

2-1-1991

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### Recommended Citation

Ouzts, D. T. (1991). The Emergence of Bibliotherapy as a Discipline. *Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts*, 31 (3). Retrieved from [https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading\\_horizons/vol31/iss3/3](https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol31/iss3/3)

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# The Emergence of Bibliotherapy as a Discipline

Dan T. Ouzts

In 1988, Ryan White spoke before the National Education Association and discussed his battle with AIDS:

*'I stand before you to ask for your help,' Ryan told the teachers. 'The many people against me said they weren't against me, but against my disease. Help me beat the odds and together let's educate and save the children of the world. By proper education, AIDS can be a disease, not a dirty word.'*

Ryan White was the child who had contracted AIDS through a blood transfusion and was barred from school when school officials and parents rejected health authorities' assurances that AIDS cannot be spread through casual contact. Ryan became the spokesperson to lead the nation out of ignorance and hatred of people with AIDS. His legacy has taught us lessons of courage, understanding and hope. In teaching and learning about these concepts, the book *Losing Uncle Tim* (Jordan, 1989) is recommended. In this book, a young boy learns that his favorite grown-up is dying from a disease called AIDS. This book is recommended for use in the intermediate grades.

As educators we must sensitize children to themselves and to others through books. We cannot ignore the emotional aspect of learning and adjustment and concentrate solely on the academic aspect. It is detrimental to both the learner and the learning process to consider the intellect without consideration of the social aspect of learning. The reading teacher occupies a strategic position in the development of emotions of children, and it is through this development that the teacher is able to help shape the future of children who are experiencing stress and crises in their lives. Caring, competent and knowledgeable educators fully appreciate how authentic interactions with literature can contribute to overall cognitive and affective growth (Jalongo, 1983).

### **The effects of social change on children**

Life is a continual adjustment to many different types of problems and these problems can cause times of sadness, uncertainty and stress. Many children must face problems stemming from handicapping conditions and cultural differences, and now the threat of nuclear war (Ouzts, 1984).

Galen and Johns (1976) conducted a survey in which teachers were to select the ten problems most prevalent among primary grade children. Three categories were analyzed (concept of self, relationships with others, and need to cope with change). The ten developmental/emotional problems were: 1) coping with competition, and divorce or change in family status; 2) coping with failure; 3) coping with peer group pressure; 4) recognizing and accepting one's strengths and weaknesses 5) coping with alienation and rejection; 6) resolving problems with siblings; 7) accepting the strengths and weaknesses of others 8) moving to a new neighborhood; 9) new baby, and 10) coping with physical

handicaps or differences. If we were to examine these ten problems facing both teachers and children since this study, one would find that many of these same problems still exist. With the dilemma of homelessness, this problem will be encountered in the future. Educators are recognizing the critical need for delivering literacy instruction to at-risk and homeless children and their families (IRA, 1990). It appears that a movement away from the traditional fairy tales has occurred in today's literature and more real-life situations are being presented. In a study conducted by Ouzts (in press), the favorite fifteen books in each of the sixth, seventh, and eighth grades were determined from a population of 555 middle school students. Forty-five books were determined as favorites of children in these grades, and, of these, only five books were fairy tales — *Three Little Pigs*, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *Jack and the Beanstalk*, *Cinderella*, and *Mother Goose Nursery Rhymes*. Some of the favorite books were *Superfudge*, *Freckle Juice*, and the *Ramona* books, which reflect more contemporary trends.

One needs only to examine the content of many concept books and one would find issues such as adoption, AIDS, alcoholism, Alzheimer's disease, blindness, day care, divorce, Downs Syndrome, latchkey children, and even nuclear war (Albert Whitman, 1990).

### **The background of bibliotherapy**

The word *bibliotherapy* first appeared in 1930 in an article by G.O. Ireland. Other terms applied to this type of therapy were therapeutic reading. In the United States, Drs. Will and Karl Menninger were among the first to foster an interest in this type of aid to healing (O'Bruba and Complese, 1983).

Bibliotherapy was first used as a type of therapy with people who were emotionally ill. Today bibliotherapy is also used with a wide range of people from school children to adults in prison. It is used to help people adjust to life's many problems as well as to promote change in attitudes toward people and situations.

Shrodes (1949) first linked three interdependent stages in psychotherapy — identification, catharsis, and insight — to bibliotherapy. Russell (1970) used *identification* as the holistic name for the process under which the other two processes are subsumed. Jalongo (1983) states that theoretically the process follows a consistent pattern in which the reader or listener initially senses a common bond with the story's character, and finally, the reader/listener, by sharing vicariously in the dilemma of the story character, reflects upon personal circumstances and internalizes some of the coping mechanisms. Garfinkel and colleagues (1988) state that any young person attempting to cope with severe emotional problems, alone or in an ineffective way, needs assistance. Whenever teachers are aware of a situation where a young person is facing a series of traumatic events or a one-time crisis, they should be alert to the emotional fallout and offer whatever help they can.

In *Responding to Adolescent Suicide* (Garfinkel et al., 1988), suicide is reported as the second leading cause of death among high school students, exceeded only by motor vehicle fatalities. This useful resource text details what to do in the wake of a teenage suicide, suggests how to manage the crisis, and recommends the establishment of a school crisis team. It also presents an at-risk adolescent checklist. It is important that educators play an important role when a suicide occurs, and this publication will help with the problems that arise after a suicide.

