

Rebecca Markwick:

Quick content warning for this episode, we do talk about mental illness, chronic illness, and suicide. Before we start, if I could get you to say your first and last name, just to make sure that I pronounce it correctly. If you want to, please state your pronouns.

Marcus Sedgwick:

Yes, my name is Marcus Sedgwick and you can call me anything.

Rebecca Markwick:

Well, hello and welcome to Shelf Healing, UCL's bibliotherapy podcast. I'm your host, Rebecca Markwick, and our guest today is Marcus Sedgwick. Marcus has written over 40 books for adults, young adults and children. He has won many prizes, most notably the 2014 Michael L. Prince award for *Midwinter Blood*, and his first novel, *Floodland*, won best debut children's novel in 2001.

He has been shortlisted eight times for the Carnegie Medal, and Marcus was author in residence at Bath Spa University for three years. He's reviewed books and written articles for many national newspapers. He sometimes teaches creative writing at Arvon and he has judged numerous book awards over the years, including the Costa Book Awards. So much stuff that was, I started off with a biography that was literally a page long.

I really loved *Floodland*. I love that book. It's great a book.

Marcus Sedgwick:

Yeah. It's 21 years old.

Rebecca Markwick:

I know, I feel, oh, I remember that book coming out.

Marcus Sedgwick:

Yeah, the beautiful thing about that book is it's still used a lot in year five and year six. So, I often get asked to speak to year six groups about it, and I realized that, you know, it was published like 11 years before they were born.

It's so nice to, you know, have your first book still in print is wonderful.

Rebecca Markwick:

I've read many of your books actually, less so recently. But like, *My Swordhand is Swinging*, and *The Foreshadowing*, *The Dark Flight Down*, and *Look at Dead Days*, they have from favourite spots on my bookcase.

Marcus Sedgwick:

Oh, that's very nice to hear. Thank you very much.

Rebecca Markwick:

They're the sort of books you go to again and again, and every time you find something new in them, which is always lovely in a book.

Marcus Sedgwick:

Well, yeah, that's really nice to hear because that was my mark of a good book, that you can go there again and again and again. We make the mistake, I guess, of feeling like the books are unchanging objects and of course, you know, the book is, but we're changing all the time. It's amazing, the things I've gone back to like 20 years after I first read them and you liked them the first time and second time, and you just like, oh my God, I had no idea how good this was when I was 20, but now I do, then I will start to get some ideas.

Rebecca Markwick:

Our first question is the same for everyone.

And I always say, it's nice and easy and I don't think it is, but here we go. Do you feel that reading is therapeutic?

Marcus Sedgwick:

Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. What a huge subject. Yeah. That is a simple question, but one that they'd be a bit more because there is so much that you could say. The thing is, you know, for those of us, you know, my whole life really has been about books and reading and I'm sure that's the case for you and for many people listening to this. It's kind of so obvious but it's really hard. But you know, it's like same as saying, 'why is air important?' Well, now there's all this research that shows, you know, people have done that, you know, neuroscientists had done this research that shows the positive effects on the brain and what's happening and why it's happening because of the existence of these things called mirror neurons that, you know, exists. When we see someone doing something else, we see, we imagined the same action in our head. They, they fire, even when we're reading about someone doing this, whatever action it is they're doing. And this seems to be the basis of why we have an empathetic response when we're reading and how we, therefore, you know, I think it's the ultimate power and why books are really the most powerful thing. Because you, as the reader are doing so much of the work yourself, and if you compare it with, I love cinema too, I mean, a really big film nut, but the difference with reading is that, and particularly the kind of books I thought I liked to read myself and the books I tried to write. It requires the reader to make some investment on their part. And because then you've made that investment, you've literally co-created this thing, and it therefore becomes extremely powerful. And therefore, that therapeutic effect is greater with reading than possibly with anything apart from music.

Rebecca Markwick:

Yes, definitely. Do you find the act of writing is therapeutic? Same? Different?

Marcus Sedgwick:

That's interesting. Yeah. I think the answer there is, it depends. It's hard because I was having a chat to a friend of mine and the writer, David Almond that I'm sure lots of people will know. Who's a wonderful writer and a wonderful man, just a great human being. David's a bit older than I am, but we were both agreeing how physically tiring writing is, you know, there's this, the stereotype of the, which is something I've investigated for other reasons, the stereotype of the sickly writer, is it true? And whether or not that was true as a conversation in a week and a half later perhaps, or another day. But we did agree that actually it's really, um, surprising how physically tiring writing is. If for one thing, when you're thinking really hard, 25% of the oxygen being used in your body has been used in your brain.

