

Shelf Healing interview with Giles Paley-Phillips. Transcription by Luke Montgomery

00:00:15

Rebecca:

If you could say your first and last name to make sure we pronounce it right and give you pronouns, that would be great, because I have a name that people can't pronounce, so I like to get that bang on.

00:00:25

Giles Paley-Phillips:

It's Giles Paley-Phillips. Not Paisley-Phillips, as I sometimes get, or Palley-Phillips. So, yeah Paley-Phillip. And Mr

00:00:48

Rebecca:

Hello and welcome to shelf Healing UCL's Bibliotherapy podcast. I'm your host, Rebecca Markwick. Our guest today is Giles Paley-Phillips. Giles is an award-winning children's author, and an author of a semi-autobiographical free verse novella published this year with Unbound. Giles co-hosts the podcast *Blank*, which has also just announced a new book to be released March next year, covering themes from the podcast as well as anecdotes. These themes include mental health, grief, fear and social anxieties. Giles is also a patron for ActionAid UK and has the most lovely, uplifting Twitter account full of kind words. First question, to get us started is nice and easy: do you feel that reading is therapeutic?

00:01:32

Giles Paley-Phillips:

Well, I think it's therapeutic for some people. I have to say I find reading quite tricky. It's always a bit of a weird thing because people like- basically, when I go to do school visits because obviously I'm there to promote reading and books and stuff. And I think I wasn't particularly big reader as a kid, I was more of a I was more physical, like going out and playing football and running and that kind of stuff. So the only kind of books I liked as a child with those, like the fighting fantasy books and like, you know, where you at the beginning, you get a dice- it's almost like a game. You get a dice and then you roll it and you get, like, your skill and your stamina and then, yeah, as you proceed through the book, you would have to make a decision at the end of each paragraph like, are you going to go through this door? Go to page 368 or you can attack this orc that's coming down the corridor? If so, go to page, you know so on and so on. But those are the kind of books I was really into and comics as well, so I wasn't really much for reading. I've come to kind of come to reading a bit later in life almost. It wasn't really until my sort of mid-twenties leading up to my thirties that I started. I guess I was starting to hang around with other people that were into reading and books. I got really into sort of cold novels, American novels, authors like Chuck Palahniuk and Don DeLillo, Paul Auster, like, you know, sort of, quite heavy-going books. I kind of went in when it was like a- I'm a bit all or nothing anyway as a person, I think I just went into, like, let's get some really hardcore kind of fiction. But yes, certainly so I having said that, so I've always found reading quite challenging. I struggle, sometimes get through books. I mean, at the moment, I'm having a bit of a people talk about writer's block, but I'd certainly have, like readers block sometimes for sure, and I sometimes drift between different genres just so I could get back into it. Having said that, when I'm into a book and I'm enjoying a book, almost nothing

better in a way when you escaped into that world. Particularly with fiction and actually with good non-fiction as well. When, you know, there's a really good narrative. I mean books like by people like Jon Ronson, fantastic, for getting you within like that world and you can escape. And I think, you know, like all great kind of creative things like movies, music that, you know, you get taken away from what's going on in your normal life. So to answer your question, which was very long a very long answer to your question. Yes, I do you think books could be, yeah, and reading can be very therapeutic. You know, I've predominantly have written children's books in the past and, you know, I've often used challenging subjects in those books to talk about various different things. So I think going on from that, I think it can be therapeutic to open discussions about difficult subjects and challenging subject. So from that point of view as well, it's always been. Yeah, I would say, Yeah, you can. You can get so much out of reading and books.

00:04:23

Rebecca:

Yeah, definitely. Especially the challenging subjects. I think reading is somewhere that you can read in a very therapeutic manner about things that are very difficult to deal with in your everyday life.

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Giles Paley-Phillips

Yeah, absolutely. Yeah.

00:04:36

Rebecca:

What type of books do you reach for when you want too relax or kind of improve your mood?

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Giles Paley-Phillips

Okay, that's an interesting-

00:04:44

Rebecca:

Is it still those fighting fantasy books from your childhood?

