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Bibliotherapy as Narrative Practice
Reader Empowerment Through Re-Authoring Conversations

Mariana Casale

The University of Manchester, United Kingdom
mariana.casale@manchester.ac.uk
casalemariana30@gmail.com
ORCID ID: 0009-0005-5207-3361

Abstract

Based on the view that reading literature is a dialogical act of decentring and co-authoring, narrative bibliotherapy can achieve reader re-empowerment in the face of culturally dominant discourses which are at odds with a person's values and beliefs causing suffering and oppression. The aim is that readers regain a sense of agency in the re-authoring of preferred life narratives, inspired and driven by what they give value to, potentiating wisdoms that underpin them. This article examines several key concepts and practices of narrative therapy as developed by Michael White and David Epston and their application to bibliotherapeutic practice, establishing a clear link between the poststructuralist foundations of both practices. Example questions about a poem support the examination of the bibliotherapeutic use of externalising conversations; deconstruction of culturally dominant discourses; finding exceptions in the problem story and re-authoring alternative stories. It argues that alongside the benefits of this practice for the individual, the power of each reader's voice and its reverberations in the collective become forces for both individual and societal change.

Keywords: bibliotherapy, narrative therapy, story, re-authoring, discourse, deconstruction, agency

> *Waiting for a world to be unearthed by language, somebody is singing the place where silence is formed. They will later discover* that just because it displays its fury doesn't mean the sea—or the world—exists. *That's why each word says what it says and more and something else besides.*
> —Alejandra Pizarnik, 'The Word that Heals'[1]
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> *In considering therapy as a context for the re-authoring of lives and relationships, I have proposed a "therapy of literary merit"*
> —Michale White, *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends*

The experience of reading literature can be transformative: seeing ourselves reflected in stories, finding words in a poem that speak about -and to- us can enable us to approach difficult feelings or complex situations at a safe distance. Considering characters, plot, setting or point of view, the elements and layers of our own stories which may at times feel like a confusing and oppressing mess, can begin to be disentangled. We can then tease out what

[1] My own version of a translation by Yvette Siegert. The original poem, 'La palabra que sana' was published in Pizarnik's last book, *El infierno musical* (1971) and translated by Siegert in Pizarnik, A. (2013). *A Musical Hell*, (Yvette Siegert Trans.). New Directions.

may be causing us pain and tenuous threads of resistance and potential change begin to emerge. What is more, where one text opens a plurality of meaning to just one reader, the meaning-making possibilities in a community of readers grow exponentially. Literary texts act not just as mirrors to, but as shapers of the multi-storied nature of people, with collective meaning making becoming a powerful force of social cohesion.

Interacting with literature affords safety: the text becomes a place where it is not only safe to be but also safe to question; and which the reader is free to leave at any time. This brings to the fore a landscape of possibility for the reader's life who will discover that they do not have to exist in a problem story. Interacting with literature in this way makes empowerment and the retrieval of agency a real possibility by developing awareness that it is always possible to find exceptions, sparkling events (White, 1991), deep rooted resources and wisdoms within a problem story. Pulling those sparkling threads out to embroider a new tapestry for themselves puts the reader at the centre of their own story, not as a passive protagonist, but as its maker.

This paper refers to the narrative bibliotherapy as a bibliotherapeutic practice which inserts itself within the theoretical and practical frameworks of narrative therapy. It aims to show a reciprocal relationship between the two practices, where narrative therapy may benefit from using literary texts while bibliotherapy may be conducted within the conceptual framework and use of narrative approaches and techniques. As part of this exploration, I refer to the reading of a poem by Argentine poet Alejandra Pizarnik to provide examples of how some of the narrative concepts I examine can work in practice. It is also an invitation for you to partake in this and observe how this way of experiencing literature might work for you. Occasionally and more generally, I also refer to elements and other examples of my own practice, with the aim of sharing the experiences that have informed the development of what I have come to understand as my personal theory (Kelly, 1955). While a general overview of narrative therapy is offered, the aim of this piece is to focus on the processes leading to what is known in narrative as re-authoring conversations.

Consistent with narrative therapy's 'respectful, non-blaming approach, which centres people as the experts in their own lives' (Morgan, 2000), my work places the reading self in the centre of the reading experience, as collaborative meaning-maker in a journey towards regaining a sense of agency with which to re-author their life narrative. With Michael White (1991), my view of the reading self is not an essentialist one, but rather that of a contextualised individual whose existence is shaped by certain 'modes of life and thought' (Bourdieu, 1988) and who is invited, by the very act of reading, to become aware of the extent to which their life is shaped in this way; and to be in a position to decide whether they might choose other 'modes of life and thoughts' by which to live their life. In this context, I consider literary texts as conducive to, and enabling of this meaning-making process, rather than as authoritative sources of pre-existing truths.

