



# Reading for Health: Bibliotherapy and the Medicalized Humanities in the United States, 1930-1965



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2014-10-20

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Abstract

In this dissertation, I tell the story of midcentury attempts to establish, develop, and study bibliotherapy in the US. I follow three groups-hospital librarians, psychologists and psychiatrists, and language arts educators-from the 1930s to the 1960s, when each in its own ways expressed belief in the therapeutic power of reading and set out to enact that belief as a legitimate practice in the evolving contexts of its profession and in the broader culture. These professionals tried to learn what happened within people during and after reading, and they attempted to use what they learned to apply reading toward healthy ends.

Today, therapeutic reading has become commonplace to the extent that it seems natural. In this dissertation, I aim to recover and explore the midcentury processes by which therapeutic reading came to seem at once natural, medical, and scientific. I argue that midcentury bibliotherapy functioned in concert with an evolving cultural narrative that I call "reading for health." The reading for health narrative gathers up into a coherent story various and deep beliefs and commonplaces about the power of books over our minds and our bodies. In midcentury bibliotherapy, reading for health was reinvigorated as a story about the marriage of science and culture, a unity narrative that claimed the iconic book-capable of swaying minds and societies alike, and burnished with all that western civilization signified-for the professions that applied reading toward their healthy ends. As I demonstrate, however, these narratives were not confined to discrete professions, but functioned as a part of a larger cultural movement set upon the shifting fault lines of the humanities and science.

Each of the groups I follow took an avid interest in what I have called the embodied reader. Rather than viewing reading as an act of a disembodied mind, they understood the practice as a psychosomatic experience in which mind and body could not be disconnected. Moreover, they believed that reading could capitalize on the embodied nature of thought and affect, and engender healthy effects. In this way, the embodied reader was constructed as a new, modern locus of both the literary experience and the therapeutic ethos.

By valuing above all else how reading could be used to achieve health, advocates of bibliotherapy fashioned a form of applied humanities, one that defined the meaning and judged the value of books in terms of their utility and efficacy. In so doing, they contributed to the development of a form of the medicalized humanities that now resonates in three contemporary sites: (1.) the study and use of bibliotherapy in clinical psychology; (2.) the dominant and naturalized approach to books known as therapeutic reading; and (3.) the medical humanities.

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Bibliotherapy is an expressive therapy that involves the reading of specific texts with the purpose of healing. In addition, reports from the 1930 Public Health Conference about bibliotherapy were included in the British journal *Lancet*. [7] With hospitals taking the lead, bibliotherapy principles and practice developed in the United States. In the United Kingdom, it should be noted, some felt that bibliotherapy lagged behind the US and Joyce Coates, writing in the *Library Association Record*, felt that the possibilities of bibliotherapy have yet to be fully explored. [7] In 1966, the Association of Hospital and Institution Libraries, a division of the American Library Association, issued a working definition. Most libraries in the United States carry a set of books from the approved list for this purpose, often providing as a book list on their website. The Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh is one such library. Their website also lists books for children, which cover topics like adoption, self-esteem, grief, divorce, and more. Anecdotal research suggests bibliotherapy may offer significant benefit in the treatment of mental health issues, and its popularity among mental health professionals further implies positive results. Many therapists believe the inclusion of books in treatment increases participation in therapy and can decrease recovery time, providing more opportunity for insight and behavioral change while also allowing people to take more responsibility in their therapy work. Rare readers in the United States “treat novels less as a source of aesthetic satisfaction, than as a practical dispenser of advice or a form of therapy” (1). But in fact in bibliotherapy aesthetics has become linked to health, with art increasingly a tool used in the pursuit of well-being. Critiques of therapeutic culture abound. In 1966 Philip Rieff, surveying the triumph of a historically new character type that he called “psychological man,” suggests the relationship between these reparative motives for reading and the language used to reflect upon and advocate for them. Taking such insights as a starting point in this. *The Birth of the Literary Clinic: Modernism, Bibliotherapy, and the Aesthetics of Health, 1914-1945*. Jesse Miller. [View project](#).