

## Shelf Healing Interview with Clare Balding. Transcription by Lukas Montgomery.

00:00:09

Rebecca Markwick:

Just before we start. If I could get you to say your first and last name to make sure we pronounce it right and just give your pronouns as well, that would be great.

00:00:18

Clare Balding:

I am Clare Balding. I am she/ her.

00:00:25

Rebecca:

Hello and welcome to Shelf Healing UCL's bibliotherapy podcast. I'm your host, Rebecca Markwick. Our guest today is Clare Balding OBE. Clare is an award winning author and broadcaster and campaigns for better coverage of women's sport. After a career as an amateur jockey Clare moved into radio presenting then into television presenting. She currently presents women's football on BT Sport and hosts the coverage of the Olympic and Paralympic Games. Clare hosts the Radio Four show *Ramblings* and has recently published the book *Heroic Animals* that is doing very well in the bestseller charts.

First question to get us started Clare is nice and easy. Do you feel that reading is therapeutic?

00:01:10

Clare:

Yeah, I think it is a way of, you know that I probably won't say anything particularly original here, but I think it is a way of escaping into other worlds. I think it is a way of understanding other lives and I think it is a spark to our own imagination. So, whether you are reading in a biography of- or an autobiography of the First Lady of United States, or you're reading a fantasy fiction that is going to take you into space or- they're blowing leaves on the street outside so I'm going to apologise for that in case you can hear it, I'm delighted they're doing this has got quite slippy, but it is a bit noisy- and I think it can inform you. I love, I quite like historical novels, actually, because there's no and then and then to look around the truth. So unlike *The Crown*, where there's lots of inaccuracy in it in most historical novels it is absolutely based on truth with a bit of, you know, imagination thrown in. And I enjoy that. But I also enjoy books that are setting foreign countries that I haven't visited. Yeah, all sorts, actually.

00:02:17

Rebecca:

So what type of books do you reach for when you want to relax or sort of work on your mental health?

00:02:22

Clare:

I also do read a fair a bit of I guess what they've loosely termed self-help and actually, this she would be a very good interviewee for you. The latest book that I'm going to get into is called *How to Win a Life Without Losing Yourself* and it's by Dr Pippa Grange. Cath Bishop also has written a very good book, she is a former Olympic rower, has written a book called *The Long Win*. I'm quite interested in how the brain is understood, so *The Chimp Paradox* when it came out, which was by Dr Steve Peters, had a big effect on me. He'd worked closely with Victoria Pendleton, and various others of the cyclists, and then went on to work with footballers and rugby players and sorts and at the time I think I was struggling a bit to understand my own brain. I got annoyed at things that I shouldn't get annoyed at because I'm not - I'm actually quite a calm person, but I was frustrated at work. And as soon as I understood that was just my brain, the emotional part of my brain or reacting that helped me just go oh, it's not just me, this is how the brain works, and I think for a lot of us, when we go through problems in life, and we all will. We don't understand our own reaction, so that makes us more anxious and it can become a spiraling circle. And actually, as soon as you read something that just breaks it down into non emotional, factual practical tips in a way, you go okay, I get it this is what I need to do to cope with this. One of the things I know I absolutely need is natural light. So I make sure that my desk is near a window. I make sure I walk every day. I make sure I could see this guy, just things that are positive triggers for me. I think that's terribly important. And I think especially when you're working academically, it's quite easy to not see the sunlight all day. And you think you're doing better for yourself because you're working, working, working and you're buried into into books or into stuff on screen. And actually it is - thank the Lord you can work and walk at the same time because of podcasts.

00:04:26

Rebecca:

I'm fully with you on the understanding sort of that that the chimp part of your brain and the non chimp part and understanding what comes from which part I feel is really important. Are there any books that you returned to over and over again? Sort of like comfort food but books.

