



Words are, of course, the most powerful drug used by mankind.

—Rudyard Kipling



SELF-MEDICATING WITH BOOKS

- In my childhood, reading was escape, solace and entertainment
- Mundane moments
 - Car rides and the dull points of a vacation
- Emotionally difficult times
 - Instability and dysfunction
- I prescribed my own medicine: Books
 - When my grandmother passed away
 - *Where the Red Fern Grows* by Wilson Rawls
 - Escaping cabin fever during harsh New England winters
 - *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* by C.S. Lewis
 - Distraction from emotions
 - *Goosebumps* by R. L. Stine



SHORT INDIVIDUAL EXERCISE

Throughout your life, what book has meant the most to you? How has it been a kind of medicine for you, and what do you think it “healed”?

- Was it comforting? If so, how?
- Did it offer escape?
- Was it funny?
- Did it offer reflection?
- Did it describe an experience or feeling you had?
- Did it make you feel less alone?
- Did it reinforce some idea that you belonged to a certain group?
- Did it speak your “language”?
- Did it soothe an anxiety?
- Did it lift you out of despair or offer you perspective?
- Did it give you words to express a feeling or experience?

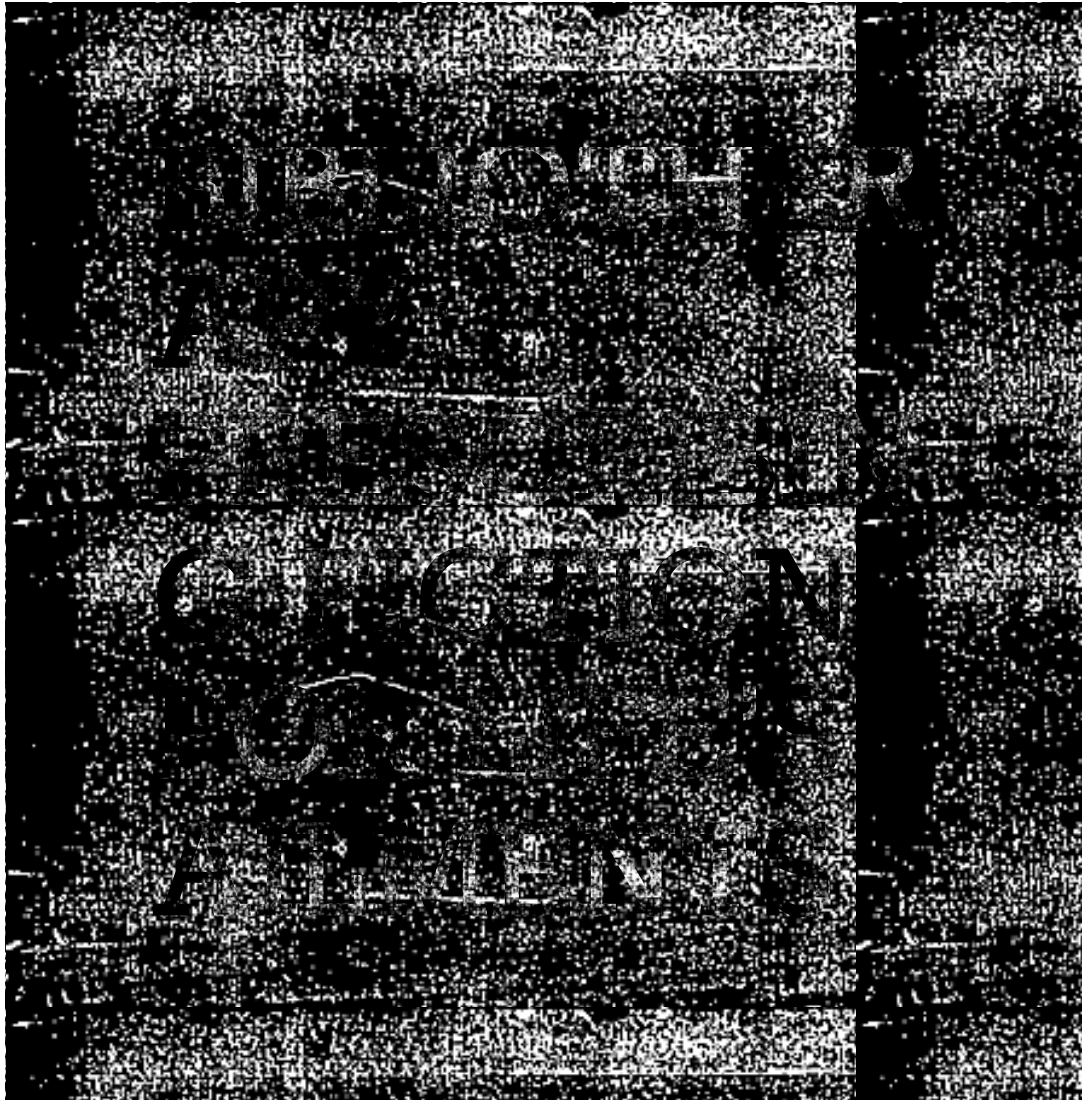


MEDICINE FOR THE SOUL

Like psychotherapy, literature can help:

- Resolve conflicts and heal trauma
- Navigate traumatic experiences and promote psychological healing
