

## Helping Children Cope

### What Is Bibliotherapy?

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Children's librarians wear many hats—human search engine, program designer, outreach professional, cataloguer, teacher, artist, storyteller. But ask a children's librarian whether or not the library provides specific services to help children cope with personal problems, such as the loss of a loved one, fear, moving, or bullying, and you are likely to get one of two answers—“yes, we occasionally have this kind of request,” or “no, that's bibliotherapy. We aren't qualified to give medical advice, nor do library patrons ask for it.”

It's difficult to argue which assertion is more prevalent when there is little evidence in library research for what kind of “coping assistance” actually occurs in libraries. Perhaps even more problematic is the underlying assumption that providing any coping assistance is equivalent to performing bibliotherapy.

What exactly is bibliotherapy? Is providing coping assistance bibliotherapy, and, if so, should children's librarians provide this service? These questions are the focus of this article.

### What We Know

The research reviewed here refers to the multifaceted use of the term “bibliotherapy” and to some relevant library services. To date, most studies on bibliotherapy have been conducted in the fields of education and psychology. Bibliotherapy used to be discussed by medical librarians, but a keyword search for bibliotherapy in Library Literature showed only thirty-nine articles from 1995 to 2005, which suggests that there is currently very limited use of the term “bibliotherapy” in this field.

### Bibliotherapy

Definitions of bibliotherapy exist along a broad spectrum. At one end of the spectrum stands the most rigid definition in

which medical aspects are emphasized. “Bibliotherapy is a clinical treatment in which a trained facilitator or therapist uses a selected work of literature to guide discussions with the participant(s), with the aim of integrating their “feelings and cognitive responses” and consequently affecting change.”<sup>1</sup> At the other end is a fuzzier definition. “Bibliotherapy is sharing a book or books with the intent of helping the reader deal with a personal problem.”<sup>2</sup> As no formal qualifications for bibliotherapy exist today, what bibliotherapy is and who is qualified to perform it are still controversial issues.

### Bibliotherapy and Librarianship

In the United States, bibliotherapy first received recognition in the early twentieth century when librarians, working with physicians, used books to treat the mentally ill. In the 1930s, Alice I. Bryan, a pioneer librarian and bibliotherapist, published several classic articles suggesting the use of bibliotherapy to cope with mental health as well as life and personal problems.<sup>3</sup> Her idea of applying bibliotherapy to daily life problems had a great impact on its subsequent research and practice. It was also during this period (1939) that the Hospital Division of the American Library Association established the first committee on bibliotherapy and thus it finally earned an official status in American librarianship.<sup>4</sup>

After World War II, the scope of bibliotherapy expanded beyond the medical sphere, and teachers, nurses, and social workers began using it in their practices. From the 1940s through

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the 1960s, articles about bibliotherapy continued to appear in various library journals, and there was significant graduate research that explored its theories and practices. During the 1980s, interest in bibliotherapy turned to the use of self-help books for changing negative behaviors and for helping children with developmental problems.<sup>5</sup> This would have seemed a perfect time for children's librarians to apply the concepts of bibliotherapy, but librarians' interest in it waned during that time. Fewer librarians went to the ALA bibliotherapy meetings in the early 1990s, and eventually the ALA Bibliotherapy Committee disbanded. Few articles on bibliotherapy have been published in library literature since then.

## Librarian's Discomfort with Bibliotherapy

What's wrong with bibliotherapy in a library setting? Perhaps the terminology itself is what is most problematic for nonclinical practitioners because it is easily associated with licensure and medical treatments. Some scholars, who take only the medical-oriented definition, argue that only mental health professionals are qualified to perform bibliotherapy, and based on the same argument, they still question the librarian's legitimacy to perform bibliotherapy.<sup>6</sup> To avoid controversy, many alternative terms have been proposed, but none has persisted long enough to be prevalent.

## Coping Assistance in the Public Library

Although empirical library research about coping assistance is rare, there are some relevant anecdotes. In the aftermath of the tragedy of September 11, many people asked for books to help soothe their sorrow. Teachers looked for stories to help children escape from a stressful reality, and parents searched for books to cope with their children's fear of flying.

