

Prof John Mullan Shelf Healing Interview

Rebecca: [00:00:00] Before we start, if you could say your first and last name to make sure I pronounce it right. And if you'd like to give pronouns, give pronouns, that'd be great.

John: [00:00:11] Hi, my name's John Mullan.

Rebecca: [00:00:16] Hello and welcome to Shelf Healing, UCL's bibliotherapy podcast. I'm your host, Rebecca Markwick. Our guest today is Professor John Mullen. Professor Mullan gained his PhD at Cambridge and was a Research Fellow and Lecturer at Cambridge colleges before moving to UCL in 1994, he has been a Professor since 2005 and in 2016 was appointed Lord Northcliffe Chair of Modern English Literature. He was a judge for the 2009 Booker Prize and has written on contemporary fiction for *The Guardian*.

He's a specialist in 18th century literature and is currently writing a book, the Oxford English Literary History, which covers the period of 1709 to 1784. John has also got a large interest in Jane Austen and has published books on Austen and Dickens. Well, the first question to get us started is nice and easy. Do you feel that reading is therapeutic?

John: [00:01:06] Well, I've been troubled by this question ever since you asked me Rebecca ,

Rebecca: [00:01:15] I thought you might be

John: [00:01:17] because I suppose I've always thought that in a way all reading was therapeutic, but there was no reading which was sort of more or less therapeutic because I guess reading literature anyway, which is what mostly I do, in a way takes you out of your own life, makes you less self-centered, I suppose. So that even if it's ringing bells or twanging chords or bringing alive something that you think is familiar to you, it's doing it in a way that makes you share it with another imagination and other personal, maybe many other imaginations and persons, and therefore, if it's good writing, I think tends to make you less, self-centered I suppose. So in that way, you know, it, it, it should all be therapeutic and even the books which have upsetting or tragic material in them, at least take you out of yourselves and, but I was reading your email and I was thinking nah but that's not what Rebecca means. I can't come Shelf Healing and say, reading *King Lear* is therapeutic. Or reading *Jude the Obscure* is therapeutic because those are two examples of wonderful, tragic literary works and they do sort of shake and devastate you, cause they're supposed to. So for this exercise, I have tried to kind of think of literature, which I find either sort of consoling or escapist, or having a tendency to make life seem better than it is. Rather than to awaken you to all that is most shuddering and tragic.

Rebecca: [00:03:17] Yes. I recently interviewed Professor Kiernan Ryan from Royal Holloway on Shakespeare and he went straight in with the tragedies are the most therapeutic, so it's

John: [00:03:29] Yeah, well there is of course, but he's right in a way he's right in a way that the ancient Greeks were right to think that there is a thing called catharsis. And I really believe that and that therefore reading or even better seeing *Hamlet* or *Oedipus Rex* does cleanse you and purge you. I think they're absolutely right. And I think if I may be

controversial for a second, some of our some critics and some of our and some students are wrong to think of literature as sort of awakening bad things which, which traumatize you. I think the great literature can be about traumatic material, but is not in itself problematic.

It's the opposite. So if Kiernan had a Shelf healing session which was entirely tragedies, I would defer to him. I think that is one way of looking at it, you know, and the, the, the sort of alcoholic, bum, shambolic, womanizing, LA poet, and writer, Charles Bukowski. It was kind of an interesting man or not always a very good person, but he summed it up.

He said, without literature, life is hell. So, you know, one of the one of the works of literature that I can't read in its original language, but which I find most sort of absorbing and ennobling really is, Dante's *Inferno*, which is about hell! It's about hell and torment but it doesn't make you tormented and it doesn't make you think you live in hell.

It's a wonderful sort of vindication of the human imagination and the human spirit. So the book I haven't chosen tragic and hellish books, but I respect those who do.

Rebecca: [00:05:30] What kind of books do you reach for then when you want to.

John: [00:05:34] I suppose I have the two things that you mentioned at the beginning of this I've written about, which is best to get shot of right away, because otherwise, you know, I won't, they'll just be lying in wait for us, which are my two favorite novelists.

