

# The Cognitive Foundations of Therapeutic Reading and their Implications for Literary Bibliotherapy

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**Abstract.** This paper explores the cognitive foundations of bibliotherapy and their implications for literary bibliotherapy, emphasizing why therapeutic reading, particularly of literary fiction, is uniquely effective. Drawing from cognitive literary studies, reception aesthetics, and modern neuroscience, the discussion highlights how embodied cognition, and the asynchronous nature of reading processes contribute to the therapeutic outcomes of bibliotherapy. By integrating emotional, sensory, and intellectual engagement, literary texts facilitate empathy, self-reflection, and personal transformation.

The paper distinguishes between bibliotherapy as clinical therapy and as counselling, focusing on literary bibliotherapy's reliance on fictionality and narrativity. Unlike self-help books, literary fiction fosters cognitive and affective empathy through its narrative and mimetic qualities, enabling readers to process complex psychological and social issues. Cognitive mechanisms, such as embodied simulation, emotional processing, and motor representation, are shown to play pivotal roles in creating therapeutic effects. Additionally, the text underscores the significance of literary quality, narrative complexity, and the reader's intent in the bibliotherapeutic process.

Empirical evidence supporting the efficacy of literary bibliotherapy is analysed alongside neurocognitive studies, which reveal the physiological and emotional impact of reading literary texts. The paper argues for the societal importance of promoting bibliotherapy, especially amid contemporary mental health challenges. By establishing a scientifically grounded framework, this paper aims to validate the role of literary bibliotherapy as a critical interdisciplinary practice that merges literary studies and therapeutic intervention to support mental well-being and personal growth.

**Keywords:** bibliotherapy, cognition, literary fiction, empathy, emotions, therapeutic reading

## Introduction to literary reading<sup>1</sup>

This paper was prepared as a preliminary study for the presentation I delivered at the first European Congress on Bibliotherapy in Budapest in October 2024. The text

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presented there was, of course, an abridged summary, yet discussions following the presentation, as well as debates with other speakers, revealed two points: there is considerable interest in bibliotherapy across Europe, and literary studies hold a prominent role within this interdisciplinary field. Among the participants, there were numerous comparatists and literary theorists from across Europe, such as conference chair Judit Bérés (University of Pecs, University of Verona), Eevastiina Kinnunen (University of Turku), Davor Piskač (University of Zagreb), Torsten Pettersson (Uppsala University), Penelope Kolovou (University of Bielefeld), Thor Magnus Tangerås (Kristiania University College), and Danish literary historian and theorist Jürgen Pieters (Ghent University). Outside the Scandinavian countries, bibliotherapy occupies a significant place also within Central European academic institutions, often housed in departments of world and comparative literature or cultural studies. This raises the fundamental question of why bibliotherapy is such an essential reading method for literary scholars that they take the lead in its promotion and research. While this question may be posed somewhat tendentiously and partially rhetorically, it is worth noting that literary studies have been researching reader response since the twentieth century, achieving significant insights. It is perhaps no coincidence that literary studies are notably active in researching bibliotherapy within the Central European cultural sphere, considering reception aesthetics originated in this cultural region, forming early and even current perspectives on literature's role in bibliotherapy. However, empirical scientific research on the effects of reading literature in a purely pragmatic sense has only recently emerged with the advent of second-generation cognitive literary studies, which heavily relies on modern neuroscience and functional methods for exploring human cognition.

European literary studies, broadly understood as any engagement with poetry and prose, have considered the effects of reading since the earliest works of Plato and Aristotle. Plato's reflections on how poetry influences its recipients are more diverse than the typical references scholars make to the tenth book of *The Republic*. In *Ion* and *Phaedrus*, he appears more sympathetic to poets, partly due to his own youthful poetic impulses. Plato's analyses particularly highlight literature's strengths in deep emotional experience and the influence it exerts on young readers. Ultimately, it is this potent influence that leads Plato to banish poetry from *The Republic*; we might say that from Plato's perspective, literature is dangerous precisely because it works, not because it fails to work. In recent decades, considerations of literature's effects in psychological and social terms have evolved into one of the most significant theoretical directions within literary studies: ethical criticism. Ethical criticism, especially in its Chinese iteration (Nie Zhenzhao), has experienced a vibrant intellectual development, confronting earlier and highly diverse European and American perspectives on the relationship between literature and ethics (e.g., Tomo Virk, Martha

Nussbaum, Wayne Booth, and James Phelan). Today, experts in comparative literature generally agree that literature works, even if they disagree on what “literature” and “works” mean. Perhaps the most significant evidence that reading literature functions—and that it functions positively—is the development of bibliotherapy, particularly literary bibliotherapy.