00:04:46

Clare :

Not in terms of, not with fiction, I don't really read fiction tend not to anyway, unless it was an old classic and I might go back something like *The Great Gatsby*, because I can't quite or, well, anything, actually any of the great books. But I think poetry is probably the only thing that I would read again and again. And I have various collections. But and that, I suppose that is a good comfort food is it is comforting. I will reach for poetry because I think it distills an idea into very few words, and it therefore requires your brain to work slightly harder around it. If you're in that frame of mind or just a luxuriating those in those you in that beautiful assembly of words. The other books that I would go back to would be factual books. I'm looking at my bookshelf now, and things like Tristan Gooley's *How To Read Water* or the *Walkers Guide to Clues and Signs to Outdoor Clues and Signs* and those are quite good, and I know that I read it and I forget it. So I need to read it again and guides to long distance walks, because I like my walking but that, that would be the only thing I go back to.

00:05:57

Rebecca:

That's really interesting. So there's a big difference there into why you return to things like you return to poetry for sort of the poeticness, the really hard brain work that that requires. But it's different when you're returning to your walking books.

00:06:16

Clare:

Yes, absolutely. Yeah, I've returned to walking books for a practical reason, but I think poetry like music because there is a musicality to it, obviously. I could listen to the same song again and again. So of course I could read the same poem again and again and yeah, I mean it's an interesting one with words, because we can quite often feed in because of the scrolling nature of the modern way in which we absorb words. You know, we're const- I am anyway, constantly refreshing Twitter for news more than anything but news and views, I suppose, and clicking through to articles and reading things, and then it's gone there isn't a very rarely buy papers now. I mean, I do occasionally by Sunday people, maybe it's still sitting downstairs and I haven't got to the travel section, you know, but I will. I keep saying I will and Alice keeps saying, 'Can we put that in recycling?', No, no no I haven't finished. But yeah, I think we are a bit more disposable with words now and maybe less thoughtful about them and therefore angrier with them. And that's what social media has provoked in us as a race. And it's so disappointing. It's so disappointing. It's interesting with podcasts, equally, I think the spoken word has become more valuable on who would have predicted that even in America, where radio, speech radio isn't really the thing that it is here. Even in America, the podcast has become, you know, incredibly popular. We like to hear another voice in our ear, and we like to hear another voice cogitating and you can't I mean, when I'm writing, I can go back over sentences, obviously enough. I think I know that's not quite the right verb I need to change that, to come up with something I could look at a thesaurus or I can go to poetry and think about what I what will I say? What can I use? What's a clever way of making this comparison. With the spoken word It's much harder to do that, and I can't just delete that sentence and, you know, replace it with something more refined. But I quite enjoy hearing people struggle and search. And when you do suddenly hear somebody who's gotten amazing vocabulary, you think, Oh my word that that's so impressive and whether they thought about it. Sometimes I think I think have they got a little book next to them with 100 different ways of saying, you know, 'brilliant', for example, you know, or do they just know that? Or have they thought about it in advance? And sometimes you listen and you think or you just, you know, just showing off now.

00:08:50

Rebecca:

Are there any books in your life that have profoundly affected you?

00:08:58

Clare:

Let me think. Can I ask you that question?

00:08:59

Rebecca:

Oh, you can. You're the second person who's asked me a question back at myself every time it puts me off. It's just I get in the mindset you know of interviewing and then you've turned it back, I would have to say it would be the *The Lord of the Rings*. I just I read it such a young age, being horribly

precocious. It really affected me in the in sort of the length of it. The way Tolkien writes, really affected me. My love of descriptive sentences and waiting for the story, the way he switches narratives a lot. Once you get past the fellowship, you're with Aragorn, then you're with Frodo. Then you're back with Aragorn and it that that having to have patience and wait for something, I think was incredibly good for me as a small child. And the fact that it's such a huge important thing that they're doing in that book and how many people are doing and how hard it was for everybody. You get everybody's troubles, you feel how hard it is for Frodo, for Sam, for Aragorn, for everyone, even for Gollum, you know how difficult it is. And that sense of powering on through even when everything is so terribly difficult, I found, gave me a sense whenever I've had anything difficult, it's always been sort of. It took them a long time. It was years, that journey and they succeeded and it was hard and it was terrible. But at the end, they succeeded and when they came back. The bit that I was devastated wasn't in the films when the hobbits returned to Hobbiton. They're changed in a better way. That everything that was scary for them at the beginning was no longer scary. And they were capable of dealing with life, you know? And that that just for me I mean, I read it when I was very young, but it has affected how I perceive life and everything and struggles.