And they're the two novelists that I've most recently written books about are great places to go to, not just soothe the soul, but actually to remind you how absurd life is rather than how terrible. And that's Jane Austen and Charles Dickens. I think lots of people find Jane Austen therapeutic, but actually I find it so not because, not because of the reasons that sort of say I dunno, some journalists might sometimes think that, you know, oh, it's a lovely ordered safe world, and everybody wears muslin and talks properly and has tea parties because actually that inherited TV film version of Jane Austen is in some ways, not at all true to the books.

Jane Austen doesn't bother describing how people look, let alone what their clothes are like, or, and she doesn't really describe their houses or their gardens very much - a bit in *Mansfield Park*, but not really in the others. But, but if it's therapeutic it's because she seems to me that the greatest of all novelists in her small domain, because she makes you as clever and perceptive as she is while you're reading.

And so she sort of alerts and electrifies all your faculties. And she says she doesn't, she said somewhere that she doesn't write for people who have not a great deal of ingenuity themselves. And while you're reading, you have all our ingenuity and unfortunately then you put the book down, and you realise it was a borrowed ingenuity.

You're not as perceptive as her. So she writes beautiful elegant sentences. Yes. Hardly a bum sentence in the whole of Austen. But almost everyone has sort of, I don't know how to describe it. Dazzling, spinning little lives inside. And you can see that, or you can, you know, glide past it, but she wants you to see it. And that makes her kind of wonderfully absorbing writer to read.

Takes you out of yourself and then Dickens my other favorite completely the opposite in some ways, great baggy copious plentiful, millions of characters, strands of subplots, but also a writer who in a different way, every sentence is a pleasure. But with Dickens, it's usually fireworks rather than witty elegance.

But I guess the thing about him, which is so, to be recommended to anybody, is that he's terribly, terribly funny. I think often funny when he shouldn't be, you know, so he makes you laugh when you shouldn't laugh, which I think is the core of most sort of great humor. And anybody listing those, just try going in the opening chapter of *Dombey and Son*, which is a tragic deathbed. And the child Florence Dombey's mother is dying having given birth to a baby. Her father, the stern hard-hearted Mr. Dombey can't even express affection to his wife, but she's dying. So this baby is doomed to be motherless from the word go. And it's, it's a Victorian deathbed. And it is really sad, but also meanwhile, interwoven with this, Mr Dombey because he's rich has hired these Harley Street doctors, and they're only, they only wait upon the aristocracy usually.

And they're blundering around. They keep getting Mrs. Dombey's name wrong. Cause they can't understand that she's not a duchess. And then there's an attendant nurse who's so terrified of Mr. Dombey that everything she says is phrased as a question because she doesn't have the courage to make a statement.

So she gives even her own name in the interrogative. And it's terribly, terribly funny because this is happening at such a sad moment. Not despite, but because, and it's just a little example, but I think, yeah, Dickens because of all great novelists, he's the funniest.

Rebecca: [00:10:16] It's that weird juxtaposition isn't it between what should be, especially in Dickens, what should be very sad is actually quite witty.

And then you feel a little bit bad that you're laughing.

John: [00:10:28] Absolutely. And not just what, what, what should be sad sometimes what is frightening. So the opening chapter of *Great Expectations*, which if you see it in you know, film or TV versions is always frightening. The scene in the graveyard where the eight year old Pip meets the escaped convict on this bleak and lonely evening. But actually, as narrated in the book, it's also funny because, you know, we see it through the childish eyes and there's a, there's a, there's a gibbet out on the marshes where pirates used to be hanged and the child thinks that, um, that you know, that the convict is, is going back to hanging himself back up on the gibbet and the cows look at him and think so too. It there's a comedy with the horror too. And that's what he's so brilliant at.

Rebecca: [00:11:20] Definitely. Is there a book in all of your life that has profoundly affected you?

John: [00:11:27] I think there is. I think in a way, the one that affects me most. Lots and lots of books profoundly affect me, but one that really has shaped my life actually is *Tristram Shandy* by Laurence Sterne. Which is this wonderful sort of eight mid 18th century it's published in the 1760s in installments.