So, you know, that this way, you know, everyone remembers that those days of studying cramming for finals or whatever it is, and just how exhausting that is. But I've also realized, and this is something that's really come out through my illness and becoming more aware of what my body is doing, how I might hunch over the keyboard, how I'm tensing my arms and my shoulders, how I'm, you know, my head is bowed. This is stuff that I never was aware of before.

I would just do a day's writing and I was younger, and I was fitter, wouldn't particularly notice the effect. And now I'm clear that the effect writing physically has on me. And that being said, if it goes well and you think, you know, this is powerful and I'm really into this and you get in the flow, it's really healing at the same time.

So, it's, it's strange. And it's a hard question to answer, as I said, it depends. It's the only good answer I can give you.

Rebecca Markwick:

It's an excellent answer. I like to start with those ones, which they seem simple on the surface. And then as soon as you try to answer them, they get really complicated. So if you're having a bad day, what kind of books do you reach for to try and make you feel a bit better or, or escape into another world?

Marcus Sedgwick:

Yeah, that's interesting. I just realized recently I'm in one of those phases of not reading fiction at the moment. And that happens to me. And I think it always has happened to me that I have phases where I read a lot of fiction and phases where I read none. And because I'd been in a bad place physically for most of this year. My illness has been in quite a slump through this year and life has been very complicated in other ways, I think sometimes reading fiction is not the thing that I need. And actually, I've been

reading a lot of nonfiction now, some of this stuff, because I'm trying to find answers to things in life that I want to find answers to.

And yet then occasionally, you know, a book will just pop up out of nowhere and I'll read a novel again. But I think, you know, we're all in danger. We do it because my specialism is writing for younger people. We do it to younger people, this snobbery about nonfiction versus fiction. And we do it to adults too.

And we, you know, particularly there's a lot of men tend to, you know, those men who only read like Patrick O'Brian and books about the second world war. And again, why are we judging them then? Okay. You might not think this is the best literature ever written, but reading is reading.

That being said, there is one book that I come back to, and I read it for the seventh time this year, which is Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, which is a book about illness in itself. And going back to what we were saying before, that is about, even though we are rereading it for the seventh time, this year, still getting more out of it because it is so wise. It has so much to say, and even Thomas Mann himself at the end of the book, the first edition that I read. He says, I suggest you read this book twice, which is a bold flavour. You know, he was a Nobel prize winner, I guess he had the right to dictate those kinds of things. But it's a book that needs reading, you know, twice is fine, but seven times is better.

Rebecca Markwick:

Is that a particular book that profoundly affected you at a point in your life?

Marcus Sedgwick:

Yeah, that is the main book, really. I think there are several, and I think the two things I want to say is, first of all, that we, we stop for a moment and think about the books from childhood. Those are the most important books.

You know, if you ask anyone in the street, you know, tell me the book that really meant the most to you. They're probably going to tell you something from when they were a child. And I think that's really interesting. And yet again, there's this huge snobbishness. I used to work in children's publishing alongside being a writer, and there's this massive prejudice within that business about children's books and children's publishing. Despite the fact that adult publishers suddenly think that their readers appear magically overnight, fully formed at the age of 18. Where did they come from? Well, it's because they actually, they got into reading because they read some amazing children's books.

Gary Paulson died I think this week, last week. He was a great, great writer for young people. And I saw someone put on Twitter, a quote of his, which was basically saying that exact thing of, if you ask someone to name the most important book in their life, the chances are, it was pre-puberty.

That being said, I've already mentioned the book that saved my life, which was *The Magic Mountain*. I first read that eight years ago, in the first year that I was ill and I was in, you know, become ill. No one could explain what was going on. No doctors had an answer for me. I was suddenly absolutely, bewildered. A friend of mine, a very good friend of mine, another writer, said that perhaps it's time to read all those classics you've always meant to read. And I thought, well, I've always meant to read more German literature. And if you're going to read more German literature, you really need to start with either Goethe or Mann. So having loved *Death in Venice*, I picked up *The Magic Mountain* and I, you know, to say it saved my life may sound a bit like a grandiloquent claim, but it certainly saved my sanity.

