

## **Creative Literary Bibliotherapy – Examples of Good Practice**

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### **Abstract**

The paper focuses on the field of creative literary bibliotherapy with special emphasis on the implementation of bibliotherapy methods in the school library.

The goal is to show the theoretical basis, application of bibliotherapy and its positive impact on the selected population. The paper aims to apply bibliotherapy tools, provided by targeted literary works, in the experiential-cognitive process. The selected literary works include contemporary short stories and a problem picture book, suitable for the application of the MED cycle method.

The progress of bibliotherapy workshops, examples of good practice, intended for high school, elementary school and preschool children are presented. The works were selected taking into account the criteria of the participants' age, potential interest in the topic, the expected development of the discussion, with the aim of potential implementation of the offered solutions to their own life situations.

**Keywords:** bibliotherapy; creative literary bibliotherapy; theoretical overview; MED cycle; library; workshop; examples of good practice

### **Introduction**

Reading is a complex process that we learn gradually, through acquired strategies. It is a fundamental life competence that is crucial both for a child's success in school and for effective management of life situations. Reading comprehension enables the establishment of communication processes between the author's intention/realized text/competencies and the reader's experience.

In addition to being essential and useful for functioning, reading can also be healing. It is precisely this therapeutic, bibliotherapy aspect that will be presented in the work through selected basic and additional literature.

Bibliotherapy is a process of guided reading, a dynamic interaction between the reader and the text. The roots of bibliotherapy can be found in ancient Greece, but its definition and delineation of the scientific field began in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The analysis of the theoretical basis of bibliotherapy will demonstrate its foundation in the scientific fields of literary theory and cognitive psychology. The paper will describe the tools used in the analysis of literary works, encouraging the development of empathy towards a literary character as well as insight into their psychological motivation, with the aim of gradually bringing about a change in the client's thoughts and actions and improving the quality of life.

As a professional school librarian, the author strives to find a way to implement bibliotherapy within the school library. The literature indicates that librarians generally accepted bibliotherapy and recognized their role in its implementation.

While public libraries sporadically implement bibliotherapy programs, as evidenced by the available literature, this is an attempt to include school libraries in such activities.

### **Defining the scientific area of bibliotherapy through a historical overview**

Papers dealing with bibliotherapy in Croatia and in the world in the field of literature, psychology and pedagogy, mostly concern clinical or developmental bibliotherapy. This paper, as well as the selected literature, focuses on creative literary bibliotherapy, so this area of interest will first be defined.

Indications of bibliotherapy can be reconstructed and explored in the theoretical works of ancient authors. The task before contemporary theoreticians was to define the terminology and methodology of the scientific field.

The first definitions of bibliotherapy, the use of literary texts for the purpose of psychological help, can be found in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the USA. Samuel McChord Crothers read parts of the Bible to the terminally ill, thus initiating the practice of applying literary texts to provide relief, comfort and help (Bušljeta & Piskač, 2018).

Libraries and librarians recognized and embraced bibliotherapy very early on, noticing the importance of choosing a good literary model, and bibliotherapy was officially confirmed by the establishment of the first expert committee, as part of the American Library Association, in 1939 (Sabljak, 2022, 78).

Bibliotherapy is defined as a process, an interaction between the reader and the text that has its own dynamics and is organized under the guidance of an educated guide. There are two different methods of applying bibliotherapy – clinical and developmental bibliotherapy, and in addition to the mentioned methods, Ivana Bašić mentions the method of creative writing (Bašić, 2021, 15).

This overview focuses on authors who make a distinction between developmental and creative literary bibliotherapy, so we can state that the scientific field is expanding with new schools and visions of development. Davor Piskač states that as opposed to the traditionally understood bibliotherapy, which uses any text, the creative literary bibliotherapy emphasizes exclusively the use of literary – artistic texts (Bušljeta & Piskač, 2018).

Literary bibliotherapy is carried out by teachers, librarians trained in the analysis and interpretation of literary texts, and on the basis of interpretation, they help readers to gain insight through identification and catharsis with a tool called the MED cycle. The MED cycle represents a synergy of the motivation of thoughts, emotions and events of literary characters. Such an approach to bibliotherapy ventures interdisciplinarily into the field of psychology. The task that the bibliotherapist sets before their group is to observe cognitive, affective and psychological processes and connect them with aesthetic functions.

