

## Shelf Healing Interview with Dr Paula Byrne, transcribed by Luke Montgomery

Rebecca:

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

Dr Paula Byrne:

So, I'm Paula Byrne, and what do I say? She/he- she/her (laughs) she/her! People often- do you know people often call me Bren or Bryn, not Byrne, so I get that. Or people will spell it Bryne instead of Byrne, so I get that- I get that, and it is annoying.

Rebecca:

Hello, and welcome to the first episode of Shelf-Healing, UCL's bibliotherapy podcast. I'm your host, Rebecca Markwick. Our guest today is Dr Paula Byrne. Paula is the founder and CEO of the charity ReLit, the Foundation for Bibliotherapy. ReLit researches bibliotherapy and offers help and suggestions for reading as therapy. Paula has a Doctorate in English Literature, is a fiction author, and successful biographer, with subjects including Jane Austen and Evelyn Waugh. Paula has also co-edited a therapeutic poetry collection with Jonathon Bate.

Rebecca:

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

Dr Paula Byrne:

Ah, yes. Absolutely I do, and I think it's really fascinating that there have been some interesting recent studies about the importance of reading for creating empathy, the ability to put yourself into the mind and head, and indeed stand in the shoes of other people is greatly enhanced by the reading of literature. I'm also interested in the idea of reading for solace, and for comfort reading. I think sometimes people are really snobby about reading for solace, as though it's something to be ashamed of, or indeed reading for pleasure. And I think if you scrape the surface most people would say they are exactly the reasons why they began the study of English Literature was because of comfort and pleasure and an intellectual solace and an intellectual enjoyment and all of those things that really bring. So, for me, I can only really speak for me. I always think those two words are very important. I can only really speak for me, but for me, ever since I was a child I was obsessed by reading. It's always been my haven, it's always been my safe place and I think, in a world where mental health is becoming such a huge issue, we need every tool in the kit as it were. You know, I think the more tools we have in the kit the better so yes I do firmly believe in the importance of reading, for all of those things.

Rebecca:

So, what type of books do you reach for when you want to relax or gain solace?

Dr Paula Byrne:

Well, you know, PG Wodehouse is always my port of call if I'm ill always, always. And that goes back to being a child and when my mum would say oh you must always read P.G. Wodehouse when you're feeling poorly because you can't stay miserable, and I think it is what is interesting about P.G. Wodehouse and people like Jane Austen or say Barbara Pym is the creation of- sort of a sustained world where you know those characters intimately, where you become, as Jane Austen said "you become like old friends" and so there's a sort of safety in that world. It's a world of comedy, it's a world where you know there's going to be a happy ending and I just think there are some times in your life when there is just nothing wrong with that familiarity. I mean, other times we want literature to do other things for us but I think there is a time when, in times of anxiety and let's face it we're in the middle of a pandemic those worlds become really important to us and I've noticed that just on social media when I've engaged with people, so many people are saying that they're turning to people like P.G. Wodehouse, Barbara Pym, Jane Austen. It's quite interesting I'm fascinated by: what is it about those readers that continue to inspire but also continue to give us great comfort? Just as Jane Austen was read in the trenches for instance. Soldiers would read Jane Austen, they'd take copies of her novels in pocket books that'd fit into their pockets and I think also for the anxiety and stress of being in the trenches and what you're fighting for you know, the idea of fighting for England. There's all sorts of reasons why people read but I'm fascinated in all of them. So I find myself, certainly very recently, you know it is like meeting an old friend. You sometimes don't want the surprises, you just want to re-engage. I think from Jane Austen's time you know, they would talk about characters like they were friends and it feels like English literature has been really moving away from that, that it's somehow sort of vulgar and somehow crude to treat books like old friends. You know, Literary theory has broken down a lot of that pleasure because it's just a text and I think it kicks itself in the teeth really. It's done itself a disservice because I think most people, if you ask, would probably have similar reasons as to why they've devoted their lives to reading. So, I absolutely- I'm writing a new little book about Jane Austen and solace and I've taken sort of a straw poll from readers of Jane Austen, just trying to pin down what it is- what is the bibliotherapeutic value of Jane Austen? Why do people turn to her in times of grief? And there's some really fascinating results.

Rebecca:

It's funny you should mention P.G Wodehouse. I am re-reading *Much Oblived Jeeves* right at this very moment, it's my before bed book.