And I think that's pretty much the same thing as saving your life. It saved my sanity literally with one single sentence. And it's an 800-page novel. We know it's a huge, huge book and it saved my sanity because if people don't know it, it's a wonderful, wonderful book. And I don't know why it's kind of slipped out of the cannon now so much. But it's about this young man, I think he's 23, 24 years old as the book opens, he's called Hans Castorp. He comes from Hamburg and he goes to Davos, Switzerland, to visit his cousin Joachim who's in a tuberculosis sanatorium. Hans Castorp thinks he's going through the visit of three weeks, and he ends up staying for seven years and that is the novel. And it's a wonderful conceit. And he's been there for a few weeks, I think, maybe a month or so. And through these two main pedagogical figures in the book, there's this Italian scholar, a guy called Settembrini, and Settembrini, he says to him one day, So, how are you getting used to life up here? And that phrase life up here is actually already become an allegorical term for not just being in the mountains in Davos, in Switzerland, in the sanatorium.

It means more how you are getting used to this life of illness is what it's saying. And Hans Castorp replies and says, well, I've been told that you never get used to it entirely, but I'm getting used to not getting used to it. And that concept getting used to not getting used to it is really what saved my sanity. When I had this illness that no one could explain, do anything with, find any kind of hope or progress for whatsoever. And I think it stands for me for, you know, it's a bigger metaphor for life in general we are all getting used to not getting used to it.

Rebecca Markwick:

Yeah. So, like you said, eight years ago, you suddenly became ill. How did you find this affected the way that you were able to write? And also, obviously we talked a little bit about how it changed, what you read, how did it affect your writing?

Marcus Sedgwick:

Yeah, so to start with you know, so I have the illness that they call ME or Chronic Fatigue Syndrome and I, all these names are disputed. I tend not to use any of them, but just as a shorthand for what it is right. And one of the predominant symptoms that was particularly strong to start with is this thing called brain fog in which your brain is

tired, and you can't think straight and you muddle words up and you can't finish your sentences.

And, you know, as a writer, this was pretty terrifying because yeah, my body had physically gone to pieces and that was scary enough. But then I was thinking in a thing that gives me, has given me meaning in life is writing. And if I can't do that, you know, then I'm really in trouble. And at least I have to say, I'm lucky in that, you know, I know people with this illness who were ballet dancers or runners, or, you know, who can not do the thing that they love anymore.

And at least I've been able to keep writing. But the first few months, when that was particularly strong, it was terrifying. And then two things happened. The first thing is I managed to write, I think I wrote my second adult novel, about a year into the illness. And that is a book with a really complicated plot.

It's a kind of mystery, thriller thing and has a very complicated plot. The fact that I proved to myself that I can do that kind of book was a big step, but still these phases of brain fog would come and go. And after a while I decided to go with it. And rather than fight against it, if I was writing a passage and I remember this very clearly with probably the next book I wrote, which was a thing called *Saint Death*. If my brain was like forgetting the word I was actually searching for and throwing up a really weird word that seemed inappropriate, I would look at it and think why don't you kind of use that and why is my brain throwing that word up? And I would find ways to work those strangenesses to make the prose a bit more, unpredictable. So, I decided to go with the flow and now, the other big thing that's changed is that I just write for much shorter periods of time.

So, I used to be able to sit at the computer all day and now it's like an hour, an hour and a half tops. If I'm lucky.

Rebecca Markwick:

Obviously, lots of writers have ideas frequently popping up. Are you a write them down in a notebook kind of person? Or do you just now let them float around until they're a bit more formed?

Marcus Sedgwick:

I am a write them down in a notebook kind of guy. That being said again, there are phases when I'm much more diligent about it and phases where I'm much more lax about that. I've tried to get myself back into the habit recently, keeping the notebook near me, wherever I am, because we all know anyone who's ever tried to write anything will know that you have the idea in the middle of the night, and you think that's brilliant. I won't forget it. And it's gone. Because ideas, you know are really, slippery, slippery little fish and they, they can go as fast as they come. So, and I think, you know, I'm a big believer in letting things percolate for a long time, and this is deep, subconscious, but equally they can percolate to the back of a notebook.

And I use my notebook in two different ways. I work from the front on things that I'm kind of actively trying to work on now. And at the back I put just random ideas. That could be something for next year, the year after, in some cases, you know, in a decade later, come back to that idea. And because again, I still think it's there percolating and there is I think, a real benefit in writing something down. And rewriting something and copying out to one notebook and putting it in a new notebook because it's putting it through your brain in some level one more time. So, you're processing it again. And it's very easy to think that your conscious mind isn't processing stuff. That actually, deep down the real important stuff is going on unaware as to you, even while you sleep, which is wonderful.