### **Theoretical basis of creative literary bibliotherapy**

Cognitive therapy is considered the theoretical backbone of creative literary bibliotherapy, emphasizing that thoughts, emotions and behavior are interconnected. It suggests that every reaction is mediated by a personal mental outlook that builds an emotional attitude, given the life situation. Information processing becomes distorted when we relive an unpleasant situation. In order to achieve a better or more satisfactory emotional situation, it is necessary to reconstruct one's own thoughts. The event that happened is preset and we cannot change it, but we can change our thoughts related to that event (Piskač, 2018, 38).

We distinguish an event in reality (the factual one) from an event described in a literary work which, although it is fiction, can be experienced as real. That is why we are talking about a *communication event* that is created in the communication between the reader and the literary work. Such communication integrates language, thought and emotion, or as the author states, it is a "confluence of thought, emotion and language". The MED cycle is launched, combining language, thought and emotion and interpreting them (Bušljeta & Piskač, 2018, 39).

Emotions play a big role in the communication event. Every society or culture treats emotions differently (Piskač, 2018). Today, we live in a culture of entertainment placing emphasis on positive emotions that are fueled by the ubiquity of technology and social networks, the publication of the imitation of life. True emotion is suppressed, while emotions on the "negative" spectrum are not acceptable in our culture. Emotions are learned, first intuitively, and later independently, adopting the language of the culture to which we belong. They are triggered by an event or stimulus responsible for their manifestation, external or internal. External manifestations are evident and easy to read. Internal ones are much more difficult to detect because they are fueled by thoughts and stimulate internal events. By imagining a situation, we enable our thoughts to experience it as real. However, without language it is impossible to gain the emotional experience. The development of language and communication sheds light on the thought and encourages the emergence of emotion.

Literary texts precisely use imagination to realize the process of reviving emotions. One of the fundamental theses of bibliotherapy based on this is that every appearance of emotion in a literary work is preceded by a thought (Piskač, 2018).

In literature, we only have an imagined event that stimulates the development of certain emotions. The different strength of these emotions will resonate differently in the psyche of the reader. Once an emotion arises, we cannot eliminate it, but it can be replaced by another emotion. It is precisely here that the MED cycle tool can be utilized to allow readers to learn to think differently and manifest different emotions that will help them to either accept or change the situation.

It is a cyclical process within which we distinguish the phases of thought, emotion and event, and it is a process that will not automatically bring results (Piskač, 2018). However, it should be kept in mind that the MED cycle method is primarily intended for the analysis of literature, texts that should have high aesthetic functions, and as such is not used for client work, but speaks exclusively about a literary character and a literary work. The task of the bibliotherapist is to guide the group in the analysis of the text, and if the text is analyzed gradually, to stimulate emotions, while the experience of catharsis is possible, but rare.

The MED cycle allows the character's experience to be incorporated into the reader's life experience. The reader gains an insight into the way in which a literary character satisfied his needs and what he thought, felt and did in the literary text (Piskač, 2018).

Literary bibliotherapy encourages the development of empathy, in the sense of understanding emotions and situations, and prefers it over identification with a character. Empathy helps to understand the MED cycle because if the reader is encouraged to be tolerant of the imperfections of others, but also of their own imperfections, it encourages understanding of characters, their emotions, creates an atmosphere of safety and trust so that criticism or anger towards some of the characters' actions can be expressed, all with the aim of encouraging communication.

In this paper, we will present the realized workshops through selected literary examples using the MED cycle process as a specificity of literary bibliotherapy.

### **Bibliotherapy in the school library**

Libraries, as the core of the community, are a safe and pleasant place that favors the development of bibliotherapy programs. According to the rules of the profession, the school library should be an information center, a place that encourages reading and learning in every school. At the same time, it is a place where users meet and exchange books and ideas, so as such it is suitable for connecting, responding to their need to talk about what they have read.

A professional associate librarian is a person who, depending on the interest and the age of the user, recommends literature, encourages reading and a positive attitude towards learning, using and searching for information. It is therefore not surprising that, after psychologists, it was librarians who practiced bibliotherapy to the greatest extent (Antulov, 2019).