00:10:57

Clare:

Now you're the first person that made me want to read it. Read them. I never have done. Maybe I should.

00:10:59

Rebecca:

It's outstanding. There is an excellent audiobook off it as well.

00:11:06

Clare:

Okay, presumably with different voices. Because it would be too much, too much for one voice to read. I know from having read my own books for audio book, how long they take and how much to take out of you. I would say a few books and I'll link them together through a theme of animals. So the first one was *Black Beauty* that I read when I was very young and the narrator is the horse, and Anna Sewell wrote it to raise money for the RSPCA, which had just been formed. It's the only book she ever wrote very late in her career and that opened my eyes to the way you treat animals because there's quite a lot of cruelty in it. But there's also a huge kindness and understanding and empathy. Then on the same animal theme but different twist on it the political side of it, is *Animal Farm* by George Orwell, really influential in understanding behavior and what power does to behavior and how it can corrupt. But I think both books and the incredible journey gave me that belief that animals do communicate and that we should learn to communicate with them, and that's something I've held on to and obviously has informed my work, whether it's *My Animals and Other Family* or *Heroic Animals*, or, you know, *The Racehorse Who Wouldn't Gallop*, which is for kids or the next book I'll write for kids, which is about what we can learn from animals and their behavior. So those have all being fairly influential. But emotionally, Maggie O'Farrell wrote a book called *After You've Gone*. She's written many novels since. Oh, my God, the pain of loss, the pain of losing the person you loved the most, which luckily hasn't yet happened to me and may never I hope. That really, I think she writes that sort of grief and loss better than anybody I've come across so far. I mean, books I've hugely enjoyed. There's actually lines that you can remember from books. So in *One Day*, David Nicholls puts in to Emma and Dexter have this conversation at the beginning, when they're about to leave Edinburgh, you know, he says, I suppose you want to change the world. She's very idealistic, and I was at

university as well, and I suspect you are. And I kind of hope everybody is because I think that's when you should be and experience may at some point knock you back a little bit from thinking you can change the world, but she says, 'just the bit of the world around me', and I think that's and actually Megan Rapinoe, the American footballer has said something very similar about the 10 metres around you. If you can change that, then you are effectively changing the world. We can't solve every problem in every country, but we can change the 10 metres around ourselves and that we should aim to do so, and I think that's quite a good attitude to have.

00:13:58

Rebecca:

You've mentioned your books. And my next question involves that in a slight way. So your children's books involve animals, as does your most recent book, *Heroic Animals*. Do you feel there's a strong connection between books, animals and mental health?

00:14:13

Clare:

Yeah, I do, actually, and let's just take animals and mental health. Think of the number of animals that are used in therapy and particularly horses and dogs. But it can be all sorts of animals, actually. Do you watch *Educating Greater Manchester*?

00:14:27

Rebecca:

I did watch some of the episodes. Yes.

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Clare:

Yeah, there was one where they took animals into the school and the headmaster, who's quite you know, he's an original guy. He's great, I think, but it was amazing there, even in the space of a day of how it affects behavior and encourages responsibility. But I think also, you know, it doesn't matter what age the person is I mean quite often they'll take pets into care homes. It's the sensation of touching something that is soft, that's lovely and real and breathing and dependent upon you for food and grooming. But I've you know, I watched a lot of work with horses, a lot of you know, whether it's riding for disabled or whether it's youngsters coming into a set up like a racing yard when they're are only 13 and 14. And they might have had real issues with behavior, on problems with discipline and suddenly there into a very disciplined environment where you are required to get up early and muck out and groom and ride and actually, watching them grow and become stronger because of that is interesting. And I've seen there's a great charity called Learning Through what's it called Learning and Education Through Horses, and it's based in North London and I went there to do some recording for a radio show. It works with boys, who a lot of them have been kicked out of school or on the verge of being expelled from school and they're mainly boys, and it's not only for boys, but it just that's the behavior issues tend to be with teenage boys who struggle with authority, who don't really understand, have lost a bit of direction and don't quite can't get a grasp on their position and place in life and they, you know, don't know what they want to do. And I and I absolutely understand that confusion and create and kick out trouble because of it. And they worked with horses and these horses are massive and stuff like, You know, God, how am I gonna how, what am I meant to do?