Bibliotherapy is the use of literature for therapeutic purposes, practised by certified therapists and psychiatrists. However, many experts follow John Pardeck’s belief—who popularized bibliotherapy with children in the 1990s—that bibliotherapy can also be practised by parents, teachers, librarians, and others who wish to alleviate specific mental distress and issues among children, adults, or the elderly.<sup>2</sup> There does seem to be a distinction though between the work of psychiatrists and therapists in a clinical setting and the ways others employ literature. Many experts thus define the difference between bibliotherapy as clinical practice on the one hand, and, on the other, bibliotherapy as counselling, aimed at supporting milder developmental, interpersonal, and personal growth issues and as a preventive approach for maintaining mental health.<sup>3</sup> While bibliotherapy may be understood either as clinical therapy or as counselling, the use of literature remains largely similar across both approaches. The fundamental distinction between the two types of bibliotherapy lies in the need for greater predictability and control over texts in clinical settings, which often involves using adapted or specifically written therapeutic stories.

The deeper implications for understanding the role of literature in bibliotherapy lie in the distinction between bibliotherapy and literary bibliotherapy, a difference articulated by Davor Piskač and Manca Marinčič. While the term “bibliotherapy” encompasses any therapeutic use of reading, including the reading of self-help guides and didactic stories for therapeutic purposes, literary bibliotherapy refers to a specific method of reading literature aimed at introducing certain, even minor, changes in participants’ experiences. This discussion focuses on literary bibliotherapy, which, in comparison to reading self-help books, offers several advantages. These advantages, which I will explain in this article, stem from the unique ways we experience (literary) reading on both cognitive and bodily levels.

Before delving into a detailed analysis of literary bibliotherapy and the role of literature—especially literary fiction—in bibliotherapy, it is necessary to briefly define the two terms that qualify this specific type of bibliotherapy: literature and fiction. Literary studies certainly define the terms with great precision, and the definitions vary widely. For instance, we encounter semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic

2 Heath et al., “Bibliotherapy,” 564.

3 The most important pragmatic difference between the two is that in counselling, the participant themselves is responsible for any behavioral changes they decide to make, rather than the therapist, as is common in clinical practice. See Zabukovec, “Biblioterapija v knjižnici,” 25–26.

definitions of fiction, while literature may mean fiction or belles-lettres, refer to literary texts themselves, or even encompass all written texts (e.g., when we refer to “literature on songbirds”). Literature may also denote texts written in a specific literary style, or refer to a discourse that includes not only the texts but also the agents involved in their production, processing, and reception. While the nuances of these definitions and discussions of their relevance in various contexts are certainly intriguing and important, it seems evident that literary bibliotherapy, as both a concept and a reading method, requires very specific semantic definitions of fiction and literature. In the context of literary bibliotherapy, the term “literary” is used primarily to denote belles-lettres,<sup>4</sup> referring to texts whose purpose is not to adhere to factual truth but to tell engaging and beautiful stories. The second meaning of literature in the term literary bibliotherapy pertains to the fictionality of texts as opposed to factuality, as factual connotations are associated with self-help guides and other self-help books used in bibliotherapy.

Bibliotherapy does not necessarily require literature or even fictional literature; it may also be conducted through films and therapeutic writing. It may involve reading various types of texts, not only literary or fictional ones, and may include self-help books.<sup>5</sup> However, a study conducted by Meenakshi Palaniappan, Laurie Mintz, and Rachel Heathery in the 2010s showed that the effects of reading literary fiction were at least as effective, if not more so, than reading self-help books. Their approach was medically oriented, but the issue they addressed—the perception of a lack of sexual satisfaction—was social. The finding that fictional literary texts were even more effective than self-help guides surprised the study’s authors, while contemporary cognitive literary studies have developed methods and drawn conclusions that explain this phenomenon. The fact that reading literary fiction may be more effective in treatment than reading specialized self-help guides can be understood by recognizing the embodied nature of reading as a technology. The aim of this article is to establish a discursive space in which an interdisciplinary approach could explain the specific mechanisms through which reading literary fiction functions therapeutically and serves as an effective tool for bibliotherapy.

4 In his latest book, *Čustveno življenje metafor: biblioterapevtska perspektiva* [The Emotional Life of Metaphors: A Bibliotherapeutic Perspective], Davor Piskač and co-author Manca Marinčič emphasize a key distinction in literary bibliotherapy. They note that, unlike in clinical practice where the therapist often guides behavioral changes, in literary bibliotherapy, the responsibility for any behavioral changes lies with the participants themselves. This approach empowers individuals to take an active role in their personal development through engagement with literature.