- Integrate disowned aspects of oneself and achieve inner wholeness
- Offer spiritual fulfillment and promote self-actualization





- Greek for “book healing,” bibliotherapy is the notion of reading for therapeutic effect.
- Bibliotherapy dates back to the Ancient Greeks.
 - Over the entrance of the library in Thebes, a phrase that means “healing place for the soul” was inscribed. Grecian libraries were seen as sacred places with curative powers.
- In the early 1800s, reading became one of the most commonly used therapeutic interventions, second only to physical exercise.

WHAT LITERATURE “HEALS”

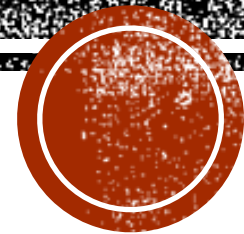
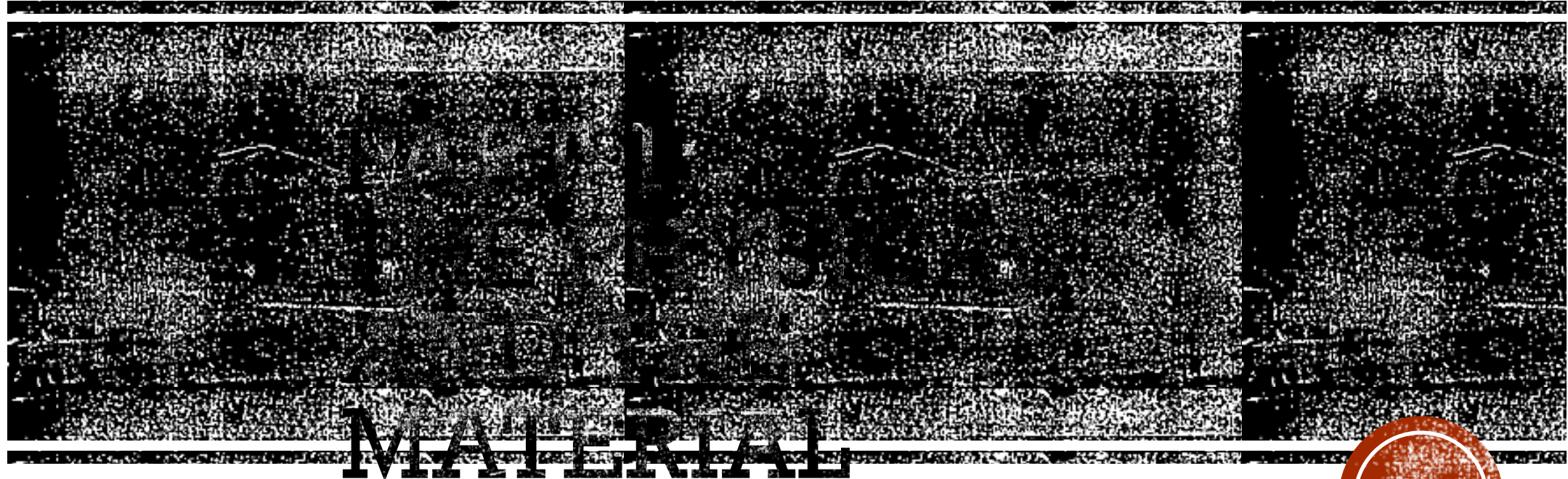
- The School of Life in London (2008)
 - Bibliotherapy service run by Ella Berthoud and Susan Elderkin.
 - Common ailments are “life-juncture transitions”: “being stuck in a rut in your career, feeling depressed in your relationship, or suffering bereavement.”
- *The Novel Cure* (2013)
 - Book on bibliotherapy by Ella Berthoud and Susan Elderkin
 - Prescribes books for a broken heart, loss of a loved one, single parenthood, the fear of commitment, etc.
- “Bibliotherapy for Hospital Patients” (2004)
 - The use of bibliotherapy for hospital patients.
 - Books helped patients address fears, confusion, embarrassment, sense of lost control, and increased vulnerability.





