

Shelf Healing interview with Deborah Alma. Transcription by Lukas Montgomery.

00:00:15

Rebecca Markwick:

Hello and welcome to Shelf Healing, UCL's Bibliotherapy podcast. I'm Rebecca Markwick, and I'm joined today by my co-host-

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Sara Cheraghlou:

Sara Cheraghlou. Hello.

00:00:24

Rebecca:

Our guest today is Deborah Alma. Deborah is a poet, editor and lecturer in creative writing at Keele University. She co-founded and runs the Poetry Pharmacy where you could be prescribed poems to improve your wellbeing. The poetry pharmacy also has a physical bookshop based in Bishop's Castle in Shropshire. So the first question to get us started is nice and easy. Do you feel that reading is therapeutic?

00:00:56

Deborah Alma:

Oh, well, so I'm certain that it is I think that that we all, all of us who read regularly would know that to be true. For lots of us who read when we were children, it could be all sorts of things. It could be escape or sort of satisfy your curiosity, take you to new places, but also helps to make sense of the world. You know, the kind of things- and a kind of moral compass is well, but yes, definitely.

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Rebecca:

What kind of books do you reach for when you want to improve your own mental wellbeing?

00:01:30

Deborah:

It's an interesting question for me because I work prescribing poetry for people very explicitly with a therapeutic intention. It's really interesting because I'm sort of doing research around that all of the time and doing reading around that all of the time probably could imagine that, for me that those texts and aren't necessarily the ones I go to for a break, you know, for- to escape from my day job. Although, although just at every now and again a poem will grab me and take me away without that kind of- without the kind of objective head on my shoulders, looking at it so oddly the books that I turn to make me feel better are what they're quite varied. Quite often their books that I enjoyed when I was younger that when I'm reading them, I go back to that younger self, a place obviously of you know, when I was reading it, that was a comfortable or a happy place, so quite often I'll read. I know Tove

Jansson and *The Moomins*. I quite like those that I re read those quite often, but also yeah, sort of a kind of escapism. So in these coronavirus days, I'm quite interested in reading fiction about kind of worse, even worse scenarios than we're in now. And that kind of makes me feel comforted somehow about what we're living through at the moment.

00:03:04

Sara:

That's really great. To follow up with poetry being so open to interpretation, how do you approach prescribing the right poem for the right state of mind?

00:03:15

Deborah:

That's a really good question, actually, and I'm really glad that you asked it, because very few people ask that question. And for me if I- if I were to describe my superpower in the world, it's about getting the right home to the person and I think it's so often people are put off poetry because they're reading the wrong stuff for them. So, the whole idea behind emergency poet and the Poetry Pharmacy is to curate the poetry so that I can help people find the poems that will resonate with them in some way. So, the way I do it when I do my poetry on prescription, whether I was doing in my vintage ambulance as Emergency Poet or now in the Poetry Pharmacy. It is by listening to people asking them about their reading habits, books that I used to work for a publisher, and I was a bookseller before I had children. So, oddly, I know about a lot of literature, and, this sounds big headed, but I'm quite well read. You know, I just read a lot when I was young, so I can signpost people to the to the right text, I think, after having listened to them carefully and whether they found poetry in particular difficult because quite often people have put off reading poetry when they're at school, secondary school usually, I really believe that there's a right poetry collection or right just- it may be the right poem for them. So yeah, that's my superpower. Thank you for the question.

00:04:56

Sara:

No worries. And how do you go about storing the prescriptions? Do you just memorise the poems that stand up to you, or do you keep note of them in the notebook?

00:05:04

Deborah:

Yeah, that that's another interesting about how I do it because I would- if anybody knows me, they would say I was quite scatterbrained and that I had a really terrible memory. Yet for this I have some kind of odd memory. It's almost like, an emotional memory for the poems. So, somebody will talk about, I don't know, feeling lonely. I'll have a sense of- because we all of us feel all of the emotions to some degree at some point. So, I'll remember Oh yeah, that poem. What I do and what I did in the ambulances, I have about 300 odd poems ready, printed out as though they were a prescription with the patient in inverted comments name at the top and at the bottom how they should take it, whether they should take in the evening with a glass of wine or sit in the garden and look at birds or whatever. So, I have them printed out. But quite often it's quite hard to find that poem, you know. I'll remember it. I won't be able to remember the title. I won't be able to remember the poet, but there'll be a line. So, I

have this really bad cross referenced book. Just a notebook. Put together that I keep thinking if I lose that, I'm in real trouble and I should put it on a laptop or something, but it's beyond me that one.