Dr Paula Byrne:

Yeah! I mean it just never gets old does it? I mean, I just wonder whether laughing- laughter is such a confident, a panacea. P.G. Wodehouse still makes me laugh out loud. I mean, *Right Ho Jeeves* will never date for me, it is my favourite, just the humor. And I think it's like a valve, the safety valve just goes off and, I don't know the biology, but like with tears that calm you,

laughter also it can give you permission to feel calm and so I think for me I really understand- it'll never get old, it'll never get old and those book they kind of don't date for me.

Also, I think comedy is very underrated, sometimes I think we talk about the great novels, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, or *The Portrait of a Lady*. Somehow there's sort of a literary snobbishness about comedy and you think gosh Jane Austen has perfect comedies, better than most things I'll ever read and same for P.G. Wodehouse because it is very intricately plotted, P.G. Wodehouse. It's hard to be funny.

Rebecca:  
It really is.

Dr Paula Byrne:  
It's really hard to be funny. It's hard to make people laugh and I think it's hard to make people laugh out loud and I don't know about you but I still laugh out loud with P.G. Wodehouse, it just feels so good.

Rebecca:  
Every time, every time.

You've sort of almost answered my next question which is, what is it about these books that keeps you coming back? Is it the plotting? Or the comfort of returning to old friends? Or that sense of nostalgia?

Dr Paula Byrne:  
I mean I do think I am a real fan of rereading I just think I can never understand people who say oh I read that once, because for me I can't get in that mindset particularly with the classics that I am such a great fan of. To me I never really fully understand a book unless I've read it three or four times because, particularly with people like, say Jane Austen, and to some extent P.G. Wodhouse and all my favourite authors, you always find something new, you know, you go back and with the re-reading. So for me it's not always the familiarity of the characters but I can understand that. A lot of people seem to say that when I've taken the straw poll about why they re-read Jane Austen in times of stress and anxiety and a lot of people seem to like the familiarity of the characters. That's not always the case with me, I actually realise, if I am particularly thinking of Jane Austen, say. Often it is just a line that I haven't seen before. It's a bit like going to see a Shakespeare play with a brilliant director that just made an actor read a line that you known before but suddenly you think I never understood that line, now everything makes sense. It could just be a simple line of verse or prose and you just suddenly go oh. So what I like with that is just going over some of the pearls of wisdom or the beauty of the rhythm of the line or the way the sentence is constructed or the perfect sort of comic timing of it so I think for me it's more of- I'm an avid close reader so I think more the character and plot. I'm a bit like (unknown) that don't interest me so much but I do like- I do love looking closely at a particular sentence and then just thinking that's just such a well written sentence. What is it about that sentence that

is so great? SO I think for me it's that but it's so different for everybody, we all have different reasons for returning to classics or reading or- *The Diary for Nobody* is another one of my fallbacks, I love *The Diary for Nobody* because it is so funny, and it never dates, it just- the humour never ages, not for me. I think it's more for me that close reading I would say.

Rebecca:

Nice. Are there any books that have profoundly affected you?

Dr Paula Byrne:

Oh many, many, many. I think I do- I mean Henry James' *Portrait of a Lady* I do try to re-read every year. I try to re-read *Anna Karenina* every year, just because I love them so much and I read them both when I was very very young. Too young to understand them to be honest. I'd read so much by the age of thirteen I just kept- I was just looking for new things to read so I probably didn't understand them the way I do now. You know, you're returning and seeing the things you might have missed on a first, second, third, fourth reading. But I would say my comfort reads are one hundred percent, as I said Wodehouse, Jane Austen, *Diary for Nobody*. So I do find myself turning to comedy, probably, but if I want to be really sort of stretched there's nothing like *Anna Karenina* for stretching you.

Rebecca:

Very true. Even just keeping track of everybody's names in that book is so hard.