Rebecca Markwick:

And obviously a big benefit, bonus, hindrance? I don't know, of being a writer for young people is school visits and talking to children about books and the contents of books and the stories within the books and the writing process. And obviously. When you have a chronic illness that impacts your daily life, those sorts of things can become very difficult to actually fit into your life.

Have you found that it's changed it for the better, for the worse, not much? You just do it less? And do you talk about it with the children?

Marcus Sedgwick:

That's a really good question. So, seven years ago I moved to France. Part of the idea was go and live in a rural part of France and maybe a quiet life will help you get better. It didn't, but you know, it was nice to move to France anyway. And, you know, the views are better and the wine is cheaper. And I largely stopped doing school visits, but I occasionally was still doing some before the pandemic. I would come over for a week or whatever and do a few. And in the time when I was ill, but still in the UK, I was doing some. I came to this point where thinking these are absolutely exhausting, and I found them exhausting even before I became sick.

I actually think then they, they may have been part of why I became sick because I found them. So, I would literally be on the verge of throwing up from the adrenaline rush after each one. And the great irony of all of this is because, the day I left school at 18, I said, I'm never going back into not only this school, but any school, as long as I live, then I became a, wrote two books for young people and was visiting schools on a regular basis.

And, you know, it was like a traumatic thing for me because school had been a violently traumatic experience for seven years. So, I really had to think about this. Am I going to go on doing this? Yes, you can earn some good money doing it, but is it really worth it? And then I, so I came to a point where I had to tell people, you know, the librarian typically who's booked me.

And so, I say in addition to the microphone, and the projector, and the laptop, I now also need a stool. Very often you turn up and there'd be the laptop and the projector and the microphone, but there would be no stool. And it's, you know, then you have to point out that you did actually ask crystal and blah, blah, blah.

So, then it got to the point where I would send the emails saying, and this is why I need a stool to try, and, you know, as I've said upfront, then I am sick and I cannot stand for more than five minutes, you know? So, I need a stool, and then I felt really bad because I just felt like it was a real lack of respect to stand in front of like 500 teenagers.

I used to also realize how much I used to kind of march around the stage left, right, all over the place, desperate to keep their attention. And then I thought you either do this the way you are, or you stop doing it. So, I sat still in a chair and I spoke and I thought, okay, so there's a big chance I won't hold their attention and they'll be bored.

And actually, I found it was completely fine. And you know, there was no longer the ability that I'd had before to put on this act and pretend to be this writer called Marcus Sedgwick, giving this talk about writing. I was just me, this sick guy talking about books in a chair, and I found the events went better.

That being said, I used to make this joke at the start with every talk and say, I'm sorry, I'm sitting down. And it's not because I don't have any lack of, you know, it's not a lack of respect that I have for you. It's nothing to do with, with that. It's just that I have this chronic illness and it prevents me from standing for any great period of time. And then I'd give a little pause and then say it's called laziness and get a big laugh and to kind of diffuse the thing. But then I thought to myself, why am I even bothering to do that? Who's that for really, you know, why do I have to justify that? I need to sit anyway. The only school events I do now are over zoom. So, I'm sitting anyways. So, the question no longer arises.

Rebecca Markwick:

It's like a win-win, I love doing stuff zoom.

Marcus Sedgwick:

Yeah. And for those of us that have access issues, it's made so many things freer for us. More, more accessible.

Rebecca Markwick:

Definitely. Do you find, well, you have been working on a book called All in your Head, I believe, which I've been seeing random updates on your website as it goes.

I think the last update was earlier this year, all about, you know, how for a lot of people with chronic illnesses, that people can't diagnose or it takes an incredibly long time to diagnose people, kind of go, maybe, maybe you're making it up. Maybe there's nothing

wrong with you, which as someone with a chronic illness that took about a decade to get diagnosed, it's really annoying.

So obviously your writing this all out was to help you sort of make sense of it all. When did you decide to try and turn it into a book? If that makes sense?

Marcus Sedgwick:

It was a, I guess it's a classic example of that fact that people often ask you, like why you chose to write certain book. You never choose to write a book. The book chooses you by which, I mean, your unconscious has already decided long before your conscious mind knows that that's what you're going to be working on next.

And I guess I didn't, I, you know, I've been saying for a long time, I was in a really bad rut mentally and physically. I didn't have any, like novel on the go. One day in this time of year about, I don't know, three, four years ago, I just sat down and wrote one sentence. One that opening scene, which happened about five or six months into being ill.