And it's a sort of. It's an autobio fictional autobiography of Tristram Shandy. Full title: The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman. But Tristram the narrator who shares a lot in common with Lawrence Sterne who invented him, sits down and tries to write his life. And as soon as he starts to write, he starts thinking, oh, well, what as we all do.

.So where do I start? David Copperfield starts at the moment of David Copperfield's birth, actually, Tristram Shandy more accurately starts at the moment of Tristram's conception. And for your shockable listeners, I can tell you the very moment of his conception. And it, then it goes backwards to explain how he could possibly know about the moments of his conception and who his father was and his uncle and what weird eccentrics they were.

And, um, and you get to. It takes, you know, uh, two or three volumes of the book for Tristram even to get born. And it's amazingly digressive mock learned also very funny, very, very clever book, which is written by this obscure eighteenth century clergyman who'd never written a novel before. Brilliantly uses all sorts of experimental typography to kind of reproduce things that words can't say. It's got blank pages and black pages. Somebody dies. The page goes black. Uh, a beautiful woman enters. I'm not sure I can describe it. Here is a blank page, fill it with your own description description, a man waves a stick in the air to indicate the freedom that comes from being unmarried and you get the twirl at the end of the stick on the page, it's all sorts of extraordinary things going on.

And if it had been published in the 20th century it would have been called the most experimental Modernist novel in history, but it was published in the middle of the 18th century. And it's a book which got me into academia, I'm afraid Rebecca, it's a book, but more specifically it's the book, which made me realize that the 18th century was an incredible place where people were cleverer funnier and more audacious than any of us that ever managed.

Rebecca: [00:14:10] I think similar publication time, I may be wrong, it's a long time since I studied my undergraduate, but there's that wonderful book, *The Confessions of an English Opium Eater* which is,

John: [00:14:19] oh yes, that's slightly later.

Rebecca: [00:14:23] Yes. Great title for a book. That's wild. But yes. As a Professor of Literature, do you find this has affected the way in which you can read in a therapeutic manner? Does that critical analyst in you ever fade away into the background? Or?

John: [00:14:38] That's a good question. I don't think it does actually in a way. I mean, I think that, you know, the novelist Vladimir Nabokov said, you, you know, he said, you enjoy by which he meant, he enjoyed, you enjoy a book more if you see how it works. Now, you know, everybody will feel that, but I feel that.

So, so for instance, you know, I, I found myself during lockdown reading, you know what you might call very escapist, some very escapist books. Cause I mean, we weren't going out, we weren't doing anything. I got bored with TV. So actually I did, I think like quite a lot of people, I think during the pandemic lockdown, I read a lot more just for fun or diversion than I would normally.

And amongst other things I read, I enjoyed detective novels, who done it thrillers. So I sort of read some Agatha Christie and PD James and, but when I read those, I mean Agatha Christie, I really enjoy Christie. But as I read it, the pleasure for me is that although it's stylistically not particularly wonderful and it's psychologically, quite simple, you know, it's not *Middlemarch*. However, the plotting is really clever and the use of sort of, yeah, the plotting in particular I find I'm fascinated by her use of chronology of time and dates, because of course, usually it's a Poirot. He'll always be saying, so what time did this happen?

Can you remember what time it was? Because it's all about timing her novels. And I can't help, but be switched on to that. I can't, couldn't help when I was reading some of these novels thinking, oh, I can use that in my, my lecture on sorts of chronology and modern fiction or something, you know? So I'm afraid I'm a bit like that.

And I think when you, when I read, let's call them thrillers or, or detective novels. I think I do slightly read them as a literary critic and that's why I enjoy them. I read in during lockdown, a new writer to me who just, I read cause she was a friend of a friend, um, Sabine Durrant to be thriller by her called um, Lie, is it? *Lie With Me*.

I think it's called. And it's about a man who's a congenital liar. But who tricks his way into a relationship. And of course, you know, he is being tricked because, you know, from the cover, what kind of book it says. Yeah. Yeah. That thing it's you get the same thing when you're watching *Line of Duty* on TV, you're playing in a way a game with the author of this, you're guessing, or trying to out guess them in the ways they've used the convention of the, of the thriller.