Dr Paula Byrne:

Levin books- the philosophy in Levin, you know, you do find yourself skipping over a few pages don't you. But I'm working on Hardy at the moment- Thomas Hardy and women so I've been rereading the whole of Hardy from the beginning in chronological order. Some of those early Thomas Hardy novels I didn't know terribly well: *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, *The Woodlanders*. They're so fantastic and again I wonder if it's a sign of maturity that I am able to come back to those novels that might have seemed a little bit superficial. It's not like reading *Tess* or *Jude*. But in fact they're just gems. So it's been really great for me to re-read these books that were not familiar to me and see the seed of those later great works of Thomas Hardy, so that's been incredible so I'm always looking. So, I'm not brilliant on contemporary novels I mean I'm not- I'm so steeped in the eighteenth and nineteenth century I think if I've got the time to read sometimes I think I don't want to read a contemporary novel. I'm trying, I am definitely trying to read more- I mean I love those novels of the nineteen fifties Elizabeth Taylor, I've just written a biography of Barbra Pym and her entire canon- oh my goodness if you want comfort reading it's just superb. It's so funny it's so brilliant. She was a writer of the fifties writing about female experience- I mean I'm very drawn to novels about the female experience, I would say.

Rebecca:

What drew you to bibliotherapy?

Dr Paula Byrne:

So for me it was again, it was really personal because whilst I have always believed in literature's power to inspire and console and educate and all those things I had always turned to literature. I was always in my own little world of books but what really inspired us to start the charity was our daughter, who was five at the time, lost her kidneys and was very ill. We just spent a lot- very unexpected, very out of the blue. And the first night that she went into hospital I just happened to have a poem in my handbag which I just kept reading and it got me through that night when they said she was going to die, and she didn't die but they thought she would. So it was a case that without that poem it was almost like I kept repeating this poem and then spent a lot of time in hospitals until she got a transplant and touch wood she's doing brilliantly now. So, I was always really shocked by the death of good reading material in hospital wards. It's just another pile of dusty Hello magazine which you just don't want- sometimes you do and sometimes you don't and often you don't in my experience. When you're waiting for a child to come through an eight hour operation you know. I was just so shocked by the fact there was no books and- so there was that and I always thought gosh I'd love to get a volume of poetry in every hospital ward for parents like me, and then I just had an experience of stress which manifested itself as really bad pain in my fingers and hands which meant I couldn't write. I just went to see a very enlightened doctor, GP, who said this is stress and you're really stressed and he went to write a prescription and I said I don't want sleeping pills or anything like that. I'll deal with it. He said oh no I'm prescribing you a book and I thought, well that's really interesting, and he prescribed two books actually. A book of haiku poetry and a book- a mindfulness book. As soon as you walk out of my office it will go away. You've got yourself so anxious, and I went out and the pain went away and I never got it back. I just remember walking home and thinking if more healthcare professionals were more creative about anxiety and stress instead of just throwing pills at people- it's fine if you need pills. Obviously I would take pills if I needed them but A they don't always work or B they can be the wrong thing so also they're very expensive. I thought it's quite cheap reading a book, poetry doesn't cost much. And for me it sort of reignited my passion for poetry, it really made me think about reading poetry slowly, it really helped me to calm down. So ReLit came from that sense of being re-lit by literature and I just thought this could be really helpful so that's what we have been doing; going to schools and prisons and to hospitals and encouraging people to look at the benefits of slow reading particularly. We do tend to emphasise poetry and slow reading. It's kind of bitesize, it's not like reading *Middlemarch*, and when people are anxious and depressed they often lose concentration- sometimes lose concentration. Whereas a line of poetry is very focused and it can be almost like saying a prayer or mantra and so it sprung really out of personal experience but all connecting the dots and about well I do believe in literature's power of healing. It's an ancient idea, it goes back to Milton or even to the Greeks. The idea of reading is medicine, it's the oldest medicine of all really, reading. So it's not a new idea but I think that sometimes the old ideas are the best ideas.

Rebecca:

Yes. So obviously you set up Relit and as you said, you go to schools and prisons. Do you try and give people the tools as well as the books in order to get the most out of this idea of reading for your mental health?

Dr Paula Byrne:

I mean we do- I don't do sort of literacy classes because there are quite a lot of people, particularly in prison work who do literacy because there is a big connection between lack of literacy and crime. I never went down that line and I also don't really believe in patronising people because I think that anybody can understand Shakespeare if it's taught properly so I was always very firm in my belief that if- I worked at a prison with category B male offenders in Grendon. It's a rehabilitation prison and I was absolutely adamant that we would look at plays like *Othello* because many of them had killed their own wives and I was going to confront that head on and they loved it. I did poetry, we did Robert Frost's *The Road Not Taken* for obvious reasons. We did some haikus but I was never going to patronise people and say we are just going to- I just wouldn't do that. People need to come away and think, yes I've learned something, I can take something back with me. So many people- you start going round the room and go have you ever read any Shakespeare? And they- no- no- no Shakespeare and by the end of it they're hooked, and it's a marvelous thing to see. So I've always been very much- yeah give people the best. Don't patronise people and don't worry about intellectually getting it just try and feel it. Feel the rhythms of the prose and I would act out bits of say *Othello* so- you know this was meant to be seen in a theatre not meant to be read and the results were phenomenal. Every single time. I don't think there is a single example of someone saying you've lost me or I don't like that, it's not for me. Maybe we were just lucky. I just don't think anyone should be patronised.

