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SENIOR THESIS APPROVAL

This Honors thesis entitled

“More than just Books”

written by

Katie Michelle Simmons Laney

and submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for completion of the
Carl Goodson Honors Program
meets the criteria for acceptance
and has been approved by the undersigned readers.

Dr. Amy Sonheim -- thesis director

Dr. Chris Long -- second reader

Dr. Deborah Root -- third reader

Dr. Amy Sonheim -- Honors Program Director

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More than just Books:

Using Fiction to Help Young Girls Relate

An Honors Thesis on Bibliotherapy

By Katie Michelle Simmons Laney

Presented to the Honors Council

Spring 2009

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More than just Books:

Using Fiction to Help Young Girls Relate

Table of Contents

Preface	4
Background Research	5
Mean Girls Conference	8
<i>My Secret Bully</i>	11
Introduction to Bibliotherapy	14
History of Bibliotherapy	16
Schools of Thought/Types of Bibliotherapy	21
Methods of Practicing Bibliotherapy	23
Resources on Bibliotherapy	26
Real Life Applications of Bibliotherapy	27
Ways of Continuing Research	31
Conclusion	32
Works Cited	34

More than just Books:

Using Fiction to Help Young Girls Relate

Preface

In recent years, I have had the opportunity to work in a variety of ministry settings. One such setting brought me in contact with a girl who was in a bullying situation. In her case, she related to me action taken in her classroom by her teacher at the urging of her parents. The situation had been remedied, but she was still dealing with the emotional repercussions of having been a victim of relational aggression. In my acquaintance with the girl, I knew she enjoyed reading. Therefore, she helped to inspire my original thesis idea of learning more about the messages that can be derived from reading fiction, the process of writing fiction, and the possible beginning of my own book to be used in bibliotherapy.

My thesis idea originally centered on books that could be used in ministering and counseling; since I want to pursue both as part of my eventual career, but then I began to realize that teachers and parents might also be able to apply whatever I discovered. I shared my thoughts with Dr. Amy Sonheim, who introduced me to the term bibliotherapy.

From the first instant Dr. Sonheim mentioned bibliotherapy, defining it briefly as the use of books to help people, I was hooked and wanted to know more. How did bibliotherapy work? Who practiced it? How did one use it? And is bibliotherapy effective? Thus, a research project idea was born. I would research bibliotherapy—what it was, how it was practiced, and what its benefits were to those who used it.

Background Research

Individuals are most likely to make the decision to become a Christian and take other steps of faith before the age of 18.¹ This information emphasizes the importance of childhood, the tween, and the teen years for shaping a person's identity. My passion is to work with female children and teenagers. During these formative years many girls gain or lose confidence in themselves. It is important that they receive positive messages about being girls, especially in America, with stereotypes and misconceptions flooding the media. As girls realize who they are in God, they relate better to others of their own and different cultures.

As I look back at my childhood, I realize now that the fiction I read influenced my self-concept. Aware of this fact now, I see the need to make more books available for girls to engage in and interact with that foster positive Christian values and truths appropriate for this crucial age of self-discovery.

Self-perception is partially grounded in how one person sees another individual, and this view influences one's own self-worth. Self-worth should be grounded in and reflected by God's image in His children, but so many times, young girls reverse this relationship, attempting to mirror the image of women popularized in the media. Magazines, television, movies, and the Internet offer stereotypical images of superficial beauty that cause girls to compare themselves to what they see as the ideal, which often makes them feel as if they do not measure up well, if at all, resulting in negativity. Consequently, it is crucial to the development of girls in the next

¹ See books such as George Barna's *Transforming Children into Spiritual Champions* and Art Murphy's *The Faith of a Child*.

generation that there be resources available for them to relate to that can be beneficial in helping to develop and maintain their positive self-concept.

My thesis proposal was to research and study the field of bibliotherapy. My original plan was to research the process of bibliotherapy, as well as the process of writing fiction with the result being the beginning of my own works. That idea changed when I received the Honors Council Scholarship to travel during the summer of 2008. That opened the door for me to communicate with Trudy Ludwig, an author whom I had read about online who “specializes in writing children's books that explore the colorful and sometimes confusing world of children's social interactions.”²

My original travel itinerary was to travel to Oregon to interview her and attend a writers conference. During the time frame that I was available to travel she informed me that she would be presenting a lecture on bibliotherapy at a conference in Florida. She invited me to attend and said it might interest me. So in the summer of 2008, an opportunity was presented to attend the Second Annual Mean Girls Conference in Orlando, Florida, hosted by Developmental Resources, Inc. That conference became central to my research, narrowing my field of study considerably. Focusing on relational aggression in female children and teenagers, bibliotherapy was discussed as one of the tools to use in helping these girls, and thus became the driving force behind my thesis.

In preparation for this thesis project, I completed a directed study under the supervision of Dr. Sonheim, who specializes in children's literature, in the fall semester of 2006. This

² Trudy Ludwig Web Site. (2008) <<http://www.trudyludwig.com/author.html>>.

directed study focused on literature for and about Asian American Girls. As part of this study I encountered fiction for children and teenagers, a non-fiction personal account of the effects of race in America for Asian Americans, a documentary as well as self-expressive poetry by two young Asian American girls who articulate exactly who they are as Asian American women in America.