And I really enjoy that. And I think that's quite an analytical enjoyment. Even when I'm reading things I'm never going to teach these things very much, but, you know, when I read P D James who done its, I don't think she's a great writer, but she's a very enjoyable, writer because she invites you in to play the game of clues spotting with her.

Rebecca: [00:18:04] I think that's a particular draw isn't it to the thriller crime genre is a good writer like you say maybe isn't the greatest stylist. But they, they engage you, they draw you into the novel and make you kind of a part of that, working it out. Will it be a shock, will you guess before the end, will you guess correctly. Which I think is really lovely when you are reading sort of for fun, like you said, that's a great journey to go on.

John: [00:18:30] Yeah, and actually, it's a pleasure, which isn't, it is there in some great literature, you know? Um, so if you read perhaps my favorite thing, favorite novel of all time, I've just done a new edition of it. Jane Austen's *Emma*. I don't know if I should spoil it for those benighted individuals haven't yet ready, but anyway, almost all the novel seen through the eyes of the main character, Emma, although it's told in the third person, it's not told in her voice, but it's seen through her very limited and often self deceived, uh, vision of things. And there's another story going on between two of the other characters, which if it had been a different novel they might've been the main characters.

And when you read it for the first time you haven't seen the film or the TV version, or if nobody's told you. The first time reader. And I know this is the case because one of my

daughters, did this. Won't guess, they won't guess, and to a certain revealing point what's been going on between these two characters.

But the second time you read it, you can see all the clues are there, but you like Emma were too blind to notice. And actually that detective story, write I referred to PD James once gave a rather entertaining talk that I heard in which she treated *Emma* as if it exactly was that who done it a detective novel, you know, and it works perfectly as that.

So that kind of pleasure in clue spotting, isn't just limited to detection novels I think.

Rebecca: [00:20:14] Definitely. And you've said you love *Emma* are there any books that you kind of return to over and over again like a comfort food?

John: [00:20:25] Yeah. I mean, I've been thinking about that and I mean, there is one which is a big one for me and I'm hesitating slightly because I know it's a book that some people, to me bizarrely, say they find really, you know, uh, uh, hard or daunting, um, you know, one of those books, one of those great big books that people you know, like *Moby Dick* or *The Magic Lantern* people think they should have read, but as soon as they tried to read it, you know, they get bogged down and that, and yet to me, it's nothing like that.

And that's George Elliot's *Middlemarch* and it does have long sentences, some long sentences, but so does something else I find wonderful, Proust *A la recherche du temps perdu*, but I, I have a difference being I, my French isn't really good enough to read the Proust in French. I read it in English. I mean, I can read a bit in French, but I have to really read it in English where the long sentences are translations of French long sentences.

Whereas *Middlemarch* is long sentences are all just as George Eliot meant them. But actually I find it, perhaps I'm just used to it and I've read it lots of times and I return to it uh, exactly in order to become totally absorbed. I mean, quite often I returned to cause I have to reread it because I'm teaching it or something, and that's a happy. That's my happy fate I guess of my job. Whenever I do, I just I'm completely sucked into this, the length of the sentences, the length of the book is part of the point. You're part of a community of people and that famous George Eliott thing that, um, you know, there's lots of centers, there's lots of centers of consciousness in the book.

So, um, it's not just a story of one person. There is at least sort of seven or eight main characters whose fates are equally important. And their stories are kind of elaborately entangled in this place, Middlemarch, this imagined place. And, um, you know, Virginia Woolf famously said it was, you know, the only novel for grownup people.

And by which I think she meant something like. No, no, there are no villains, no heroes or heroines. Everybody is to use a word I use far too often in life: complicated. Everybody's complicated, and there's room for endless psychological subtlety and contradiction. And it's absolutely wonderful. Um, and it's not all happy at all.

There's comedy in it. And there's, there's some, there's a sort of happy ending for one of the main characters. But, but because it's George Eliott, it's about ordinary people's lives, so

even tragedy is muted or qualified and, you just inhabit other people's lives in a way that I think no other novel that I've come across makes you do.

Maybe Tolstoy does it a bit, and you know, something like *Anna Karenina*. Um, but yeah, maybe those, those two *Anna Karenina* is tragic. Whereas *Middlemarch* is about a kind of life that anybody can recognize.