00:06:27

Sara:

That's really lovely. And I think this is something you'd mentioned earlier about reading for escapism. And we talk about prescribing for the right state of mind. Do you find that your patients tend to want to read things that will reflect the state they're currently in, or imagine things in you, or turn away from it entirely and go somewhere else? What do you find is the most constructive?

00:06:53

Sara:

Another really good question. All of those things. So, in my listening, I've done this so many times. So, the thousands of times probably talking 1 to 1 with people. And I think I've become like a gypsy fortune teller. I listen out for clues, so you know how when you talk to a friend do you think they need this and so sometimes it is, the poem is chosen, because they need a way out. They need maybe to see that that someone has gone ahead of them has been through something similar on has come through. So, it might be that it might be to remind them that they need to do something so that their lives are too busy, too stressful. So that the poem may say, keep this poem and stick it on your fridge by Sheamus Heaney. You know it reminds you to go out into the countryside and- or to remind you of a place of boredom. Or it could be a poem that talks of future and hope so all of those things. And again, it's, you know, that's what I've learned to do, I think is I'm a terrible, middle aged, opinionated woman who will say to my friends, What you need is this, you know? So, it's just a way of being able to do that with poems. I suppose.

00:08:22

Sara:

I love that.

00:08:23

Rebecca:

That's great. I was going to ask if you'd noticed a difference moving from being Emergency Poet in your vintage ambulance to running a bookshop. Have you noticed a difference in how you've been prescribing poems with that kind of you're no longer driving around to being in a building all day?

00:08:39

Deborah:

Yeah, that's an interesting question too, there's something about turning up in an ambulance dressed up as a doctor with nurse first. You know it is ridiculous. It's clearly lighter. You know, there's an element of- strong element of theatre on people encounter it and go, what's going on here? And I'll have a go, and that happens much more. So, you have a much wider cross section of people. Quite often I'd be in a city center somewhere or outside of the library or even inside the library, but not really ambulance. But there's something here. There's something about being in this pretty town in

Shropshire that people have to come and find me. And so they have- I've tried to keep the element of theatre as well, because I think that's really important that it stays light, that there is no- it's not explicitly therapy. It might have therapeutic value, but it's definitely not, I wouldn't call myself a therapist in any way or make that claim, so it needs to have a light touch. So, I have the- this Victorian room with a velvet green chaise longue and you know, I sit there and with my clipboard and so, the element of theatre is still there. But the people that come here, and this is a sadness for me, actually, is our people and, you know, they tend to be a certain demographic and, to be honest, it, you know, it's kind of middle class, white women. And I'm a mixed race, although I don't look like it, Londoner. And so, I miss that, that kind of element of giving poetry to people who wouldn't otherwise encounter it, which is really important for me and so that there's less of that now. It's much warmer.

00:10:43

Rebecca:

I can appreciate that. I work outside on a day to day basis.

00:10:46

Deborah:

Yeah, well, you know, people didn't realise working in the ambulance with the doors, open it's cold. Oh, it's really exhausting.

00:10:57

Sara:

Have you ever considered doing kind of little pop up shops again?

00:11:01

Deborah:

Well, it's again- that's really interesting question and the answer largely, is no, because I loved your email to me, it was kind of, you know, Deborah Alma and team and at the moment, it's just it really is just made largely so it's lockdown at the moment and also, you know, we've not been able to do all of our workshops- you can probably see behind me on this Zoom meeting. This is our poetry reference library. So, we have workshop space here. We have a cafe. We have the bookshop and pretty much it's me running all of it. So, I haven't got time to do anything else. But the interesting thing for me is because people keep asking me to do things, I'm looking into doing an Arts Council bid to do training for people. You know? To do it probably so that- to use the model that I've used and send out poetry pharmacists all over the country. We're doing it in partnership with libraries, so that would be quite good fun I think, because I've worked with, apart from Emergency Poet, I did work with people with dementia using poetry. I've worked in hospices and with other vulnerable groups using poetry. So, it isn't just about training people to do that the slightly ridiculous theatre- theatrical thing, which is fun but maybe doesn't work very well in a care home with someone with dementia. So, you have to be adaptable.

00:12:38

Rebecca:

What made you decide to start the Emergency Poet with your lovely ambulance in the first place? Did you- were you already recommending poems to people and thought more people should have this? Or did you just suddenly sort of get an ambulance and go let's go around with poems?