Through these works I discovered that Asian American girls have many resources available to them for information about who they are as Asian American girls and how they are supposed to act and be treated according to society. Sometimes these resources can send them wrong messages—that Asian American girls need to change and become “westernized” rather than be who they truly are. This can lead to confusion, resentment, and low self-esteem among other problems. That is where a facilitator—be it a parent, teacher, minister, counselor, or friend—needs to be able to step in and help young Asian American girls and girls in general understand who they are and synthesize the messages they are receiving from the media and from literature.

A specific example from my directed study of a way that an Asian American girl, who is searching for herself, might need guidance is in hearing the self-expressive poetry *Black Hair, Brown Eyes... YELLOW RAGE*, by Michelle Myers and Catzie Vilayphonh. Myers and Vilayphonh perform self-expressive and self-written poetry, raps, and chants. In the presentation of their work, for the most part, they shout—usually angrily and agitatedly. The purpose of their poetry is to debunk and dispel the common misconceptions and stereotypes of today’s Asian American women—at least in their eyes. If an Asian American teenage girl heard that and then encountered some of the historical novels written by Linda Sue Park, who encourages Asian

Americans to remember their roots and have confidence in who they are in society without anger, then confusion could easily ensue. What are these girls supposed to do? How are they supposed to synthesize and apply what they have gleaned from the poetry and literature that they have encountered?

I had read and encountered a wide variety of literature and material specifically about Asian American girls, and a few pieces for girls in general—including a few resource books such as *Real Gorgeous* by Kaz Cooke and *The Body Project* by Joan Jacobs Brumberg, which can help a girl understand what it means to be a girl and the changes that her body undergoes. Upon reading and being exposed to all of this information I began to wonder if there was any organized way that a girl can be exposed to this information, be it with a teacher, parent, minister, or counselor.

Mean Girls Conference

Bibliotherapy was one of the many topics that was discussed at the Mean Girls Conference I had the privilege to attend. The 2nd Annual Mean Girls conference allowed me the opportunity to learn about the problem of relational aggression and various ways that it is being addressed. Developmental Resources, Inc. offered this opportunity so that all of the attendees could become more aware of the issue of relational aggression and add tools to their toolbox for times they encounter problems with relational aggressive girls as well as the victims of such aggression. A mission statement for this organization was stated on the inside of the program for the conference, “we hope to help shape the future by working to create nurturing environments

for our children, making our communities safer, and our families stronger.”³ Many opportunities to this end were presented to the attendants of the conference.

This year’s speakers were comprised of counselors, authors, psychologists, and various other professionals. The keynote speakers included Diane Senn—elementary/middle school counselor; Rosalind Wiseman—bestselling author; Valerie Hodge-Lane—founder and president of Positive Image Consulting Firm; Jodee Blanco—bestselling author and creator executive producer of a national anti-bullying program; Josh Lorick—radio owner and state director of South Carolina’s Youth Mentor Program; and Trudy Ludwig—children’s author and speaker. The speakers all addressed various topics with regards to relational aggression and bullying among school age girls, including bibliotherapy.

Formally defined, relational aggression “encompasses behaviors that harm others by damaging, threatening to damage or manipulating one's relationships with his/her peers, or by injuring one's feelings of social acceptance.”⁴ Each group session and the various break-out sessions provided ways to help girls deal with relational aggression, some including various statistics and prevention tips.

The keynote speakers had powerful messages and insights to give to those in attendance about the problem of relational aggression, prevention tips, the effects of it, and how to deal with it. Some of the high points included the discussions led by Rosalind Wiseman and Jodee Blanco.

³ Developmental Resources Inc. Mean Girls National Conference, (2008).

⁴ "The Ophelia Project Relational Aggression." The Ophelia Project - Leading Resource On Relational Aggression. (2008) <http://www.opheliaproject.org/main/relational_aggression.htm>.

Wiseman, author of *Queen Bees and Wannabees*—the basis for the 2004 movie *Mean Girls* spoke about “teaching girls to speak their truth to power.”⁵ Her discussion began with defining terms such as social justice, competency, dignity, and respect. After defining her terms, she developed the rest of her speech by describing what speaking the truth looks like using the anagram SEAL (Stop, Explain, Affirm, Lock).⁶

Blanco, author of *Please Stop Laughing at Me*, creator and executive producer of the national anti-bullying education program *It’s NOT Just Joking Around!*TM, and spokeswoman against the damages caused by relational aggression—shared her story of being bullied. From her discussion, a clear picture of a first-hand experience of being the victim of relational aggression was presented so that those who had never experienced bullying would have an understanding of what it is like for the bullied child. Throughout her presentation Blanco made some statements that she used to emphasize her message. Blanco said, “It’s not just joking around...you are damaging them [the victim of the relational aggression] for life;” “Bullying is not just the mean things you do, it is the nice things you never do;” and “Bullying is not just defined as cruelty, it is also defined as a deliberate omission of compassion.”⁷ These key

⁵ Rosalind Wiseman. "Beyond "I Messages"" Proc. of Mean Girls National Conference, (Florida, Orlando, 21 June 2008).

⁶ *Ibid*

⁷ Jodee Blanco. "It’s Not Just Joking Around"" Proc. of Mean Girls National Conference, (Florida, Orlando, 22 June 2008).

statements from her presentation emphasize how cruel and discriminatory bullying can be for the victim. The effects are detrimental and long-lasting.