Rebecca:

I thoroughly agree with that. I tutor a lot of GCSE and ALevel children and focus a lot on poetry and Shakespeare and find that they understand it when you read it and you try and say well imagine this was now. Listen to the words and don't worry about the words. Listen to it. What does it make you feel like? Obviously classes these days they're quite large and there's a limited time to get through everything. There's that tension I think of trying to get through everything. I mean- I adore Shakespeare. There's so much you can get just from listening to a bit of Shakespeare being read aloud.

Dr Paula Byrne:

Oh definitely, I couldn't agree more. Absolutely.

Rebecca:

Is there a particular aspect of bibliotherapy that interests you the most?

Dr Paula Byrne:

It's quite interesting- I just read a really, a marvelous memoir by an ex-yale professor called Priscilla Gillman who- it's called- I've actually got it in front of me here funnily enough which I didn't mean to have at all. It's called *The Anti-Romantic Child: A Story of Unexpected Joy* and it's about- she was a Yale professor who loved wordsworth and loved the way that really wordsworth really sort of created the concept of childhood really, because before wordsworth no one really wrote about childhood the way he did. And she gave birth to a very severely autistic child and was so sort of shocked by this and couldn't understand, and her whole notion of childhood and of motherhood and all of that was challenged. Wordsworth got her through, so she would find herself turning to Wordsworth and it's a beautifully written book and I just wrote to her to say that anyone who had an autistic child would benefit from reading that book. It's so beautiful and it makes you see autism in a very interesting way. And she said oh I teach bibliotherapy classes and I- so we've been in touch but I don't like the idea of prescribing a book for a condition, which I know some biblio-therapists do. I don't really like that, having said that I think if somebody had an autistic child I'd give them that book and say you've got to read that book so I'm kind of interested in autism and dementia. I'm interested in how bibliotherapy can reach people who are locked inside themselves. So another story, I interviewed (unknown) from our online course and he tells this story about how when his mother had very severe dementia he couldn't reach her at all but the only time he ever really connected was when he would read Wordsworth, again funnily enough Wordsworth. When he recited *Daffodils* that part of her brain connected and she could recite it perfectly. It was very moving because it is also very moving for the carer because the carer- you know with his mum she was very locked in her world and that can be very frightening for dementia patients, they feel very scared. So, the calmness, the soothing repetition, all of those things can be comforting but it also connected with the bit of their brain that hadn't been affected. So I'm getting increasingly- I mean I am interested in all aspects of bibliotherapy- I mean I began with stress because I think so many of us suffer with stress so I began with- I'm not talking about full blown depression because I'm not an expert on that. I'm talking about low level stress if you'd like, and how reading can help with staying calm. But I am increasingly- as I know more about bibliotherapy I'm sort of getting very interested in other aspects of how the mind connects with literature and so- yeah its evolving in other words.

Rebecca:

That's really interesting. Especially the dementia aspect. We have a guest coming on soon who is a strong believer in memorising poems again for the importance in later life. That memorising, not only does it give you comfort, it keeps your brain functioning, that its a separate part of your brain that memorises those poems so that's really interesting.

Dr Paula Byrne:

They used to call it learn by heart when I was at school, but in a way it is letting it in your heart you know. Learn by heart means that. Perhaps if you learn by heart it does- I mean I can still remember we were taught by wrote when we were at school and I can remember large swathes of poetry because I learnt it by heart. Like the times tables it stays with you, doesn't it? It's a really odd- repetition as well. I am very interested in rhythm and repetition. It's like children learning nursery rhymes. They find it very comforting to read the same story over and over again. You read a child the story and they go again, so you read it again and they go again, and you read it again and they go again and you think- what? They want it again! But there's got to be some sense of comfort in repetition and in rhythm and that's why we say nursery rhymes as well. There's something aesthetically pleasing about rhythm. So in this little book I am writing about Jane Austen's solace I am very interested in the rhythm of sentences and how that can make us feel calmer. She often writes these tri-part sentences. Which is very Dr Johnson, very Johnsonian. He would always do things in threes, there's something about things in threes for some reason. I don't know the science but it just feels comforting. So to me it is just endlessly fascinating.