5 Palaniappan et al., “Bibliotherapy Interventions for Female Low Sexual Desire,” 344–58.

## Bibliotherapy and literary bibliotherapy

Bibliotherapy may involve simply reading a literary text that addresses a specific theme, issue, or dilemma one seeks to resolve,<sup>6</sup> or it may entail reading followed by a discussion of the material.<sup>7</sup> Both types of bibliotherapy are practised, though even the first type follows a bibliotherapeutic process and is not simply casual literary reading. A defining characteristic of bibliotherapy or the bibliotherapeutic process that sets it apart from typical literary reading is its focus on a particular problem. This problem is individually defined based on the needs of the participant or patient, or, in the case of group bibliotherapy, based on a broadly defined issue that resonates with all participants. Bibliotherapeutic reading always takes place in relation to some social, psychological, or other issue that it examines and attempts to address. While every literary work includes more than just a focus on a psychological problem (e.g., *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* encompasses more than the coming-of-age story of a neglected and misunderstood orphan), bibliotherapeutic reading continuously emphasizes an issue through text selection and subsequent guidance before or during discussion of the reading.

Another distinguishing feature of bibliotherapeutic reading as opposed to ordinary literary reading is the possibility of counterfactual reading. This concept, well-known in literary theory, is often applied to pseudo-historical texts that use alternative versions of historical events to create fictional narratives. Since Aristotle, it has been understood that literature is not defined by truthfulness but by its ability to convey believable stories. In bibliotherapy, this means that it is possible to isolate a specific aspect of a literary text that addresses and resolves a psychological or social problem positively, even if this aspect diverges from the overall meaning of the narrative. Piskač and Marinčič similarly observe that “therapeutic reading is not an exact process, as readers do not seek a ‘correct’ answer but instead practise connecting emotional metaphors in discourse with possible emotions.”<sup>8</sup> In bibliotherapy, it is less important for readers to fully comprehend the motivations behind the characters’ actions than to form their own understanding of these motivations, which they can then transfer to self-reflection or the consideration of the psychological, social, or other issues addressed by the bibliotherapeutic process.

The selection of suitable texts is essential for literary and other types of bibliotherapy. Bibliotherapeutic theory here is somewhat limited, focusing primarily on the psychological aspects of selection—such as highlighting the problem and its

6 E.g., Palaniappan et al., “Bibliotherapy Interventions for Female Low Sexual Desire”; Wimberley, Mintz, and Suh, “Perfectionism and Mindfulness.”

7 Zabukovec, “Biblioterapija v knjižnici.”

8 Piskač and Marinčič, *Čustveno življenje metafor*, 20.

positive resolution—while disregarding the functional and effectual aspects of texts explicated by neurocognitive literary studies, as well as the older fields of reception aesthetics and reader-response theory. Furthermore, bibliotherapeutic theory has yet to address the narrative, aesthetic, and axiological aspects of the texts used in literary bibliotherapy, which I will describe as integral to the efficacy of the bibliotherapeutic process.

Because of its focus on a specific problem, theme, or dilemma, bibliotherapeutic reading follows a defined therapeutic process of overcoming. This process is another characteristic of bibliotherapy, which different theorists and bibliotherapists segment differently. Melissa Allen Heath et al. propose a detailed description of the stages through which bibliotherapeutic reading progresses: engagement, identification, catharsis, insight, and universalization.<sup>9</sup> The engagement stage involves developing an interest in the story, while identification entails the reader's identification with a literary character, their difficulties, and their resolution, thus making the positive outcome crucial from a psychological perspective. Only through identification can catharsis occur, much like the emotions of fear and compassion in Greek tragedy lead to catharsis, which is achievable only through immersion in the text. Heath et al. suggest that this stage is automatic, meaning that it occurs when a character successfully resolves their problem. This assumption includes the embodied experience of the reader, who viscerally undergoes a change analogous to that of the literary character. However, the bibliotherapeutic process does not end here but is only half-way through, as the next stage, that of insight, involves stepping out of the aesthetic illusion and establishing aesthetic distance, allowing the reader to consciously reflect on what happened in the story, their own life, and their experience of the story. This is the stage of rational analysis and reflection, which leads to the final stage of the bibliotherapeutic process: universalization. The key aspect of this story is not the reader's realisation that, regardless of their problem, others have successfully overcome similar issues, but the experience of acceptance within a community, thereby reducing feelings of isolation and alienation. The essence of bibliotherapy is for the participant to transfer this realisation to their own life, manifesting in personal growth, behavioural change, altered thinking, or even a shift in experience. This transfer represents the final stage of the bibliotherapeutic process.

