

What benefits might be found in writing about experiences of trauma? Alternatively, what might be the effect of reading about somebody else's experiences?

In my October and November posts, I explored aspects of the medical and rehabilitative object-human relationships in Harry Parker's novel *Anatomy of a Soldier*. Although a work of fiction, Parker's novel is semi-autobiographical. It is Parker's chosen way of sharing his story and making sense of what happened to him. Parker served in the British Army and lost both his legs in 2009 when he was blown up by an IED. *Anatomy of a Soldier* features a main character who experiences the same trauma. Parker remarked in an interview that "[w]riting about the explosion . . . felt good creatively, but also you've mined your personal experiences." He goes on to explain that writing was a key part of the "restitution of his independence and sense of self". This suggests that an important part of Parker's recovery, the reinstating of his 'sense of self', was facilitated by his engagement with creative writing as a key part of that sense making process.

There is an indication that, whether or not the intention was so, *Anatomy of a Soldier* has similarities with trauma literature. As I will go on to explore, trauma literature can encourage a certain type of engagement from both writer and reader.

What is trauma literature? This question is worthy of its own discussion, but to give some brief ideas; Tal writes:

*[t]he writings of trauma survivors comprise a distinct 'literature of trauma'. Literature of trauma is defined by the identity of its author. Literature of trauma holds at its center the reconstruction and recuperation of the traumatic experience, but it is also actively engaged in an ongoing dialogue with the writings and representations of non-traumatized authors (1995, p. 17).*

This suggests an autobiographical dimension to trauma literature. However, also recognised in literary criticism is the positioning of trauma narratives within a fictional realm. Baleav writes:

*[t]he term 'trauma novel' refers to a work of fiction that conveys profound loss or intense fear on individual or collective levels. A defining feature of the trauma novel is the transformation of the self, ignited by an external often terrifying experience, which illuminates the process of*

coming to terms with the dynamics of memory that inform the new perceptions of the self and world (2008, p. 2).

For the writer, writing about personal experiences can be a form of therapy. Pennebaker is a pioneer of therapeutic writing. His work draws attention to the relationship between language and recovery from trauma. Pennebaker's research began to explore this trend in the 1980s, during which he explored how and why people could use creative writing to work through negative emotions. Pennebaker conducted studies into the use of writing paradigms throughout the 1990s. He found that cognitive changes resulted specifically from engagement with therapeutic writing, through the use of language to construct a coherent story, combined with the expression of negative emotions (1992; 1997).

What of the reader? What might readers gain from exposure to somebody else's writing? Bibliotherapy, the use of written material in a therapeutic context, might offer some clues. Bibliotherapeutic techniques have, in the last decade or so, gained increased attention as a formalised discipline. However, the actual practice of bibliotherapy has ancient roots; in the ancient world, libraries were seen as houses of healing (Weise, 2004).

As we can see, there have been bibliotherapeutic whispers for a while and the movement is gaining momentum. In 2013 Ella Berthoud and Susan Elderkin published *The Novel Cure, An A-Z of Literary Remedies*, in which they suggest books to read in response to many physical, psychological and emotional ailments readers might be experiencing. The book is curious and compelling. Although Berthoud and Elderkin are not the first to suggest reading can have therapeutic benefits, their book helped pave the way for contemporary recognition of bibliotherapy. Berthoud and Elderkin might themselves be understood as alternative apothecaries.

Although the focus of this post is trauma writing, bibliotherapy is not and should not be restricted to any specific genre. No written material is off-limits, the focus should be on the reading material that benefits the individual and what they like to read. There are many questions still to grapple with when it comes to Bibliotherapy and therapeutic creative writing. Seeing books as something 'to use' or 'prescribe' will not sit comfortably with everyone, as it may suggest there is a clinical aspect to something that possibly should not be distilled down into a formula. These disciplines offer an interesting segway between art and science, but maintaining the rigour of each approach, when they are brought together, needs careful consideration. Furthermore, does some of the magic of reading disappear if we only engage with it 'by rote' or adhere to it as a prescription? It is early days in our understanding of these practices. Perhaps our efforts are an attempt to formalise and bring recognition to something we have already been practising for centuries.

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