While the term first appeared in print in 1990 with the publication of Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends (White and Epston, 1990), coauthored by Australian social worker and family therapist Michael White and New Zealand therapist David Epston, narrative therapy was first developed by White in the late 1970s (Madigan, 2019). It is a postmodern, social constructionist approach to psychotherapy and community work (Freedman & Combs, 1996) in which the therapeutic relationship is de-centred, and rather than being seen as problematic, the person is considered the expert in their own life. Thus, problems are seen as separate from the person, who is assumed to have existing competencies, skills and wisdoms that can help them to reduce the impact of problems in their life (Morgan, 2000).

The therapeutic stance in narrative therapy has been described by White (2007) as decentred yet influential, where the therapist assumes the role of co-editor in the person's meaning-making process, rather than as a figure of knowledge and authority who provides diagnoses, interpretations and solutions. Thus, the narrative therapist's attitude is one of openness, curiosity, awe and optimism, with unswerving belief in the person's wisdom, and hopeful that there is always an alternative story. With the person at the centre, the therapist remains influential in that they provide structure to the person's inquiry, mainly by asking questions (White, 2007), thus bringing forth a 'multisited and multistoried idea of the subject' (Madigan, 2019, 4). This shift away from a figure of authority who is neither central nor neutral is comparable to the decentring that occurs when the author of a literary text is displaced by the reader as the primary subject of inquiry (Madigan, 2019, 4) and the author function (Foucault, 1977) becomes uniquely transformed by each reader's set of assumptions and beliefs.

As a bibliotherapist in tune with these ideas, my practice focuses on conversations with the people who consult and read with me, held in the hope that our voice and its reverberations in the collective become forces for positive change; and in the hope that together we may:

- Focus on meaning-making conversation prompted by a literary text.
- Experience the reading of literature as co-authoring
- Allow literary texts to help us start difficult conversations and identify our own problem saturated narratives
- Consider identifying and deconstructing received and dominant discourses.
- Be inspired by our own and each other's wisdoms and what we give value to, so that we can regain a sense of agency.
- Identify and support exceptions, 'sparkling moments', preferred narratives which may lead us to re-authoring conversations.

When two or more people share the reading of a literary text, the experience affects each reader in a unique way, as each person brings their own worldview, values, hopes and dreams, and their state of mind at the moment of reading into this encounter with the text. I could invite you to read with me the poem 'All Night I hear the Noise of Water Sobbing' by Alejandra Pizarnik (Pizarnik, 2018), for example.[2] I would start by inviting you to focus on the act of reading itself to place you at the centre of this experience. Whether you have read the text prior to our conversation, or we are reading it together, quietly or aloud, this might entail having a conversation about what reading this text was like for you: imagining that you could observe yourself reading and noticing how your body, your emotions and your mind reacted. I might ask you what thoughts crossed your mind, or what your facial expression was. I might also ask you to describe the experience using only one word, or perhaps referring to a sound, a scent or a texture, for example. I might even suggest a brief guided meditation, inviting you to become aware of your body and the space it occupies, focusing on the rhythm of your breath, visualising a place that feels safe. In this way, together we create and hold a space of safety and non-judgement, in which your voice becomes strong and audible.

[2] Full text of is available at https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/147376/all-night-i-hear-the-noise-of-moaning-water where the poem is reproduced by permission of the copyright holders.

I will then ask questions such as whose voice you hear in the poem, whether it feels familiar and how this familiarity or newness feels. I will be curious to know who you think is being addressed, how you imagine them, what has happened and what they might be feeling. These questions aim to identify and name what is happening to the person in the poem, to consider their context and what is important to them: the values and beliefs that shape their life. We can then begin to deconstruct this, making the familiar strange, 'exoticizing the domestic' as Bourdieu suggests (1988), but going further, with White (1991), deconstructing self-narratives, dominant cultural knowledges that persons live by; the dominantly cultural practices of self and of relationship and the discursive practices of our culture themselves. By noticing the discursive practices that may shape both what we find in the text and our reactions to it, it becomes apparent that it is possible to separate the two.

As we consider what we perceive is important to the voice in the poem, we become aware of both the impact of those dominant beliefs on us and what we give value to. Loosely, this is known as 'landscape of identity' in narrative therapy (originally referred to as landscape of consciousness) and it is 'constituted by the interpretations of the characters in the story, and also by those of the reader as s/he enters […] the consciousness of these characters.' (White, 1991, 28). As we look more closely, the problem story begins to emerge as distinct from this landscape of identity as we recognise that it is at odds with what the person gives value to, thus causing suffering, or oppression, for example. In the case of this poem, we may consider this to abandonment, sorrow, loneliness. Or it may be that other readers notice something else as problematic: it will depend on what in the poem has touched a nerve with that each reader. I may ask whether you recognise yourself in any of the emotions, actions, wisdoms, hopes that you see in the poem. To be more curious about this, I may ask what these difficult feelings speak of for you.