HOW DO STORIES HEAL?

- What devices and techniques make literature therapeutic?
- How do fictional narratives work on our bodies, minds, and spirits?
- By which mechanisms can a therapeutic book get into our subconscious and change our minds?
- How can they remedy melancholy or demoralization?
- How do they work as medicine for the soul?



THE LOOK AND FEEL OF BOOKS

- The physical act of reading can be a pleasurable tactile experience
 - Feel: the weight, shape, and size of the book in your hands
 - Scent: the smell of the pages
- Avid readers take pleasure in building personal libraries
- The cover of a novel invites you on an adventure
 - Journey to unknown places with unfamiliar characters
- Open a book, and you're off on a new beginning
 - Fresh voice
 - Thought-provoking ideas.
- Exposure to knowledge and wisdom can calm the mind and provide a rush of excitement



THE NOURISHING EXPERIENCE OF READING

Stillness and
contemplation

Permission to stop
or slow down

Time with the
thoughts and ideas
of another person

Sense of movement
and forward
progress

Upon completing
the book, you
might feel:

- Satisfied
- Accomplished
- Proud of yourself



THE CALMING SOUNDS OF PROSE

- The rhythm of some books' prose can have healing effects, and the way words are arranged and presented can calm a reader's restless mind.
—Susan Elderkin, *The Novel Cure* (Paraphrased)
- “Regular readers sleep better, have lower stress levels, higher self-esteem, and lower rates of depression than non-readers.”
—Ceridwen Dovey, “Can Reading Make You Happier?”
- “The humorous inflection, the rhythm and flow of his sentences, the glorious linguistic precision of his phrasing . . . ‘mostly harmless’; ‘total perspective vortex’; ‘and me with this terrible pain in all the diodes down my left side’; ‘a liquid that was almost, but not quite, entirely unlike tea.’”
—Andy Miller on Douglas Adams's *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*





**DISTRACTION
FROM
EVERYDAY
PRESSURES**

- Lose track of time
- Engage with a story and forget about the past or the future
- Step away from the endless chatter of your mind and step outside yourself and your ego
- Lose yourself in a controlled hallucination, or “counter-delirium” (Northrop Frye, “Literature as Therapy”) that concentrates and intensifies your mind, dislocating you from reality.