Rebecca:

Do you think that with Covid-19 and in the UK we've had- we're on a second lockdown now, do you think that might've drawn more people to read therapeutically?

Dr Paula Byrne:

I think there's good evidence of that, I mean- on social media I do a lot of twitter and I often do book chat up because I think twitter is great for book chats. And also for recommending books that you wouldn't otherwise see and also I connect with a lot of my writer friends on twitter that I don't see and we can share ideas and stuff but in the course of that and talking to readers of my books so many people have written to me saying oh I read your book on this and it really helped me or I just read your *Stressed, Unstressed* poetry anthology- Priscilla Gilman who I just spoke about, she immediately bought our anthology and said I'm getting *Stressed, Unstressed* for all my friends, it's brilliant. So it seems that yes I think people are and there's a lot of support for independent bookshops but I don't know If i just follow these people and have a distorted picture- I don't really know but if I just follow bookish people it may be distorted but I like to think that more people are reading in lockdown and I think they are because people do get fed up of television they do get fed up of- but then some people- I've heard say I can't read during lockdown my brains gone. Some people have said they can't write during lockdown so it does really depend. Personally I've read- well I read loads anyway but I probably have read more for solace in lockdown. My children, teens, read- I've been reading them a lot and I think they read more in lockdown so I mean do you think- have you had experience with people reading more in lockdown do you think?

Rebecca:

I think so. I've noticed more of my friends who have been working from home have been setting aside their commute time for reading or listening to an audiobook on their walk, which they walk instead of a commute. They go for a little half hour wander and they'll listen to an audiobook or they'll sit and read because they didn't want that time that's usually taken by a commute to be taken up by work.

Dr Paula Byrne:

Oh that's brilliant. I'm such a fan of audible and all those because I just think that as you said before just listening and if you get a good reader of a favourite novel it is such a joy and again like you said before, when you listen to books you hear things differently. That line was really interesting. I think often when I have- I love audible and hate wasting time. Women multitask, sorry to generalise but we do. I'm sure men do too. But I multitask and I don't like to think I'm wasting time so if I'm just wandering- and I notice when you see people jogging that so many have earphones in and I'm always wonder to myself are they listening to a book or are they listening to music or podcasts are massive now aren't they? Which are fantastic. I think it's lovely that people don't want to waste that time that they would spend commuting. My son, actually reads a lot- loves listening. He was raised by audiobook because we were so busy with my daughter's illness so we were like go and listen to another book and he really loves- it used to be his comfort. He would always put an audiobook on at bedtime. So I mustn't generalise about those gender stereotypes because he was one who really does- he really does love hearing good readers. Also my son came to reading late. I think- now he's a complete bookworm but wasn't for a long time but he always did listen to books and I think he wants to be a writer and I think it's given him a good ear. My youngest son, I keep saying start with audiobooks if you find it difficult, start by listening to books, I think there's so much to be said for it.

Rebecca:

Especially for the older more heavy reading books, *War and Peace* for example where it's much easier to keep track of what's happening and who's who with a good audiobook. In relation to that, I listen to audiobooks and I also listen to cast based audiobooks which there's a lovely company called Librivox who do a lot of out of copyright and it's a volunteer based thing so people will read- and there's a lot where there's some beautiful Jane Austen read on there and there's also cast ensembles reading those classic books and I find I like listening to both. Librivox, I'll pop it in the show notes for everyone else.

Dr Paula Byrne:

That's amazing! I love that idea. I didn't know about that so thank you for that recommendation. I support- there's a theatre company called Sun and Moon theatre company and they've been

going through very difficult times because of Covid. What they've been doing which sounds very similar to what you said they've been doing cast readings. They began with *Pride and Prejudice*, they read the entire novel over twenty-four hours and I've been appearing as a sort of guest person to talk about *Pride and Prejudice* and the importance of reading aloud. And they also do it as a cast, it's fantastic so do support them if you can. They did *Emma* and maybe *Persuasion* is next. They're basically doing it as a fundraiser to help declining theatre companies who can't make a living and it's just brilliant to hear the different voices and to hear people getting into the heads of those characters you now so well and giving it- and these are readers you know they're not actors. They're people who love Jane Austen and also it is global so you get lots of different accents. It's just a fantastic thing, but I haven't heard of that but I will look out for- yeah it would be very good for children.