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Giles Paley-Phillips

What I've started funnily enough, I thought, well, they don't- you don't see them as much now. And I thought, Well, where are they? Because it was a couple of authors. I think Ian Livingstone and Steve Jackson with, like, predominantly in the sort of eighties and nineties, would write those books and they wrote hund- like, you know, like hundreds of them. And I thought I'd really like to get through that with- my oldest is into that kind of stuff as well. He's a vivacious reader, really quite jealous of him

sometimes because he just, he just eats books. Honestly, he's just- it's incredible really. Or he'll get a new book and he'll be finished it within, like sometimes he's like in like a day he just, like read the book. It's really impressive and even like he started getting into a sort of more adult books as well. Like he really loves Jurassic Park and the Jurassic World movies and everything. And he read Jurassic Park like in two days, like just like that, you know? Yeah. So he's a vivacious reader, so I thought, Well, this is really good. I could maybe get some of those old books that actually the books that I did enjoy as a child on we can do it together. So we did buy one of the original fighting fantasy books and that together, But for me, I guess- well, like I say, sometimes I find it difficult to get into books. But there are certain authors. I think that, you know, like I'm a big fan of Chuck Palahniuk. I will read pretty much anything that he puts out. So I kind of know if he's got a new book out, that I'm going to enjoy it and get I'm going to escape into whatever world that he's created. But I mean, having said that, I recently got more into nonfiction as well, and I think you know, that's, you know, it could be very informative, obviously, if it's a particular subject, so yeah, there's not one particular kind of. But what I would say, Yeah. I mean, my favorite office probably Chuck -Chuck Palahniuk and his books always, yeah, they're always great for diving into and escaping what's going on in the world.

00:06:37

Rebecca:

Something we've all needed quite a bit this year.

00:06:40

Giles Paley-Phillips:

Yeah, absolutely.

00:06:42

Rebecca:

So are there any books that you return to over and over again, like comfort food but a book?

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Giles Paley-Phillips:

It's an interesting thing because my wife she's really into chick lit. She won't mind me saying that because she is because she like because it's easy. She likes to have an easy read like I was saying, like when I got really into reading in my late twenties, sorry mid-twenties, early thirties, it was kind of really challenging books that were hard. They were quite hard work to read sometimes, and she loves to just escape into, you know, into a romantic novel that she's kind of knows, and she will reread books over and over again that, you know, if she's run out authors that, you know, she likes. She doesn't often like to try new author, so it be like if the output of the output of the authors that she's into has dried up for some reason, she will definitely go back and re read stories. Like you do, like the way you re-watch a movie. I'm really I'm a bit funny about books I don't ever - I've never really truly say that I've never really gone back to another book to read, which I know is like almost seems, sacrilegious that you've just like, you know, like they'll be like an amazing book and you'll be like I'm never reading that again. But maybe it's to do with the fact that I find sometimes find in an effort to read and the idea of like going back and reading a book that I've already read, I think, well, there's probably loads of other books I probably should be reading. I'm not like that with other things, like other creative things. I mean, I love re watching movies and listening, obviously listening to music

over and over again. But for some reason books, I never looked back. I always sort of move onto the next thing. Maybe I should. Maybe I was thinking, actually, that might help when I'm in those readers block moments and I can't move on. It would actually probably be quite a good thing to go back and read something that I've enjoyed before.

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Rebecca:

Is your memory for the stories then, really good? Do you ever think back that was a really good book and kind of just think about it every so often? Maybe not read it, but sort of just think about, I don't know, like a really- character that you loved or really great bit of plotting.

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Giles Paley-Phillips:

Yeah, absolutely. And certainly when I'm in the midst of kind of writing my own stories or, you know, coming up with stuff or just to inform the way I write things certainly I will go back and think about how other people have written the craft of it. And, you know, I mean, there are certain books that really stick with me. Like I remember reading John Fowles *The Magus*, that was a book that really stayed with me for a long time. David Gold wrote a book called *Carter Beats the Devil*, which is a book that's really beautiful, and I've got- I've always thought about that a lot. The plots in those stories have really have always stuck with me for sure. So, yeah, it does happen, but yeah, often, when I'm when- I'm in the midst of writing something, I will try and think back to how other people have sort of tackled a particular thing.

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Rebecca:

Now, imagine we're not in lock down. Is there a particular place or a certain time that you usually do read, when you read?