what am I meant to do? and are very much, you know, told what to do. But then they have to sort it out. And I think the horses are so understanding in that situation and their power is something that's, you know, bigger than- it's not just about their strength and their size and they have a dignity to them and actually going back to a book that I think it shows that very clearly, *Gulliver's Travels* when he goes to the land of the Houyhnhnms. That's the only time he comes across a society that is about mutual respect and the horses are quite often in literature, even in Charlie Mackesy's book, the horse is the one that says all the sensible things. And I think that's quite a theme through literature that the horses are tend to be the noble ones. And I think, you know, dogs have an incredible power. And God, they're so intelligent. But also their sense of smell of so developed that they can they can sense all kinds of things, whether it's disease or accelerants at a fire or bombs or indeed, guiding people, whether it's, you know, guide dogs for the blind or hearing dogs, they are, or assistance dogs more generally, I know somebody called Chloe Fuller who I've interviewed a few times, actually, and she's got this amazing dog called Ted. Ted The Assistance Dog is an Instagram account worth following. That dog is extraordinary on so devoted to her. Yeah, I'm pretty impressed by what they can, what they can do. I do think there's a very strong connection is the answer to your question. Yes.

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Rebecca:

Do you feel a someone who's been lucky enough to grow up with horses and dogs that you find it really important to put those and sort of those connections into your books for especially children, perhaps who don't have that physical connection themselves?

00:18:14

Clare:

Yeah, and I think in and also trying to support charities like Ebony Riding School, which is based in Brixton that is giving kids who wouldn't get the chance to be around horses, giving them a chance to ride and groom and be involved in the, you know, very small yard. That's right in the middle of that, you know, sort of high rise council estate. And I always you know, love to sort of keep challenging the assumption that horses are only for rich country kids, because I just don't think that's true. And it shouldn't be true. I think there's a- Yeah, I mean, I know lots of people who. It's such a shame this year because I'm just thinking how much the riding schools have struggled because of people not being allowed to go in and ride, and both for the kids and for the yards themselves, you've still got to feed those horses, you've still got to keep them, still got to pay vet bills and just that is being shattered and same with the RDA, you know, with their centers had to close. It's just desperate is really, really sad. And I think that that emphasises even more than you know, the power they have and you look at the huge rise in the purchase of puppies and kittens and the subsequent price inflation. And there will be, you know, I don't want be negative about it but I think there will be problems come next year. So, but hopefully there will be good homes that will be ready to take dogs from people whofind they can't cope anymore. And I hope, you know, I think the huge benefits of them is why you know, the reason that it's gone a bit crazy is that people have realised having an animal in your life is a really, really comforting thing. And particularly with a dog, gives you a reason to get out every day and exercising. You know, the first lockdown was one of the only reasons you could go outside other than for exercise.

00:20:10

Rebecca:

You travel a lot for your sports broadcasting, often spending long times abroad, covering huge events such as the Olympics. Do you make space in your bag for books to help cope with the stresses of being away from home and reporting for extended periods?

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Clare:

I don't when I'm doing an Olympics I wouldn't because there wouldn't be a lot of time to read anything. Mind you I took Chris Boardman's book with me to Rio. But that was connected to what I was doing. I wouldn't ordinarily take a comfort read, only on holiday and that would be, you know, take a load of books if that was the case.

00:20:48

Rebecca:

Is there a particular time or place that you read in your daily, weekly, monthly life?

00:20:55

Clare:

I tend to read- I tend to read in the evenings. I tend to read at night for a good sleep, probably not the best time to read. And not for long enough. But then on holiday, as soon that we go out, play a round of golf, come back and read for four hours, you know, three hours, whatever and get through loads books or if we quite enjoy going on cruise ships as well. I speak on ship a couple of times, but we take a load of books and still do physical books rather than Kindle.

00:21:21

Rebecca:

I know you're a super keen walker, as you've already mentioned. Do you tend to listen to things like podcasts or are you a keen audiobook listener?