Rebecca:

So you've said that- well obviously we love Jane Austen, who doesn't love Jane Austen? But also it's the comedy aspect that calls to you. Do you find that there's sort of a strong divide between when you read poetry for- sort of therapeutic reasons, and you reading those comedy books- well I say comedy books, those books with excellent comedic writing. Do you find there is a divide? Do you go for very different types of poems or are you drawn to poems that have that element of comedy?

Dr Paula Byrne:

I think that's a really good- really good and interesting question and I haven't been asked that question before but I think the answer would be know because I think that when I read- I think poetry does seem very different in terms of bibliotherapy because what I always think with poetry is its concentrated language in concentrated form and it demands concentration and focus, I think. Every poet, those words are very carefully chosen and sort of go to poetry really for that kind of inspiration although that does bring solace too but I think when I read Jane Austen it is slightly more for comfort, more for that comedic value, because one thing I don't really like is comic poems, interestingly. And I hadn't really realised that until you'd asked the question, because we did include a couple of comic poems in the anthology, *Stressed, Unstressed*, I liked it- I liked them, but you know there were four of us, we had a GP who prescribes poetry. There was me as a writer and then there were two academics. The four of us, we just sifted through all of the poems that- we wanted to get to a hundred, to find the poems that we thought would be best and a couple of the group really insisted on comic poetry and I'm like, it really doesn't do it for me. So I probably do like poetry that is more emotional or perhaps more demanding. I'm very interested in the seventeenth century poet called Katherine Phillips, and she's fantastic. There's one poem that she wrote, she'd had seventeen miscarriages and she finally- and it's called *On the Birth of Hector*, my rosebud or something like that and she finally gives birth to this baby and the baby's perfect and then the baby dies. It's so poignant and it's so modern and it's so fresh. I think it was written in something like 1621, maybe later. I can't remember off the top of my head, but I've used that as a therapeutic tool for grief and it never fails to resonate with people. It's very cathartic, it's very emotional and it just also makes you think that people are untied by poetry over centuries. You're part of this community, and I think that people still felt as badly about miscarriages in 1621 as people do today. The emotions don't

change just because infant mortality rates were greater I don't believe the pain is any different and if you've lost sixteen- i mean it's unimaginable to us to have lost sixteen babies, but it- so insisted to Jon that that poem. So, I think that if I am feeling emotional or upset I tend to go to those poems, it's almost a cathartic for me. Where anxiety is better for me again it's just always for me. You have to keep those words, what is it for you? But for me if I am just a bit gloomy or low and in need of cheering up, yeah, I would go to the perfect comedy novels and you're instantly laughin, in minutes. Does that make sense to you? I don't know whether you feel the same but I think that's why- that's why I think I am very wary of prescribing books to people because somebody who say had an autistic child might not like *The Anti-Romantic Child*. They might feel angry with it, they might feel like that's not my experience. I just think you have to be a little bit careful with the recommendations that you give and I know some biblio therapists have a prescribed set of work if you are suffering from anorexia nervosa, read this. And I think you have to be so careful. You have to be careful what harm- I'm always conscious, can literature harm? I think it is really important whether we look at whether it can have harmful effects, and I know the doctor that is on our team, he trains medical students at Oxford but he would say that when they teach their course on depression, he would always use Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* because you can teach as much as you can, you can give as much pamphlets and leaflets but when you are teaching medical practice- he felt the best way to get inside the mindset of somebody who was suffering from acute depression, was to teach *The Bell Jar*. Now I love that. It may not work for some, he would do that alongside the theories and all of that but I just like that he said over and over again in the evaluations the medical students said that was one of the best classes. The same doctor, when he taught alzheimers to his students he used to take them to art galleries. There was a famous artist who drew a self portrait for fourteen years at the onset of dementia. It's just heartbreaking because you see how it feels to be inside that person's head and how they begin with this portrait and each time the portrait is changed, and this is where I think arts and humanities can really help. I am really into medical humanities and again, the teaching of empathy for students that- literature can give that. They can make you, or help you rather than make you- enable you to get inside the head and that's empathy and that's- I'm very interested in these new studies on empathy which are coming out a lot from medical humanities institutions where they are saying its about teaching empathy and avid readers tend to be more empathetic people. That's what they are saying. It's because from a very young age you've put yourself in that mindset of somebody else. I think those studies are really fascinating. I think more work will be done on that aspect and I reckon it would be a good thing for medical humanities too.