### Cognitive aspects of reading

Emy Koopman and Frank Hakemulder, in their explanation of a multimodal model of the effects of literary reading, suggest that any type of reading can potentially

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9 Heath et al., "Bibliotherapy," 568.

bring about changes in the reader's personality traits.<sup>10</sup> However, bibliotherapeutic practice presents a slightly different picture.<sup>11</sup> The crucial factor appears to be the reader's motivation to introduce changes into their daily life. When participants in bibliotherapy exhibit a high degree of motivation for change, these changes can occur independently of reading itself. Conversely, if this motivation is lacking, reading and therapeutic intervention may prove ineffective. Pallaniappan et al. conducted a study indicating that bibliotherapy using literary fiction is as effective,<sup>12</sup> if not more enduring, than reading self-help books. However, the authors caution that they could not evaluate the influence of motivation on behavioural or emotional change. Although these findings cannot be generalized to the overall impact of literature, it is fair to conclude that bibliotherapeutic effects in literary reading depend on the reader's motivation for reading and for personal transformation. Therefore, communication between the facilitator and participant, as well as the circumstances of reading, are crucial aspects of bibliotherapy.

Typically, literature is not read in a bibliotherapeutic manner, but the foundational premise of cognitive approaches to literature asserts that our psychological experience of a literary character when reading is processed through the same psychological mechanisms as one's experience of other people in everyday life<sup>13</sup>. Additionally, the existence of bibliotherapy and the possibility of bibliotherapeutic reading demonstrate what neurocognitive literary studies (second-generation cognitive literary studies) have theoretically discovered only recently: reading literature impacts bodily experiences, not only abstract or mental ones; nevertheless, it recognizes that the abstract mental level is essential. Consequently, the results of studies using bibliotherapy solely as a reading aid for addressing psychological issues without therapeutic interaction during or after reading are unreliable. Aesthetic distance, which enables the contemplation of one's emotions—just as the concept of a literary character's self allows for observing the entirety of their behaviour in context—serves as the theoretical foundation for the ethics of reading.

To achieve bibliotherapy's goal of modifying certain personality traits, mood, behaviour, self-image, and other factors, numerous conditions must be met, including the reader's motivation for change, the context, and the bibliotherapy

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10 Numerous reading researchers from various schools of literary theory have made similar claims, such as Martha Nussbaum, Keith Oatley, Brian Boyd, and others. See Koopman and Hakemulder, "Effects of Literature on Empathy and Self-Reflection," 79–111.

11 The aim of the study by Koopman and Hakemulder is also to demonstrate the diverse tendencies in the effects of different narratological features of texts.

12 Palaniappan et al., "Bibliotherapy Interventions for Female Low Sexual Desire."

13 Bortolussi and Dixon made this assessment following Fludernik's notion of natural narratology (see Bortolussi and Dixon, *Psychonarratology*, 10–12).



implementation process. However, the essential prerequisite for effectiveness is embodied reading, which encompasses a holistic understanding of reading as a technology involving numerous and diverse mental processes. Embodied reading refers to the connection between individual cognitive processes, including thinking, language, and, ultimately, reading, and motor and sensory areas responsible for processing the physical position in space and time in relation to the environment. Alvin Goldman and Frederique de Vignemont distinguish four definitions of embodiment: embodiment related to body anatomy, bodily activity or movement, bodily representations, and bodily modes of representation.<sup>14</sup> For them, embodiment does not merely imply that human cognition, encompassing all mental processes from perception and emotion to thought, is fundamentally dependent on the dimensions, actions, and functions of the human body. Furthermore, embodiment is not necessarily tied to the content of representations that constitute thought; rather, it represents a mode of bodily representation. For instance, understanding another person's experience of pain is related not only to processing an abstract concept of pain but also to the visceral perception of pain, processed similarly to how we would experience pain ourselves.

Regarding the embodiment of language, Goldman and Vignemont highlight that according to neuroscientific findings embodiment can be understood as part of linguistic processing on both the syntactic<sup>15</sup> and semantic levels.<sup>16</sup> Conversely, Tettamanti and Moro argue that language processing is complex enough to resist explanation by a “comprehensive MNS [Mirror Neuron System] theory”; instead, they advocate for an “integration of internal computational mechanisms and perceptual-motor systems.”<sup>17</sup> In literary reading, embodied cognition operates on the level of syntactic, rhythmic, metric, and other text transformations (literariness) and on the level of semantic and narrative aspects, though it does not define them in an absolute sense.