Although it was once questioned whether a librarian can or should implement bibliotherapy programs, especially due to the specificity of the term itself, which implies therapy or treatment. Nowadays the opinion that the librarian's role is to create a self-help collection and to classify and catalog literature that will be displayed in a visible place for users is vanishing (Odiri, 2023).

It is important to highlight and perhaps encourage librarians to actively assume a role in designing workshops, selecting adequate texts with the aim of achieving benefits for their users.

A literary text used in bibliotherapy should be universal so that clients can relate and possibly identify. It is recommended to avoid materials that are disheartening and feed confusing negative emotions. Text metaphors should be built consistently and coherently (Bašić, 2021).

Literary works provide us with an insight into characters, their lives and actions as sometimes completely different from our own, but by reading, we try to identify with them. It might be better to develop empathy instead of identification, because complete identification makes it impossible to objectively distance oneself from the literary character, and thus we are not able to offer new solutions that could lead to a more successful realization of the selected problem.

Literary theorists disagree on whether or not literature increases empathy. Some are of the opinion that literature is indeed written about us, but that we do not live long enough to experience all these

different lives. Others are of the opinion that human nature is selfish, and that reading turns us away from empathy, detaches us from the world (Bukvić Pažin & Ott Franolić, 2023).

Regardless of which point of view you take, the fact is that reading good books makes us more aware of the world around us, other personalities and perspectives, making us more prepared for the relationships we build in real, non-literary life.

### **Examples of good practice**

Taking into account the stated theoretical assumptions, we tried to implement bibliotherapy workshops for high school students, primary school students that are clients of the UZOR Association, and preschool age attendants of educational rehabilitation at the LogoSens centre.

There are several key steps in the preparation of workshops. It is necessary to define the time and place of the workshop.

The selection of a literary text is a fundamental prerequisite for a successful bibliotherapy workshop. It is necessary to choose a literary text that is both complex and contains a problem that can be discussed and new solutions proposed. Selected literary texts are read in depth. Deep reading is a slow and complex process that changes the nature of our thoughts, teaches us patience in discipline, offers us aesthetic and ethical experiences.

The selected texts are in the form of short stories. This form is believed to be suitable for workshops that do not have continuity of meetings because they are short and complete enough. Also MED cycle can be applied and an alternative solution offered, which represents the therapeutic segment of the workshop.

### **Ivana Bodrožić, Fikcija (*Fiction*) (Bodrožić, 2024)**

The story was selected because it was written by an established author and because of its current topic that could be stimulating for discussion among fourth-grade students. We read the text in the workshop because students usually do not read the given text. The first layer of reading is literally the detection of a communication event without involving the interpretative level. It was observed that the narrator is the protagonist of the story who will be in the focus – a writer who narrates a factual story in a fictitious environment. The central thesis of the short story was detected, which the students interpreted as a woman's fear and discomfort in the world of men. By the end of the story, through each fragment, the narrator chooses one communication event in which she places herself or her daughter in the center of a situation that will cause a feeling of discomfort, fear and caution when a man is involved in the interaction. The author chooses a policeman who stops her in the evening, a gynecologist who addresses her inappropriately during a pregnancy check-up, or a random passer-by during exercise. The students were asked to express what the mentioned professions mean to them, when we turn to the police or the doctor. The goal was for them to notice that the narrator felt threatened by those we turn to in moments of vulnerability and fear for our own

lives, and that they failed her expectations. Then the focus was on the dominant metaphors and answering questions about their function in the body of the text.

The students were encouraged to verbalize the emotions revealed by the narrator and which confirm the initial thesis about a woman's insecurity in a man's world and about unauthorized entry into her private space. The therapeutic moment of the meeting comes with the attempt to offer alternative solutions and reach a common conclusion that greater involvement of all members of society, especially the silent majority, is needed in order to reduce violence and the consequences of violence to a minimum, and to make the world safer for women and their daughters.