TAKE A JOURNEY TO OTHER WORLDS

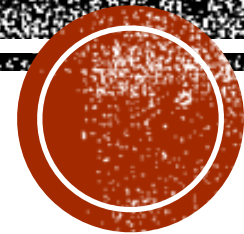
- “Psychologists and neuroscientists are increasingly coming to the conclusion that when we read a story and really understand it, we create a mental simulation of the events described by the story.”
—Jeffrey M. Zacks, 2011 fMRI study, *Annual Review of Psychology*
- This imaginary experience is the work of what are called “mirror neurons.”
- “We don’t just mirror other people. We mirror fictional characters too. In fact, when people are undergoing an fMRI while reading a short story, the areas of the brain that lit up when they read about an activity were identical to those that lit up when they actually experienced it.”
—Lisa Cron, *Wired for Story*



REALITY SIMULATION THAT SAVES TIME

- Literature is the ultimate time-saver.
- “[Literature] gives us access to a range of emotions and events that it would take you years, decades, millennia to try to experience directly. Literature is the greatest reality simulator — a machine that puts you through infinitely more situations than you can ever directly witness.”
—Alain de Botton, “What Is Literature For?”
- Why is this important?
- “Once you’ve visited other worlds . . . you can never be entirely content with the world that you grew up in. Discontent is a good thing: discontented people can modify and improve their worlds, leave them better, leave them different.”
—Neil Gaiman





IDENTIFICATION, CATHARSIS, AND INTEGRATION

- “Readers are encouraged to identify with significant characters in the story (identification) . . . to experience emotional catharsis as the story characters express themselves (catharsis) . . . and then to gain some insight into themselves and their situations (integration).”
—P. S. McMillen & D. Pehrsson, “Bibliotherapy for Hospital Patients”
- As you read and see yourself in fictional characters, emotions may arise, particularly negative ones.
- “[A real benefit] of reading can be seeing how others have dealt with problems or survived difficult situations.”
—P. S. McMillen & D. Pehrsson, “Bibliotherapy for Hospital Patients”



FEELING BADLY WITHOUT CONSEQUENCE

- Literature lets you identify with characters, self-reflect, and gain insight into yourself without risk of harm or other consequences.
- Tragedy: a form of literature that evokes emotions of pity and fear to affect a catharsis of those emotions (Aristotle)
- Tragedy allows readers to play inside a “counter environment,” where we can purge feelings of pity and terror that we would not be able to bear in real life.
- “If these emotions of pity and terror are purged through catharsis, as they are in tragedy, then the response is a response of emotional balance, a kind of self-integrating process. That is, what we feel when we respond to a tragic action is, well, yes, this kind of thing does happen: it inevitably happens given these circumstances.”

—Northrop Frye, “Literature as Therapy”