And within two or three months, I had like a first draft of a hundred thousand words about the whole thing. It just, you know, it was a big splurge. The massively frustrating thing about this whole experience is that I have learned one of the conclusions that I come to at the end of this book, which is about, as you say, it's about the experience of becoming chronically ill, of being undiagnosed of no one having an answer for you of the first two doctors that I saw telling me it was all in my head that I was a hypochondriac, that I was faking it, I was making it up.

Of all the weird and wonderful paths that I have gone down all the weird and wonderful therapies that I've tried, which are as funny as they are bleak in some cases out. And it takes diversions into literature. And I say, this is for example, why I was looking at that question of, is it true that writers are sicker than everyone else? Both mentally and physically. And one of the conclusions I come to in the book is basically we don't want to talk about chronic illness, as a society. And the proof of that as being that my agent has been unable to sell this book as a, I mean, she's a wonderful agent is not hurtful at all.

Publishers are just not prepared to go there. And the last rewrite I did of the whole book. I did a kind of long COVID rewrite because I'd written this book long before the pandemic came along and then the pandemic came along. And what I'm going to say next is going to sound arrogant. It isn't meant to at all, right at the beginning of the pandemic, literally I think it was March of last year.

I wrote to six national newspapers, both in the UK and the U S and said, they will be a long form of this illness. And this, this was not an amazing form feature of insight on my part because anyone like me who became sick through getting a virus in Asia, that was what triggered the. Yeah. I mean, it can be triggered by many things, but for many people it's a viral trigger. It was obvious that there'll be some long form of this illness.

There was the same thing happened with SARS, for example. None of them were interested. None of them were interested in this article. I wrote about what would be long COVID. So then I decided to do this book needed a long COVID rewrote to frame it.

The whole book is not about long COVID at all because it's more about this wider issue, which now so many more people are going to experience, you know, the moment they say there are about 25 million people worldwide with ME, but, you know, even taking really conservative figures, that number is just going to absolutely explode in terms of people with long COVID who are going to go to their doctor who are going to be told what would you say if I told you this was only in your head, as my doctor said to me, and yet we still can't find a publisher who has, is brave enough to, you know, print a few thousand copies and see what happened.

So, as I said, this is one of the conclusions I come to, is that the stories we want about illness are I had terminal cancer and I beat it. And here's how I beat it. Or even. You know, my mother had terminal cancer and died, and it was tragic, but, you know, we took away this lovely heart-warming lesson about life in it.

Those are the stories we want. They have some kind of narrative, and they have a resolution. By definition, the simple fact about the chronic undiagnosed illness is there is no resolution and it's too frightening for most people to go now. Unfortunately, there are going to be many more people who won't have the choice of whether they go near this story.

Rebecca Markwick:

And I think there's a, there's a big issue with representation for chronic illness and chronic undiagnosed illness, because so much of what we read, with our empathy is to sort of, we try to see ourselves in literature in order to feel like better people, you know, like you see yourself in a book, things are wonderful.

I have a friend with epilepsy who was a bit... and then read a book last year with an epileptic main character and suddenly went, oh my God, I feel seen, I'm in a book and they'd suddenly just turned that corner. And we're like, it's so important. Why, why are there not more books with, you know, epileptic main characters?

So now they're reading literally everything they can find, which isn't very much to be honest, which, which is sad. And then it's, it's not like there aren't people that would love to read. And who it would help because seeing yourself in literature fiction, nonfiction, somewhere in between, you know, can be so therapeutic for people to, to feel like they're not alone.

And that other people have the same experiences, especially with chronic illnesses where you're not going to get better. You know, it's just a case of living with it. If it's a degenerative chronic illness, then it, you know, it's going to get worse. If you're

undiagnosed, you live in the hope that maybe with a diagnosis, it can be managed or cured to an extent.

I can't. I just can't believe that a publisher hasn't picked up a book by you. You've sold millions of books, Marcus, millions.

Marcus Sedgwick:

I mean, I guess there's just, you know, it kind of does prove the point, the books, as I said, the books we want about illness, are things like Adam Kay's *This is Going to Hurt*. You know, we want those all kind of gossip inside track stories about a junior doctor or, you know, the heroic recovery stories. And this is not a narrative that we are... and it's fear at the end of the day. It's because, you know, being sick as one thing, but the kind of sickness that you've just been describing very well is a whole other level. There we are. I mean, we're still hunting around through some smaller imaginative publishers. I'm still hopeful that we'll find a publisher at some point.

And of course, you know, the timing with the pandemic was not great because everyone just suddenly like didn't know what to do and what their schedules would be. So, I remain optimistic that out there, there is a brave publisher who can take a relatively small punt on it, quite frankly. But, as I said, it is a story that's going to be walking unbidden into many more people's lives very soon.

