Cecilia Pettersson, »Women’s experience of reading fiction while on sick leave«

ABSTRACT
The article presents an empirical study of women's experiences of reading fiction while on sick leave. The aim is to discuss questions concerning the choice of literature and the function of reading in a bibliotherapeutic context from the viewpoint of literary studies. The results presented shed new light on previous research on bibliotherapy. They also show that the surveyed women's reading patterns correspond very well with how women have read historically. Thus, the literary studies perspective applied in the study opens up for a more broad-minded approach to the selection of literature and to different kinds of reading in bibliotherapy than has been customary. In addition, it suggests that research on bibliotherapy has everything to gain from taking a gender perspective.

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Keywords: bibliotherapy, literature, reading, women

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in the relation between cultural activities and health. In Sweden for instance, this interest is manifested through public efforts. One example of this is a project called »Prescribed culture«, which aims to investigate whether participation in cultural activities can serve therapeutic purposes and be part of a rehabilitation process. The creative arts investigated here, preferentially music and visual art, have long been used for therapeutic purposes. Studies have also been carried out to provide evidence of the therapeutic and health-promoting gains of these art forms. When it comes to literature, there are several international studies suggesting a link between reading and health. Despite this, the use of literature to promote mental health, so called bibliotherapy, has not been investigated empirically in a Swedish context. Thus, the study titled »Women’s experiences of reading fiction while on sick leave«, which will be described below, is the first major attempt in this country to critically and systematically describe and discuss a group’s experience of reading fiction during a period of mental and sometimes also physical illness. The English word »fiction« should, in this context, be understood as synonymous with the Swedish word »skönlitteratur«, which in addition to novels, short stories, drama and poetry also includes biographies, memoirs, autobiographies and autopathographies.

In an international perspective, a lot of scholarly work has been done to describe the foundations of bibliotherapy and efforts to use it. Since the middle of the last century, when Caroline Shrodes wrote the first dissertation on bibliotherapy, it has been an ever-growing area of research in the US and some other countries in the West. During years of research and practice, various forms of bibliotherapy have emerged; these include reading bibliotherapy, where the clients read the recommended literature on their own or with a certain contact with a therapist, and interactive bibliotherapy, in which a group of people discuss selected literature under the guidance of a bibliotherapist. Most of the research on bibliotherapy originates from psychology. As a consequence, questions concerning the psychotherapeutic processes in bibliotherapy, treatment outcomes and the bibliographic training of therapists have had a high priority.
However, questions concerning reading and the literature used in bibliotherapy have largely been left aside. Although some of the research has discussed the literature used in bibliotherapy, there is no agreement on what kind of literature – for instance, fiction or self-help literature – is most appropriate for use in bibliotherapeutic interventions. Other questions that remain to be answered concern how to read and the function of reading in a bibliotherapeutic context. Answers to these questions may shed new light on bibliotherapy as a science and contribute to new insights in the field. Answering them requires adopting a literary studies perspective on bibliotherapy. This is the aim of this article.

THE DESIGN OF THE STUDY

The study >Women’s experiences of reading fiction while on sick leave< was carried out in Gothenburg, a town with more than 500,000 inhabitants in the southwest of Sweden. There were several reasons for focusing on women’s therapeutic reading. Women read more than men. This is especially true when it comes to fiction. Furthermore, women are more often absent from work due to illness than men, and mental illness, for which bibliotherapy is most often used, is a more common reason for sick leave among women than men.

One important reason for focusing on fiction rather than on self-help literature, which is most common in bibliotherapeutic contexts today, is the healing potential that many theorists throughout history have identified in fiction. Aristotle argued that literature can be seen as a medicine for the soul. More recent theorists like Martha Nussbaum and Rita Felski highlight that fiction is characterized by a unique ability to stimulate thoughts and emotions. This made the choice of fiction appropriate for those on sick leave.

The participants were recruited by purposeful sampling. Flyers with brief information about the study were strategically placed in bookshops, libraries, educational associations, health care centres and so on. Criteria for participation were: woman of working age who was currently or had recently been on sick leave for at least three months; a physical or mental condition as the reason for sick leave; reading at least one piece of fiction or autobiography (or an equivalent amount of literature) per month during sick leave; ability to read hard-copy books or listen to audio books; ability to understand and speak Swedish without the assistance of an interpreter. When compared with the existing forms of bibliotherapy, the women in the study was regarded as having carried out a form of self-initiated reading bibliotherapy, as they read the literature on their own.

Ten women showed an interest in participating. However, two of them were excluded as they did not fulfil the criterion of ongoing or recent sick leave. Thus, the study included eight
women ranging in age from 26 to 67 years. Before taking sick leave, their occupations were communicator, librarian, teacher, social worker, personal assistant, physiotherapist, self-employed worker and student. The reasons for taking sick leave were cancer, post-traumatic stress, fatigue syndrome and psychosis. For all eight participants, reading fiction was a lifelong interest.