### **Olja Savičević Ivančević, *Lijepa glad* (Savičević, 2020)**

Before reading the short story, the workshop began with a sequence of associations related to the meaning of the title. The students tried to write possible meanings of the oxymoron in the title by considering in what context hunger can be beautiful. The unexpected meaning revealed after reading the short story. We defined the key communication event of the main character – the struggle with anorexia. Furthermore, through guided reading, the students noticed a number of underlying issues that were verbalized because they were important in understanding the context in which the main character was found: the death of her mother who held the family together, the non-existent relationship with the father, father's dysfunction and lack of communication.

The students concluded that the father's marginal appearance in the text is a counterpart to his role in his daughter's life. This raised the problem of lack of communication in the family. The idea of involving all family members in decision-making, as opposed to making one-sided decisions, was encouraged.

In addition to family issues, the selected literary text was suitable for questioning the relationship with oneself and the perception of one's own body. The students listed the descriptions that the main character used to describe food, thus showing her distorted perception (disgust, contempt, hoarding food as an example of emotional hunger or refraining from any morsel).

The therapeutic moment of the session emerged from a conversation about ways to improve relationships, the mistakes that could have been avoided, but as a key conclusion, it was emphasized that in the case of serious mental or physical illnesses, we cannot make decisions on our own, but must accept the help of experts.

### **Raymond Carver, *O čemu govorimo kad govorimo o ljubavi* (Carver, 2003)**

Since the workshop was limited in time, only the first part of Carver's short story was selected. The group session began with a series of associations. The students were given a worksheet on which they had to answer the question "What I talk about when I talk about love?".

After a short discussion about what love means to them and the showing their associations, we read the text that the students encountered for the first time. The group verbalized the theme – two couples, at different ages and in different relationships, trying to define love.



The students were encouraged to find parts of the text that explained different emotions, thoughts and actions that resulted from different attempts to define love, ranging from the scientific one that the main character Mel insisted on, to the romantic love between Nick and Laura.

The known facts about Mel were linked to the way he approaches the debate (cardiologist, divorced and back in a relationship). An interesting fact was pointed out, that he as a cardiologist is a doctor "for the heart" and so probably considered himself relevant in the discussion about the secrets of the heart.

Interacting with other characters, the students noticed emerging topics, such as the difference between marital and romantic love, expectations in a relationship, violence in a relationship.

It was concluded that love contains both rational and emotional elements and cannot be defined unambiguously.

### **Nika Kovač, Pisma tebi** (Kovač, 2023)

The workshop was held at the UZOR Association in Rijeka, organization that carries out activities aimed at helping, supporting and protecting vulnerable groups. The workshop was attended by 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade elementary school students (a group of 10 students) and psychologists who normally work in the association with the participants.

Since the participants of the workshop were students transiting from elementary to high school, which is a dynamic period that brings numerous challenges, we decided on the topic of friendship, more precisely, breaking up friendships, outgrowing relationships. The focus was on the question of how to be a good friend.

After reading the short story/letter, it was found that departures were an integral part of life, so the participants were asked what emotions are associated with departures. Since it was difficult for the participants to verbalize the range of emotions, the emotion of sadness was broken down: at what moment do we feel abandoned, helpless, unfulfilled, lonely. What can be manifestations of sadness? What if we decide to leave – a friend, a relationship?

Different variations of the basic feeling that the students recognize were emphasized, but it was also necessary for them to recognize nuances, both in emotions and in relationships.

Interacting with the text, it was concluded that the main character was changing her attitude towards her friends – from the elementary school period when she had a whole class of friends with whom she lived in the neighborhood, in the community. It was noticed that she clung tightly to her friends and identified with them, with the group. The students were asked if they agreed that friends are like family.

The participants concluded that the author was afraid of losing her class, community, familiar relationships, conversations and topics, with an underlying fear of abandonment and fear of rejection.

In the second part of the text, the author talked about the friendships she made in high school and the changes in relations with old elementary school friends. She made a decision about who she would hang out with.

The moment of making the decision was recognized as a key moment in her growth. It was concluded that the older we get, the better we have to manage our time, and that we face and accept that we do not have space and time for everything, but only for some people.

It was very important that the students realized that the fear of abandonment or the fact that we will be alone at some point should not hinder or influence us to stay in bad relationships. This was considered important for the moment when friendly relationships are replaced by loving ones so that the students realize they could not remain in relationships which make them dissatisfied.