Rebecca Markwick:

Also, I really have to know when you did your research on whether authors are generally more, sickly, what did you find?

Marcus Sedgwick:

So, it becomes quite a complicated subject and there were two things I wanted to look at and they're the stereotypes of, was looking particularly at writers, but creatives, artists, artistic types in general, because if you go up to most people in the street and say, is it true that creative people are crazy?

Those people would say, yeah. And they would immediately think of, you know, Van Gogh cutting his ear off on blah, blah, blah. But it's much more complicated than that. I spoke to some of the world's leading experts on these subjects, interviewed a few people, a guy called Dr James Kauffman for one, and he discovered this thing called the Sylvia Plath effect.

And the Sylvia Plath effect is that female poets are more likely than the average population to be schizophrenic. But as he himself points out; this is a pretty esoteric finding. You know, he was saying himself is like, don't get carried away with this. This is a niche kind of amusing anecdote at a dinner party finding we're not, it's very different from that to saying creative people are crazy. And for one thing you have to think, what do you mean by a creative person? How are you going to define that? And how are you going to define what a crazy person is? And here I don't mean to offend anyone. You

know, I have full respect for mental health issues. I have my own mental health problems. I'm just using the kind of street parlance for how we perceive these things. I don't mean to insult anyone. Because the DSM, for example, that you know, is the Bible of mental health conditions is a thousand pages long. So, which one of these conditions in this thousand-page Bible are you saying is correlated to, to, and to what form of creativity on what level? You know, so. What James Kauffman is saying is it's one thing to say, okay, a great poet like Sylvia Plath had this particular mental health issue is very different to extrapolate from that to say, I like painting therefore I'm going to commit suicide at some point. But that's where we come into the other thing called the availability heuristic. And that means is because it's so much easier to bring to mind stories of. The dramatic, tragic stories of artists killing themselves, you know, Virginia Woolf walking into the River Ouse with stones in her pockets, or, you know. We forget that Tolstoy died in his old age, peacefully in his sleep. I mean, it was tuberculosis. I think he died of, but anyway, you know, those are the stories that we remember the dramatic horrific ones. And for that reason, we have this automatic bias to make those correlations. And while this is so important is because I've got so many friends who are writers. And I do have a lot of friends who are writers, who like me have mental health problems.

And I've had this conversation, especially with many of them in which they say, yeah, but if I went to therapy and I got cured, you know, will my angels leave if my demons leave me thing. And it's really important that we don't tell this story about mental illness and creativity, because for one thing, any successes you have, you were giving to the demon and saying, well, I only wrote that book because I, you know, have this mental health problem not taking any credit for your own creativity. And secondly, there's probably a lot of people who should be seeking out assistance in some way for their mental health problems, but aren't because they think, oh, well, stop writing and I really need to write. So, it's dangerous in several ways. To come back to what you actually asked me of are writers, more physically sick, I couldn't, this was interesting. If you do the Googling yourself, you will find that all one gazillion articles about the links between mental health and creativity.

I couldn't find any research at all about the links between physical health and creativity, and maybe they're locked in there somewhere. But even for example, there's a, um, a journal that's published by, I think it's Johns Hopkins University, called Literature and Medicine, and you would think of anywhere. And I went through their entire publication history and couldn't find any articles saying, yes, it's true, that writers are physically sicker than the rest of us. The only thing I can find is that it does seem to be the case that there is a link between intelligence and both physical ill health and mental ill health.

And this is, this is pretty out there stuff, but there's some research that goes back to a Polish guy whose name I've forgotten. I'm sorry, who was working in the fifties and sixties, but now other people have picked up more recently, but for example, there was a study of Mensa members. And I always think when you hear those kinds of studies, first of all, you have to ask why someone would want to be a member of Mensa

anyway, if I'm offending anyone again here, it's like, I want to prove that I'm intelligent maybe makes you a certain kind of person in the first place, but leaving that aside, it did seem to be the case that people with high intelligence were more likely to suffer from things like allergies and other physical ailments, and more likely also to suffer from mental health problems, than the average.

So does that mean the creative people are, I guess it depends how you perceive the Venn diagram between creativity and intelligence. And some people say that actually there's quite, you know, some definitions of intelligence work on the fact that there's a high component of creativity. That's what intelligence is.

I didn't get any further than that. At that point, I was just ready to, you know, throw myself off a bridge and I didn't want to dig any, any deeper into that particular avenue at that point.