00:09:36

Giles Paley-Phillips:

I've taken to- I'm not particularly brilliant sleeper. I kind of say that I'm a part time insomniac because I'm not, you know, there are sometimes when I do sleep alright. I know I have a good night's sleep if I read before I go to, like, go to sleep. So if I'm in bed, my wife always reads before she goes to sleep. And actually, if she ever wakes in the night or like, you know, she'll pick up a book to relax her again. So, yeah, sleeping before- sorry, reading before I sleep is something I try to do. And actually that does help me nod off and go, you know, and get a good night's sleep. And I know that I keep having to tell myself now because I had a bad night's sleep last night and I'm saying- I'm saying in my head: remember tonight to read a couple chapters and you know you'll have, You know, I know I have probably have a good night's sleep. So I'm sort of saying that to myself as I'm saying this. So that's probably my main time, but yeah, I mean, sometimes if I- like in school holidays and stuff, obviously, if you're yeah, on holiday, that kind of thing that you know, the kind of normal time when you've got a bit more time to actually really stick with a book. I mean, I think, you know, with work, when you're working and everything's fast paced, it's sometimes difficult. To, you know, difficult to really- I like to really sort of invest time in it, really, rather than just reading a couple pages and then coming back to it to kind of like staccato and I would rather bury myself in a little bit and give it a bit more attention and time. So I think, yeah, and even at weekends and stuff, I like, it's one of those things like, I will carry almost carry my book like a book. If I've got a book, I generally have a book on the go, even if

it's not been finished- got lots of half-finished books. But I will carry this book around the house with me, like with the intention that I will actually sit and read it and then often, like, you know, that I don't for whatever reason. So there's all these things I'm saying to myself, I'm saying to you now I'm actually saying to myself, come on, you need to sort yourself out. Because there's all this great literature that I'm not investing my time in. I probably should do really, maybe put my phone down a bit more and read a bit more.

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Rebecca:

So it doesn't sound like lockdown has affected sort of the amount of time you spend reading if you read before bed. But are you the sort of person that goes 'just another page', 'I'll just read another page before I go to sleep' or you really good?

00:11:52

Giles Paley-Phillips:

Sometimes. Yeah, yeah, but I'm when I'm really when- if I'm really into it, yeah, I'm really into something. It tends to be I think it would probably be cliché, but those sort of page turner-y thrillers I will always, yeah, will certainly do that with yeah, definitely 'one more page'. Also, I'm a bit, maybe it's an O.C.D thing, but like sometimes wanting to make sure that I get to the start of a new chapter. I don't after night to leave halfway through a chapter. Or maybe I might even say like, odd numbers. But yeah, I definitely like to try and get to a bit. I hate books without- I mean, I get annoyed when there's books without chapters, or at least splits in the story somewhere that there is a sort of natural stop to a point. I'm reading this- I'm reading the latest Chuck Palahniuk book, actually, and that he hasn't- there's no like chapters and I'm like where do- where am I going to stop? Because if I'm going into the next- and it's kind of split narrative and I want to make sure I'm in the right narra- like I want to in that narrative and then like, so I can go onto the next narrative. So yeah, I think maybe it's a bit of a- it was possibly a bit of an O.C.D thing maybe about it.

00:13:02

Rebecca:

Yeah, I remember I read Lord of the Rings and I was very young, and he's very cheeky about doing that, where it's like 'I'm definitely finishing at the end of this chapter' and then he'd go into something and you'd just read the first sentence and then it's- suddenly it's like the other half of the crew. And you're like, oh my God, I need to read this chapter now.

00:13:20

Giles Paley-Phillips:

Yeah, yeah, yeah, I'm suddenly with Frodo and Sam and Gollum somewhere, I was- a minute ago I was with Aragorn going in Helm's Deep. I want to stay.

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Rebecca:

I'm really bad. I have zero self-control when I'm in a good book like 'I just- I'll just read the next chapter. It's fine.' As a writer, especially as a children's writer, do you find the act of writing to be therapeutic, or is it tricky?

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Giles Paley-Phillips:

At times- yeah, at times I mean, yeah, it's a tricky one because anyone who is a writer will know that it's not an easy gig. Yeah, it can be very challenging at times and it's you have to be the right mood. sometimes to be able to do it and get your head into it. I think probably the best bits of when you first, for me anyway, when- when you first start, I think that first draft is always quite enjoyable. But that first kind of start with that when your ideas that you've sort of been mulling around in your head start to hit the page and your still figuring it out, and I guess I'm probably a bit organic in my process. I kind of let the story lead me a little bit. I don't- I was talking to Ian Rankin recently, so a big name drop, and I- he said that he doesn't- but it was interesting because I really, really empathized with him. And he was saying that he doesn't know who's going to be the killer until- like, he finds it out as well as he's writing it. It's not all plotted out, and that was really interesting, I thought well that's actually how I write as well. I don't really work out what's going to happen. You know, I'm not a planner in any way. I don't like, sit there and say, you know, this is going to have- this person's narrative is going to go like this the organic process. So going back to your question, there are moments that are very enjoyable and active. The act of writing is enjoyable. And I would say, But for me, I guess it's probably that starting bit, when you're first doing the first few chapters and working out how you want to start the book, that's my favorite bit for sure.