The participants finished the workshop by writing letters to friends with whom they had some unfinished situations. The idea of such a form of directed writing was that they analyze the letters with a psychologist in case they wanted to discuss relationships that have remained unfinished and created certain emotional problems.

### **Tamara Vučković, Mirko Bjesomirko (Vučković, 2019)**

The workshop was held in the therapy and education centre LogoSens for children with developmental disabilities, which helps them develop attention and concentration, speech and communication, motor skills and sensory integration, learning and memory, and social skills. The participants were beneficiaries of the centre, aged 5 and 6 (five children). Along with the leader of the bibliotherapy workshop, the moderator was an educational rehabilitator.

Since these were children with autism spectrum disorders, it was extremely important that a fellow expert be present during the workshop, but also afterwards for feedback.

In cooperation with the educational rehabilitator, the topic of the workshop was chosen – anger. The workshop leader suggested the problem picture book Mirko Bjesomirko, which is part of a series of picture books about the development of socioemotional competences in children.

This is a story about self-control, the ability to manage thoughts, feelings and behaviors. The goal of the workshop was how to regain control after being in a state of strong emotional excitement.

We started the workshop by giving the participants a drawing of a child that had to be colored and finished. The task was to draw themselves when they are angry. The participants were encouraged to choose a color that would show the feeling of anger, but also to show with a drawing where is anger, as a physical manifestation of the emotion, felt in the body.

The children chose red as the color that best indicates the emotion of anger and rage. They also verbalized that they felt it in their body when they are angry, especially in their cheeks, stomach, arms and legs, as evidenced by their drawings.

After reading the picture book, it was important that the content of the text was comprehensible to everyone, that there were no unclear words or situations. Then we turned to the text itself, singling



out the situations in which the boy from the picture book felt angry. The boy's interaction with other children in the class and with the teacher was emphasized, trying to make them aware of how they felt in moments of emotional outbursts – some children were afraid, girls cried, the teacher was dissatisfied.

The children were invited to offer some solutions so that Mirko can calm down in moments of anger, and the children suggested that he start counting or do something that makes him happy. It was also suggested that deep breathing could calm down the excitement. All the suggestions were tested out with the children at the workshop. This was therapeutic moment of the workshop, because the children were given a tool that they could use when they lose control, in order to calm down and regain focus and attention.

At the end of the workshop, the participants were suggested to draw themselves when they feel happy, but the children refused this activity and wanted to read the story about Mirko again.

The feedback was received from the parents, the rehabilitator and the participants themselves, which positive and encouraging, and new workshops are underway.

## **Conclusion**

Our aim was to consult selected literature that problematizes the field of creative literary bibliotherapy and the possibilities of its implementation in the school library.

At the very beginning of the paper, we emphasized the essential importance of acquiring reading skills, which are a prerequisite for understanding texts. Encouraging reading as well as reading comprehension is today, more than ever, in the center of interest because the approach to books and reading is rapidly changing under the influence of technology and lifestyle. It is interesting that such social circumstances, which have created the problem, also create the need for educational programs that will focus on the reader and the text so that the reader will rediscover the healing power of words.

The central part focused on listing the differences between the fields of clinical and developmental/creative/literary bibliotherapy. It was pointed out that creative literary bibliotherapy introduces only literary texts as a working template, focusing on the literary character. It thus makes literature a safe place through which the client can, if he or she wishes, talk about their own problems.

The workshops were based on the MED cycle, a tool that detects, understands and explains the character's thinking, explains how thoughts lead to emotions, and questions what affects the outcome of the event on examples of selected texts. The workshops conducted showed that the participants accept contemporary texts that are approached in a non-compulsory way, something they are not used to in the school system. The chosen topics were stimulating for the development of the discussion as well as for the therapeutic part in which the participants offered their solutions in order to change the established model of thinking, and consequently of action, and ensure more favorable life outcomes.

Libraries and librarians have recognized the value of bibliotherapy and, especially in public libraries, guided therapeutic reading workshops are conducted. We aim to open space for this kind of work with users in school libraries. For this reason, we found and consulted literature that refers to the role of librarians in conducting workshop activities.

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