Rebecca Markwick:

Yeah. I feel, I feel like there's gotta be something from the physical aspect that if you are physically unwell and unable to move very much, one of your outlets that remains is writing and reading.

Even if it's audio, that then gets transcribed by someone that that is something that you can do as opposed to going and playing lacrosse or football or whatever. You can sit in a chair and write or dictate or create stories. Yeah, that's probably correlation rather than causation, but.

Marcus Sedgwick:

No, I mean there's, and this is why it all becomes so hard to unpick.

Are those things that, you know, um, correlation versus causation, but equally on the other hand, you know, I've got two friends who were illustrators who really learned to draw because they had childhood illness and there's a friend of mine who was basically bed bound for a year as a kid. And he learned to draw.

So there, as you say, you're not going to suddenly become a lacrosse player because he was sick in bed for a year, but it might develop other aspects of you. So this stuff is obviously really, really hard to unpick. Um, there's a wonderful essay, just while I think about it, Virginia Woolf wrote this amazing essay called *On Being Ill*. I'm sure some of your listeners already know it. It was published in the *New Criterion Magazine* and the first issue of that, '20 something, '25, '26, '27, sometime around then. And in that essay, it's an amazingly weird fluid piece of writing. It starts quite composed. It ends up very off the map. It's extraordinary thing. And she slightly at the start, she kind of bemoans the lack of, to go back to what you were saying before, the lack of great literature about illness. She was writing this in '27 and the *magic mountain* had been published in 1924, but in German, the English edition didn't come out until '27.

But even before then there probably are some good examples of illness in Dickens, for example, and Tolstoy and I think there is some great world literature, but she was basically making the argument, not as much as you would expect in comparison to stories about love or war or other great human things.

And she also points out something that I've really known to be true. And I don't know if you would agree with this, how limited our vocabulary about illnesses is, compared to the, you know, the myriad of synonyms we might have for aspects of love, or when you started coming to talk to your doctor about illness.

Our language is very limited and very vague, you know, an ache, a pain, a stabbing pain. You know, we really, we struggle around to find I'd never, for example, just to speak about my own situation, I've never been able to adequately describe the way my legs feel to anyone. Nor have I read anyone else's description of this condition that I thought, yeah, that really is how it feels for me.

Whereas you see the great poets. This is why we have the great poets who can talk about, you know, love or anger or friendship or whatever it will beauty and nature and capture it exactly. And I don't know what that means.

Rebecca Markwick:

I feel like sometimes there are flaws in language. That's when sometimes I'm a bit jealous of German because you can just keep putting words together to make one really big word to mean something really, really specific. Whereas over here in English, we're just like, we can't do that. No compound words.

Marcus Sedgwick:

Yeah. Yeah, yeah, no, I wish I could read German.

You know, I've got O-Level German in me and that's from 40 years ago because so much of the writing that ended up coming towards is it is German and not just fiction, but also, you know, I wanted to go back and read a lot of Freud and Jung and it'd be so amazing to read those guys in the original.

Rebecca Markwick:

Do you have a feeling about the sense of escapism that people can get from literature, and that effect on sort of like your personal wellbeing, if you're reading fantasy.

Marcus Sedgwick:

Yeah. So, this might come out, what I'm about to say might come out a bit garbled. So, bear with me because I think on the one hand, yes, I still fully subscribed to the benefits of escapism. Let me make that perfectly plain before we go, you know, books are amazing. That thing that you can do for you, it's absolutely extraordinary and wonderful, and I would never be without it. Equally in writing this book that I can't find

a publisher for, All in your Head, about this kind of memoir thing about illness and other avenues connected to it.

I have become aware of how dangerous stories are. I don't think it's something we ever even think about or talk about. If we look at it from outside briefly, just to give you an example, we know that stories dangerous or books would not be burned by certain regimes. At certain points in history, books are enormously powerful and the people who've have resorted to book burning knew that. They're not just this stupid escapism thing that much of society will try and push modern society particularly tries to just sweep aside. So, books are powerful, and books change the world from time to time. You know, a novel like *Black Beauty* changed Great Britain's opinion of the treatment of horses, which I know is something that you're particularly interested in or a novel like *Uncle Tom's Cabin* had a major impact on the, you know, being, a factor in the origin of the American Civil War and people's attitude to Slavery. So, we know that books are powerful, but what I'm talking about here is the danger of the stories we tell ourselves and, you know, I'm a writer, so I'm not going to try and make a special case for me. I think this applies to all of us. We all tell narratives all the time about all that.

