

Shelf Healing interview with Dr Samantha Rayner. Transcript by Lukas Montgomery.

00:00:11

Rebecca Markwick:

Before we start if you could say your first and last name to make sure it's pronounced right and give your pronouns, that would be great.

00:00:20

Dr Samantha Rayner:

My name is Samantha Rayner and my pronouns are she/ her.

00:00:29

Rebecca:

Hello and welcome to Shelf Healing UCL's Bibliotherapy Podcast I'm your host, Rebecca Markwick, our guest today is Dr Samantha Rayner. Sam is the Vice Dean of wellbeing for the Faculty of the Arts and Humanities at the University College London. She is a lecturer and researcher of book history at UCL. Her special interests include the culture of bookselling, publishing archives and paratexts, and has taught on mediaeval literature courses with a specialism in mediaeval and Arthurian theory in texts. Sam is a member of the AHRC Peer Review panel and his co-chair for the Bookselling Research Network and of the Bloomsbury *Chapter* is the deputy editor for the Journal of the International Arthurian society and is a general editor with Cambridge University Press. Sam is also the head off the Shelf Healing project.

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

00:01:22

Sam:

Well hi, Rebecca. Thank you for that lovely introduction. Yes, absolutely. Of course, I do think that reading is therapeutic. I've managed to make a whole career out of having reading at the core of what I do, not just in my private life, but also with my professional life. So yes, in short, reading is definitely therapeutic.

00:01:40

Rebecca:

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

00:01:46

Oh, that's a good question. As somebody that enjoys books a lot, and this might be quite a long answer. So it depends what mood I'm in and what kind of wellbeing situation I might need to help myself with. Georgette Heyer is the first author that comes to mind. So Georgette Heyer is probably my failsafe, like reading a Georgette Heyer will pretty much fix any mood you're in. You know, whether you're just feeling ill under the weather, you just feel stressed, and you want something to take you into another place. Georgette Heyer is my go-to comfort ultimate comfort book, but there

might be some times when I really enjoy reading poetry books is well so find poetry for that time when your mind is really so full of stuff that you just can't face reading long bits of text. But I do really enjoy poetry, so I have quite a large poetry book selection- and I'm a farmer's daughter, so poems about nature, particularly writing about nature on there's been quite a lot of really lovely books written in the last few years about, you know, farming and *Wilding* one for instance. I love that, you know, books that talk about the benefits actually, nature could give to your wellbeing as well. So even when I haven't got time to go out and get some fresh air and walk in the countryside is the combination of that in a book that for me can really give me a mental boost.

Yeah, historical fiction is a genre I really enjoy. Fantasy, I'm a big fantasy writer as well. So sometimes you know you're in the mood for a big fat book like a big fantasy epic. So, people like Robin Hobb's big fan of her books and yeah, which I came to via Tolkien and now have discovered people like her. So yeah, a big fat epic is often a good wellbeing tonic as well and, yeah, I suppose, because it's my day job just keeping up with what's currently on the best seller list. So, I never have to feel guilty about going out and buying a book, because I could always justify as research for teaching purposes so recently things like *Normal People*, you know, because I wanted to see what all the fuss was about. Books like that that are in the charts. Not so much, maybe for well- But well, maybe that's professional wellbeing to make sure that I'm up, you know, on top of where publishing is at the moment, does that answer the question?

00:04:05

Rebecca:

It does. Very comprehensively I love it. Is there a specific time or place that you read?

00:04:13

Sam:

Not really. I suppose whenever I can is the short answer again. At the moment. In the last few months, because of Covid, there's been less chance to do reading. So for my academic reading, I have a couple of my favorite places. So one of the places I love to go and read for work purposes is the university library at Cambridge, which is sort of it's purpose built for readers and it's just- it is one of my happy places, but otherwise at home I've got a lovely, small, cozy lounge that I've made sort of very hygge with all my throws and twinkly lights and things. And yeah, evenings and weekends there's that time isn't there. If you can hit that sweet spot when, especially this time of year, when you can cuddle up on the sofa with a book, a cat, a blanket, yeah, and a cup of tea. So yeah, mostly at the weekends at the moment. That's when I find I get a little time of respite by to doing some reading.