00:12:54

Deborah:

So it is a combination of the two, so yeah, I would I remember years ago, a friend with a broken heart at the kitchen table. And me going, you must read this poem. You know, So I've always done that. And it was Derek Walcott, *Love After Love*. By the way, if anyone has broken heart, but yes, I have always done that. And then I worked for a few years with people with dementia in care homes and those two sort of things that I did led directly to Emergency Poet, with hindsight. But I remember looking on eBay because I was looking to do creative writing workshops in a mobile way for primary school children. I was looking for vans on eBay and saw the ambulance for sale. I was on Facebook talking to friends and my friends were going No, Deb, don't buy it. But I did anyway. But yeah, it was like the idea came. It's a- It's kind of inspirational madness really.

00:14:03

Rebecca:

Well, the best ideas come from inspirational madness.

00:14:05

Sara:

Do you find that there's a time of day for you, where you're the most receptive to the words you're reading? So, like you said, you prescribe an evening with a glass of wine is a morning with a cup of tea. But for you, what's the best time?

00:14:20

Deborah:

Ah, yeah, because I'm quite odd now, aren't I? So, I'm living around poetry and also, I've taken on too much as well. So I- in the past it was Sunday mornings in bed, which is also kind of writing- because I write is what I don't write anymore. But I used to write then and read then so my best- I don't know when I'm talking to other people I listened for when their best time is, but in a way, I've lost mine. But probably in the mornings, I think.

00:15:02

Sara:

It's so hard when you're doing something that is something you're so passionate about, and it does become a job that you're doing, then you feel like falling out of line with the parts that felt so genuine and just rewarding for you initially. But you're doing much. I can't imagine. I want my own poetry prescription. It sounds ideal.

00:15:26

Deborah:

Thank you. We have to do- have a chat on the phone. Now we're in lockdown I do- people get in touch and I'll do consultations on the phone or via email as well. Which has been quite nice to do. Then I send them a parcel in the post.

00:15:41

Sara:

This leads in great into my next question Deborah, is there anywhere listeners can go to find more information about Poetry Pharmacy and perhaps get in contact for their own prescriptions?

00:15:52

Deborah:

Yeah, well, yeah, we've got a website www.poetrypharmacy.co.uk and people can have a consultation with me by email on the phone on in future they can come here is well and lie down on the couch. But when I when I do- if somebody- when I talk to someone on the phone, I ask them to make sure that they've got their feet up and that they've got a cup of tea and a favorite cake on a pretty plate and you know so that the scene is similar. It's important that they- it's really important, oddly, that they put their feet up. It takes them into completely different states. Somehow, I've watched- watched that happen. So yeah, and then just have a cosy chat about the positive things in their lives and the things that they're good at. It's all very gentle and positive.

00:16:45

Rebecca:

Is there a particular poet that you find yourself prescribing more than others? Or is it kind of very wide ranging?

00:16:55

Deborah:

It's really- It's really wide ranging because I've listened to the to the person, but they- but I much prefer contemporary poets I really like- again it depends on the person. If somebody, if it tends to be an older person, they've grown up loving Keats or bits of Shakespeare. Then then that's what you know. I'll try and find them something that they might not have encountered. But that's within their taste. Maybe, but yeah, it- for me I, oddly, I seem to be prescribing- here's a poem by Seamus Heaney called *Postscript*, so I'm prescribing Seamus Heaney quite a lot and also the poet Esther Morgan. There's a poem by her called *Grace*, which is, a really lovely poem at the moment. And then, yeah, they're all over the place, actually

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Rebecca:

Is there a book or a poem that you find has profoundly affected you and sort of changed your outlook at all?

00:18:01

Deborah:

Changed my outlook? There are lots of poems that I'm glad to know, I might not be able to recite them off by heart. But there are poems that I kind of- I kind of hold in my hand and I could just, I can kind of think just the name of the poem and it will give me the sense of the peacefulness or the hopefulness of the poems. Actually, Derek Wilcots *Love After Love* when I had a broken heart was brilliant and wise and so that did actually have a really good effect. It worked like medicine. So that was really good on. But I actually yeah. And *Grace* by Esther Morgan I mentioned before. It's a very simple poem, but it's about stillness and appreciating the small and the beautiful and noticing. So yeah, that one too.

00:18:58

Sara:

That's really lovely. I can't wait to read *Love After Love*.

00:19:08

Deborah:

You also need then, you need- there's an extract from T.S. Eliot's oh, *East Coker* and it says something like wait without hope for hope is- hope for the wrong thing. Wait without love- or anyway, look it up. You'll find it.