Data was collected in individual interviews, which were carried out using an interview guide that included different aspects of reading fiction during a period of sick leave. The open-ended interview questions served as a general basis for reaching more specific and deeper questions on different factors. A brief analysis was carried out after each interview to gain an overall understanding of the women’s experiences and to develop new questions to be used in the subsequent interviews. Each participant was interviewed once.

The interviews were carried out in places chosen by the participants. Four of them took place in conference rooms at a university, three in the participants’ homes and one on Skype. Attempts were made in the interviews to maintain a balance of power concerning preferential right of interpretation and the meanings of concepts and words of both parties. This form of reflexivity was promoted by performing the interviews in a relaxed way, so that they were more like conversations than formal interviews, and by letting the interviewees react to perceived meanings. The interviews, which were digitally recorded, lasted from 40 to 60 minutes.

THE RESULTS OF THE STUDY

The choice of literature
The women’s answers can be sorted into two main categories, one concerning the kind of literature they read and the other concerning how they read during sick leave. Regarding the kind of literature the women read, fiction clearly predominates. The most common genre is the novel, but some of the women also read poetry. There is also a tendency among the participants to choose autopathographies, that is, stories of people who themselves have suffered from a disease. Nonfiction such as health books and psychology literature is read to a much lesser extent.

The predominance of fiction is not very surprising since one of the selection criteria for participation in the study was that the woman would have read at least one piece of fiction – such as a novel, a drama, or a collection of poems – or an autobiography per month. However, what is more surprising is that self-help literature was deliberately avoided. This is something that will be discussed later. At the moment I just want to hold this result up against recent research in biblio-
therapy, which has largely been based on studies that have used self-help literature.

Another conclusion to be drawn from the study is that each participant has read a great variety of fiction. The women have chosen literature often referred to as quality literature as well as popular literature, including chick lit, feel-good novels and fantasy.\textsuperscript{17} In previous studies of bibliotherapy, so-called quality literature has almost always been used, without there being any scientific evidence that this type of literature would be preferable for therapeutic purposes. Instead, it seems that the researchers’ selections are based on their own literary preferences or their notions of literary value rather than on their knowledge of literature and reading.\textsuperscript{18} Very little is known about whether specific kinds of literature really work therapeutically, or whether the therapeutic gains in bibliotherapy depend more on the individual readers and how they read. In view of this, a literary perspective on bibliotherapy seems especially important.

--- Changes in the choice of literature

When the women fell ill, a change in their reading pattern occurred. All but one of them could not read at all for some time. The reason seems to be certain symptoms related to their health conditions, such as tiredness, dizziness and having concentration difficulties. For some of them, the symptoms became even worse when reading. During this period, they could sometimes perform other activities, like going for a walk or watching TV or movies, but it is clear that these activities did not compensate for the reading. The women became depressed or frustrated when they wanted to read but were not able to.\textsuperscript{19} Almost all of the women stress that literature has certain qualities that other media lack, such as the ability to read at one’s own pace, to back up if something is missed or not understood and to make up one’s own pictures while reading. When they were unable to read, the women craved these qualities.

When the women began to read again, they often chose literature that faces more towards a popular literary direction, such as chick lit and autopathographies. One reason for this could be that popular literature is often characterized by a particular literary structure that may already be familiar to the readers. When it comes to chick lit, these stories are usually structured by a romantic plot about a young woman in crisis who meets two men, one evil and one good, and who eventually succeeds in choosing the right one.\textsuperscript{20} The autopathography, on the other hand, is based on a similar success story where the sick narrator survives the disease, and will ultimately be better, even if not completely cured. Like chick lit stories, the
autopathographies end happily. Thomas G. Couser believes that reading survivor stories like these may serve as a kind of therapy. This seems to be especially true for one of the women in the study. She read a lot of autopathographies while she was recovering from her cancer and she emphasized how important it was for her to read about other people’s experiences of this disease or of other life-changing events. The literature worked as a kind of vicarious friend or companion who was on hand when the people in her life were unable to acknowledge or understand her experiences. When she talks about her own experience of cancer, she draws parallels between her life and those stories and identifies important similarities. »I survived. I should have been dead but I survived.«

However, when considering the arguments that the women themselves put forward when asked about what literature they had read during their illness, the question of literary structure does not emerge. Instead, the literary language and various aspects related to it appear as the most important criteria. The women chose genres such as chick lit and fantasy because they found that these were characterised by a flowing language, a language which were easy to assimilate. As their recovery progressed, they were often able to read literature written in a language which they found more sophisticated. Of course it may be that the women’s choices were partly based on their assumptions about the language used in chick lit and fantasy rather than on the actual language used in these genres. At the same time, it is obvious that language that was too complex created problems with concentration and understanding among the women during their period of illness. The same applies to the literary form. One of the women describes how she was forced to stop reading a book because »it was written in such a difficult way, you never knew who they were talking about«.