THE PROMOTION OF EMPATHY

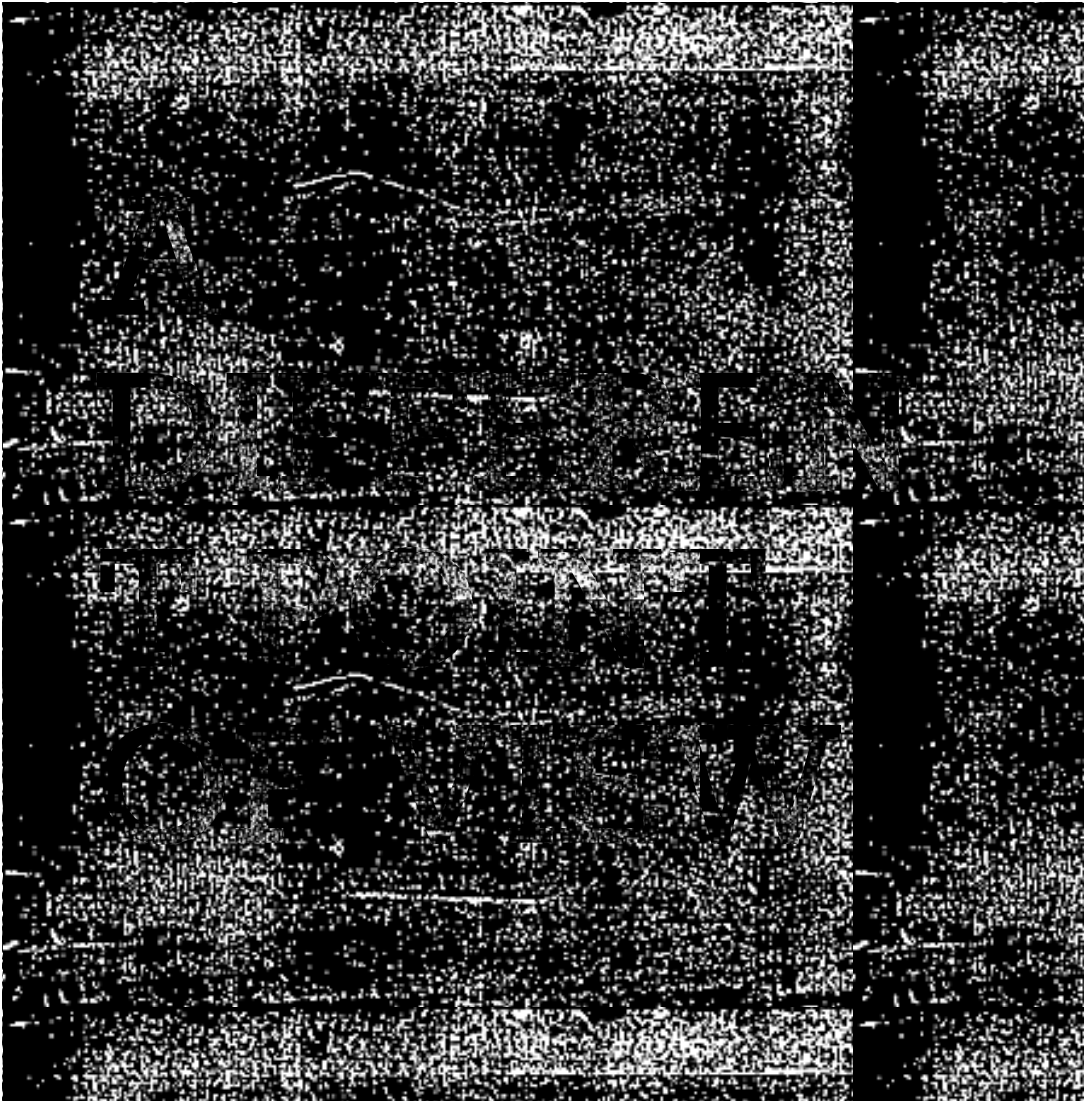
- “[As we read,] we join ourselves to a character’s trajectory through the story world. We see things from their point of view — feel scared when they are threatened, wounded when they are hurt, pleased when they succeed.”
—Keith Oatley, “A Feeling for Fiction”
- The important aspect of this identification is that we have distance.
- Literature amplifies experience and extends our contact with people beyond ourselves.
- Literature gives us practice for different situations.
- Unlike watching a play or a movie, reading fictional prose allows us direct access to the interior thoughts of characters.





A
COHERENT
NARRATIVE

- Fiction can provide our lives with a coherent story.
- “People who have experienced loss or trauma may find healing if they are able to turn their life stories into a narrative that hangs together and makes sense.”
—Flora Armetta, “The Therapeutic Novel”
- “Recent research suggests that developing a story from the events in one’s life — not necessarily a story with a happy ending, just a true and ‘coherent’ story, as opposed to a ‘fragmented’ one — can bring real relief from depression and anxiety.”
—Flora Armetta, “The Therapeutic Novel”



- Following characters in novels offers a level of access that is hard to achieve face to face with real people
- Reading literary fiction sharpens your “theory of mind”
 - The ability to intuit the thoughts, feelings, intentions, and beliefs of another person
- Engaging in fictional worlds can encourage tolerance

UNDERSTANDING OUR OWN FEELINGS

- The words and deeds of fictional characters can give us the vocabulary to know what we are feeling.
- “Once the unconscious or ineffable has been put into words, it loses much of its power to terrify. The capacity to use verbal reasoning to explore potential solutions to problems also increases people’s sense of their options and enhances their sense of control.”