Rebecca:

I agree, I feel like that's very important and very interesting. I'm going to have to go and look up those studies.

Dr Paula Byrne:

Do you feel like bibliotherapy is on the rise? Do you feel like more people are sympathetic to it?

Rebecca:

I hope so. I'm hopeful, I mean we are pushing this project to try and increase the awareness of bibliotherapy as helping with your mental health and your mental wellbeing and your mood.

Dr Paula Byrne:

There is an epidemic of anxiety and mental health problems among young people, and that's not going to go away. That is only going to get worse, I think, and I think again just a tool in your kit is what I always say. And I say to GPs have this as a tool in your kit. Have bibliotherapy as a tool in your kit to give to people and the doctor I was telling you about, he would put poetry all around his waiting room because waiting rooms are very anxious places and you know you've got ten minutes and you sit there and you think about the narrative of your problem, of what you're going to say and it's a stressful and you see these leaflets on the wall and they make you feel worse because you think oh have I got this. So he would put poetry and people would steal the poems, which he loved. And they'd come back and say oh doc I stole this poem but he'd say no keep it, keep it, keep it. It was actually a little charity called poetry in the waiting rooms that would do this and put poems round and it made a huge huge difference to the ambience of the waiting room so I'm very mindful and I see it with my children and my children's friends that so many suffer from anxiety. So many do. It does feel like an epidemic and COVID is going to make that worse, not better. So again I just think that give it a try, use it as a tool in your kit. It may not always work and you may not be able to concentrate and that's fine but you will feel better and I think my take, my take is it's a great- I think *Reasons to Stay Alive* is- I give that book to everybody. When my son had a very bad bout of depression recently, my eldest son, I gave him the Matt Haig book. That's one I give to so many people. I think he writes brilliantly about depression and my son said that helped enormously for him. So I think what you're doing is fantastic, that's why I did really want to help and support it because I think it's absolutely- it's crucial, it's crucial what you're doing. Spreading that word and letting young people know there is solace to be had, there is help to be had in reading so it's brilliant what you're doing.

Rebecca:

I've just looked at the time, I've taken up so much of your time Paula

Dr Paula Byrne:

Oh don't worry, don't worry. It's been a pleasure.

Rebecca:

Thank you so so much for coming on. That's been really very eye opening and very interesting

Dr Paula Byrne:

Oh it's a pleasure. Thank you for having me.

Rebecca:

That's it for this week's Shelf-Healing interview. I'll be back in two weeks with another one.

Goodbye.

Thanks Nicholas Patrick for our music and Luke Montgomery who does all of our transcriptions

Authors Mentioned (in order of appearance):

Dr Paula Byrne  
Jane Austen  
Evelyn Waugh  
Jonathon Bate  
P.G. Wodehouse  
Barbara Pym  
Thomas Hardy  
Elizabeth Taylor  
William Shakespeare  
William Wordsworth  
Matt Haig

Titles Mentioned (in order of appearance):

*Much Obligated, Jeeves* by P.G. Wodehouse  
*Right Ho, Jeeves* by P.G. Wodehouse  
*Tess of the d'Urbervilles* by Thomas Hardy  
*The Portrait of a Lady* by Henry James  
*The Diary for Nobody* by George and Weedon Grossmith  
*Anna Karenina* by Leo Tolstoy  
*A Pair of Blue Eyes* by Thomas Hardy  
*The Woodlanders* by Thomas Hardy  
*Middlemarch* by Mary Ann Evans  
*Othello* by Shakespeare  
*The Road Not Taken* by Robert Frost  
*The Anti-Romantic Child: A Story of Unexpected Joy* by Priscilla Gilman  
*Daffodils* by William Wordsworth  
*Stressed, Unstressed* by Jonathon Bate and Paula Byrne  
*War and Peace* by Leo Tolstoy  
*Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen  
*Emma* by Jane Austen  
*Persuasion* by Jane Austen  
*On the Birth and Death of My Dearest Child Hector Phillips* by Katherine Phillips  
*The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath

*Reasons to Stay Alive* by Matt Haig