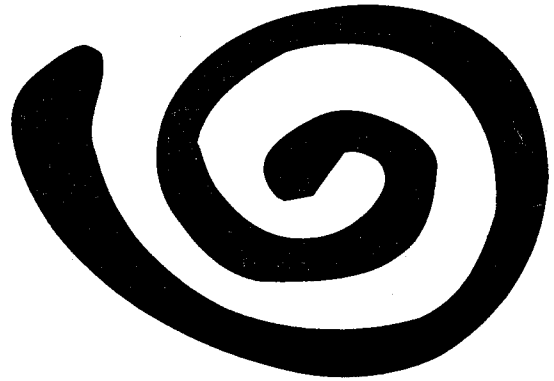


EXCHANGE

Bibliotherapy: Thinking and Feeling through Literature

by Carol L. Schlichter, Teresa Beardsley, and Diane Weber



Ursula LeGuin's (1976) novel, *Very Far Away from Anywhere Else*, is the story of a special friendship between Owen and Natalie, who are bright, talented, and different. It is about peer pressure, priorities, and individual responsibility. Owen wants to be a great scientist, Natalie wants to be a composer. As they wrestle with the challenges of their dreams and ambitions in a world of "levelers," realism and idealism play a balancing game.

The following two sets of questions are designed to guide adolescents in reading and responding to this selection. What do you notice about them?

Set 1: What are the problems Owen is wrestling with? How is he coping with them? What effects do Owen and Natalie have on one another? What effects do Owen's and Natalie's parents have on them? Why does the relationship between Owen and Natalie become a problem? How are Owen and Natalie alike? How are they different? How are they alike and different from others at their school? Why do you think the differences make a difference? What do you think Owen means when he says, "Some kids really don't have much ME at all"? What kind of adults do you think Owen and Natalie might become?

Set 2: How do you think Owen feels about the problems he is wrestling with? What strengths does he have that help him cope? Why is choosing not to

conform so difficult for Owen? How is he feeling? Do you know anyone who has ever been in the same situation as Owen (or Natalie)? Tell about their experiences. What importance does Owen's mythical kingdom of Thorn have as he deals with his problems? Have you ever worked through a problem in a similar way? What helped you? How did it help? (or What personal strength did you use?) If you were Owen's best friend, what advice would you give him? How might that help the situation? What do you think the story was really about?

Both sets of questions are challenging invitations for junior- and senior-high students to reflect on meaning in the novel. The *thinking* questions in the first set are the kind of questions teachers might ask to help students comprehend and probe the themes and issues of the literary selection. The *feeling* questions in the second set help students identify with and gain insight into their own feelings about issues a story character faces.

The latter set of questions is the grist of *bibliotherapy*, a technique for sharing carefully selected books or stories to help students face developmental challenges of everyday life.

What is bibliotherapy? Bibliotherapy is a guided discussion of literature that underscores the importance of the reader's feeling response to a story, book, or poem. It is a process used by teachers, counselors, or parents to help healthy people deal with the pleasures and perils

of their normal growth and development. Such developmental bibliotherapy focuses on identifying needs before they become problems and using selected literature to provide examples of how other people have dealt with similar developmental changes.

Bibliotherapy involves an active dialogue about a shared reading, facilitated by an adult, which helps individuals recognize, sort out, and evaluate their feeling response to the literature. This strategy can be implemented with an individual student facing a particular problem or with a small or large group of students sharing a common concern or interest.

When and how is bibliotherapy used? Effective leaders of bibliotherapy know their audience! They understand the developmental challenges faced at various ages, and are sensitive to the ways in which students express needs for intervention about various issues and situations in their lives. Such anticipation of needs is a critical first step in bibliotherapy because it helps the timing for a facilitated discussion.

The process of bibliotherapy begins with shared reading of a story, book, poem, or informational material and may include the use of a video tape or film. The adult leader might read a story to a young audience, while older students could be asked to read for themselves prior to the discussion time.

The heart of bibliotherapy is discussion. The facilitator uses a series of

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questions to guide students in identifying with the characters/situations in the story, responding emotionally as the characters work through a difficult situation to a resolution, and applying the characters/situations to their own lives, exploring consequences of actions and feelings. These three phases of bibliotherapeutic discussion are detailed in several sources (Cornett & Cornett, 1980; Halsted, 1991; Hynes, 1986; Pardek, 1995).

Follow-up activities are often used with discussion to facilitate further reflection and personal application and/or to provide students with alternate ways for expressing their feelings about an issue. Writing, painting, puppetry, and dramatization can extend the reader's involvement and, perhaps, lead to personal problem solving.

Illustrations of the bibliotherapy process appear below and come from the classroom experiences of the authors. Teachers' comments on the usefulness of the sessions are also included.

In Primary Grades

In my first-grade classroom, using bibliotherapy gives students an opportunity to discuss and to express feelings about issues important to them. In our rural community, males have many taboos about what they are allowed to do. Girls, even very young girls, are assigned housekeeping and child care tasks almost exclusively. Their interests are outside the accepted standards, and they wanted relief.

I selected *Amazing Grace* by Mary Hoffman (1991). In the book, Grace loves stories and acts out the most exciting parts of all sorts of stories. When there is a chance to play a part in a school production of *Peter Pan*, she knows exactly

which role is hers. It is hard when her classmates are doubtful. They read that Peter Pan is a white boy, and know Grace is a black girl. But Grace has no doubt of her ability.