From the overall experience of this conference I learned about relational aggression, what it looks like, how to identify it, and how big of a problem it is among girls today. I learned how to relate to girls who are going through this, and how to prevent this from happening. During the keynote segment, as well as the breakout session, I had the opportunity to learn more about bibliotherapy and how to use it as a facilitator in relational aggressive situations.

My Secret Bully⁸

Trudy Ludwig is an author who “specializes in writing children's books that explore the colorful and sometimes confusing world of children's social interactions.”⁹ She has written several books in English, and some have been translated into Spanish. Her books, *Sorry!*, *Just Kidding*, *Trouble Talk*, and *My Secret Bully* all deal with social issues that children face. Her first book was based on an encounter her daughter had with relational aggression. She wrote *My Secret Bully* to help her daughter through her difficult situation of being bullied at school. She wrote this book to be used in bibliotherapy with children, specifically girls, who are victims of relational aggression like her daughter encountered.

In her break-out session about bibliotherapy, Ludwig walked the attendees through the process of using *My Secret Bully* with children in bibliotherapy. To show the audience how to

⁸ Trudy Ludwig, *My Secret Bully*, (Berkeley: Tricycle Press, 2004).

⁹ [Trudy Ludwig Web Site](#).

use her book in bibliotherapy, she began by reading the book to the group, the premises behind *My Secret Bully* being based upon Ludwig's daughter's experiences with relational aggression.

The story in *My Secret Bully* is recounted from the perspective of a girl named Monica who has a secret bully named Katie. On the first page of the book, Monica says, "Katie is my secret bully. A lot of people would be surprised to know this because they think she's my friend. And she does act like my friend...sometimes."¹⁰ Monica then recounts their history as friends, pointing out that Katie has been mean to her though she does not understand why. Not only is Katie mean to Monica, but she also turns Monica's other friends against her, as well. As the problem continues, Monica eventually tells her mom what is going on. Her mom then guides her through ways that she might be able to deal with Katie. They try role play, which helps Monica gain confidence to talk to Katie the next day. In the end, Monica and Katie are no longer friends, yet Monica is content because she no longer has to deal with Katie bullying her and causing her life to be difficult.

After Ludwig finished reading the story she began to ask questions. Then she segued into an activity to accompany the book—a "Monica" paper doll activity. This activity engaged the children in thinking about how the relational aggression affected Monica. Once the activity was completed there was a brief time of role play of key scenes from the book, and then a time of "what if" discussion and scenarios. The session concluded with more discussion questions to engage the audience.

¹⁰ Ludwig, *My Secret Bully*, 1.

After Ludwig completed the above process of bibliotherapy, she introduced her “EmpowerKids Tool Belt™.” The “Tool Belt” provided the audience with a visual reminder of what to do when they encounter relational aggression as Monica did in the story. The “EmpowerKids Tool Belt” consisted of a child’s tool belt in which each tool represented a different strategy that would empower kids in a relational aggression situation. These strategic tools are to “say STOP!; ask WHY; walk away; say “so,” “whatever,” or “who cares” in a neutral tone; change the subject; act silly or goofy; turn an insult into a compliment; or agree.”¹¹ Ludwig made sure to note that these tools should only be used when the child feels safe and comfortable using them. Children should also be reminded to report what is happening to a trusted adult so that he/she can monitor the situation and intervene with help when needed. Ludwig suggested that when talking with kids about their “tool belt” to relate it back to the story that was just read and see how those tools would have made a difference in that situation.

This was just one example of how to use fiction in bibliotherapy. Although the story is based specifically on the experiences of Ludwig’s daughter, the message of the impact of bullying can open the door for others who have endured similar situations. This fiction allows for the troubled reader to connect and relate to the characters in the story without getting too personal to their own situation. Through this door, discussion can happen and corrective and therapeutic action can be taken.

¹¹ Trudy Ludwig, Bibliotherapy Tools, Techniques & Activities, (Ludwig Creative Inc., 2008) 3.

Introduction to Bibliotherapy

To begin my endeavors of understanding bibliotherapy, I first had to come up with a definition to apply as I studied. Authors Arleen McCarty Haynes and Mary Hynes-Berry define bibliotherapy as using “literature to bring about therapeutic interaction between participant and facilitator.”¹² The American Library Association defines bibliotherapy as “the use of selected reading material as therapeutic adjuvants in medicine and psychiatry; also, guidance in the solution of personal problems through directed reading.”¹³ Researchers Richard Riordan and Linda Wilson define bibliotherapy as “the guided reading of written materials in gaining understanding or solving problems relevant to a person’s therapeutic needs.”¹⁴ Psychologists Russell and Shrodes define bibliotherapy as “a process of dynamic interaction between the personality of the reader and literature—an interaction which may be used for personality assessment, adjustment, and growth.”¹⁵ For the purpose of this thesis, I define bibliotherapy as author Cheryl Coon does in her book entitled *Books to Grow With: A Guide to Using the Best Children’s Fiction for Everyday Issues and Tough Challenges*. She defines it as using books to help people in a therapeutic way.¹⁶ Cheryl Coon expounds on her explanation of bibliotherapy by saying:

¹² Arleen McCarty Hynes and Mary Hynes-Berry, *Biblio/Poetry Therapy—The Interactive Process: A Handbook*, (North Star Press of St. Cloud, Inc.: St. Cloud, MN, 1994)9-10.

