

Päivi Kosonen

Towards Therapeutic Reading

PART III

FORMS OF SHARED READING

In recent years, the impacts of reading on wellbeing have not merely been topics studied in academia; they have been current issues discussed in various media. Concurrently, reading is being promoted more than before in schools, libraries, penitentiaries and assisted living facilities through projects promoting equality and social belonging where a bibliotherapeutic perspective may be considered necessitous. But what exactly is a bibliotherapeutic understanding of reading?

In the third part of my series of articles, I examine various forms of collective reading and methods which I consider significant in bibliotherapeutic work. First, I will briefly describe the reading group activities in libraries and introduce the British Shared Reading model, which has been experimented with in the Nordic countries and found to be quite a success. I will also discuss the reading group models in our research project funded by the Academy of Finland: the creative reading group and the metanarrative reading group. Finally, I will examine an interactive model of bibliotherapy in terms of collective reading work.

READING GROUPS IN LIBRARIES:
ADVENTUROUS ACTIVITIES

I do not know whether Finland can be called a model country for reading groups, but the number of publications associated with the topic indicates that they are quite popular. Public libraries have made an indispensable contribution to the widespread increase in literacy, the promotion of reading and the spread of reading groups. (Ahola 2013). Today, the new Library Act (2017) obligates libraries to promote reading and literature. The ultimate goal is to support civil society, an open and public space:

People, books and space: all three elements are needed to create a library which is actually a combination of infinite possibilities. The library space is an open, public place – no one's place, but at the same time, everyone's place, the adventurous and figurative significance of which expands above the ceiling and walls and beyond the rows of bookshelves. (Ratia 2010, 180: unofficial translation.)

The library also organises various adventuresome activities to support people's literary and conversational skills and to promote their wellbeing. In these times of freedom and individualism, activities promoting communal cohesion are especially needed (Ahola 2013, 153–155; cf. Frid 2016).

Groups committed to the promotion of reading gather people together at libraries to discuss books they have been reading at home. Discussions may involve non-fiction, literary fiction, genre fiction, travel literature, philosophical works, new releases or classics, prose or poetry (Ahola 2013, 110–111). In recent years, open read-aloud groups

for adults have been established in libraries, alongside the traditional reading circles, where group members can, for example, knit while listening to someone read a book (see Pihlajaniemi 2018).

Whether one reads books at home or aloud in a reading group, reading groups in libraries integrate interaction, experiential discussion that is not limited to facts or text analysis; rather, it touches upon people's memories, hopes and dreams, "images hidden in the layers of the mind", as Taina Ratia (2010, 183; unofficial translation) writes. Library reading groups, which cultivate this kind of experiential discussion and adventure, closely resemble bibliotherapy groups. Do bibliotherapeutic reading groups differ in any way to reading groups in libraries?

The issue has not been studied, but my hypothesis is that a bibliotherapeutic reading group is guided by an *orientation for growth and change*. In a library reading group, people are *engaged in the adventure of reading*. Admittedly, the facilitator of a library reading group must have skills in group leadership: the ability to take care of the group, contact group members and ensure interaction. People must feel secure and confident in a library reading group, as well, to be able to express their thoughts and feelings. Otherwise, "literary democracy", as Nina Koskivaara (2010) fittingly puts it, is not possible. However, special skills and the use of them are also needed for goal-oriented guidance in the process of growth and change. Indeed, some people long for current information in library work about the reciprocity of reading as well as tools and measures for encountering people who read (e.g. Frid 2016; Tangerås 2018).

In its current format, the bibliotherapy facilitator training (Phase 1: 15 credits and Phase 2: 35 credits), organised by the bibliotherapy association in Finland (Suomen kirjallisuusterapiayhdistys ry), is already a good supplement to the informatics and literary knowledge of library professionals, at least judging by the feedback provided by participants in the training. Guidance in group leadership, growth and change in theory and practice, in particular, are at the heart of the bibliotherapy facilitator training, and interactive bibliotherapy is suitable for developmental work. (see Ihanus 2009; Linnainmaa 2005; Mazza 2012).

Many of the library employees who participated in the bibliotherapy facilitator training feel that bibliotherapy holds numerous possibilities for the future (e.g. Gruborovics 2019, Jovero 2019). I, too, would love to see a diverse repertoire of reading groups in libraries in the near future, self-help network services together with traditional types of reading groups (see Frid 2016, 45) and non-therapeutic, read-aloud reading groups. Bibliotherapeutic reading groups could meet in libraries; one good example is the *Läsa för livet* (reading for life) project in Sweden. Reading groups are also an excellent place for writing (see Frid 2016, 127–138).