Through reading, the experience of what is read is not only abstract but also affective and emotional. This departs from old theories of sentimentality in literature—it is not about focusing on unreflective emotional effects or a special sensory form of reflection that would determine the success of a text or genre.<sup>18</sup> Rather, it

14 Goldman and de Vignemont, “Is Social Cognition Embodied,” 154.

15 See Tettamanti and Moro, “Can Syntax Appear in a Mirror (System),” 924–25.

16 See Aziz-Zadeh and Damasio, “Embodied Semantics for Actions,” 35–39.

17 Tettamanti and Moro, “Can Syntax,” 932.

18 Compare with Lessing's connection of pathos, morality, and tragedy in the *Hamburg Dramaturgy*: “Man zeige mir in der Geschichte der Helden eine rührendere, moralischere, mit einem Worte, tragischere Situation!” Ephraim Gotthold Lessing, *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*, <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/10055/pg10055-images.html>.



involves integrating emotions and bodily sensations, processes (including interoception, or awareness of the organism's internal state), as well as memory, experiences, and the reader's personality structure into the semantic structure of language. Thus, the act of reading is not merely associated with bodily experience; it also includes the way emotions and bodily sensations connected with reading shape the meaning of a literary text. The impact of emotional words on the limbic system (including the amygdala and cingulate cortex in both brain hemispheres) is particularly significant, as is the way literary text evokes emotions, sensations, and the reader's overall mood. In bibliotherapy, this is why a narratologically supported textual analysis and the examination of narrative characteristics and the motivational-thematic analysis of lexical and supra-lexical elements are crucial for understanding emotional processes during reading.

Reading begins when light strikes the retina; after 150 milliseconds, the VWFA (Visual Word Form Area)<sup>19</sup> is activated, and between 180 and 300 milliseconds after stimulation, signals travel through the dorsal and ventral pathways to the Broca's and Wernicke's areas. Then, holistic semantic processing takes place, including long-term memory processing. Only 500–600 milliseconds after stimulation do we become aware of what we have read. According to Paul Armstrong, this description of reading temporality could be described as the asynchronicity of reading, which collapses at the moment of awareness, creating the illusion of reading as an instantaneous, synchronous process. In reality, it involves temporally segmented and spatially distributed processes in the brain, which are not only mental but also—importantly—emotional and motor-based. The meaning-making process in reading opens a space for the parallel functioning of different brain regions, establishing diverse experiences. Thus, reading literature is not a unified mental process but a technology composed of asynchronous cognitive processes.

Emotional words create a particular stimulus that activates the “evolutionarily older limbic system, including the amygdala and cingulate cortex in both brain hemispheres,” where amygdala activation in these cases occurs extremely quickly, within 200 (or 350) milliseconds of beginning to read.<sup>20</sup> Lionel Naccache et al. examined the impact of subliminal messages on emotional responses, finding that the subliminal reception of emotional words, particularly those associated with fear (processed mainly in the amygdala), influences the activation of this area long before classical

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19 This is now a canonized hypothesis about the functioning of the visual cortex during reading, first presented by Stanislas Dehaene in the book *Reading in the Brain*. For a more recent longitudinal study of this phenomenon, see Dehaene-Lambertz, Monzalvo, and Dehaene, “The Emergence of the Visual Word Form,” 1–34.

20 Naccache et al., “A Direct Intracranial Record of Emotions Evoked,” 7716.

language areas are activated. Some studies<sup>21</sup> suggest this activation coincides with the VWFA, while others<sup>22</sup> report minimal delay (50–150 milliseconds). This indicates that the amygdala can process the emotional value of words simultaneously with orthographic processing and before syntactic and lexical-semantic processing. For understanding how literary reading functions in bibliotherapy, this implies two points:

1. Emotional processing cannot be bypassed; it occurs before consciousness and is always part of the semantic structure of the text.
2. The strength of emotional experience influences our aesthetic judgment, with some emotions, particularly those related to defence mechanisms, being felt more intensely, leaving a deeper impression on us.

Equally important are studies of motor system function in reading, particularly the relationship between motor representations and linguistic processing. Based on the theory of embodied simulation, semantic processing at the lexical and sentence levels is connected to mirror mechanisms in the motor and sensory cortex. In short, when reading about a character's actions or perceptions, mirror mechanisms activate, simulating the experience of that action and perception in the real world, even if the reader has never experienced or performed it.