¹³ Trudy Ludwig, *Bibliotherapy Tools, Techniques & Activities*, (Ludwig Creative Inc., 2008), 1.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Dr. Lawrence I. Silverberg, "Bibliotherapy: The therapeutic use of didactic and literary texts in treatment, diagnosis, prevention, and training," *Journal of the American Osteopathic Association* 103 (2003): 131-35. 30 Mar. 2009 <www.jaoa.org/cgi/reprint/103/3/131.pdf>.

¹⁶ Cheryl Coon, *Books To Grow With*, (Portland,OR: Lutra Press, 2004), xxi.

Bibliotherapy is the use of literature to help children cope with changes in their lives. Some experts view bibliotherapy as the exclusive province of psychologists and psychiatrists. Others distinguish between developmental bibliotherapy (for normal life transitions) and clinical bibliotherapy (for especially difficult emotional issues). Although traditional bibliotherapy may be carried out by a therapist, using fiction to help children isn't limited to that setting. It's simple common sense. As children read fiction and observe the behavior of the characters, they learn how to solve problems or at least that problems can be solved. A parent, a teacher, a librarian or a counselor who knows a particular child need not shy away from finding an appropriate fiction book for that child. Reserving bibliotherapy to specialists means foregoing a valuable tool to help kids with resources available to all of us.¹⁷

In general, bibliotherapy “helps guide a child’s thinking skills, instills moral values, strengthens personal character, shapes behavior, empowers children with critical thinking skills to help resolve conflicts.”¹⁸ Thus, bibliotherapy is the application of fiction to all areas of life to help one deal with his or her present situation. Anyone can practice it with children as long as he or she is open to it, but depending on the nature of the issue being dealt with it might be advisable to engage the assistance of professionally trained counselors or psychologists.

¹⁷ "Guides to children's problem-solving and bibliotherapy books." Lutra Press: Guides to fiction that help children cope with life. (2008) <<http://www.lutrapress.com/books.htm>>, Cheryl Coon Frequently Asked Questions.

¹⁸ Trudy Ludwig, Bibliotherapy Tools, Techniques & Activities, 1.

History of Bibliotherapy

Bibliotherapy has a long history dating back to ancient Greece, where “the ancient Greeks recognized the power of books as therapeutic tools by inscribing these words above the door at the library of Thebes: ‘the medicine chest of the soul.’”¹⁹ In modern history, bibliotherapy goes back to the early 1900s. The term was “first coined in 1916 by Dr. Samuel McChord Crothers,”²⁰ a Unitarian minister “who wrote in *The Atlantic Monthly* about a technique of bringing troubled persons together with books.”²¹

This new tool was “first used by hospitals in conjunction with library services to help WWI vets.”²² Specifically, “by the early 1920s, Sadie Peterson Delaney, chief librarian of the United States Veterans Administration Hospital in Tuskegee, Alabama, was using books to treat the psychological and physical needs of African American war veterans.”²³ She developed a process that she followed in her use of books:

The first step in bibliotherapy, which Delaney defined as ‘the treatment of a patient through selected reading’ was to know the patients through case histories as well as books. Working as a team of social workers and psychiatrist, their purpose was to ‘enable patients to connect—or reconnect—themselves with a broad community of

¹⁹ Jami Jones, "A Closer Look at Bibliotherapy," *Young Adult Library Services* 51 (2006). <http://www.kirkwood.k12.mo.us/parent_student/khs/arenske/biblio.pdf>, 24.

²⁰ Ludwig, *Bibliotherapy Tools, Techniques & Activities*, 1.

²¹ Jones, 24.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Jones, 24.

ideas.’ Delaney’s holistic practice of bibliotherapy transcended typical literary events such as book groups and story hours to include hobby clubs and activities such as stamp and coin collecting and debating to awaken a patient’s mind.²⁴

Once her technique began to spread, Delaney began to share what she was doing with other librarians so that they could implement it as well.²⁵

Then in 1937, Dr. William C. Menninger, of the prestigious Menninger Clinic, edited a psychiatric book. This book included some of his own papers—“In one of these papers he described the purposes of bibliotherapy, how it fits into a patient’s treatment plan, and how it was to be prescribed. At the Menninger Clinic, bibliotherapy was used to treat mental illness but only after the patient’s background, symptoms, and therapeutic needs had been evaluated.”²⁶

The practice of bibliotherapy and the connections between bibliotherapy have been and are continually being studied. In 1950, Carolin Shrodes focused on the subject of bibliotherapy in her dissertation. She explained that the psychological basis of it, and “according to Shrodes, the reader ‘under the impact of imaginative literature, is subject to certain processes of adaptation and growth,’ which correspond to the major phases of

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

psychotherapy: identification, projection, abreaction and catharsis, and insight.”²⁷ The specific correspondences of each phase are enumerated by Shrodes:

First, identification and projection occur when the reader shares a problem, circumstance, or issue with the book’s character. Second, abreaction and catharsis occur for the reader when the character resolves a problem, circumstance, or issue. Third, insight occurs when the reader reflects on his or her situation and internalizes the character’s solution.²⁸

Support for these correspondences has been seen by others who have studied bibliotherapy.