SHARED READING: WELLBEING THROUGH READING ALOUD

At the beginning of the 21st century, development of a non-therapeutic reading group model suitable for libraries began in Britain. Now a licenced model, *Shared Reading* (=

SR) was created by literary researcher Jane Davis and her colleagues as part of a reading promotion project to offer ordinary people opportunities to read fiction. Organised by *The Reader Organisation*, the idea was not to merely offer library patrons literary groups and “book therapy”, as the *Books on Prescription* programme had done. Encounters with others and reading aloud were at the heart of the new model. The purpose was to generate wellbeing through the live presence of literature (*live reading*). (Billington et al. 2010; Longden et al. 2015; Billington 2016; Brewster 2018.)

Shared Reading groups are guided groups which meet in public, municipal places, libraries, health care centres and rehabilitation centres. The groups of 5–10 members meet each week for 1.5 hours to read aloud and discuss a chosen text. The group facilitator, who has been trained to use the method, guides the group discussion and, above all, keeps the group members focused on the text being read. Focus is placed on the narratives in literary fiction, short stories and prose. The idea behind reading aloud is to stimulate the participants, to arouse emotions and provoke recognition of experiences and memories. However, the purpose of SR is not to process the participants’ personal emotions; rather, the creators of the project emphasise the significance of natural discussion. They detach themselves from British bibliotherapy (*Books on Prescription*) which concentrates on diagnoses and recommendations for non-fiction (Gray et al. 2015; Billington 2016.)

Shared Reading has achieved a foothold in the Nordic countries also. It is particularly appropriate for libraries. The theoretical foundation of the model has been devel-

oped with care. The method has been tested in numerous multidisciplinary research projects and practical applications with people suffering from depression, dementia and chronic pain, among others. Follow-up studies have indicated that the method increases individual wellbeing in different ways, improves social skills and increases empathy, improves the ability to concentrate and increases faith in the future. (Billington et al. 2010; Longden et al. 2015, Gray et al. 2015; Billington et al. 2017; Brewster 2018.) Results pertaining to the long-term effects of the method have not, however, been obtained, yet.

The model has also been tested and studied elsewhere. For example, in Sweden, the *Läsa tillsammans* has trained method instructors in the regions of Uppsala and Stockholm since 2017. Since then, activities have expanded and there are numerous groups that meet in libraries all around Sweden. The project has also laid the foundation for *Shared reading i nordisk kontext* (2018–2021), a joint follow-up and research project among the Nordic countries, which is supervised at the Uppsala University.

Shared Reading is, without a doubt, interesting with regard to interactive bibliotherapy. Precisely speaking, the key elements in the SR model, i.e. the significance of structure and rules in creating security, emphasis on space for creative reading, use of literature as a tool for interaction, are almost straight from interactive bibliotherapy textbooks (see McCarty-Hynes & Hynes-Berry 1986/2012; Mäki & Linnainmaa 2005). What is more, reading aloud is not a foreign element in bibliotherapy. Folktales and stories have always constituted a significant part of the materials and bibliotherapeutic toolkit in children's groups,

(see Mäki & Arvola 2009ab), but folktales and short stories have also been read aloud in groups for adults (Mäki 2015). Poems, in particular, are read aloud a lot in bibliotherapeutic groups. This is an area that, thus far, has barely any theoretical foundation. We do, however, have experience in combining reflective, expressive and therapeutic writing in the reading process, and this knowledge should be spotlighted more intrepidly in the development of reading group models.

READING GROUPS FOR CREATIVE READING –
INVESTIGATING THE POSSIBILITIES OF NARRATIVES

In autumn 2018, I embarked on a research project with the Academy of Finland, together with Hanna Meretoja, professor of Comparative Literature and fellow researcher Eevastiina Kinnunen to investigate the possibilities of narrative and storytelling in reading groups. To construct a reading group model for creative reading, we utilised the research in comparative literature, the psychology of reading, narrative and especially the theory in Meretoja's ethics of narratives (Meretoja 2018) as well as her metanarrative and instrumental narrative theory (Meretoja 2019), in addition to information pertaining to bibliotherapeutic reading – topics I have discussed in the previous two articles in my article series.