In response to the tragedy, ALA provided a website with a wide range of materials, from how libraries could help Americans understand and cope with the tragedy, to how to provide specific types of information, including books for differ-

ent age groups.<sup>7</sup> The New York Public Library launched a series of programs and extensive Web resources, including book discussions and presentations on depression, anxiety, and grief.<sup>8</sup> The Providence (R.I.) Public Library held a program, "*Finding Safety in an Unsafe World*," that aimed specifically to relieve teenagers' feelings of anxiety.<sup>9</sup>

Similar coping assistance anecdotes at local, state, and national levels were found after the devastating Hurricane Katrina. These included websites containing information about assistance that any evacuee might need, lists of books that might help children cope with Katrina, and book displays, book discussion, and storytelling aimed at helping children deal with the situation.<sup>10</sup> An empirical study done in three California public libraries found that coping assistance in the public library could occur in ordinary times; that is, times not marked by national crisis. The same study also showed that coping assistance in the public library was not limited to book recommendation (or readers' advisory); children's librarians provided nonclinical programs that helped children understand or cope with certain issues. Some examples included discussion clubs such as "Girls' Talk" or "Boys' Talk," and "therapy dog" that helped struggling children with their frustration in reading.<sup>11</sup> These examples indicate that the American library has been providing services to help patrons—including and perhaps especially children—cope with a multitude of special needs, feelings, and difficulties.

## What We Don't Know

The lack of research on coping services for children in public libraries renders this a particularly interesting topic. None of the aforementioned services used the term "bibliotherapy" to describe what the librarians did. Most services were simply cast under the rubric of "information service."

Unfortunately, because the helping and healing aspects of library work have gone undocumented, how these services have been conducted goes unrecognized and their importance hasn't been researched.

We also don't know the effects of coping assistance on children.

## What, Then, Can Librarians Do?

Because we are committed to children's information needs, we actively provide them with many types of media resources. By providing various library and information services, we can help meet the different needs children have, including the daily challenges they encounter. In the end, librarians do not need to focus solely on the medical aspects of bibliotherapy. Instead, our attention should be drawn to the potential healing power inherent in reading and through participation in relevant library activities.

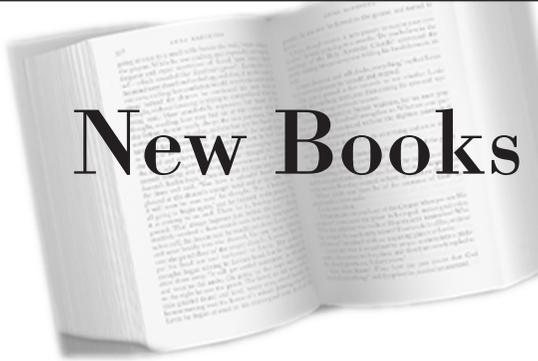
When providing coping-assistance services in the public library, the librarian's first challenge is to know how far she or he can go. This issue can probably be best approached by policy-making. There should be some confirmatory policies telling librarians what they can and cannot do in various circumstances, just as is done now in guidelines for answering medical and legal reference questions. ALA should consider guidelines and standards that distinguish clinical bibliotherapy from librarian-led coping assistance.

Within our library, we can do some critical evaluation ourselves to reexamine our duties and responsibilities—to provide information or assistance as a coping tool, and not just as an educational or recreational device. We should work with parents and teachers to find evidence that coping assistance is, in fact, effective. Our library programs and collection could have a much greater impact on the patrons than what they initially expect. Through library activities such as storytelling, book talks, or displays, books addressing sensitive issues could be shared more naturally.

It is time to reexamine our self-consciousness as professional information-service providers. Providing healing or coping information, after all, is but one task that we do to meet our patrons' information needs. It is a task we must not put off—a task that will require us to don yet another hat. ☺