In 2003, Dr. Lawrence Silverberg, studying bibliotherapy for a larger medical audience, wrote an article about it for the *Journal of the American Osteopathic Association*. In his article, he noted the process and dynamics of bibliotherapy. Speaking in terms of clinical bibliotherapy, Dr. Silverberg said:

In this process, a positive outcome is sparked by the *mechanisms of change*. Alternatively, stasis or negative outcome is a result of the patient-reader’s *defense mechanisms* being aroused by this treatment modality. In bibliotherapy, the mechanisms of change expand the patient-reader’s awareness, unmask and offer insight into latent personal issues and suggest solutions that have helped others

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

cope with feelings and situations similar to their own—including separation or loss caused by human interactions.²⁹

Dr. Silverberg provided a chart for better comprehension of the therapeutic process of bibliotherapy.³⁰

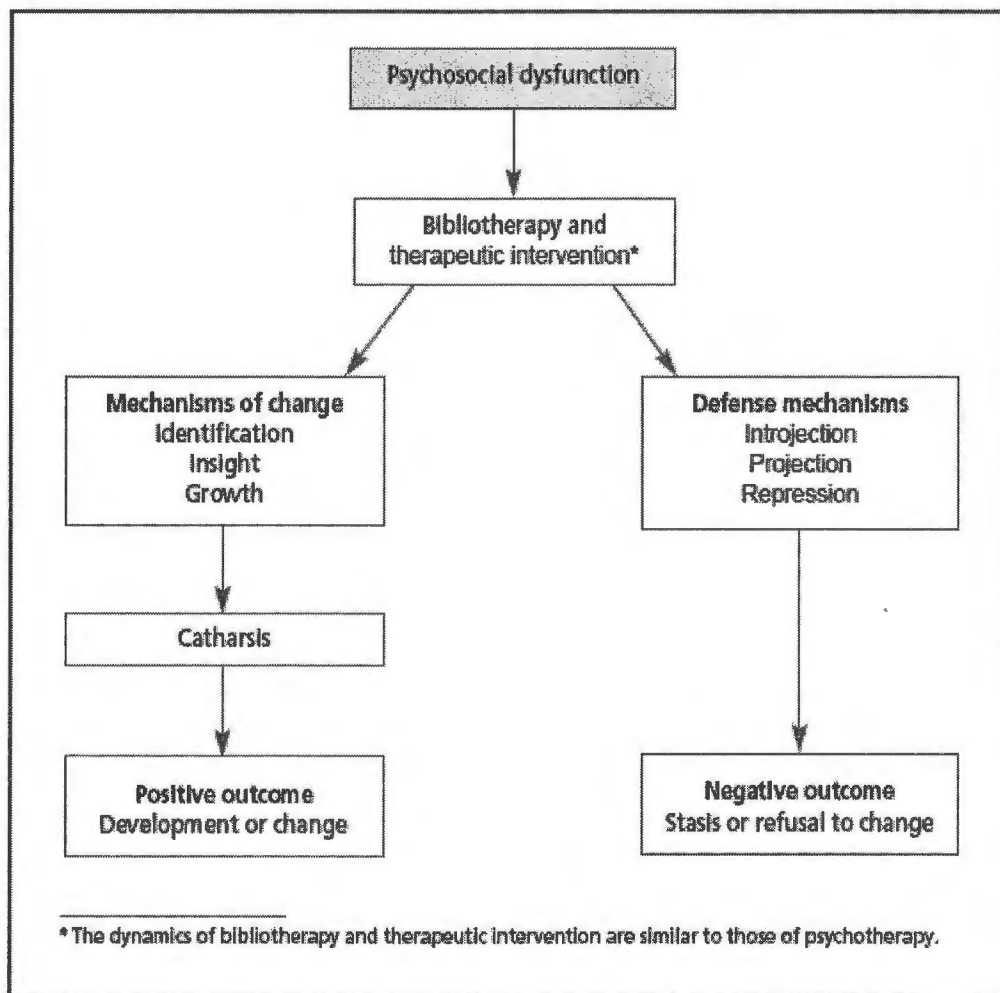


Figure 1. *The bibliotherapeutic process.*

²⁹ Silverberg, 131.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 132.

The dynamics that Silverberg describes coincide with the correspondences of Shrodes's taxonomy.

Through the years, bibliotherapy has been used in various settings, including the clinical setting as well as the home and school. For example, "Pieter Cuijpers and Robert J. Gregory et al. performed meta-analysis to isolate the effectiveness of bibliotherapy in treating depression," and "Timothy R. Apadaca and William R. Miller conducted a meta-analysis to determine the effectiveness of bibliotherapy in treating alcohol problems."³¹ Both the meta-analyses of treating depression and alcoholism with bibliotherapy have supporting data for the effectiveness of bibliotherapy in mild cases.³² Other examples of the effective use of bibliotherapy include that of "Lenkowsky and Lenkowsky [who] encourage the use of literature with learning disabled students who bring special problems and challenges to the classroom because of past histories of academics and social failure," and that of "two nurses, Manworren and Woodring, [who] write about the ways children's literature can be used to educate patients about illness, surgery, and hospitalization."³³

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² D. Chamberlain, D. Heaps, and I. Robert, "Bibliotherapy and information prescriptions: A summary of the published evidence-base and recommendations from past and ongoing Books on Prescription projects." Journal of Psychiatric and Mental Health Nursing 15.1 (Jan. 2008): 24-36. PsycINFO. EBSCO. [Library name], [City], [State abbreviation], 30 Mar. 2009
<<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=psych&AN=2008-00320-005&site=ehost-live>>.

³³ Jones, 26.