00:05:12

Rebecca:

And here's a question that I just have to ask. Do you have any beautiful books?

00:05:18

Sam:

Well, I do have some beautiful books. I'm not- it's a bit like it's a sort of a personal thing, isn't it? It's what do you mean by beautiful? They might be beautiful to me, but nobody else might find them beautiful. So I do have my most precious book is not a very valuable book. It's a very battered old copy of the Penguin selected poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins, which I had when I was an A-level

student at school, and it's got all my meticulous notes in, the cover's a bit torn and is all bent and battered, but it means so much to me because not only because I love the poems. I remember that revelation of thinking oh my goodness, this is a poet that just blows my mind, but also because of all the memories of being back at school during that time. And they were two very happy years for me being in the sixth form. So, it's got all those memories bound up in it as well. So, although books I've got, if there was a fire in the house, I would probably run to, get that one above the others.

I don't have any, like, valuable first editions or things, but I do like collecting well designed books. So, it won't surprise you to know that I've got quite a collection of old Penguins and also new ones as well. So the ones with the Coralie Bickford Smith covers the Pocket Penguins I collected, so I'm yeah, I'm a bit of a sucker for a collection thing. Um, so I love the author Dorothy Dunnett, who is, by the way, the best historical writer, probably even better than Georgette Heyer. Don't say- don't tell anyone I said that, they are epic fat books, but you need to have your brain switched on because they're full of historical detail they're not a light comfort read, they're 'I want to get into this period'. But they recently reissued those with the new jackets in and even though I've already got two sets of Dorothy Dunnett's I had to go and buy the new set because I like to collect them and they are again they're books I suppose that means something to me. So I have. Yeah, I have sections, but nothing, I'm afraid valuably exciting.

00:07:24

Rebecca:

Doesn't stop them being beautiful.

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Sam:

Exactly. Exactly.

00:07:26

Rebecca:

Are there any works that you return to over and over again, like comfort food? But in book form.

00:07:33

Sam:

Yes. So we've already mentioned Georgette Heyer, so maybe I won't. I won't pick on her again. Finally, enough it's- but it's old books again. It's books that so it's historical fiction. But authors like Margaret Campbell Barnes or Anya Seton. Yeah, books like Anya Seton's *Katherine*, which I have read so many times, I probably don't really need to read it anymore because I practically know what's coming up in every chapter. But there's something about knowing a book that well that when you pick it up, it is- it's just easy and familiar and good. Somehow you just, you just lose yourself in it completely and I think that's what it is about historical fiction that appeals to me that you do disappear into a different world. So, yeah, it would be- and there's something about the vintage book as well that again takes you away from the present. So it's mostly those old paperbacks that I pick up and escape through.

00:08:25

Rebecca:

What do you think it is that draws you back to your historical fiction, your Georgette Heyer? *Katherine*? Is it nostalgia or a sense of old friends? Is it the plotting or the setting or the characters or something else entirely?

00:08:40

Sam:

What is it? I don't know whether I really thought about that before. I know when I was little, it was my grandmother who used to encourage me to go to the library, and she was the one that set me off on things like *Anne of Green Gables* I still remember we used to go every week and get the latest book in the series of the library had and she was the one also introduced me to Anya Seton's *Katherine*. And actually, if I think about it, that's probably where my love of mediaeval literature comes from. Because it's all about Katherine Swynford, who was wife to the Duke of Gaunt and Katherine Swynford's sister was married to Geoffrey Chaucer. So Chaucer figures in this book, and it's all about sort of mediaeval London and England of the time. And I think it just fascinated me as a way of learning about history. And I know all the historical details are not absolutely 100% accurate, but you still end up getting some sense of who the Kings and Queens were, what kind of battles were going on, what the political and social context were. And for me, that's just a lovely, I suppose it's- yeah. I mean, it's true escapism in the same way I suppose I like fantasy is just taking you into something that is not real, it's not now. I can't compare it can't let what's happening now crowd in on that. So, yeah, I am a big fan of historical- well, as you can tell, historical fiction I do enjoy it a lot.