Another recurrent criterion guiding the women’s selection of literature is that it must create a desire to read. Sometimes this is expressed in a very concrete way. One of the women talks about how she stood in front of her bookshelf, looked at the books and decided to sort out every piece of literature that she did not want to read: »So I sorted them. And then from what was left, it didn’t make any difference what I chose to read. None of the remaining books are ones that someone else thought I should read. There were just books that I wanted to read myself.« The books she wanted to read cannot be easily sorted into categories such as quality literature or popular fiction, which is in line with what was stated earlier, namely, that the women in the study have read a great variety of fiction during their sick leave.

But there is a genre that she and almost all of the other participants actively opted out of during their period of illness, and that is self-help literature. With their clear advice and instruc-
tions, self-help books make demands on the women that they feel they cannot manage to live up to when they are sick. Self-help literature sometimes tends to make the women feel sicker than they actually are. At the same time, it contains a false promise of getting healthy. One of the women describes this experience as follows: »I tended to stop reading it [self-help literature]. I was so sad and angry when I read it and I thought 'Do I have to find an additional diagnosis on myself now? No, that’s enough!’« When reading fiction, on the other hand, the women feel free to understand and use the story in their own ways. Reading fiction does not have to lead to achieving something concrete, it can also be an activity that they do for their own sake.

—— How to read and the functions of reading
When asked about why they are reading and which functions reading served during their sick leave, the women give various answers. Generally, they describe two different functions: reading allows them to recognise themselves and also to forget themselves. For most of the women, both of these functions are important. Recognition can mean identifying with a character, which has gone through similar problems or difficulties as one’s own, for example, the loss of a loved one or the experience of cancer. But it can also be a matter of recognising oneself on a more general existential plane, in a character who is struggling with a problem. »No matter what life I read about, I always find myself somewhere in the story,« one of the woman says. This outcome is in line with previous research on bibliotherapy. Being able to identify with what one reads is often associated with good therapeutic results. Laura Cohen, who has conducted numerous studies of bibliotherapy, argues that the more the women in one of her studies could identify with what they read, the greater the advantages their reading had.

Zipora Shechtman expresses similar thoughts.

However, researchers in bibliotherapy have not been very interested in reading as a means to forgetting or whether this kind of reading could have an impact on people's health. Therefore, it is important to highlight that the women in this study emphasize time and time again that they read in order to forget their own difficult situation. For them, the literature provided the opportunity to go into another world and read about someone else. As one woman puts it: »The focus on me tends to disappear while I’m reading.«

In addition to recognising and getting a chance to forget oneself, the reading fills another important function for the women. It provides entertainment, enjoyment and above all relaxation. »Now I read more novels. It is more relaxing,« said one of the women, who earlier in her life had read a lot of self-help literature. This outcome is particularly interesting...
when considered in relation to the previous research on bibliotherapy. Rhea Joyce Rubin, who identifies various types of bibliotherapy based on their target audiences, says that reading as relaxation and entertainment is mainly used with prisoners and people with severe mental illnesses, that is, institutional bibliotherapy. The purpose with this kind of bibliotherapy is to offer some kind of distraction rather than to improve people's health. Rubin also states that this form of bibliotherapy had become less common by the nineteen seventies; a more (psycho)analytical and in-depth reading was advocated instead. Today, this is also the predominant form of reading in bibliotherapy (especially in interactive bibliotherapy). Its purpose is to have the reader identify with something in the story, to become emotionally involved in the text in order to release repressed emotions and become aware of his/her problems and possible solutions to them. This is a kind of reading that requires the reader to do a great deal of psychological work, and it differs, sometimes greatly, from the reading described by the women in this study. Still, their reading seems to have had a major impact on their well-being and ability to recover from illness. For instance, the woman mentioned above, who sorted out all pieces of literature that she did not want to read, describes how her muscles relaxed and how she «calmed down» when she read the kind of literature that she preferred to read at the moment. In addition, this also, according to her, meant that she was able to perform some kind of activities that she, due to her mental condition, could not perform otherwise, like doing the laundry or the washing up. Thus, one conclusion to be drawn from the study is that reading for the sake of pleasure and relaxation may be healing as well.