Research into the role of the motor system during reading and particularly on the link between motor representations and language processing is equally significant. Based on the theory of embodied simulation, semantic processing at the lexical and sentence levels is linked to the action of mirror mechanisms in the motor and sensory cortex. Simply put, when we read about the action or perception of a literary character, mirror mechanisms are activated, simulating the experience of that action or perception in the real world, even if we have never directly experienced it ourselves. These mirroring processes may even be sensitive to intentionality, meaning that specific neurons only engage when an action is intentional rather than accidental—they respond, for example, when we pick up a glass but not when we merely move our hand.<sup>23</sup>

From a literary theory perspective, findings by Leonardo Fernandino et al. on mirror mechanisms and mirror neurons are particularly intriguing.<sup>24</sup> They investigate how even figurative (metaphorical, non-literal) language relies on motor simulations. Their approach to exploring this connection is especially interesting and potentially clinically significant: they examine whether Parkinson's disease, which affects a patient's motor system, can be linked to specific deficits in understanding

21 Nakamura, Tomoe, and Akira, "Left Amygdala Regulates," 8.

22 Naccache et al., "A Direct Intracranial Record of Emotions Evoked," 7716.

23 Armstrong, *How Literature Plays with the Brain*, 153–54.

24 Fernandino et al. "Where is the Action."

sentences related to action and movement. They confirmed that the motor system and motor simulation play a crucial role in the semantic processing of action-related sentences, and furthermore, “our results suggest that even the figurative senses of action verbs are dependent on motor representations.”<sup>25</sup> An impairment in the motor centre, where running, for example, is processed, affects the understanding of words that denote that same action.

The processes that unfold in the specified sequence and timing are also recursive—interactions between different regions are not only unidirectional but can also flow backward, so cognitive processes that occur later may influence processes that happen earlier. The simplest example would be the return of attention to a previous word in the text when encountering an unfamiliar or unclear term that we do not recognize or understand in its given context. Failing to recognize a word prompts us to direct our attention back to its start and repeat the reading process, possibly through spelling it out or through more detailed phonetic and motor processing, for instance, by reading the word aloud. More complex and telling examples are rare cases when, due to a negative memory or a traumatic experience, we unconsciously skip a word that might be dangerous for our system because it triggers extremely strong negative emotions. This can only happen because emotional processing during reading occurs simultaneously with semantic processing, though separately from it, and well before we become consciously aware of the meaning of what we have read.

The list of cognitive processes involved in reading is extensive, but even more significant is the temporal asynchrony of reading, marked by a fundamental time-space unit of 0.5 seconds. This asynchrony allows not only for the embodied nature and recursiveness of the cognitive processes involved in reading but also for diverse combinations of these processes in relation to text characteristics, reader’s personality traits, and reading context. If reading were a simple cognitive or merely mental process, identical for all individuals and executed in precisely the same manner every time, such influences would not exist or would be significantly weaker (e.g., the reader’s personality traits would be less influential). Thus, the reader’s intention, which is especially crucial in bibliotherapy, as well as the intention of the text (e.g., addressing a particular mental health issue), can evoke impressions and experiences that differ substantially from other readings of the same text.

## Meaning and significance in bibliotherapy

What is important from a literary-theoretical perspective for bibliotherapy is not what Eric Donald Hirsch calls “meaning” but rather what he terms “significance.”

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25 Fernandino et al. “Where is the Action.” 1515.

Meaning, according to Hirsch, defines what the author intends to communicate—the author’s purpose expressed in a proposition. An interpretation is valid if it remains faithful to this intention. In contrast, significance refers to what the text means to us, the readers—how we adapt, alter, or employ “meaning” for a specific purpose in an individual reading. Hirsch, contrary to his predecessor and mentor William K. Wimsatt, who famously wrote *The Intentional Fallacy*, and in opposition to Hans-Georg Gadamer, defends the reader’s theoretical capacity to discern the definitive meaning of a literary text, which can then be practically applied (e.g., in the bibliotherapy process) as significance. “Meaning, then, may be conceived as a self-identical schema whose boundaries are determined by an originating speech event, while significance may be conceived as a relationship drawn between that self-identical meaning and something, anything, else.”<sup>26</sup> Although I believe that interpreting a literary text is, as Gadamer argues, always a merging of horizons, making direct access to an author’s intended meaning impossible, Hirsch’s pragmatic view seems accurate. The construction of meaning in reading a literary text, in its relativity and transience, produces effects on the reader’s experience that are not necessarily matters of consciousness and, therefore, meaning, as Hirsch might say, but also of the body and sensation, as recent findings in cognitive literary studies suggest.

From this, I infer that in bibliotherapy, it is not only meaning that functions, although it is important, nor is it only the reader’s intention, such as the desire to change a behavioural pattern, even though this intention is significant. Rather, it is the combination of the two within the broader context of reading, specifically on the level of preconscious and bodily experience. The bibliotherapeutic reading process then fosters the reader’s reflection and self-reflection, awareness of the problem, and its resolution based on this experience, guided through structured discussion and questioning.