00:09:59

Rebecca:

It's good. I like a bit of historical fiction. With such strange new online schedules of lectures and research have you found it hard to fit in your personal reading for your mental wellbeing?

00:10:10

Sam:

Yes, I have, Rebecca. I'm not going to lie. It's been very hard. Yeah, and I suppose having this new role as wellbeing person has made me more conscious of that too. But there's also the sense that we are, all of us trying to cope with this horrible word that keeps being overused, unprecedented circumstances and times and so you know, we're all doing the best that we can. I try and- my main fault in the evening now is, you know, going up after dinner and instead of sitting with a book, I will just sit obsessively on my iPad and check my emails and try and do a bit more work and a bit more work. And then you're too tired and you're just falling asleep, and I know what I should do is just put the iPad away in a different room and just go back to reading, because I'm sure that would help more. So, I'm going to try and do that. But yes, we should all turn more to books and less to screens, because if nothing else, these months of doing everything online just teaches you how hard it is on your eyes and your head as well somehow. It's hard work doing everything on the screen.

00:11:20

Rebecca:

As a book historian, does discovering the life and history of a book help with your mental wellbeing?

00:11:26

Sam:

Yes, so this goes back to the oh my goodness, one of the hardest things about this Covid situation is not being able to go in archives at the moment and investigate all the history of the book. So some of my happiest times have been in places like The Penguin Archive down at Bristol University and discovering something random about the history of a book that nobody else has found before because it's hidden in a you know, an old memo that's just been tucked away in a folder that nobody really knew the rest of the story and suddenly you know what that jigsaw piece fits into, you know, in the bigger picture. So I love that detective work there is, you know it- and it may not be world changing stuff that you find out there's something so wonderful about putting that story together. And realizing that any text is a composite of lots of people like palimpsests in time, as you know, layer upon layer of different editors and readers and input and designers and incarnations of specifically canonical text you know how they come to the reader. Yeah, it's awesome. Well, sorry. That's me gushing a bit, but I mean, it really is fantastic.

00:12:39

Rebecca:

You can gush, Sam. Gush, as much as you like. You are the Vice Dean of wellbeing for the faculty and are the originator of the idea that became Shelf Healing. What drew you to bibliotherapy and creating the project?

00:12:55

Sam:

It's always been there, quite simply, probably you could tell from the answers that I've given you already, this thread of reading and on the knowledge of what it can give you and how it can help when you're feeling different things or your in different situations, and you can find something that somebody else has read that connects to you and helps to put the, put things in perspective or at least make you feel that you're not alone. You know that somebody else has been through this or you know it's nothing is new. It's okay, so it might be really rubbish at the moment, but you know it will- It will change again, just as it has sort of hundreds of years ago. People were moaning about the same things then, and look, we're in 2020. Nothing much has changed. So it's part of, I suppose, what I thought when the role came up, knowing how much you know, I enjoy reading and that most people do. And actually, following all the media attention over the past few months about the importance of bookshops, there's been a lot of attention to whether bookshops count as essential retail outlets and I just think that's fascinating that has become such a hot topic and bookshops have fought hard to get books into the hands of their readers and become much more innovative about ways to sell online during this period. So, I'm hoping that because it's something that I have experience of, that that might be something that, as the first person in this role for the faculty, I can carve out this space with the UCL publishing students because, you know, you guys all have a lot more experience. You all bring another layer of experience to this project as well. And it's a way of us doing something really positive and concrete, and we can do this. We can get on and do that now, and that's quite exciting. I really I'm quite excited about this project.

00:14:50

Rebecca:

So am I, it's all coming together. You keep a commonplace book in the form of a blog. Do you find this aspect to have sort of regular blogging, journaling helps reduce anxiety and improve your mental health?

