

BOOKS WHICH HAVE INFLUENCED ME

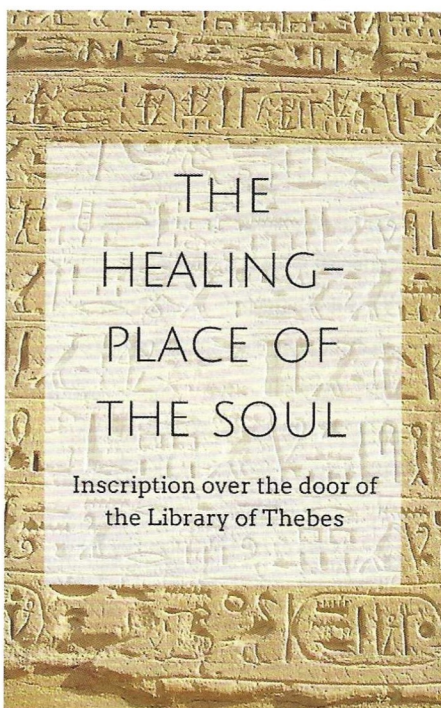
The Healing Power of Books

Professor M L O'Rourke

The Healing Power of Books

Books, poetry, plays and other literary forms have been used for centuries to give people pleasure, to make people think and wonder, to help cry, resolve and act. The fact that ancient civilizations valued books for their ability to uplift the soul and add to the quality of life is best epitomised in an inscription over the library of Thebes entitled: "The Healing Place of the Soul". We have long used books and stories to create a love of reading, to quench the thirst for knowledge and to help people reflect upon the human condition acquiring greater insights and understandings in the process. There is a model of psychotherapy which is popular in America, Scotland and to a lesser extent here in Ireland, called bibliotherapy and is used by therapists to help their clients share thoughts and feelings in a more enlightened manner. The term bibliotherapy originates from the Greek words *biblios*, meaning book, and *therapeio*, meaning healing hence the notion of healing with books.

Bibliotherapy has been described in many ways by different writers. A broad definition is offered as a "family of techniques for structuring an interaction between a facilitator and participant, based on their mutual sharing of literature in the broadest sense possible" (Gery, Contemporary Bibliotherapy, 1978). Bibliotherapy can be used in a variety of settings including schools, hospitals, book clubs and clinics. It is interesting to note that bibliotherapy was widely used in American schools and in psychiatric hospitals from the 1950's onwards. Books then encourage free expression of problems and concerns that are sometimes hidden; it helps readers to analyse



Inscription over the door of the Library of Thebes.

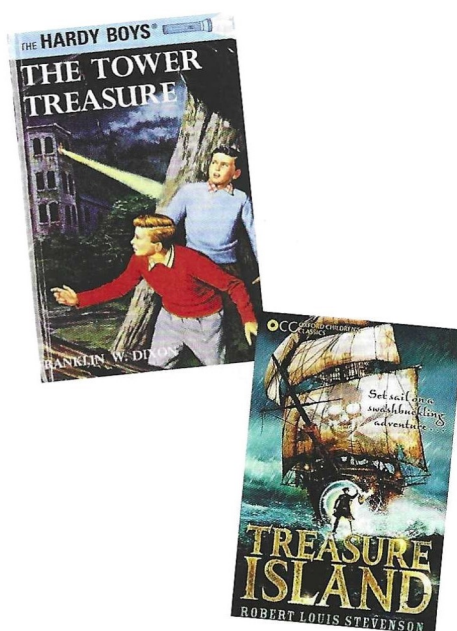
their thoughts and behaviours in relation to self and others and it teaches by providing information needed to solve problems and promotes positive thinking. Books of course, promote relaxation while reducing anxiety and providing emotional release.

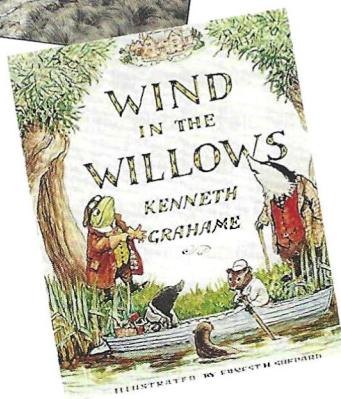
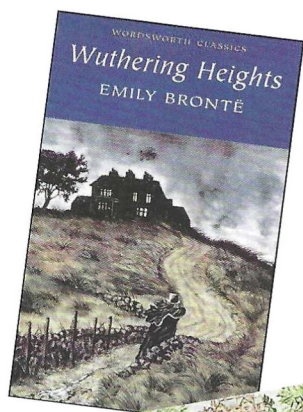
Books which Have Influenced Me— The Influence of the Good Teacher

The most influential books, and the truest in their influence, are works of fiction. They do not pin the reader to a dogma, which he or she must afterwards discover to be inexact. They do not teach us a lesson, which we must afterwards unlearn. They repeat, they rearrange, they clarify the lessons of life; they disengage us from ourselves, they constrain us to the acquaintance of others; and they show us the web of experience, not as we can see it for ourselves, but with a singular

change where the old consuming ego of ourselves is struck out. A really beautiful and enjoyable book's influence is profound and silent, like the influence of nature; we are bettered by the experience, yet know not how.