Schools of Thought/Types of Bibliotherapy

There are several schools of thought and different types of bibliotherapy. Two schools of thought about bibliotherapy are reading bibliotherapy and interactive bibliotherapy. The school of reading bibliotherapy emphasizes “the healing process as taking place through reading itself.”³⁴ It is in this school that books are “prescribed.”³⁵ Supporters of this school of thought include Caroline Shrodes, as this is the thought of the bibliotherapy process that she seems to confirm in her dissertation.³⁶

Interactive bibliotherapy emphasizes more than just the reading of the text. According to the school of interactive bibliotherapy, “the process of growth and healing is centered not as much in the act of reading as in the guided dialogue about the material.”³⁷ This school of thought emphasizes a triad; “in effect, the triad of participant-literature-facilitator means that there is a dual interaction: the participant’s personal response to the story is important, but dialoguing with the facilitator about that response can lead to a whole new dimension of insight.”³⁸ One view of the nature of therapy as stated by psychiatrist Jerome Frank states:

Viewed as a healing art rather than as a form of reeducation, the most effective ingredients of psychotherapy lie in those aspects of the therapeutic relationship which raise the patient’s morale and inspire him with courage to try new ways of

³⁴ Hynes, 10.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

coping with the stresses that beset him. These healing components lie in the realm of feelings. Arousal of such emotions as hope, faith, reverence, even sometimes fear, characterize all forms of healing in nonindustrial societies. Such emotional states seem to increase accessibility to the healer's influence and facilitate attitude change.³⁹

Bibliotherapy is a way to elicit these feelings that lead to personal growth and development; "the beneficial integration that interactive bibliotherapy offers comes from the cognitive process of first recognizing feelings and then sorting out and evaluating the feeling-responses."⁴⁰

Along with the two schools of thought about bibliotherapy, there are also two types of bibliotherapy: clinical and developmental. Clinical bibliotherapy is used in the clinical setting and "is typically one of several creative therapies being used with populations in a specific treatment program."⁴¹ Some examples of these populations where clinical bibliotherapy might be used include with "emotionally disturbed persons," "correctional institution residents," and "chemically dependent persons."⁴² Similarly, developmental bibliotherapy is used in settings that foster "normal growth and beneficial development" and "is typically practiced in groups that have formed and meet in the context of a school, community center, library, church, or synagogue."⁴³ Some examples of populations in which developmental bibliotherapy might be

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 13-4.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 14-5.

used include “adolescents and children,” “senior citizens,” “support groups,” “dying patients,” “handicapped people,” and “public library patrons.”⁴⁴

Methods of Practicing Bibliotherapy

There are several methods that can be followed when using bibliotherapy. The general steps of practicing bibliotherapy are simply stated and easy to follow. One way to practice bibliotherapy, as outlined by Ludwig in her presentation on bibliotherapy, is to follow the process of “instilling critical thinking skills in young readers by 1) reading to an individual or group, 2) discussing the story, and 3) achieving closure by furthering discussion, having activities, including role-play, list problem-solving strategies, and other forms of intervention.”⁴⁵

Some questions to keep in mind when choosing a book to use in bibliotherapy are if the book is:

well written, developmentally age-appropriate in content and reading level, does it honestly portray the human condition—is the language familiar to children, is the storyline relevant to the reader; does it have multi-dimensional characters that ‘hook’ the reader—including relatable experiences, realistic portrayals of emotions; does it explore problem-solving techniques—non-violent strategies, realistic responses, and safe interventions.⁴⁶

Choosing a book based on these premises has an important impact on the effectiveness of the bibliotherapy that is being practiced.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 15-7.

⁴⁵ Ludwig, Bibliotherapy Tools, Techniques & Activities, 3.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.

There are many benefits that are a result of bibliotherapy. For example, “bibliotherapy helps children to identify with the story’s protagonist, acquire insight into the characters’ thoughts, feelings & actions, have an opportunity for catharsis, allowing them to express similar personal experiences in a safe environment.”⁴⁷ It is sometimes hard for people to open up. This is especially true of girls at any age, but especially during the childhood and teen years. If a girl can connect with a character in a book on some level be it emotional, situational, or in any other way, this can and often does foster a springboard for conversations. The connection provides a door for a conversation that the girl is comfortable having, a conversation that is not too personal, but that can address personal issues.

Some other ways that bibliotherapy is helpful is that it “fosters empathy, perspective-taking, and compassion, and changes social attitudes.”⁴⁸ If a girl has a connection with the characters in the book, it often creates an emotional bond and allows for the development of empathy which furthers comprehension and has the possibility of having a lasting impact on the reader. Ideas are expressed through books, and it is through books that a deeper understanding and appreciation of such ideas can occur. For example, a deeper understanding of the idea of kindness can be reached through the contemplation of a book about helping a friend in a time of need.

The texts that can be used in bibliotherapy are classified into two categories: didactic—“instructional and educational, similar to textbooks used in the traditional educational process,” and imaginative—“dramatic presentation of human behavior through fiction, poetry, drama,

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 2.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 2.

biography, and autobiography.”⁴⁹ Thus, the texts used in bibliotherapy can be either fiction or nonfiction. For the purpose of this thesis, the focus of the examples given was with the use of imaginative literature.