—Jerome Frank, MD, *Persuasion and Healing*



- The characters have been through, seen, or felt what we have
 - If a character suffers from something we have, their survival can buoy us
 - If a character experiences a more extreme situation, we can gain a new perspective for ours
- “Marvel in relieved recognition”
 - Lisa Cron, *Wired for Story*
 - Engaging with characters like us can help us realize we are not alone in what we deal with
- Sympathetic identification creates a sense of solidarity



THE THERAPEUTIC POWER OF EXPRESSION

- Book clubs
 - Group setting that encourages sharing
 - Multiple people reading a common book
 - Group discussion of its ideas and how it informed their lives
- Examples of literature that encourages sharing
 - “Grief” by Anton Chekhov
 - *Ordinary People* by Judith Guest





- Positive emotions aren't the only ones we experience while reading
- Experiencing unpleasant emotions can lead us to actively search for relief, a benefit of exploring the shadowy aspects of ourselves
- “Intense emotional experiences . . . may break up old patterns of personality integration and facilitate the achievement of better ones”

—Jerome Frank, MD, *Persuasion and Healing*





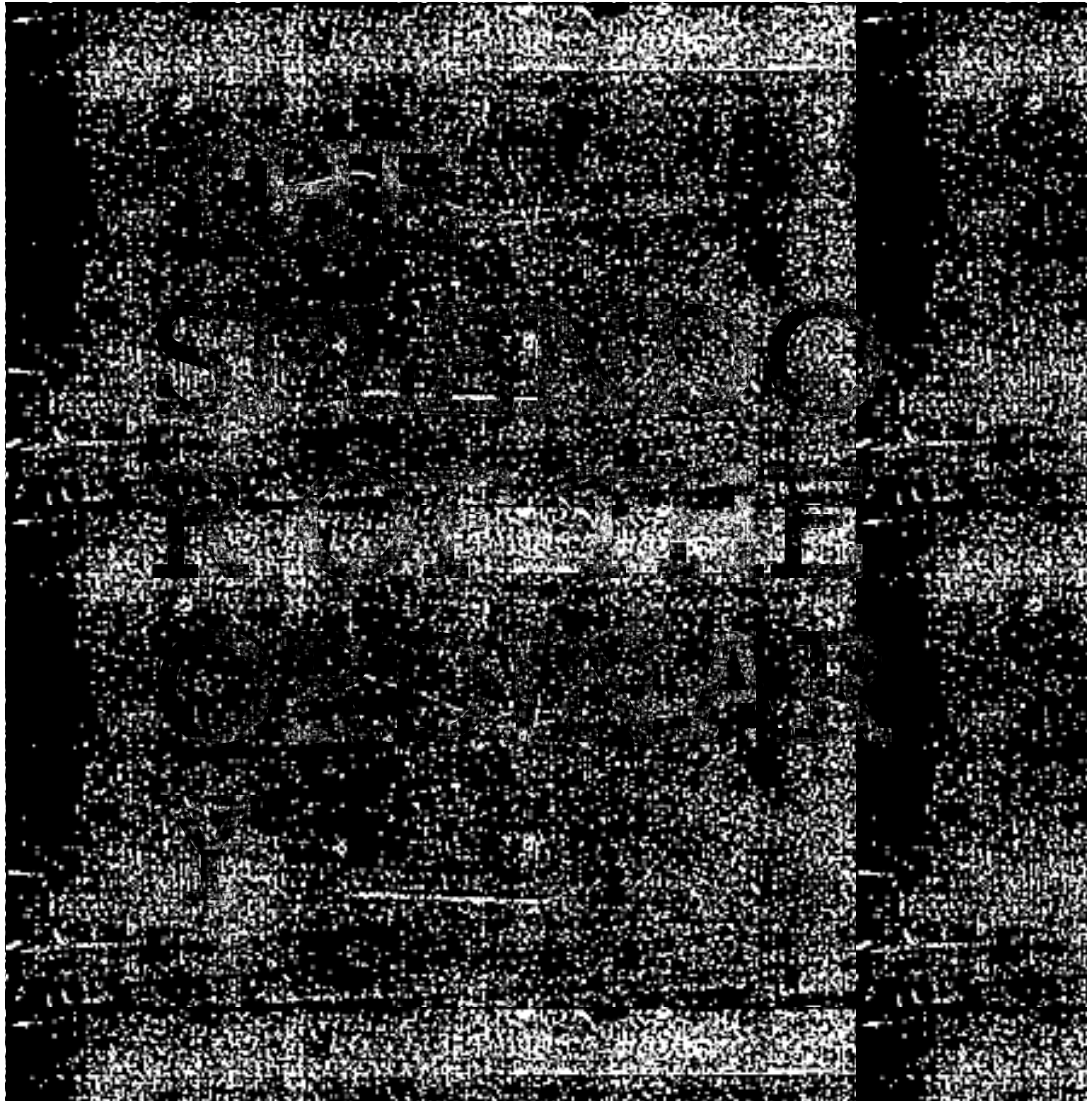
A CURE FOR LONELINESS

- Literature often describes who we genuinely are more honestly than what ordinary conversation allows
- “In the best books, it’s as if the writer knows us better than we know ourselves—they find the words to describe the fragile, weird, special experiences of our inner lives. . . . Writers open our hearts and minds, and give us maps to our own selves, so that we can travel in them more reliably and with less of a feeling of paranoia or persecution”
—Alain de Botton, “What Is Literature For?”

LAUGHTER: THE BEST MEDICINE

- Some books are just fun to read, making us smile and laugh.
- Humor is good for our health.
- People with certain types of humor have higher self-esteem, greater self-competence, more positive affect, more control over anxiety, and perform better in social situations.
- But perhaps the healing effects are the result of the distraction that levity produces?
- “The art of medicine consists of amusing the patient while nature cures the disease.”
—Voltaire





- Unhappiness: a lack of material things or an improper appreciation for what is already around us?
- Literature can expose us to images of beauty and help us appreciate the little things we so often overlook.
- According to Proust, fiction can open our eyes and make us notice the beauty around us. Such appreciation can spark a spiritual transformation.