So, what are the books which have greatly influenced me over the years? So many stand first. We had a mobile library (leabharlann) which came to our primary school and our wonderful teacher of those early years, Michael Whelan, encouraged us to read one book a week. A good class discussion would follow and one outstanding boy, Patrick Killenny, would enthuse us all with his ruminations on the world of the Hardy Boys! It was thus during these wonderful and inspiring years that my love of books began. The Hardy Boys were my first magical experiences in reading followed by *Treasure Island* and *Kidnapped* by Robert Louis Stevenson. Years later another beautiful work by Stevenson made a deep impression: *The Weir of Hermiston*.





In secondary school, I loved reading *Wind in the Willows* by Graham Greene, *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë, and the poetry of William Wordsworth made a deep impression- a certain innocence, a rugged austerity of joy, a night of the stars, *"the silence that is in the lonely hills"*; something of the cold thrill of dawn, cling to his work and give it a particular address to what is best in us. The gift of reading was well and truly nurtured by another wonderful English teacher in St Mel's College, Fr James McKeon, a good Fenagh native, and the thirst for a visit to a welcoming book store or library has never since been quenched. This enlightened educator was also our highly successful sports coach/trainer whose personality type shone through with great interpersonal effectiveness, empathy and inspirational energy. He taught us how to be winners on and off the sports field.

Other books of special memory would surely include some of the following in world literature and on many an occasion in the lecture room, I like to draw some beautiful illuminations and quotations from the works in the above panel.

- East of Eden by John Steinbeck
- Winesburg Ohio by Sherwood Anderson
- Collected Poems of Patrick Kavanagh
- Collected Poems by Seamus Heaney
- Collected Poems by William Wordsworth
- Anna Karenina by Leo Tolstoy
- How Much Land Does a Man need and Other Stories by Leo Tolstoy
- Collected Poems by Anna Akmatova
- The Islander by Tomas O'Crohan
- Woodbrook by David Thompson
- My New Curate by Canon Sheehan
- Letters of Vincent Van Gogh by Vincent Van Gogh
- That They May Face the Rising Sun by John McGahern
- Amongst Women by John McGahern
- Collected Stories by John McGahern
- Memoir by John McGahern
- The Letters of John McGahern by Frank Shovlin just recently published by Faber and Faber
- The Strings are False by Louis Mac Neice
- Collected Poems by Louis Mac Neice
- And Quiet Flows the Don by Mikhail Sholokhov
- The Scarlet Letter by Nathaniel Hawthorne
- Marie Edgeworth's Letters from Ireland by Valeri Pakenham
- Vaclav Havel by Michael Zantovsky
- Molly Keane by Sally Phipps
- Come All you Loyal Heroes by Con Houlihan

Last book of all that stands tall is a work of singular significance which tumbled the world upside down for me and blew into space a thousand cobwebs of genteel and ethical illusion and set me back again upon a strong foundation of all the original and manly virtues that we learned in school, church and at home. The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius began to blossom with a love of Latin in secondary school and in University College Maynooth. When you have read this book, you carry away with you a memory of the

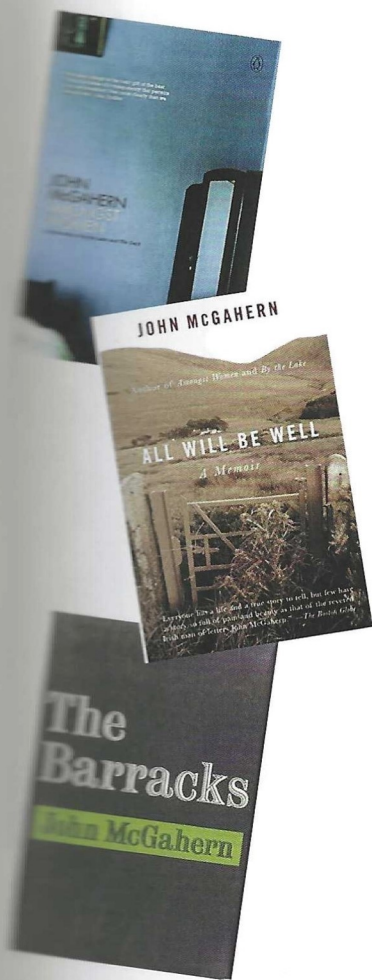
man himself. No one can read this book and not be moved. It is as though you had touched a loyal hand, looked into brave eyes, and made a noble friend. There is another bond enfolding you thenceforward, binding you to life and exhorting the adaptation of a set of ideals and a love of service to others in making the world a better place for others which is surely a powerful source of meaning. Aurelius believed that: *"the way to value life, the way to feel compassion for others, the way to love anything with the greatest depth is to be aware that these experiences are destined to be lost"*.

