*noun* \ bi-blē-ə-  
'ther-ə-pē, -'thē-rə-py:

the prescribing of fiction  
for life's ailments (Berthoud  
and Elderkin, 2013)

and bolstered by an avalanche of anecdotal evidence. Sometimes it's the story that charms; sometimes it's the rhythm of the prose that works on the psyche, stilling or stimulating. Sometimes it's an idea or an attitude suggested by a character in a similar quandary or jam. Either way, novels have the power to transport you into another existence, and see the world from a different point of view. When you're engrossed in a novel, unable to tear yourself from the page, you are seeing what a character sees, touching what a character touches, learning what a character learns. You may *think* you're sitting on the sofa in your living room, but the important parts of you – your thoughts, your senses, your spirit – are somewhere else entirely. 'To read a writer is for me not merely to get an idea of what he says, but to go off with him and travel in his company,' said André Gide. No-one comes back from such a journey quite the same.

Whatever your ailment, our prescriptions are simple: a novel (or two), to be read at regular intervals. Some treatments will lead to a complete cure. Others will simply offer solace, showing you that you are not alone. All will offer the temporary relief of your symptoms due to the power of literature to distract and transport. Sometimes the remedy is best taken as an audio book, or read aloud with a friend. As with all medicines, the full course of treatment should always be taken for best results. Along with the cures, we offer advice on particular reading issues, such as being too busy to read and what to read when you can't sleep; the ten best books to read in each decade of life; and the best literary accompaniments for important rites of passage, such as being on your gap year – or on your death bed.\*

We wish you every delight in our fictional plasters and poultices. You will be healthier, happier and wiser for them.

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\* As PJ O'Rourke said, 'Always read something that will make you look good if you die in the middle of it'.