LITERARY INCITEMENTS

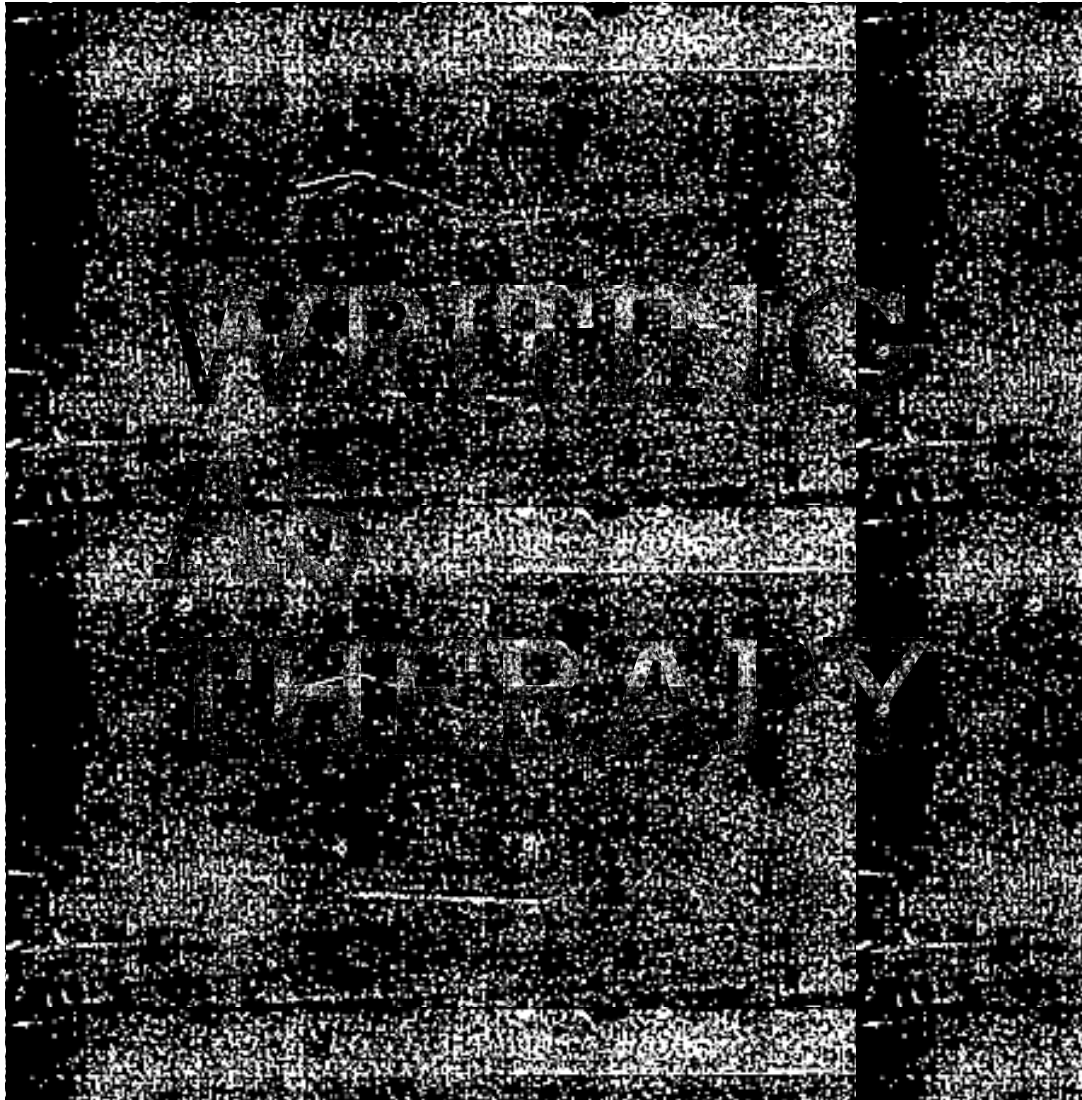
- Literature can help us heal by shaking us out of complacency.
- “Ever have a novel sneak upon you and kick you in the gut, leaving you staring into space, dazed by an epiphany? Yes. Novels do this.”
 - James McWilliams, “Books Should Send Us into Therapy: On the Paradox of Bibliotherapy”
- Some forms of bibliotherapy aim to “create” problems, rather than solve them.
- It was Proust who thought of books not as “conclusions” but as “incitements.”
 - Authors don’t so much provide answers as incite readers to look inward and better understand themselves.





VALUES IN
THE FACE
OF DEATH

- Thinking about the shortness of life can help us live more fully by encouraging us to focus on how we use our time.
- For example, the novella *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* by Leo Tolstoy reminds us of our own mortality.
- “In writing about Ivan, Tolstoy wanted us to see his life as representative of all human potential, if only we could wake up to it before it is too late.”
—Alain de Botton, “Leo Tolstoy”



- Many authors build worlds for readers to inhabit and learn from, but the writing itself often benefits the author.
- Many authors write as a form of therapy, seeking to create fictional works that give meaning to their lives and help vaccinate themselves against future troubles.
- “And so I write this to heal myself. To heal you.”
 - Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*

FOOD FOR THE SOUL

- Fictional narratives offer more than just distraction, entertainment, or a temporary relief from our lives. Books are:
 - Counselors
 - Teachers
 - elixirs for the mind and spirit
- “Literature has the function of delighting and instructing us, but also, and above all, save our souls and heal the state”
—George Stuart Gordon
- “To cure sometimes, to relieve often, and to comfort always”
 - The role of the physician as defined by John Berger and Jean Mohr in their classic book, *A Fortunate Man: The Story of a Country Doctor*



WRITE YOUR OWN BOOK PRESCRIPTIONS

- Think of someone in your life who is going through a challenging time:
 - Illness?
 - Financial troubles?
 - Loss of a loved one?
 - Separation?
 - Career change?
- What book would you prescribe to this person as if that book were medicine?
- Write it down, buy that book, and give it to them.