## References

1. Arleen McCarty Hynes and Mary Hynes-Berry, *Bibliotherapy the Interactive Process: A Handbook* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1986), 17.
2. Beth Doll and Carol Doll, *Bibliotherapy with Young People: Librarians and Mental Health Professionals Working Together* (Englewood, Colo.: Libraries Unlimited, 1997), 1.
3. Alice I. Bryan, "Can There Be a Science of Bibliotherapy?" *Library Journal* 64 (Jan. 1939): 773-76.
4. Rhea J. Rubin, *Using Bibliotherapy: A Guide to Theory and Practice* (Phoenix: Oryx Press, 1978), 15.
5. Jean A. Pardeck and John T. Pardeck, *Young People with Problems: A Guide to Bibliotherapy* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1984), 3-5.
6. See, for example, Alice G. Smith, "Will the Real Bibliotherapist Please Stand Up?" *Journal of Youth Services in Libraries* 2, no. 3 (1989): 241-49.
7. American Library Association, "Resources for Children, Their Parents and Educators: Dealing with Tragic Events of September 11, 2001," [www.ala.org/ala/alsc/alscresources/dealingwithtrag/DealingwithSept11Tragedy.htm](http://www.ala.org/ala/alsc/alscresources/dealingwithtrag/DealingwithSept11Tragedy.htm) (accessed Oct. 10, 2007).
8. Laura Hayes, "Coping, View 1: Programs Laudable," *American Libraries* 33, no. 8 (2002): 35-36.
9. *Ibid.*, 36.
10. State Library of Louisiana, "Hurricane Assistance Links," [www.state.lib.la.us/links](http://www.state.lib.la.us/links) (accessed June 10, 2007); State Library of Louisiana, "Booklist for Children Affected by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita," [www.state.lib.la.us/whatsnew/whatsnew\\_details.cfm?doc\\_id=574](http://www.state.lib.la.us/whatsnew/whatsnew_details.cfm?doc_id=574) (accessed Oct. 10, 2007); Mary C. LeBouef, "Disasters Strike, Public Libraries Prevail: The Impact of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita on Louisiana Public Libraries," *Louisiana Libraries* 68, no. 4 (2006): 5.
11. Ya-Ling Lu, "How Children's Librarians Help Children Cope with Daily Life: An Enhanced Readers' Advisory Service" (Ph.D. dissertation, Univ. of California, Los Angeles, 2005).



## New Books

Bair, Linda and Jill Andrews. *Fee Fi Fo Fum: Puppets & Other Folktale Fun*. Lohnes, Marilyn. *Storytime Puppet Zoo: Simple Puppet Patterns and Plays*.

### Professional Resources on Storytelling

By Kathryn Miller

**Bair, Linda, and Jill Andrews.** *Fee Fi Fo Fum: Puppets & Other Folktale Fun*. Fort Atkinson, Wis.: Highsmith, 2005. 144p. \$16.95 (ISBN-10: 1-57950-039-0; ISBN-13: 978-1579500399).

"Fee! Fi! Fo! Fum! I smell the blood of an Englishman." You probably know the first lines of this popular folktale. The authors use folktales such as this as the basis of this book. Combining puppets with fun folktales creates a recipe for great storytimes that children and parents are sure to remember (and maybe even recreate at home).

This book is logically organized into three sections, with appropriate folktales in each—"Animals" contains

such folktales as "Henny Penny" and "The Tortoise and the Hare"; "People" includes "The Boy Who Cried Wolf" and "Rumpelstiltskin"; and "Places" relates folktales to geography themes, including the forests in "Baba Yaga" and stores in "The Elves and the Shoemaker."

Each folktale and storytime includes ideas on how to present the story to the listeners, directions and patterns on how to make puppets, games, folklore, science, and additional group activities. This book will enhance a repertoire and bring memorable storytimes to young learners. With the puppet and program ideas, young learners may even remember the third and fourth lines of the title folktale: "Be he 'live, or be he dead, I'll grind his bones to make my bread."

**Lohnes, Marilyn.** *Storytime Puppet Zoo: Simple Puppet Patterns and Plays*. Fort Atkinson, Wis.:

**Upstart Books, 2005. 152p. \$17.95 (ISBN-10: 1-93214-615-6; ISBN-13: 978-1932145158).**

So your storytelling audience is back again, ready to be entertained with great new stories and program activities? Try puppets! Lohnes' book provides librarians and classroom teachers (and parents) with twenty-five animal puppet patterns. Along with the patterns and easy-to-follow instructions, Lohnes, a Canadian children's librarian, provides lists of picture books that can be incorporated into a storytime featuring a particular animal.

If you are new to puppetry, the book also includes information on how to maneuver a hand puppet, make animal voices, and create simple puppet stages. This easy-to-follow book will bring new ideas and storytelling opportunities to your library or classroom.