And my narrative broke down in becoming ill. This is what happens to you, there is no longer this story that you're telling yourself about how your life is going to go. It made me painfully aware of the negative stories I've been telling myself all my life, as much as the positive ones and suddenly all that is swept away.

The rug is pulled from under your feet. And I realized that my way forward now involves not telling myself stories and being okay with that.

Rebecca Markwick:

A very important thing to think about.

Marcus Sedgwick:

Well, I think so. And it's still early days. I'm only about a year into this thought, which I think is quite early days because it's as someone who, as I said at the beginning, you know, our whole lives, people like you and me being, you know, about books and reading, but suddenly to realize it's not just about the stories around that, it's the stories that are inside you. And how powerful they are and what happens to you. You know, so if, for example, I say, you know, you are a ballet dancer and you're the definition of your life is dancing and that's taken away from you. What do you do to yourself then? What do you do for yourself then? And equally on a societal level, this is something I've just recently finished a new YA novel and it's about conspiracy theories. Because again, here's the, the stories that we're telling ourselves as societies, and there's an amazing book called *The Sense of an Ending* and here I'm not talking about the novel by is it Julian Barnes or am I imagining...

So, I'm not talking about that. It's a series of essays. That were given at Yale University, I think in the 1960s, by Frank Kermode. And he makes this argument really powerfully in

there, that stories, and I think he gave these lectures in about '54, '56 something time around. So, you know, just a decade after the end of the war.

So, he often comes back to the Holocaust and he's basically saying stories are how the Holocaust is able to happen. Because stories are how we are able to say this group of people are less than human and therefore we can kill them. So, for those of us that believe in the power of stories as good. We also need to remember that there are bad versions of stories.

Rebecca Markwick:

Yeah, on a, on a slightly lighter note. We're rapidly running out of time. This happens when we get good, good discussions going. Is there a book that you think everybody should read that had a powerful impact on you or that you feel like is good for people to improve their feelings of well-being and sense of self in the current climate of life?

Marcus Sedgwick:

I always hesitate because I don't like the verb should and books in the same sentence, you get asked as a writer, you get asked all the time, you know, what should they read? And I always say, I don't know, I don't know you I've just met you at this event. And you know, it's such a personal thing. The books you should read are the ones that you want to read and you have to find out for yourself which those are. That being said you know, I've mentioned *The Magic Mountain* several times. I find it tragic that it's not because it was once really part of the Canon of you know, everyone reads this book, and it isn't anymore. And yet it's still so relevant. You know, it's set just before the First World War in this Europe is about to tear itself to pieces.

It's about questions of knowing and unknowing it's about questions of, are we sick or are we not sick? It's also very, I was surprised it's a very witty, clever, funny book. I wasn't expecting it to be so humorous in a dry way, full of irony and full of wonderful characters that, you know, even after seven readings, I weep buckets and I laugh.

And so, there's a book that I am just always trying to bring back into... but it's a huge commitment. That book is 800 pages long. So, you know, you need to be prepared to, and I don't find many people love it as much as I do. I have to say, but yeah, overall, I just think we should never say should about books because, you know, it's the worst thing to do. You know, we all go around pretending that we've all read all of Shakespeare and all the Dickens. And as a writer, you have to pretend that you have, because if you admit that you haven't people think you can't be a proper writer and it's all nonsense, you know, that's not what it should be.

I'm saying should now.

Rebecca Markwick:

We shall reframe it as Marcus recommends this book as being a fabulous book, that everyone can go and have a, have a look at if they so wish. Thank you very much, Marcus. It's been an absolute pleasure.

Marcus Sedgwick:

Thank you for having me. It's been absolute great fun to speak with you, thank you.

Rebecca Markwick:

I hope you enjoyed this episode with Marcus Sedgwick. One of my all-time favourite young people's authors in case you didn't guess from all the excitement at the beginning and throughout that episode. I think a lot of the points that he raised a super, super important and ones that the publishing industry does need to take into consideration and as writers and readers to think about the power of stories and when they can be used for good and bad and hopefully try and have them used for good more, more than bad. I would also second Marcus' recommendation of that book that he mentioned throughout the whole episode. It is fabulous. And we all love a bit of German literature.

All the books and authors that Marcus mentioned will be in the show notes for you all. Our transcript this week is by Nat Balch, thank you very much. Thanks, as always, to Nicholas Patrick from music and do go check us out on Twitter at shelf underscore healing. We have a new bod on the Twitter account Mia Dakin. She's doing a fabulous job and she's linking loads of cool stuff. So do go and check that out.