

# Books

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## Read and don't weep

Can reading heal the mind? **Wayne Gooderham**, who discovered that books could help him manage depression, joins a community-based book club with a difference

**T**hursday morning. And, in a sun-filled meeting room in Victoria Library, conversation so far has touched on infanticide, extramarital affairs, the British Empire, the morality of lying, the symptoms of cholera and the gynaecological knowledge of nuns. Despite the heavy subjects, the discussions between myself and the eight other people present have been warm and open. Group facilitator Val Nobbs waits until a discussion on unwanted pregnancies has run its course before prompting us to once again pick up our copies of Somerset Maugham's 'The Painted Veil', and, with a member volunteering to read the next section aloud, we are plunged back into 1920s colonial China.

I have always been a firm believer in the psychological benefits of literature. While not wanting to downplay psychotherapy or medication, I do know that when my own depression became a little unmanageable a couple of years ago, one of the factors that helped me get through it was the reading (and the re-reading) of Saul Bellow's 'Herzog'. The subject matter of a man going through a breakdown resonated, but just as important was the concentration required to appreciate the beauty of the prose, which was able to temporarily lift me out of my own life and into a fully realised fictional alternative.

I was, then, interested to learn about the Reader Organisation, a Liverpool-

based charity whose staff and volunteers are trained in the running of reading groups where the material is chosen not so much for any bibliotherapeutic qualities it may possess, but on the assumption that a good book has the potential to help people – whatever situation they may find themselves in.

As part of the organisation's Get into Reading campaign, groups have been set up in schools, prisons, hospitals, public libraries and community centres, regardless of gender, age, class, nationality or levels of literacy. Recently, these have been popping up across London, and with the fast approach of Christmas – a notoriously difficult period for people suffering from depression – I decided to take a closer look, and accepted the Victoria group's kind invitation for me to sit in at one of their weekly sessions.

I should confess that I'm not a fan of being read to aloud. I value reading for the necessary quiet and solitude it entails. So when I arrived at Victoria Library it was with the expectation of spending the next two hours as nothing more than an impartial observer. However, as the minutes passed, and

group members took turns to read aloud from the novel, I found there was still plenty of scope for introspection. What was lost in solitude was made up for by what's gained in the exchange of ideas, the exposure to other points of view and the general mood of empathy – not to mention an appreciation of the literary merits of the text.

For what impressed me most was how different the reading experience is when you hear, and read, the text aloud. Yes, finishing a novel will take longer (it took one group a year to finish 'Anna Karenina'), but testimonials report a sense of achievement when a novel is finished. And I could definitely feel the group pulling together, committed to the long haul.

I'm as guilty as the next person when it comes to careless reading – skipping over commas and semicolons as if they were accidentally dropped there by the author – so it was a revelation to be reading a text something close to how the author must have intended. For two hours we were all ideal readers. And while Val was obviously familiar with the novel, it was clear she took as much delight as the rest of the group in uncovering its nuances.

More and more patients are either being referred to the organisation by psychiatrists, or the latter are setting up their own reading groups. According to Dr David Fearnley, who runs his own group in the high-security Ashworth Hospital, 'Get into Reading is one of the biggest developments to have happened in mental health practice in the past ten years. Its success is due to the equal footing it [grants] the people involved – rather than the usual doctor-patient relationships, allowing real

conversations and empathy to develop.'

Demand from mental-health trusts is such that the Reader Organisation is seeing its operations expand across the UK, with groups in London increasing from ten to 25 in the past couple of months. At a time when many libraries are fighting to stay open, and when communities are increasingly fractured due to the recession and soaring unemployment, charities such as this are more important than ever. Already there are reading groups in Barnet, Kensington, Tower Hamlets and Victoria. May many more follow.

For further information or to find a reading group near you, call 0151 207 7207 or visit [www.thereader.org.uk](http://www.thereader.org.uk).  
[www.timeout.com/books](http://www.timeout.com/books)

**“**  
**This is one of the biggest developments in mental health practice in recent years**

### BOOKS FOR YOUR DOWNTIME

#### An Unquiet Mind



Kay Redfield Jamison's beautifully written account of living with manic depression.

#### The Bell Jar



Poet Sylvia Plath's roman à clef, telling of young Esther's descent into depression.

#### A Little, Aloud



Anthology of prose and poetry by Angela Macmillan for reading out loud

#### A Christmas Carol



Just read the grim bits of Charles Dickens's novel to make your own Christmas/life seem better.