00:19:25

Sara:

Writing it down Deborah.

00:19:28

Deborah:

It's complicated and difficult, but wise, you know. And if you do the work, you'll be through it. You'll be fine.

00:19:36

Rebecca:

Do you get people who sort of come back again and again for new prescriptions? Or do people tend to just sort of come once?

00:19:44

Deborah:

No, that's been the really nice thing. People come back because I think because the thing of being listened to carefully is a nice experience and the questions are- remind people of the things that

they're missing or you know that they value and reminds them of their good places and good times. And so they yeah, they just like to come and be listened to and have questions that are not about their medical health or, you know, sometimes people are in therapy cause they're in difficult circumstances or they're struggling, but they also come back because these questions are light. They're not about- they're intimate without being invasive. I suppose so, yeah, they quite often that happens.

00:20:42

Rebecca:

That's nice. Then it feels more like you're sort of really helping people, as opposed to it being- not that it is, but the sort of like you said you were making it quite dramatic and theatrical. It's not just dramatic and theatrical. It has a real sense of purpose and effectiveness.

00:20:59

Deborah:

The theatre is a way of getting rid of a kind of British embarrassment thing. You know, it makes it lighthearted seeming, but the questions and the poems are- it can be quite profound experience, actually, and it's just- it's a gentle thing. Yeah, the bit of sadness for me is when I was doing Emergency Poet, I was working for organizations, whether it was a library or a conference even, or lots of arts festivals or music festivals. And of course, what- it was free, like the NHS, you know, I was in and I've been sponsored by the Arts Council to give free consultations here, but that's run out. So, at the moment there's a charge and you know, I would like to be able to do it for nothing. But, you know, it is my living. So, that's difficult. But this Arts Council bid, hopefully, we'll sort of send it off into other settings for other people to do.

00:22:09

Sara:

I think it's such a rewarding thing. I used to work as a bookseller as well, and the best feeling ever was when someone came back and said you recommended this to me, it was incredible. Do you have more like it? And you feel like you get to always kind of be that first reader again for these incredible works that have done things for you as well and you can really see the value and the merit behind it. So Deborah, you're doing incredible work.

00:22:35

Deborah:

I am! I don't know about that. it is lovely. So it's a kind of this loop of positive feedback. You know, people come and go. Oh, that's wonderful. Oh that poem's just right. And you know you're wonderful and I go, oh, you're wonderful. And then we just you know, it's great.

00:22:54

Sara:

Has anyone ever offered you like, a surprise prescription?

00:22:59

Deborah:

Oh, no, not for me. Not after- it's so sad. Not after having listened to me, but- I- lots of people share poems that they think might be useful for me in the work that I do. So that happens quite often. Sometimes people send me, you know, their poems that they think might be- but you know, maybe not.

00:23:25

Rebecca:

Well I hope you get the Arts Council funding because that sounds like it could lead to something massive and really important, I think, getting more poetry out there because I love poetry. I think Sara loves poetry. You obviously very much love poetry. I feel like more people should love poetry because, like you said, I think a lot of people get turned off it in school because it's not the right poem for them. Or the really heavy analysis you've got to do can really drain the life out- of out of poems. I'm really hopeful that more people will read poetry, go and visit your shop when we're allowed to visit your shop or buy things online or call you for a prescription.

00:24:05

Deborah:

One nice thing has been that the shop here is laid out by, quite unusually, by emotion or, you know, periods of life. So, I'm so I'm- and it's for the general reader. So, I've got I'm able to put poetry front and center, you know, face out. So, there's a section, I don't know, on grief, or motherhood and that you people will find poems for that emotion or that time of life. And it just helps people to find the right poem rather than in most bookshops, poetry's spine on in one section. And but, of course, poetry is extraordinarily wide, you know. It has its own genres, really. And so, I'm able to do that which is nice.

00:24:57

Rebecca:

Well, that's fantastic. That interview was brilliant. I'll put links to the Poetry Pharmacy in the show notes and we'll put some of the books to all the poems you recommended in the show notes as well. Thank you so much for coming onto Shelf Healing. We've definitely enjoyed chatting with you. Sara looks like she's absolutely thrilled to have chatted with you.

00:25:15

Sara:

It's been lovely, and I can't wait to read some of these poems.

00:25:21

That's it for this week Shelf Healing interview. I will be back next week with another interview. Goodbye. Music by Nicholas Patrick and thanks to (Lukas) Montgomery, who does all of our transcriptions for the Shelf Healing podcasts.