00:15:05

Sam:

I do, so I haven't put many posts on for a long while again. But when I do, there is something- it might be something to do with that jigsaw thing I said about being in the archive and putting the stories together, but there's something about giving yourself that space to tell that story of that reading experience. I think the last one I put was about a book called *Abelard and Heloise*. A Peter Waddell novel again, a vintage novel that I found and then linking that to Melvyn Bragg's who's just written a book in the last few years about the same couple, and of course, he's a mediaeval legend. So that made me think about all the connections and a blog space is a really good way of putting, sort of putting all that stuff and I don't have to worry too much about it being terribly academic because it's just for me. It's just so I remember all these things. I don't want to lose all them in the, you know, flotsam and jetsam of what's going on in my head. So yeah, I think it's a really, it's a really great way of putting order on things. It's an ordering thing, and there's something quite calming and therapeutic about ordering your thoughts in that way.

00:16:13

Rebecca:

Lovely. As a mediaevalist and Arthurian specialist, I cannot finish without asking you for your favorite mediaeval, Arthurian text and why you love it so much. Putting you on the spot, I'm sorry.

00:16:31

Sam:

That's a mean question. My favorite author and text. Well, can I cheat a bit and say Malory's *La Morte d'Arthur*. Because that's pretty much got all of the stories in it.

00:16:48

Rebecca:

It does.

00:16:49

Sam:

Apart from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, which would be my- I suppose it would be a kind of a tie between those two because they're both beautiful. Oh and *Pearl* as well, I do like *Pearl* does that count as mediaeval? Yeah. Oh, and *Duchess*... You see, I think it's impossible. I'd have to go for Malory's *La Morte d'Arthur* just because it's got so much in it and that will cover so many different things. Oh, but it's hard. That was a mean question.

00:17:13

Rebecca:

I had to ask. Oh, but I have a hard question in there. My personal favorite, if you haven't guessed, is *Sir Gawain and The Green Knight*. I have so many copies of that book. I just, I just love the change in the character throughout and to have that, in such depth in detail in a mediaeval text I think is so impressive. The fact that he is a totally different person at the end than he was at the beginning, and it makes me sad that we do not know who actually wrote it. It makes me so sad.

00:17:48

Sam:

I know. And that's again, that's one of those detective stories that I sadly, I'm not sure we ever will find that missing piece of the jigsaw puzzle. But maybe that's part of the mystery of it. What makes it so special? You know that part of that magical sort of aspect? I do have an American friend that I did my PhD with who reads the whole of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* aloud every year after Christmas in that period, you know, tell the 12 days of Christmas, every year and I just think that's such a wonderful tradition to have, to love a story that much. But he says, you know, always it's something that sets him up for the new year. It's that kind of rhythm. So again, I think that's just another example of how books, no matter how old they are, can help you cope with what lies ahead.

00:18:35

Rebecca:

Yeah, most definitely. I am going to put all of the books and the authors that you've mentioned into the show notes, so our listeners can find them and give them a read. Heavy on the historical fiction. This this episode, which is lovely.

00:18:51

Sam:

Yes, I did mention Dorothy Dunnett, didn't I? Dorothy Dunnett is the best historical writer, undervalued by everybody because they think she's got a name that means that she must be a bodice ripper. But no. Very, very good historical writer.

00:19:03

Rebecca:

Excellent. Well, thank you so much for making time in your very busy schedule for coming onto the Shelf Healing interview podcast. I've really enjoyed chatting with you and asking you tricky questions.

00:19:15

Sam:

Yes, thanks, Rebecca, for those were quite tricky. It's hard to talk about books without, like, missing things. I'm sure I'm going to go off now and think of all the books I should have mentioned. But thank you very much anyway. It's always it's lovely to have the opportunity to chat books.

00:19:28

Rebecca:

That's the end of another wonderful interview with Dr Samantha Rayner. I will be back next week with another episode. Thanks as always, to Nicholas Patrick for our music and to (Lukas) Montgomery, who does the transcripts for the Shelf Healing interviews.