The value of this kind of reading appears even more when it is contrasted with the kind of reading that the women in the study reject, a way of reading that I would like to call results-oriented. One of the women describes in great detail how reading during her sick leave changed from being what she called «desperate» into something more pleasurable and enjoyable. Before her illness, she had been preoccupied with how many pages she read within a certain period of time. After she had been on sick leave for a while, she read more for its own sake and let it take whatever time it took: «Now it's more relaxing to read. Before sick leave it was that you should read, to develop or understand others or yourself. There was so much you could or should – it applied in all aspects of my life, and that included reading as well.» She connects this compulsive reading to school and the education system and believes that results-oriented reading is based there. Several of the other women express similar experiences: The reading does not work therapeutically or constructively when it is done under stress, whether the stress is because they have to finish a book at a
certain time or if it is because they read books that they think they ought to read but do not really want to read. But when the women read literature they want to read and have the ability to control when and how much they read, a kind of pleasurable reading arises.

CONCLUSION

The women in the study largely share the same reading patterns. When, after some time of involuntary reading interruption, they started to read again, they usually chose popular fiction such as chick lit or other feel-good novels or autopathographies. The main reasons why they turned to reading appear to be getting their life experiences confirmed, recognizing themselves in the literature or getting a chance to forget themselves and their illness. For several of them, reading is something pleasurable in itself but it also represents a moment of relaxation and rest from everyday life and disease.

This corresponds very well with how women have read historically. In both Swedish and international comparative literature in recent decades, a number of studies of women’s reading habits have been conducted. These studies show, among other things, that women often read romance literature, that they read this literature in order to recognise themselves and to take a break from an everyday life that involves too many responsibilities. The women in these studies were not sick, but the literature they chose and the way they read has often been regarded as unhealthy by society and science. Ever since the eighteen century, novel reading in general, and immersive, self-forgetful reading in particular, has been criticised and regarded as dangerous for women. It has, among other things, been considered to make them forget their roles as wives and mothers or make them lazy, self-centred and even crazy. The kind of reading which instead has been held up as an ideal is literature whose purpose is to distance the reader both from her own experiences and from the text and thus is expected to result in more true and objective interpretations.

Recently, however, the kinds of readings in which the reader identifies with something in the text or forgets herself by reading it have to some extent been vindicated. Rita Felski, for example, in her influential study Uses of Literature, has criticised the theoretical tradition that routinely understands recognition in terms of similarities between oneself, one’s life situation and the text. She argues instead that recognition always presupposes an experience of difference between the reading self and the text. To be able to recognise oneself in a text and gain insights about oneself, the reader must also establish a distance from the text and regard herself as another. In a similar way, Felski argues, the distanced and the self-forgetful way to read are united in the fact that both
require a devoted investment in the text, albeit with different aims. One conclusion to be drawn from Felski’s discussion is that reading in order to recognise or forget oneself can be just as aesthetically sophisticated as the distanced way of reading. Still, the idea persists that these kinds of reading are simpler and less sophisticated than other kinds, not least in the teaching of comparative literature. A similar view is expressed in the research on bibliotherapy. As mentioned above, reading in order to identify oneself in the literature is seen as a first step in the therapeutic process individuals must undergo in bibliotherapy. To be fully susceptible to the reading, however, the readers must be able to process the feelings that occur as they read and thus gain new insights about themselves and their illness. To identify with someone or something in the literature in question is therefore not considered sufficient in itself but should lead to deeper therapeutic work to be deemed effective.

From the perspective of bibliotherapy, it is particularly interesting that the women in the study highlight those kinds of readings in which readers can identify or forget themselves as constructive, providing a way to get back to a healthy, active and engaging social life. This runs counter to the scientific ideals about what constitutes good reading and it turns traditional notions of sick and healthy upside down. Thus, the literary studies perspective applied in the study opens up for a more broad-minded approach to the selection of literature and to different kinds of reading in bibliotherapy than has been customary. In addition, it suggests that research on bibliotherapy has everything to gain from taking a gender perspective.

ENDNOTES


ment program» in Psychotherapy and Psychosomatics 80:2 (2011).
7 Hynes & Hynes-Berry: Biblio-poetry Therapy, 10f.
15 The sound files and the transcribed interviews are in the article author’s possession. When in the following I refer to the informants, they are given a number which is based on the order in which they were interviewed.
16 Thomas G. Couser: Recovering Bodies. Illness, Disability and Life Writing (Madison, 1997).
17 Chick lit refers to modern romances in urban setting about women trying to successfully combine love and professional career.

Interviewee nr 2.


Couser: *Recovering Bodies*, 39f.

Interviewee nr 3.

Interviewee nr 4.

Interviewee nr 5.

Interviewee nr 6.


Interviewee nr 5.

Interviewee nr 1.


Shechtman: *Treating Child and Adolescent Aggression through Bibliotherapy*, 27.

Interviewee nr 4.

Interviewee nr 6.


Felski: *Uses of Literature*, 53f.