John McGahern's World of Literature The Luck of a Library

In his writings, John McGahern, tells us that as a young teenager he had a stroke of luck. There was a Big House nearby which had an excellent library. He was given the freedom of the books there and it was in this way that he acquired his literary education. He states:

"There was a Protestant house quite close by that had an enormous library and I had the run of that from when I was about eleven until I was eighteen. I often used to borrow five or six books in a week. There seemed to be a lot of books about the Rocky Mountains; there were many of Zane Grey and Jeffrey Farnol; there was Walter Scott. I would have read all Scott at that time, and Charles Dickens too. One didn't differentiate. I would have read everything I could get my hands on. It was an enormous library. I would just get lost in a book (McGahern, TCD Lecture, 1987)".

This is a good description of the total immersion in literature and where the contagious fire of a love of books is kindled in a young teenager's life: the indiscriminate reading of books of all kinds and quality. One wonders what would have been the consequence for the young McGahern if this treasure-house had not been available to him.



An Overview of the Healing Power of Books

Healing through books is an ancient art that is still considered important as a tool in the armoury of the enlightened teacher and skilled therapist. A good book that is carefully selected can help the reader to achieve a new awareness and understanding of self and others, provide a release for pent-up emotions, and contribute to conflict resolution. When the reader and book are a good match, catharsis comes when psychological release occurs as the characters in the story resolve their conflicts. When the character triumphs, the reader's tensions are released as he/she experiences the triumph vicariously. Through identification and catharsis, readers develop an understanding of their thoughts, feelings and behaviours. This insight enables the reader to alter his/her perceptions of events and contributes to more productive and successful behaviours.

Irvin Yalom, one of the great psychotherapists and psychiatrists in America to-day, reminds us that great writers in literature have so much to offer us with regard to insights and understandings since they, too, must solve their existential problems and sufferings by creative effort in their writings. They have so much to offer us in resolving life's challenges and what great thinker has not at some point in both work and life turned his or her attention to life and death issues to de-repress, to reacquaint the individual with something he or she has known all along. Yalom notes that many creative writers such as Dostoyevsky, Freud, Keats, The Bronte sisters, Van Gogh, Kafka, Virginia Wolf, suffered considerable personal handicaps or social constraints. Indeed, one of the great writers of prose fiction that this, or any country, has produced, John McGahern, has reminded us that in his portrayal of a dazzling imaginative world of fiction, it is a means of release for the writer to deal with his own personal existential angst. Suffering is the cutting edge of genius and is like grist to the mill for the creative artist. Van Gogh's remark is pertinent: *"Loneliness, worries, difficulties, the unsatisfied need for kindness and sympathy—that's what is hard to bear. The mental suffering of sadness and disappointment undermines us more than dissipation-us, I say, who find ourselves the happy possessors of disordered hearts"* (Van Gogh, 1999, The Complete Letters of Vincent Van Gogh, p146).

Books can be used then in so many ways as a springboard for individual and group discussions in which readers can relate the topic to events in their own lives. Books have a way of revealing information without the need for embarrassing questions and can surely provide a safe haven for dreams and happy endings. Sometimes a reader can ponder an idea, an inspiration, a feeling or an action as a result of reading a book, and we never know if or how it has affected his or her life. So,

let's conclude with a beautiful reflection on happiness from the existential world of fellow Leitrim-man, John McGahern, and as an example of the beauties and insights that literature can give to the reader. Happiness for McGahern can only be known in retrospect! *"The days were quiet. They did not feel particularly quiet or happy but through them ran a sense like an underground river, that there would come a time when these days would be looked on as happiness, all that life could give of contentment and peace"*.

Photograph: Leinster Champions in Colleges Football with their Coach and Trainer, Fr James McKeon, Fenagh, and with the help of a number of Leitrim players: Frank Keegan, Mohill; Gerry O'Connor, Annaduff; Michael O'Rourke, Aughavas, Captain. Fr Peter Burke is the young footballer in the back row.

Biographical Note: Professor Michael L. O'Rourke is a lecturer in Trinity College Dublin, The Military College, The Curragh, and is Visiting Professor at the University of Strathclyde, Scotland, ICPS Athens and the University of Indiana, USA. He is a native of Aughavas, Co Leitrim.

Leitrim Guardian members



Latest recruit to the Leitrim Guardian committee—Jacinta Heslin with long time member, Ann Murray, joint treasurer.