**Table 1**  
**Bibliotherapy Topics and Recommended Books**

- ABUSE: *The Pinballs*, Betsy Byars; *Cracker Jackson*, Betsy Byars  
 ADOPTION: *Adoption is for Always*, Linda Girard  
 AIDS: *Losing Uncle Tim*, Mary Kate Jordan  
 ABSENT FATHER: *A Father Like That*, Charlotte Zolotow  
 BLINDNESS: *Knots on a Counting Rope*, Bill Martin, Jr., and John Archambault; *Redbird* (in Braille), Patrick Fort  
 CANCER: *Hang Tough*, Matthew Lancaster  
 DEATH: *I'll Always Love You*, Hans Wilhelm; *The Two of Them*, Aliki; *A Taste of Blackberries*, Doris Smith; *The Cremation of Sam McGee*, Robert Service  
 DISABILITIES: *Our Teacher's in a Wheelchair*, Mary Ellen Powers; *The Summer of the Swans*, Betsy Byars; *I'm Not So Different*, Barbara Seuling  
 DIVORCE: *The Divorce Express*, Paula Danziger; *Win Me and You Lose*, Phyllis Wood; *It's Not the End of the World*, Judy Blume  
 DOWNS SYNDROME: *Where's Chimpy?*, Berniece Rabe  
 FAMILIES: *What Kind of Family is This?*, Barbara Seuling  
 ILLITERACY: *My Mom Can't Read*, Muriel Stanek  
 MOVING: *My Best Friend Moved Away*, Joy Zelonky  
 NEW BABY: *She Come Bringing Me That Little Baby Girl*, Eloise Greenfield  
 NEW PARENTS: *Sarah, Plain and Tall*, Patricia MacLachlan  
 RACIAL ISSUES: *Overcoming Prejudice and Discrimination*, Joy Berry  
 RELATIONSHIPS: *Blubber*, Judy Blume; *Queenie Peavy*, Robert Burch; *The Hating Book*, Charlotte Zolotow; *The Get Along Gang and the Bully*, Margo Lundell  
 SEX ROLES: *William's Doll*, Charlotte Zolotow  
 SIBLING RIVALRY: *The Pain and the Great One*, Judy Blume; *Jacob I Have Loved*, Katherine Paterson

## Beginning the use of bibliotherapy

Jalongo (1983) recommends that one begin bibliotherapy by administering an interest inventory to select several books with general appeal. *The Book Finder*, a guide to children's literature about the needs and problems of youths aged 2 and up (Dreyer, 1989) is an excellent source. *The Book Finder* lists books by subject or problem area, author, title, and recommended ages. It can be

purchased in four volumes. Volume 1 contains lists of books before 1975, Volume 2 contains lists of books from 1975-1978, Volume 3 contains lists of books from 1979-1982, and Volume 4 contains lists of books from 1983-1986.

According to Jalongo (1983), the following three decision points should be considered when planning and preparing lessons: 1) set purposes considering what you hope to accomplish; 2) decide who will participate, and 3) plan timing to produce synchrony between a child's experiences and the story character's conflict. After children have completed a reading they need to ask several questions to analyze whether the particular reading has affected the problem (Partridge, 1976). The questions may include the following: 1) did I resolve my problem? 2) how do I feel about the book, and 3) am I satisfied with the results from my reading?

### **Criteria for book selection**

There are three criteria to be used in selecting books for bibliotherapy: potential for controversy, accuracy or credibility, and value to literature (Jalongo, 1983). Sanacore (1982) has noted that many censorship crises in public education are related to language arts materials and has urged discretion in the selection of material. The seven most controversial subjects that Sanacore has pointed out are those of politics, religion, ethnic groups, strong language, drugs, alcohol, and sex. He has given special attention to the latter two, emphasizing that careful consideration must be given as these are very controversial subjects. It should also be noted that in *Reading Today* (IRA, 1989), the following were noted as the ten most frequently banned books in the United States: 1) *Catcher in the Rye*, J.D. Salinger; 2) *The Grapes of Wrath*, John Steinbeck; 3) *Of Mice and Men*, John Steinbeck; 4) *Go Ask Alice*, anonymous; 5) *Forever*, Judy

Blume; 6) *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, the Boston Women's Health Book Collective Staff; 7) *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Mark Twain; 8) *The Learning Tree*, Gordon Parks; 9) *My Darling, My Hamburger*, Paul Zindel and 10) *1984*, George Orwell (Demac, 1990).

### **Support for the use of bibliotherapy**

Heitzmann and Heitzmann (1975) concluded that while bibliotherapy was "not yet a science" (pp. 120-124), several excellent studies tended to support its use. One helpful step in determining how, why or when bibliotherapy works is to study published research by age group (Tillman, 1984). Tillman reviewed nine research studies on bibliotherapy, concluded that careful planning for length of treatment is required, and recommended longitudinal studies. He also stated that consideration should be given to the "how, why, and when" of bibliotherapy. In particular, the "identification, catharsis, insight" explanation of how bibliotherapy works needs to be verified (pp. 713-19).

Even though some studies on bibliotherapy have not always indicated positive and significant results, it would appear that to the teacher who is willing to become familiar with children's literature and who is willing to work within the framework of a normal classroom to develop character, morals, attitudes, and self-worth, bibliotherapy would be worth a try. It appears that bibliotherapy is emerging as a discipline in the reading field, as evidenced by the literature and by the research being conducted.

The listing of books concentrating on bibliotherapy which is presented above in Table 1 shows books which the author has used in graduate reading classes. This listing is recommended to the classroom teacher.

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