Rebecca: [00:24:03] Yeah, I managed *Middlemarch* once and I have not tackled, I haven't had the courage to go at it again, because like you said, it's so engaging.

I'm a multiple book at one time reader. So you cannot do that with *Middlemarch* because *Middlemarch* itself is like you said, there's seven or eight characters with their own different stories that are entangled. That takes up all of your brain space. For me, at least I can't be reading *Middlemarch* and seven other works.

I'd have to read *Middlemarch* all in one.

John: [00:24:32] That's no, that's very true. I agree. I think you absolutely have to, you need to take it on and perhaps at a time when you're actually able to give it a good old hour or two every day, rather than just 10 minutes, while you fall asleep.

Rebecca: [00:24:46] You've written lots of books and we've talked about some of them. Do you find that writing is therapeutic? And if you do, you can say no, if you do, is it in a similar way as when you read things or is it a different type of therapeutic

John: [00:24:59] Ahhhh is writing therapeutic? I think, I think I've, I do find it so. I mean, first of all, because if I'm writing something, which is, especially if it's going to have to be published.

It's incredibly absorbing you have to really concentrate. So suddenly three hours have gone. And you didn't give a single thought to whatever it was that was upsetting or worrying you before you sat down. So whatever was upsetting worry or worrying you hasn't gone away, but it went away for that time and perhaps that's therapeutic.

But also yeah, I enjoy, I enjoy writing. And when I, now I hesitate to say this hubristic, but I'll try it anyway. When I started off in my academic career, I probably wrote things in order to try to impress people to get them to give me jobs really. I mean, that's, that's what you do when you're young, academic and you know, you're looking for your next job or for promotion or whatever it is.

And I don't do that anymore. And I write, I mean, the last two books I've written on Austen and on Dickens were, I hope they were reasonably scholarly, but they were designed to be readable. And I hope enjoyable even by people who just like Austen and Dickens they don't have to be students. They don't have to have exams, let alone be doing PhDs.

And these weren't books, which are particularly aimed to other academics either in fact, I was reconciled with the fact that some, of my some, other academics might find quite irritating. Um, because they're very cause they're designed to be readable. And, um, so that is quite an, that is enjoyable. And in that sense, possibly, yes, therapeutic because I'm

writing to share my enjoyment of the, the writers I'm writing about and and I'm trying to do that in my own writing, you know, and not always successfully, but, but, but that's what I tried to do. So yeah, I think, I, I think that I feel better after I've done if it's worked, if I think it's worked.

Rebecca: [00:27:29] Yeah. You've written many books on specific authors and their works, as we've mentioned, Austen and Dickens most recently.

Do you find that the research reading that goes into that is therapeutic at all, or is it a very different experience when you're reading for research as opposed to reading for pleasure?

John: [00:27:48] I think it depends what kind of research it is. I think reading other academic criticism, which perhaps isn't really what I would call research is often gruesome.

Not always. Um, but it's, if you're tapping into a writer who shares your own enthusiasm, but knows more than you, that's great. But a lot of academic literary criticism is really badly written, I think. And that's taken me a while to sort of, to, to realize that. And I'd include some of the things I wrote in my early my career.

So that aspect of research isn't particularly enjoyable. But for instance, when I was writing my Dickens book, I did quite a lot. I spend quite a lot of time looking at the manuscripts of some of Dickens's novels and which are mostly in Art Library of the Victoria and Albert Museum. Um, and which he preserved quite carefully and left his friend, John Fausto left them to the museum.

And that is quite sort of quite hard work. The manuscripts are very difficult to decipher and that's one of the reasons you have to look at them in the flesh as it were, because if you look at them online, you really just can't see them at all. However, good your screen. However, pixelated, however minutely pixelated. But I did.

Yeah. That is really absorbing, cause you're sort of, you're watching genius in action really. Gosh, if only we had Jane Austen's manuscripts, but anyway, or Shakespeare's manuscripts, but we got Dickens is almost a lots of them. And so that is, yeah, that's absolutely fascinating and pleasurable. Hmm.

Rebecca: [00:29:50] And as a Professor at UCL, you look at quite a wide range of eras of novel.