There is scientific evidence that “indicates that imaginative literature has the potential to bring about change within an individual because it is more likely to produce an emotional experience—an essential element for effective therapy. The effects of bibliotherapy may occur on intellectual, psychosocial, interpersonal, emotional, and behavioral levels.”⁵⁰ This data is encouraging and testifies to the validity and effectiveness of this theory. Dr. Silverberg uses the example of raising children and the communication between parent and child to emphasize this point:

Open communication between adults and children is vital to developing successful long-term relationships, yet such communication is often difficult. By using books as a point of entry to discussion, adults encourage intellectual and emotional contact with children and make important steps toward establishing healthful relationships with them. While bibliotherapy is particularly well-suited for children showing symptoms of psychosocial dysfunction or maladjustment, it should also be considered as a vehicle for presenting challenging ideas, promoting

⁴⁹ Silverberg, 133.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

the growth of important concepts, and fostering the development of personal insights for all children.⁵¹

Thus bibliotherapy is effective and useful in troublesome and difficult situations with children, as well as during transitional phases of life that can be challenging.

Resources on Bibliotherapy

There are many books in print that deal with the subject of bibliotherapy. Some address childhood, others the teenage years and adulthood. The topics that they address within bibliotherapy also vary. Some deal with death, some with illnesses such as cancer, and some are general reference books. *Books to Grow With* by Cheryl Coon is a general resource book that has book suggestions for children dealing with transition and various life problems. This book also includes multicultural suggestions, such as books available in Spanish.

Books such as *Bibliotherapy: A Clinical Approach for Helping Children* edited by John Pardeck and Jean Pardeck, and *Using Books in Clinical Social Work Practice: A Guide to Bibliotherapy* by John Pardeck are just two examples of other books that are available to better understand and practice bibliotherapy. The first of these books focuses specifically on using bibliotherapy with children. In it different situations are addressed directly including adoption, blended families, divorce, abuse, and fears. The second book focuses on clinical bibliotherapy, offering insights on how to handle various issues and how to use various books. Both of these books are good resources, as well as others cited in this paper.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 132-3.

In this age of technology, there are also many resources for bibliotherapy available on the World Wide Web. Some of the Web Sites that I came across I found especially helpful,⁵² and the online database of PsychInfo provided me with information and direction when I was at a loss or needed more information for further understanding.

Along with bibliotherapy there are other forms of therapy that might also be beneficial to helping children adapt to life circumstances. These other options include poetry therapy, art therapy, play therapy, music therapy, and dance therapy. The term poetry therapy is sometimes used synonymously with bibliotherapy, but more specifically, poetry therapy employs the use of written or spoken verses and other forms of poetry to aid in a situation, rather than prose, novels, short stories, or narratives. Play therapy is the use of toys, such as dolls for children, to therapeutically work through their problems. Music therapy is the application of music to help clients deal with issues. Dance therapy is the use of dance and other movements in a therapeutic process. There are a variety of references available on each of these types of therapy as well. Each of these types of therapy also has various Web Sites attributed to it for, how to practice it, and organizations and societies dedicated to the specific therapy.

Real Life Applications of Bibliotherapy

With all of the information about bibliotherapy that I have gained through my research, I wanted to see if there was a way to get in contact with someone who practices bibliotherapy or something resembling it on a regular basis. I did not have to look far, because there was a

⁵² Some of the sites that I found helpful included the following:

<http://www.indiana.edu/~reading/ieo/digests/d177.html>,

<http://www.huntel.net/rsweetland/literature/development/caring/biblio.html>,

<http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/ALAN/winter95/Myracle.html>, <http://counselingoutfitters.com/Pehrsson.htm>.

counselor who practiced bibliotherapy with her clients in the town where my University is located, a town of 10,000 people.

Mrs. Kendra Seel is a licensed professional counselor and is a school-based therapist for the Arkadelphia Public Schools in Arkadelphia, AR. She graduated from Henderson State University in Arkadelphia, with a Bachelor's and Master's of Science in Education. It was during her graduate work in education professor Dr. Blair Olson's technique class that she first heard about bibliotherapy. In that class, Dr. Olson talked about bibliotherapy and the use of it. Seel now uses it regularly in her own practice and is seeing results.

Seel defines bibliotherapy as "the use of books to indirectly facilitate a client in identifying feelings."⁵³ She uses books in a variety of situations. One important reference work for her is the book entitled, *Once Upon a Time...Therapeutic Stories* by Nancy Davis, PhD. The book contains a variety of short stories that are gender specific and relevant to a variety of situations. With each story, there is also a coloring page that the client can color before, during, or after the reading of the story. Coloring the picture often facilitates conversation as the story and issues are discussed. Seel said, "Primarily to me it [therapy] is about identifying with the characters and emotions in the book."⁵⁴ She noted that at times she does not use books. If the situation arises and she has the opportunity to share a story to open the door for communication, she will tell a story that she knows with the hope of connecting with the client.

⁵³ Seel interview, 2/13/2009

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

She attributes the success of bibliotherapy to the way that clients connect to the fiction. “It’s a safety net. It’s a way for the client not to directly be asked about problems. They can explore their feelings through empathy with characters in the book,”⁵⁵ notes Seel.

Seel shared with me several examples of how she has used bibliotherapy. In one particular case, two of her special education female students had both recently experienced loss. One had lost her mother and the other had lost her grandfather. Though both of the girls had verbal communication problems, they were able to connect with the stories in the books that Seel shared with them. From the stories, they were able to communicate and share what they were feeling with fewer descriptive words. The story was the bridge across their communication gap.