The more questions we consider, the more closely we are invited to look at the text. But this does not seek to uncover hidden meanings, erudite interpretations or ultimate truths. I may ask you what wisdoms you think the 'I' in the poem has amidst the problematic story and how these are conveyed to us. In this way, we listen out for exceptions to the story, tiny little gems sparkling beneath the surface or in between the words of sorrow. These nuggets of hope are the wisdoms that we believe the person has, and they help us to start envisaging the possibility that they can slowly begin to embroider an alternative to this story of sorrow. And, hopefully, we can imagine this new story becoming a force for positive change.

A careful, in-depth examination of the tangible outcomes of such process far exceeds the scope of this piece. It is, however, a powerfully transformative one, in which each reader's meaning-making process, in collaboration with their bibliotherapist (and fellow readers when in a group setting) makes it possible to conceive and flesh out an alternative story, a process through which readers become empowered and regain a sense of agency that possibilitates change. Although it may very often feel alchemical, of course none of this happens magically, but rather much of it is a question of language.

Using writing in her work with terminally ill patients, narrative bibliotherapist Michal Simchon (2013) observed that words in poems acted as anchors for people to express feelings which 'had previously been indistinct and diffuse' (3), providing a much-needed language 'that addresses the soul and that can provide words for which there are no words' (2). She also refers to narrative therapists Chris Behan (2003) and Jane Speedy (2008) who reflect that poetic language is transformative and capable of producing change, given that it is 'alive, multifaceted, dynamic, creative, eminently suitable to the nature of the narrative thought that

aims to reveal the multiple stories that are told during therapy' and 'most appropriate to the post-structural approach, which seeks to discover other voices that hide behind the familiar, dominant, routine voice' (Simchon, 2013, 3).

Based on the Foucauldian notion that discourse constructs reality, narrative therapy focuses on people's life storying; but it is not a literary intervention per se. Rather, as Michael White explains, it engages with narrative as a metaphor in the development of therapeutic practice, encouraging people to engage in storying their lives, as they routinely do, but focusing on some of the events that to which they would otherwise pay least attention (Denborough, 2001). The narrative metaphor refers to the way in which stories shape people's lives, provide structure and have real effects, rather than reflecting or mirroring them (White, 1991). However White (2007) did find parallels between literary stories and therapeutic practice, paying particular attention to Jerome Bruner's concept of 'subjunctivity' (Bruner, 1986) as the rich realm of possibility in storytelling. Thus, White (2007) considered effective therapy to be 'about engaging people in the re-authoring of the compelling plights of their lives in ways which arouse curiosity about human possibility' (75), as a skilled practice 'can assist people to have a fuller participation and stronger voice of authorship in the construction of the stories of their lives' (77).[3]

Prioritizing rich story development in therapeutic practice consists in drawing people's attention to gaps in their storylines and carefully constructing the scaffolding of these gaps around neglected events in their lives, in the hope that 'people's lives become more evidently multi-storied as these events are identified and thickened' (White, 2007, 81). Similarly, readers 'recruit their lived experience' (81) to fill the gaps in a literary text. As I have mentioned before, narrative therapy seeks to tease out the impact that culturally dominant discourses have on people's life narratives: when these are at odds with a person's identity narrative, a problem story begins to emerge, causing a sense of oppression and suffering. With genuine curiosity and based on the belief that people are multi-storied, narrative therapists employ a double-listening strategy to listen out for a person's identity narrative within the problem story. So rather than seeking to interpret or uncover a hidden meaning behind the person's words, the aim is to identify what people give value to by spotting exceptions to the problem story.

In this way, my initial questions about your experience of Pizarnik's poem are a way of inquiring about your value system, you landscape of identity, rather than the 'truth' of the text, the author's intentions or any 'correct interpretation' of it. If, as Wolfgang Iser (1972) wrote, 'the convergence of text and reader brings the literary work into existence' (279), this occurs as readers bring into this convergence their identity stories, their multi-storied selves. As Michel de Certeau (1984) pointed out, we invent in the texts something different to what might have been intended, we detach them from their origin, combining their fragments and creating something not known before in the space which organizes their possibilities to allow a plurality of meaning. Often the first thing readers notice in a text is that which matches -or strongly challenges- their value system. Exploring a negative reaction to a text, for example, allows a closer look at what a reader holds truest and dearest, and which may have been called into question. Deconstructing these ideas offers the possibility of considering a choice for the reader to distance themselves from notions that feel wrong; or to reaffirm a position or belief that feels in tune with their preferred worldview.