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Rebecca:

As a children's picture book author, is there ever sort of any anxiety that you get between you having written the book and then the publisher choosing an illustrator for it? Do you ever have that kind of tension that then once you see the illustrations, you kind of relax a little bit and you go, you know, that's what I like that, that matches what I had in my head?

00:15:35

Giles Paley-Phillips:

It's a really interesting question because a lot of time, especially when I do like school visits and things and I talk to children and I, actually, some of the teachers as well they just assume that you choose the illustrator. Yeah, as we know, it is not that. The publisher chooses. I mean, I guess you have to put a certain amount of trust often also is a bit closure after I mean, particularly after a publishers chosen your text and has decided they want to publish it, and then you sign a contract. It's almost like, well, by the way, this person is going to really illustrator is that, you know- it is not even, is that okay? It's kind of like this is going to be the illustrator, I guess if you're slightly more, perhaps if you're slightly more powerful author, that you might have a bit more sway on who would be involved. But to be honest, generally speaking, you have to put that level of trust in them and know that that's how they wanted to- how they want it to be. I've always felt in capable hands with regards to that, but it's I mean, it's lovely when you start to see I mean the best bit is obviously when you start to see like sketches and stuff come through and you start to see your words kind of be put into life. that's always incredibly exciting. So, yeah, it's a kind of- there's a sort of trust thing there with the publishers know what they're doing. And generally, in my experience, with all the books I've done, I've been really lucky. I've worked with some really great illustrators and yeah, I can't you know- I've had a good

process with that. I mean, I'd say it might not be the same for other people, but yeah, it's always been. It has been really nice for me.

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Rebecca:

Is there a book that has profoundly affected you?

00:17:14 - 00:17:29

Giles Paley-Phillips:

Yeah, there's been a few books, actually. I would say, yeah, there's a book by Sharon Olds called *The Father*, which is actually a poetry book, which had a- was a big influence on me writing *One Hundred and Fifty-Two Days*, which was the first novel I wrote, which came out the beginning of the year. It's about it again. It's about- my story is about, based on my own experiences of my mom passing away from leukemia and the out fall from that on Sharon Old's story is a lot about her looking after her father through the end of his life, and it's very it's incredibly visceral and also very poignant in parts and you know it, really yeah, really- I guess he gave me the courage to write my story. You know, it was one of those books that gave me the courage and thinking actually, you know, I could write my own story. I could tell my own story about a similar subject. It's just always one. And because it's a poetry, because it's one of those ones that sort of dip into now and again, and like you were saying earlier about books to go back to, actually poetry books and stuff. I do sort return to those as I would possibly, you know, listen to a song, I guess, because them or they've got that sort off more musical aesthetic about them. I do go back to poetry books, for sure, so that books had a profound effect to me. I mean, there'd be no other books like American Psycho by Bret Easton Ellis was just a like a punch to the face of a book. No, you know, there's no it's very controversial, a very controversial book, but it was it was like, wow, this is- I didn't know this kind of stuff could be, you know, you could read this kind of work. Books like that, I guess. Yeah, I think just knowing that. Just giving, like, thinking like you can actually do in certain extent, to a certain extent, you can write what you want to write. And that's quite exciting. That's quite exciting. So, yeah, so I'd say those two books were big. Had a big impact on me. Yeah.

00:19:13

Rebecca:

You've kind of answered my next question. Which is are there any books that you recommend that you find are effective improving your mental wellbeing with that book of poetry?

00:19:22

Giles Paley-Phillips:

Yeah. I mean, yeah, that that book Sharon Old's called *The Father* is quite hard to get. I tried to get a friend of mine- unfortunately, her father passed away and I said, you've got must read this book. And it was really I think it's quite hard to get hold off now. I think I think it is still in print, but it's yeah, I think Knopf had it out, but yeah, that's always had. Yeah, that's been a really great book to go back to. Yeah, I'm you know, if I ever start dwelling on things from my past with regards to loss, it's always been a really powerful book. I mean, you can see behind me. Actually, this is no good for listeners. Behind me there is my I mean- my wife's not much of a hoarder, so I've got some books in the other

room, but, yeah, I've got quite a small, like array of books at the top there. I've always kept the books that have yeah, there's books that have really, like, you know, have had an impact on me generally. But I mean, saying that about the mental health thing. Actually, I think I've always really enjoyed in those moments reading, possibly reading nonfiction, which sounds a bit counterintuitive. Sometimes you want to escape to a world or something. But I sometimes feel like reading factual stuff is quite helpful for me when I'm, yeah, if I'm- if I feel like my mental health is not where wanted to be so yes. I mean, people like John Monson and I'm a big fan off. And sometimes you know it's like self-help books. You know that. You know, sometimes that's good. I've just been reading a book called *The Happy Monk* by a guy called Gelong Thubten, who's a Buddhist monk. And you know, that's got life sort of tips on mindfulness. And what kind of so Yeah, things like that could be nice to read and dive into when you're not in a good place,