Other examples that Seel shared with me included using bibliotherapy in situations of change, such as the changing of schools or the entering of new environments. She also shared with me some examples of using bibliotherapy in cases when opposition and aggression are the problems. Aggression poses a big problem in schools today. Seel notes that in these bullying situations she focuses on the concept of empathy and coping skills. She uses bibliotherapy, primarily using modeling and role playing, in a group setting.

Seel practices bibliotherapy in both group and individual settings. She prefers, “group settings with books, because you get a wide range of results and reactions...everyone has their own story to add to the story that you just shared.”⁵⁶ Yet, she has had results in both settings.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

When I asked her about her favorite aspect of this approach, she said, “The number of issues you can cover is almost countless, and it doesn’t hit you over the head that it’s talking about you and your situation.”⁵⁷ The indirectness of this approach [bibliotherapy] allows for the self-conscious client to be comfortable sharing his or her thoughts and feelings. In her practice, Seel typically chooses stories with a protagonist the opposite sex of her client, but who is in a similar situation, though not exactly the same. For example, if the client’s mother recently was diagnosed with breast cancer, Seel will pick a book about a boy whose grandpa is battling colon cancer. Her general philosophy is to follow the client and what he or she is saying, moving on from there.

In her professional experience with using bibliotherapy in her practice, Seel sees a 90% success rate in girls opening up to their issues and keeping their attention with the use of fiction. She also sees a 70% success rate of clients’ implementation of what was learned and retention and ability to draw on the skills learned by the characters in the story, though at times such insights may require prompting by the therapist. With boys, she finds both of these statistics slightly lower, especially at specific ages because boys are so much more tactile learners than girls. Therefore, she finds that modeling and role play work much better with boys.⁵⁸

In her closing remarks about bibliotherapy, Seel shared with me the benefits of teaching parents how to use the approach. She related a story in which she informed a parent how to use bibliotherapy to bridge the gap on sensitive subjects such as sex education. She said that bibliotherapy has the potential to make communication between parents and children so much

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

better. Bibliotherapy entails a certain liberating flexibility. For example, she said, “When a parent is using bibliotherapy with a child, if the child wants to talk about what is discussed on page five they will, even when page 12 does not interest them at the moment.”⁵⁹

Seel concluded our interview by saying, “I really do love bibliotherapy because instead of making clients have a specific train of thought to follow, when you read a book, they are in control of that information. As a therapist, you think you know what they feel, but until you open the door you really don’t know. Their interpretation is what you are interested in. Use it [bibliotherapy] and let them go with it.”⁶⁰

Ways of Continuing Research

There are many ways that my research can be continued. Some of the possible continuations of this research include looking at culturally specific fiction and nonfiction for any effect on the message and success of the therapy being done. Also, continuing research on the effects of bibliotherapy as a preventative tool as well as a coping tool, a study of biblioprophylaxis.⁶¹ A multi-year study following the growth and development of several children and how they relate to one another and to the issues at hand could be used in studying this element.

My research could also be furthered by seeing how boys relate to bibliotherapy, as well as teenagers and adults. The focus of this study was more on girls and how bibliotherapy can be used with them, but briefly looked at other groups. A more in-depth look at those groups might

⁵⁹ *ibid.*

⁶⁰ *ibid.*

⁶¹ Jones, 25.

be beneficial. It would also be interesting to see how using audio books affected the success rate of the bibliotherapy.

Conclusion

Girls today have many influences vying for their attention and telling them how to deal with the problems and issues that arise. They are also facing many pressures that previous generations did not face. Children are having to grow up much faster today than before and are facing things that many people did not face until they were older or may never have faced, such as sexual activity, drugs, and other vital issues. Therefore, it is important that there be some outlet that allows them to connect and relate in a way that helps them process the world around them and what they are going through. Relational aggression is just one of many areas that girls are having to learn how to deal with in life.

Traditional psychological therapy and counseling are helpful for girls in these types of situations, but bibliotherapy is a fresh option that has the potential to help girls deal with life. Curling up with a good book allows girls to enter a world in which they can relate to someone who is experiencing something similar and learn from that experience. Such empathy fosters thinking about the issue in a new way and hopefully in a way that produces beneficial coping skills.

Jesus used stories in the form of parables to spread his message and help his listeners learn and grow. For example, to teach about loving one's neighbor, He told the story of the Good Samaritan. After telling the story He asked an expert of the law who his neighbor was, and he was able to give the correct response after listening to the story Jesus told to communicate a

message.⁶² From the example Jesus set, it is easy to see the importance and power of stories in ministry.

Bibliotherapy and ministering to children go hand-in-hand. The most helpful book in life is the Bible. In it God provides insight, guidance, encouragement, comfort, and so much more. In ministering to children, the Bible is used to tell stories and in this sense it can be classified as a reference for bibliotherapy. There are also other books that have been published for children that have underlying Christian motives and morals. Max Lucado has written a series of books that do just this including *You are Special*, *You are Mine*, and *If I Only Had a Green Nose*. Knowing how to effectively use these books to relate to children and help them deal with issues in their life is a useful tool in ministering to children and their families.

Bibliotherapy is an effective tool that more parents, teachers, ministers, counselors and other practitioners need to be aware of and trained in. The power of the written word in the form of fiction has not gone by the wayside; on the contrary, it holds a key to relating to today's children and helping them deal with life issues that they are facing in a constructive and beneficial manner. Bibliotherapy, if practiced correctly, may be one of the best tools available for children of this generation and those that follow; "books can and do make a difference."⁶³

⁶² Luke 10:25-37.

⁶³ Jones, 24.

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