[3] A more comprehensive examination of the text analogy in narrative therapy is offered in Madigan, S. (2019). *Narrative Therapy*. APA.

Sarah McNicol (2018) writes that bibliotherapy involves identification, recognition, catharsis, insight and self-application: the reader identifies with the characters, recognises his or her own situations, perceptions, actions, feelings, memories in the story; may experience a cathartic release of emotional energy, and after reflecting on these, gains perspective, develops awareness of alternatives and considers potential solutions. We may empathise with a given character, but we may also be judgemental (often judging them the way we judge ourselves). However if we stop to reflect on what in the setting, the general context within the story determines the way a character behaves, we may be able to see that while the character is, as Henry James (1884) once said, the determination of incident, incident is not necessarily, as he claimed, the illustration of character: the person is not the problem; the problem is the problem. Narrative therapy seeks to tease one apart from the other, thus externalising the problem: the 'I' in the poem is not defined by their sorrow or sense of abandonment or failure. Rather, once these ideas are separated from the person and deconstructed, they are exposed as part of culturally dominant discourses. These may be what shapes a person's view that being abandoned is a sign of weakness or failure in Pizarnik's poem for example. This identification through externalising conversation begins to make way for reclaiming agency in the reshaping of those views. I may go on to ask you what other oppressive ideas we find in the poem that we can tease apart from the person in it: engaging in these conversations, you may become aware of how these may relate to culturally dominant views that are at odds with your own values, thus causing you pain.

As mentioned before, the therapist can support the person in finding exceptions: threads of hope which, regardless of how small they may seem, can be lifted out of their problem-saturated story to create a preferred narrative. Asking more questions about a person's wisdoms, resources, strengths, support systems or significant relationships, can shift the focus on towards envisaging a new landscape of possibility, thus constructing and later thickening the alternative, preferred story. These conversations are what narrative therapy refers to as re-authoring conversations. I would now ask you to return to the poem and focus on the wisdoms, resources and strengths you think the person in the poem might have. I would also express an interest in those wisdoms, resources and strengths that you have brought into the text; and I would want to know what you would say to the 'I' in the poem, to start fleshing out their preferred narrative, and perhaps, in doing so, to start constructing your own.

I would then ask you how you have been inspired by the words in the poem as well as by the words of other fellow readers or people in your support system. In a group setting, readers would be invited to respond to one another in the same way. Other concepts and practices within narrative therapy are thus incorporated into bibliotherapeutic practice, such as that of outsider witness, the discussion of which exceeds the scope of this article and remains to be discussed elsewhere.

To conclude, as I have argued, literary texts enable the filling in of gaps that is informed by received wisdoms rooted in dominant stories arising from the cultural contexts in which we exist. Bibliotherapeutic conversations which incorporate narrative approaches and techniques make possible the deconstruction of these culturally dominant discourses, support the reader in finding exceptions, thickening and re-storying identity narratives. My invitation to read Alejandra Pizarnik's poem 'All Night I hear the Noise of Water Sobbing' and proposing questions aimed at demonstrating that close reading can make dominant discourses visible and available to either incorporate or challenge. It is also part of a wider argument for the use of seemingly pessimistic literature in the re-authoring of hope, although such a conversation remains the focus of further writing beyond the present work. This is borne out by the

questions aimed at structuring the identifying and naming of exceptions to the problem story to make possible the gradual re-authoring of a preferred narrative. In the midst of a problematic story (one which causes suffering), the reader can wonder what in the fabric of that story makes it so. They can then look out for glimpses of hope that may be hiding between the words or indeed signposted by certain images and words. They may consider what wisdoms they can bring into the story to find a more hopeful resolution; or they may decide not to affect the outcome of this particular story but, by empathising with one of the characters, instead of filling in the gaps, they may like to borrow some words, be inspired by an image, to bring back into their own story to thicken their identity narrative. It is always a two-way process in a multi-storied reality.

My bibliotherapeutic practice is conversation-based. In tune with narrative ideas, I bear witness to people's stories, listening, asking questions, supporting the re-authoring process. In this context, text curation can be rather arbitrary: I suggest a certain text or combination of texts as a way of initiating a journey which could end up anywhere readers take the conversation. As a text changes in each encounter with a reader and the reader is in turn transformed in unique ways, experience has taught me that people's journeys do not begin and end within a bibliotherapy session. They are, in fact, ongoing, 'unfolding' to use a word that Michael White was so fond of, so it is not for me to see, or indeed assess, a particular outcome there and then, as much unfolds long after a session is over. So it is, for me, a question of trusting the person, trusting the text and trusting the process.

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