Literature and psychology students direct the reading groups during the research project in autumn 2019. Data associated with two types of reading group models will be gathered: 1) an ordinary reading group involving creative reading, and 2) a reading group involving metanarrative

creative reading. The metanarrative reading group entails reading literary fiction that thematises the question of the impact of cultural narratives on the lives of people and their ways of perceiving the direction of their life and their own possibilities in the world. During the project, we consider the potential of metanarrative literature in developing the participants' instrumental narrative, the dimensions of which are narrative consciousness, imagination and dialogue. (Meretoja 2019.) The data from the reading groups are gathered through interviews, questionnaires, recordings, the reading group facilitator's journal and collecting the material written during the reading group sessions. The data will be used to cast a method for a non-therapeutic reading group, which would be suitable for various venues: libraries, book cafés, student reading groups and bibliotherapy groups.

Reading together and a common, creative and dialogic space are at the heart of the model. We feel that reading literature can, indeed, increase the wellbeing of individuals (see Kosonen 2017, 2018), but participation, community, taking part in discussion where one is heard and can connect with others are more beneficial. Participation in discussion where we can be seen, heard and feel connected engenders the feeling of belonging and significance and renders the experience of meaningfulness, which reflects on to our wellbeing. For example, Sociologist Aaron Antonovsky (1990) has emphasised the significance of experiencing meaningfulness on how people overcome trauma. Meretoja's (2018) concept of *narrative in-between*, in turn, emphasises how narratives build a dialogic space between people and by shaping that space new modes of being in a

relationship can open up to them. Our instrumental narrative, i.e. our ability to define our own life story in relation to our narrative storytelling environments, is always built with dialogue, in conversation with others (Meretoja 2019).

**BIBLIOTHERAPEUTIC READING GROUP:
TOWARD THERAPEUTIC READING**

In practice, the facilitator of a bibliotherapeutic reading group or reading developmental group is usually a bibliotherapy facilitator. During their 1.5 years of training, bibliotherapy facilitators acquire an understanding of the models for expressive and therapeutic writing, and they practise applying in their own work the processes involved in bibliotherapy, whether it happens in the domain of the library, social work, rearing and education, art therapy or psychotherapy or clinical work. In addition, they have received guidance in reading work, selection of the material to be read and the theory and methods involved in reading. However, there is a lot of new research and practical applications and experiments. Therefore, they should update their expertise in these areas. Indeed, increased emphasis is being placed on the psychology of reading and the guidance of reading work in the new bibliotherapy training model.

Reading, discussion and writing constitute bibliotherapeutic reading work. Everything happens in an interactive process that progresses in synchrony between the group and the facilitator in a time period agreed upon and lived together. Most effectively, the phases of the bibliotherapeutic process (recognition, examination, comparing and

juxtaposition, application to oneself) (McCarty-Hynes & Hynes-Berry 1986/2012) also happen physically. In this process, literature is sometimes an object, a utensil and other times it is a facilitator, an instrument and a tool – and all along a living presence, an evocative potential that capacitates the feeling of something special and wonderful for which there are no words yet.

In the most influential state, we move in a creative and so-called therapeutic “third state”, a deep area of self-experience where the difference between the subject using the (book) object and the simple object no longer exists (Bollas 1992/1994, 12–32), and the therapeutic growth and process of change can begin – in the extensiveness and depth possible at a given time. Moreover, as mentioned, the interactive bibliotherapy according to the Finnish model also includes creative and expressive writing where deepening and expanding the reading experience, or remaining in the comfort zone of creative writing, is possible. The main emphasis in the work is on a safe and confidential presence from which the perspectives of the past and future are possible to unfold.

Very concisely speaking, the bibliotherapeutic process is based on this kind of creative process of rendering significance (*poiesis*) (Ihanus 2012, 2019), as broadly and deeply as is possible for the facilitator and the group. The bibliotherapy facilitator has the possibility to utilise reading methods in development groups and bibliotherapeutic reading groups in many ways, as Karoliina Kähmi (2015) has indicated in her doctoral dissertation, for example.

I am optimistic about the possibilities of bibliotherapy and dialogic and interactive reading work. We have a lot

of experiential knowledge, but we still need more research and theoretical work – not to mention collaboration with different actors working in the realm of reading.

Translated by Judie Rose.

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