## Strategies of bibliotherapeutic reading

Bibliotherapeutic reading is any form of reading that contributes to the reader’s well-being or spiritual growth. Naturally, not all reading has this effect, but bibliotherapeutic reading can still be narrowed down and understood as reading with a specific intent, with the goal of addressing a problem the reader faces in their everyday life or a broader societal issue relevant to their context. This can be achieved by understanding the embodiment and asynchronicity of cognitive processes involved in reading. Crucially, bibliotherapeutic reading integrates the reader and the reading of the text within a specific context, defined by the bibliotherapeutic perspective that addresses a particular

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26 Hirsch, “Meaning and Significance Reinterpreted,” 204.

issue (e.g., divorce, anxiety, death etc.). Bibliotherapeutic reading, therefore, is reading from the perspective of this issue field. From a literary theory perspective, the reader's intent can be seen as part of the process of constructing the meaning of the literary text in a pragmatic sense, akin to Hirsch's concept of "significance."

The asynchronous and broadly distributed nature of reading on a cognitive level allows for unique effects of literary texts, especially the influence of the reader's intentions and reading strategies. This is particularly evident when considering embodied reading, which logically depends on the asynchronicity of its processing. If a reader approaches a text intending to address an issue in their life or society, this reading differs from one without such intent. This is the first aspect of bibliotherapeutic reading implicitly considered in all forms of bibliotherapy, even those emphasizing the cognitive-therapeutic process. The cognitive processes behind such reading are likely to be primarily memory- and emotion-based, while also encouraging apperception by maintaining conscious focus on a specific theme or motif. Therefore, my perhaps controversial proposition is that, although the bibliotherapeutic reading of a literary text is always oriented toward a particular issue, readers or participants in the process may not be aware of this or even directly engage with the issue on a conscious level. Regarding the function of reading literary texts, it might be better for the bibliotherapist to keep the focus on literary characters rather than the reader, allowing for an automatic transfer of meaning.

A second aspect of the bibliotherapeutic reading of literature is the distinctive nature of literary reading itself, which not only has the potential to inform the reader but also transcends pure information—this is the mimetic quality of literature in an Aristotelian sense. Unlike self-help books often used in bibliotherapy, literary texts are close to reality because they imitate it, as Aristotle notes, but in a unique way. They create fictional worlds, events, and characters who, while living in a world resembling that of the reader, are not identical to it. This non-identity does not immediately allow readers to recognize the issue presented in a literary text as their own, yet it paradoxically acts as a catalyst for this recognition. Suzanne Keen, a proponent of ethical literary criticism, views this as a fundamental feature of reading fictional texts, grounding the reader's freedom to either identify with or distance themselves from the issue. "For a novel reader who experiences either empathy or personal distress, there can be no expectancy of reciprocation involved in the aesthetic response. The very nature of fictionality renders social contracts between people and person-like characters null and void."<sup>27</sup> In the bibliotherapeutic process, this means that, compared to non-literary texts, literary texts enable a type of reading that may shift attention to aspects of the text that are not prominent yet

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27 Keen, "A Theory of Narrative Empathy," 212.

play an essential role within the bibliotherapeutic process, connected to the problem addressed by bibliotherapy. It also empowers the reader to take the transfer step independently, according to their own capacity and will. In terms of motivation for change, this empowerment, which is a key element in bibliotherapy, is highly therapeutic. From a literary axiology perspective, this empowerment and support for multi-layered and multi-perspective reading signify elements of higher-quality texts. It can therefore be argued, though it may seem self-evident, that higher-quality texts are more suitable for literary bibliotherapy than less sophisticated, more transparent, one-dimensional, and didactic texts.

The third aspect of bibliotherapeutic reading to highlight is related to the approach to reading narrative versus non-narrative texts. Research shows that the narrative structure of storytelling enables specific modes and effects of reading, including immersion, identification or empathy, and compassion, which are crucial in the bibliotherapeutic process. Narratives about characters, their actions, and motivations allow readers to engage with the perspective of the character or narrator, immersing themselves in the narrative or narrator's world and experiencing empathy. On the other hand, due to the complex interplay of textual features, it is not entirely clear which narrative qualities or their combinations evoke different types of identification and immersion. Considering Keen's thoughts on the significance of fictionality and the effects of narrativity, one might argue that narrative fiction is particularly well-suited for bibliotherapy, where a primary aspect is the identification of the reader/participant with a literary character who successfully addresses a problem. Cognitive literary studies link identification both to narrativity and to empathetic capacity. This suggests that literary bibliotherapy using narrative texts can evoke empathetic experiences. These experiences have two aspects: cognitive empathy, which involves understanding (or re-enacting) the thoughts, goals, and intentions of the literary character (the "other")<sup>28</sup>, and affective empathy, which encompasses understanding (or re-enacting) the emotions and general state of the literary character. Thus, it is essential in the textual analysis phase of bibliotherapy for the therapist to understand the emotions, thoughts, motivations, and goals of literary characters or narrators, as it can be inferred that readers subconsciously experience these cognitive functions through embodied reading and empathy.