Do you ever approach these differently, depending on when they were written, do you go for those 18th century novels with a slightly different more, as you said earlier, that they're brilliantly modern and experimental and enjoyable. When you're then looking at modern, contemporary novel. Do you, do you come at it with a, kind of a different frame of mind that perhaps affects how you read?

John: [00:30:16] Yes I suppose I do, I suppose I do come at it with a different frame of mind. But it's very, it's difficult for me, I think to analyze it because I'm so used to I'm so used to say reading books from the past and in mine, in my academic work, I mostly read books from before the 20th century or the 21st century. So I'm lucky in a way I don't get, I think I'm lucky

that I'm used to being able to perhaps to sometimes see my way round preoccupations that writers had because of the times they lived in maybe.

And I'm aware of it sometimes when I'm teaching undergraduates who have to be helped not to judge writers. Always by standards of, you know, the standards of their own day. But then equally, when I read, when I read novelists who are writing now, perhaps I am less forgiving. If they are. If they resort to certain stereotypes about people from particular classes or women or particular countries, or, you know, it's much less easy to put up with when the novelists had every reason to be more enlightened.

So, uh, I think, I mean, yeah, perhaps I'm more tolerant and forgiving when I read books written in the past.

Rebecca: [00:32:01] And to finish off what has been a wonderful chat. Is there a specific piece of writing or book or academic essay or anything that you would recommend to people that you think is sort of, brilliant to go for for reading, for pleasure, for fun, for enjoyment.

John: [00:32:19] I'll tell you why I tell you what I would recommend. Partly because those listening to this might not have otherwise thought of it. Okay. Cause it's probably. I'm not going to recommend a bit of Jane Austen or Dickens cause everybody knows they're really very, very good. And I'm, I'm not gonna recommend, you know, uh, we've talked mostly about novels.

I'm not gonna recommend famous poems that people might already have read.. But I recommend two things. Am I allowed to have two? Yes. The first is sort of my favorite poem. Um, because we talked all almost entirely, I think about novels, and actually, I think a lot of people find poetry therapeutic and there's one great poem, which is perhaps daunting in the way that *Middlemarch* is, but which combines the sort of absorbing ness of a great novel, with the beauty and eloquence of, you know, words that are highest pitch that you get from poetry. And I know it can't just be me because it's my wife's favorite poem as well. And that's Wordsworth's *The Prelude*. And it's weird that I love that so much because perhaps rather like *Moby Dick*, it's one of those rare examples of a great, great work of literature, which doesn't have any humor in it.

Pretty much no humor, which is usually a bad sign. But anyway, a poem about, the poet's youth and childhood, but actually about all our childhoods and about the activity of memory and how strange it is, how we remember some things and not others and how we're shaped and formed by memory and it's just absolutely wonderful.

And you only have to read the first 50 lines. And if you're not hooked well, I'm sorry for you. The other thing, when it comes to novels, I might recommend something. A writer I've read a lot, so I've been lock down and I've actually been sort of reading my way through her complete works because I realized how few of them I read or could remember reading.

And also this is a novelist who writes very short novels so most of them are about 150 pages long. So, you know, you can think, oh, I'm going to read another of her novels today almost.

And that's Muriel Spark. And I thought a lot about whether I should mention her in this conversation because in one way, she's not therapeutic.

She's a merciless writer, she's not a kind writer. And, it's not cruel, but a merciless one. She writes brilliantly about human vanities and weaknesses and how human beings prey upon each other in very ordinary circumstances. But she, like Jane Austen, makes you as sharp-eyed as she is while she's, while you're reading.

And for me, it's been a real rediscovery and the last year reading her novels, they're very, some of them very odd and experimental. And I'm just wondering how I thought she was this rather genteel Scottish lady when she writes the most daring and weird kinds of narrative, but read a novel like *Girls of Slender Means* or *Symposium* and you'll see what a virtue mercilessness in a novelist can be..

Rebecca: [00:35:54] Brilliant. Well, I will pop links to your most recent book to all of the books that we've mentioned to these lovely recommendations. I'll pop those in the show notes. Thank you very much for a very entertaining and lively discussion. It's fabulous.

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