00:21:29

Clare:

I've only listened to one audiobook so far, and that was out of necessity because I needed to get through it quickly for a review, and they sent me the audiobook. But I do listen to a lot of podcasts. I listen to *Fortunately*, there's a very good short podcast by *The Economist* that I listen to that kind of wraps up the week's event or the day's events rather, all the latest things and takes you to different countries to go through what's happening there. Yeah, there's a fair few podcasts I listen to and if I'm walking on my own, that's absolutely what I do.

00:22:00

Rebecca:

Going back to the idea of animals in books. Are those the sorts of books that you like to read yourself? Or do you tend to stick to more of those nonfiction interesting sort of biographies, books on walking?

00:22:14

Clare:

No, I read an absolute mixture, a whole pile of books here and, you know, some of them are non-fiction, some of them are fiction. I'm gonna have- there are some that you can dip into, So this one which is called *A Few Wise Words* is stories of success and inspirational advice from 22 extraordinary individuals on success and I will dip in and out of that while reading something that requires concentration. I think for fiction and meaty fiction being on holiday is best because I can really focus on it and read a book in two days rather than something that might take much longer because I'm only reading a chapter at night, you know. So now I like to keep it really mixed, and I suspect most people are like that aren't they?

00:23:00

Rebecca:

Yeah, it's been really interesting talking to people. Some people have a very small type of book that they go for other people like you read a bit of everything. There's some people who, when they're reading to improve their mental health, they're just reading non-fiction books because they want to learn something and feel that sort of connection to improve their mental health. Which leads on to my last question. If you could recommend a book for someone to help improve their mental health or just their general wellbeing, what would it be?

00:23:30

Clare:

I think probably and I say this having not read it yet but looking forward to reading it and given that it will have the most up to date and modern ideas behind it, I think probably this book by Dr Pippa Grange *How to Win at Life Without Losing Yourself* and the main title is called *Fear Less*. I think that and I've flipped through it, but I haven't read it in detail yet. And actually, we talked about it before *The Chimp Paradox* because it was very, very helpful to me. Now I tell you another book that I'm going to read very soon on enjoy the *History of the World in 100 Animals* by Simon Barnes, who is a good friend of mine, is always very, very beautiful writer. But yeah, this will be beautifully written and teach me things that I don't know. But that's one to give, you know, I probably I should be reading that in the daytime when I can concentrate and I should probably take notes on this as well as an academic experience.

00:24:29

Rebecca:

Brilliant. Well, thank you so much for coming on and answering all my questions. I've really appreciated it. There have been some really interesting answers and I too am also sad about all the riding schools. I used to teach at one particular riding school, similar children the children in the special school because they have been excluded from most other schools. Teenage boys would come, and that was my afternoon on a Wednesday. And I found-



00:24:55

Clare:

Where? Where was that?

00:24:55

Rebecca:

That was a small riding school in Berkshire near Reading. I'm not sure if they still do it. I haven't taught there for about year now, but that was brilliant. And there's a lovely school, a lovely riding school, very small in sort of near Newbury that does special needs children and the neurodiverse and they were always amazing to come and the teachers always loved bringing them because they were you can get through to some of those kids and such, and they love it. And it didn't matter what they were doing they'd be sat on the pony, and they just do whatever they wanted. You know, when they feel great about life and that was fabulous know, sort of like under 10 we always loved having those. I do worry for some of those smaller riding schools.

00:25:39

Clare:

I know, I know. And I hope I hope they'll get through and thrive as soon as they're allowed to, and actually that you bring up neurodiversity and I think there is an awful lot of evidence building of how good animals are funnily enough in *Heroic Animals* one of the chapters is about a cat called Tula, who has become a companion pet to a little girl with autism. And that has that surprised me in the sense that I didn't think cats necessarily would give of themselves, that it works well for her because she found a dog much too invasive, didn't like a dog licking her face or wagging or being just too much round her, whereas the cat is like, yeah, come on I want to when I do appreciate it.

00:26:24

Rebecca:

And that's the end of a wonderful interview with Clare Balding, especially appreciated all the horse talk, a big thank you to Clare's partner Alice, who helped me sort all this out and get a bit of time in Clare's diary I really appreciate it. I'll be back next week with another fabulous episode. And thanks to Nicholas Patrick, who does our wonderful music and to [Lukas Montgomery], who spends hours transcribing these episodes for you. See you next week.