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Rebecca:

Right, last question, because your bookshelf is right there. Have you got any- have you got- and also you're a Children's picture book author, do you have any beautiful books?

00:21:11

Giles Paley-Phillips:

Okay, beautiful books. Well, I will- loads of really lovely Children's books in the other room, actually, which my son has got. Funnily enough I'm just thinking, actually, beautiful books. I'm really into Lego right, and my wife, who years ago got may a like a- it's called beautiful Lego and it's like bespoke Lego that people have made. So it's yeah, it's like one of those table coffee table kind of books. I would say that is a beautiful book to just look through, it's just gorgeous pictures of, but I mean people like create his entire meals like a roast dinner out of Lego. Things like that, yeah, it's really, really cool. So there's that. Yeah, I would say that, that's up there as a beautiful book. I don't tend to get sort of first editions or anything generally, so you know, and obviously, like normally the hardbacks of the ones that looked really, really lovely. I bought -there's a book called *The Property*, which is a graphic novel, I still really love reading graphic novels. Yeah, there's a book called *The Property*, I can see it but I can't remember the name of the author, but anyway, that's a really, really beautiful book about yeah, a lady who inherits property from a relative. And it's not just the fallout of, you know, having to deal with the upheaval and sorting out this property, and it's on then those kind of memories and stuff resurfacing from, you know from a difficult childhood. And, yeah, it's a really beautiful book. And yeah, I mean graphic novels I love and what's great now is you know it's not- I think people see graphic novels, and they think they obviously think that kind of superheroes Marvel and DC and all that kind of stuff. But actually, there's some really, really wonderful pieces of stuff out. There's a book called *Blankets*, which is amazing graphic novel. I highly recommend it. It's just it's just a drama, and it's- but it's beautifully illustrated. So, yeah, graphic novels always, you know, I would fill, yeah, fill up shelves of graphic novels if I could.

00:23:10

Rebecca:

I was really naughty, and Sand Man's Anniversary Edition came out. I was like I must have the anniversary edition. Yeah, I added it to my graphic novel collection by rebuying graphic novels today. They're beautiful.

Rebecca

00:23:27 - 00:24:04

Yeah, yeah, I do. I do love- yeah, I think comics and the underappreciated sometimes I think, you know, as you know, not always seen. That's particularly, I think, in schools and stuff. Sometimes I think it's changing slightly, but certainly when I was growing up were never seen his proper literature, and that's a real shame, because sometimes for people, for kids like me who weren't that really in to necessarily reading novels or chapter books as it would have been there, it was away in its away into reading, and I think that's so vital, actually as a medium. So yeah, big up to comics and graphic novels.

00:24:05

Rebecca:

Fantastic. I'll put all of the books and authors you've mentioned, which are many in the show notes so that our listeners confined them and give them a read. Thank you so much for coming onto shelf healing. This is a really enjoyed chatting with you.

00:24:18

Giles Paley-Phillips:

Thank you, thank you so much.

00:24:21

Rebecca:

That's it for this week's shelf healing interview. I will be back next week with another. Thanks as ever to Nicholas Patrick, who created our theme music and to Luke Montgomery, who creates all of the transcripts of our podcasts on this week. There is a special little bonus bit at the end of this episode. I'll be back in two weeks.

Yeah, thank you so much for agreeing to come on to the podcast.

00:24:52

Giles Paley-Phillips:

Thanks for having me on.

00:24:53

Rebecca:

I love, I love your Twitter feed. I have to say it genuinely- it makes me happy.

00:24:59

Giles Paley-Phillips:

Well, that's good. I'm glad that's the case, because yeah, you never- you never know with these things if people are getting anything out of it. But I mean that's- you know, that's me. I'm not, it's not like a I'm not doing it as a way of, like, you know, kind of trying to coerce anybody or, like, you know, like, make anybody like me particularly just that's It's me. And I like putting out nice messages And, you know, especially on things like Twitter where there the conversations often a lot darker.