

Literature in the Community: dementia, depression, and the “reading cure”

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Can literature make a difference?

- **The Nobel Prize for Literature is awarded to writers whose work has “made a difference” in society – but how does literature achieve this?**
- **Beauty, humour, imagination: “This book inspired me!”**
- **Solace, reassurance, self-awareness: “This book comforted me!”**
- **Openness, exploration, discovery: “This book changed my life!”**
- **Empathy, challenge, resistance: “This book changed the world!”**



Harnessing the power of literature:

- “No work of literature saved a Jewish life in the holocaust” (George Steiner) ... but
- “Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world” (P.B. Shelley)
- Imaginative writing “gives to airy nothing / A local habitation and a name” (William Shakespeare)
- Reading allows you to “slip inside the skin of another” (Lloyd Jones, *Mister Pip*)
- Poetry is “the ship and the anchor” (Seamus Heaney)
- Books may cure the body and do nourish the soul ...



Examples of the “reading cure”:

- The official term is “Bibliotherapy” – using books for health and well-being
- The Reader Organisation – therapeutic reading aloud in groups, reducing dependency on medical and social services
- John Killick – poetry in dementia care
- Books on Prescription – prose better than prozac ...?
- Ministry of Stories – storytelling for secondary school children
- Reading Friends – libraries and book clubs combating loneliness
- Changing Lives through Literature – using reading on probation instead of imprisonment

INVICTUS

Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.

In the fell clutch of circumstance
I have not winced nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeonings of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed.

Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the Horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
Finds and shall find me unafraid.

It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
**I Am The Master Of My Fate,
I Am The Captain Of My Soul.**

~ William Ernest Henley

Bangor Project 1:

reading against depression

- **Regular one-to-one meetings with a depressive student, to read together and talk about the feelings or thoughts raised by the poem, story or piece of drama**
- **Literature as company, catalyst, comfort, challenge, change**
- **Conversation, writing, drawing, thoughtful silence – all possible creative responses**
- **Result: now setting aside time each day to read**



The Three Little Pigs

retold by award-winning author Patricia Seibert
illustrated by Horacio Elena



Bangor Project 2: reading and dementia

- **Reading to a an elderly resident in a nursing home, living with late-stage dementia; silent, unresponsive**
- **Choosing books and stories that she knew and liked when younger, or had read to her children**
- **Result 1: general attentiveness in a normally noisy room at the home**
- **Result 2: reactions from the individual resident – hand-holding, pleasure, responsive sounds, associations, words, speech**



i'm ready for another
adventure now, take
me far away please!



OK one more...
but then YOU have
to read to me!



Literature working “miracles” in the community?

**Poem by Gillian Clarke,
former national poet of Wales:**

“Miracle on St David’s Day”