Before reading the selection, students discuss this question: *How do you decide what kinds of things you do when you are not in school?* Responses vary, but the most common thread is that adults guide much of what the children do. Students do not feel they have much control. But they see that when they actually engage themselves in play, they have a great deal of freedom.

After reading the book, several questions encourage discussion: *Why did Raj think Grace couldn't be Peter Pan? Why do you think he thought that? What do you think? What do you think Raj thought after Grace's performance in the starring role?* The students take over at this point: "He [Raj] shouldn't ought to have said that!" Others immediately agree and offer reasons, as well as methods, of changing Raj's attitude.

We move from these questions to more personal ones developed from the story context: *How did you feel when Raj and Natalie decided for Grace? What would you have said to them? What if one of the boys wanted to play Wendy's role? Would that have been possible? What do you think could be done to make changing roles easier for the children to think about?* The children wonder where the teacher is and why she doesn't tell Raj and Natalie to let everyone have a chance. The students indicate that things would be different if a teacher would tell everyone what to do and why they should do it.

Finally, questions directed to the students help move them to understand what **they** could do in such a situation. *What are some difficulties that come when you change roles? Is it okay for people to do things just because they like to do them? What are some things we can do in this group to help support each other to do what we do best?* In this final portion of our dialogue, students want to be truthful; they want to talk.

In this bibliotherapy session, students discover they are more comfortable with less sharply defined gender roles and are more open to variations in ability and interest than the adults in the community. They are willing to value ability as a primary force when choices are permitted. The discussion also leads to a new topic that needs to be addressed. The children seem to think they have little control at home regarding expression of their interests and ideas. They look to school and to the teacher to give them freedom of expression.

Another bibliotherapy session gives students an opportunity to discover what they can accomplish and to explore how they feel about their situations. This method of sharing books and feelings is a valuable tool for young children as they learn to accept their individuality.

With Secondary Students

Even though the school institution tells our high-ability students that they are special, talented, and diverse, it also squeezes them into a conforming mold of "nifty-gifted" high achievers. Some students rebel by choosing not to excel in academics and some by not attending college. Others do not have a clear goal for their lives, yet they need to be affirmed and encouraged to believe that they can discover their goals and experience success. A few also fall prey to the lure of illegal drugs or other unwise risks.

In an Advanced Placement English class, I used the short novel, *Orfe*, by Cynthia Voigt (1992) as the focus of a bibliotherapy session. Voigt is a favorite author among students, but there were more compelling reasons for my selection.

Orfe is a story about two very different, yet equally talented, young women. Enny is timid; Orfe is bold. Enny follows; to Orfe, "rules seemed impotent." Enny is somewhat jealous of Orfe's free spirit and daring personality, and Orfe teaches Enny to take up for herself against cruelty by her classmates. Then, Enny moves away. Years later, as a college student, Enny runs into Orfe, who has joined a heavy metal band and is in love with Yuri, an unskilled, drugged-out dropout living in the equivalent of a crack house. Orfe withdraws into her music. Enny arranges a last concert for the band. Orfe's songs drive the crowd into a dancing frenzy, and she collapses on the bleachers and dies. Her eyes speak her last words to Enny: "Don't be afraid."

A number of issues might be addressed in a discussion of *Orfe*, but I focus on the pressure of conformity from both positive and negative sources. *How are Orfe and Enny alike? How are they different? Why did they become best friends? How did Enny feel when the boys made fun of her? Have you ever felt that way? How do you counter those feelings? Have you ever felt like that when a friend went "bad"? Have you ever felt that there was something holding you that you couldn't escape? What would you like to say to Orfe? What would you do? Think of a nonconformist you know, or even yourself, if you are one. What feelings (good or bad) do you think compel people to be nonconformists? How do you imagine nonconformists feel about themselves generally? When do you choose not to conform? Why? What are different ways to be nonconforming? When is nonconformity destructive? When is it productive?*

Orfe is well received by my students, who are surprised and eager to attack a book from an affective rather than purely cognitive perspective. To my surprise, most of my students identify with Enny. I had thought that the lure to be a nonconformist would be the bait taken by the students.

As students reflect, they share personal stories about being made fun of in

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elementary school because they read so well, "until finally I stopped reading aloud and pretended to be stupid," one girl once shared. She also shared, and the others affirmed, that she felt angry at herself when she did so.

As a follow-up activity, students write a letter to themselves describing how they see themselves in ten years, what personal pressures or hurdles they expect to encounter as they work toward their goals, and how they might overcome these hurdles.

Literature for Bibliotherapy

Although teachers will want to search for just the right story or book for particular students, most busy practitioners appreciate a selected starter set of resources. Quality of literature, with attention to powerful themes and inviting style, is paramount in bibliotherapy, as it should be in any reading experience. The following references contain annotated book lists which address personal challenges of students at a variety of ages and developmental needs. ■

Carol L. Schlichter is a professor in special education at the University of Alabama. She also teaches a course in bibliotherapy for exceptional students.

Teresa Beardsley has taught first grade for over 20 years in Alabama. She recently received an Ed.S. degree from the University of Alabama in the field of special education of the gifted and talented.

Diane Weber has taught school for 18 years in the Jefferson County School system in Alabama. She is currently completing her doctoral studies in special education at the University of Alabama.

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