This general observation can be refined if we consider findings from neuro-cognitive studies examining poetic devices in narratives. Viktor Shklovsky, in his famous essay "Art as Technique," argues that what literature does differently from

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28 Keen also emphasizes the inseparability of cognitive and affective elements in the process of constructing the meaning of a literary text: "I set aside for the moment the view that emotions and cognition describe different processes of the central nervous system, for empathy itself clearly involves both feeling and thinking." Keen, "A Theory of Narrative Empathy," 213.

other human intellectual pursuits is “defamiliarizing,” presenting familiar things in a fresh and novel way. Ellen Dissanayake interprets this as the evolutionary function of art, meaning “making something new,”<sup>29</sup> creating something that transcends the ordinary within each historical and cultural context. While Shklovsky is more reserved and analytical in his approach to literary techniques, Dissanayake understands the creation of the new as a fundamental psychological category of human beings. Regardless of whether Shklovsky or Dissanayake is correct, from a bibliotherapeutic perspective, presenting known things in a novel way can prompt the reader to reflect on the situation or issue addressed by the text, which may be a decisive step toward self-reflection and implementing changes in their own life.

Both narrativity and literariness impact how readers experience literary texts. Both fictional and non-fictional texts can be narrative or literary, so it is worth investigating the role of fictionality in literary bibliotherapy. While Pallaniappan et al. show that literary texts can be more effective in achieving lasting change in bibliotherapy, they do not specify which literary elements generate these positive effects. On the other hand, neurocognitive literary studies<sup>30</sup> suggest that there may be significant differences in the reading effect based on whether readers believe they are reading fiction or non-fiction. Koopman and Hakemulder’s theoretical-empirical model terms the impact of fictionality as “stillness,” defined as “empty space or time that is created as a result of reading processes [...] it takes a pause, a break, a moment of quietness, for readers to be able to contemplate, for instance, a new way of looking at the (over)familiar, or to consider several narrative perspectives of different characters at once.”<sup>31</sup> Fictionality can thus be understood as a catalyst that accentuates the effects of narrativity and literariness. If this is accurate—as some bibliotherapists, including Davor Piskač and Manca Marinčič, assert—literary texts hold unique bibliotherapeutic value precisely because they are fictional, allowing for a certain distance between the events in the story and the reader’s real life. This distance provides a safe space in which various experiences, enriched by the multi-layered nature and narrative and literary qualities of the text, can develop.

In conclusion, the richness of experience, which Hirsch’s concept of “significance” distinguishes from “meaning,” represents a dimension of reading literary texts that the bibliotherapeutic reading of non-literary texts cannot achieve, and which must be compensated by the therapeutic process itself, such as cognitive therapy. The central strategy and final aspect of literary bibliotherapy to highlight often contrasts with literary interpretative or analytical reading and upholds the

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29 Dissanayake, “A Bona Fide Ethological View of Art,” 45.

30 Altman et al., “Fact vs Fiction,” 22–29.

31 Koopman and Hakemulder, “Effects of Literature,” 108.



value of so-called naive reading. In a bibliotherapeutic context, literary fiction functions as a medium that opens readers to embodied experience, feeling, and emotional engagement that literary fiction allows. This experience can have therapeutic effects by encouraging empathetic engagement and altruistic, prosocial behaviour. Simultaneously, it cannot be separated from the reflective and self-reflective impact of reading, through processes of mentalizing, cognitive empathy, intentionality, etc., as the neurobiological basis of reading shows that embodied emotional and other processes are concurrent with or even preceding rational-analytical and interpretive ones. This perspective opens a new understanding of and appreciation for the therapeutic use of literary fiction and validates its societal role, based on a precise, scientifically supported, and fully traceable set of cognitive processes involved in reading literary texts.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this discussion is relatively straightforward: to open an interdisciplinary discursive space in which we can answer the question of why literary bibliotherapy works. Naturally it is not essential for anyone engaged in bibliotherapy to fully understand the principles underlying the success of their work, much like – borrowing Ivor Armstrong Richards’ tenet – knowing how a metaphor works is not a prerequisite for its effect. However, I believe it is essential for the development and societal validation of bibliotherapy, especially literary bibliotherapy, to recognize its scientific foundation. We live in times when society’s mental health is under strain, not only due to the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic but also from the adverse effects of inappropriate social media use, especially among young people, as well as other causes. In this light, promoting reading as a means to help ensure better mental health is a socially significant act. This text does not aim to tackle that vital yet challenging task. Instead, it provides data, analyses, and provides arguments that support reading and the use of literary fiction in bibliotherapy.

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