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Classics, illness narratives, or fantasy?

Literature selection in bibliotherapy

Abstract

What kinds of fictional literature are most suitable for use in bibliotherapy? And what functions may reading and talking about this literature serve for those participating in a bibliotherapeutic reading group? These questions are highly relevant to researchers who carry out scholarly studies and to librarians who work with bibliotherapy in practice. However, very little empirical research has been conducted from a participant perspective. The aim of this study is to deepen the knowledge of these questions by examining them in relation to a bibliotherapeutic reading group for women with feelings of sadness after giving birth.

The material used in the study consists of participant observations of ten group meetings and in-depth interviews with the participants. The analysis shows that participants benefited most from reading and discussing genres that have not traditionally been used for bibliotherapy, such as fantasy and realistic fiction that thematize issues other than the participants' own problems or health concerns. Some of the bibliotherapeutic functions highlighted by participants can be discerned in recent user-centered research, while others, such as the intellectual function, are quite new. This study contributes new knowledge as it problematizes notions of literature selection found in previous research and presents new functions of bibliotherapy. It is thus highly relevant to both researchers and librarians. Additional similar studies that are more extensive should be carried out to further broaden knowledge of literature selection bibliotherapy.

Keywords: bibliotherapy, librarians, public libraries, library service, fiction, poetry, qualitative research

Background and aims

Bibliotherapy is a form of therapy that has become widespread across large parts of the world in recent decades (Pettersson 2020; Tukhareli, 2014). It involves using literature to promote health, well-being or personal growth, often specified as mental health or mental well-being (Hynes and Hynes-Berry 2012). Selected literature may comprise fiction (creative bibliotherapy) or self-help literature (self-help bibliotherapy) (Brewster 2009). Bibliotherapy can be practiced individually (reading bibliotherapy) or in groups of at least two people (interactive bibliotherapy) (Hynes and Hynes-Berry 2012). Interactive bibliotherapy has several similarities with Shared Reading, which can be defined as reading aloud in a group. Just as in interactive bibliotherapy, the joint reading is discussed by the participants and the leader in Shared Reading (Skjerdingsstad et al 2022). However, an important difference between Shared Reading and bibliotherapy is that Shared Reading has its roots in a reading promotion activity, whose original ambition was to make accessible canonized literature for people who were not seasoned readers or university educated (Farrington 2014). Even though many contemporary studies of Shared Reading groups report good effects on the health and well-being on the participants (e.g. Billington et al. 2010; Billington et al. 2013), the purpose of this method is not usually pronounced therapeutic.

Those who work with bibliotherapy are primarily people in health and information-related professions, such as librarians and social workers (Zanal Abidin, Shaifuddin and Wan Moad Saman 2023). Primarily in the United Kingdom, recent research studies have examined librarians' work with bibliotherapy and what needs to be done to develop and improve this work (Brewster 2008, 2009, 2013). Research in bibliotherapy is also characterized by studies that use both quantitative and qualitative methods to investigate whether and how various bibliotherapeutic interventions can lead to improved health or improved well-being for a variety of target groups (e.g. Brewster 2011; Galvin and Montgomery 2017; Hodge, Robson and Davis 2007; Montgomery and Manders 2015; Noordin, Husaini and Shuhidan 2015; Walwyn and Rowley 2011).

The kind of bibliotherapy discussed in this article is creative, interactive bibliotherapy. A question at the forefront in research on this type of bibliotherapy is which literature is best suited for use in bibliotherapy practice. This question is of the utmost importance to librarians because they need to be well-versed in what characterizes such literature in order to be able to work with bibliotherapy as effectively as possible. However, it is a question that has not been empirically investigated to any great extent. Instead, previous research has often assumed that certain genres, especially classics or literature depicting the same kind of problems the participants in a specific bibliotherapy context are themselves facing, are suitable literature for bibliotherapy (Magaji 2016; Shechtman 2009). Various theoretical models have also been developed to select literature based on literary qualities, rather than on users' response to literature (Hynes and Hynes-Berry 2012; Pehrson and McMillan 2005). In a recent study, the Swedish researcher Kerstin Rydbeck examines the choice of literature within Shared Reading, but from a leader's perspective and not a participant's perspective (Rydbeck 2022).

To the extent that research has taken an interest in the impact of literature on participants in interactive bibliotherapy, it has mainly concerned investigating the effects of one specific genre, for example how educational comics, have influenced feelings and attitudes towards health conditions (McNicol 2017). This study takes a broader approach to literature and examines how a wider range of fiction – including illness narratives, realistic short stories and novels, fantasy, and poetry – is perceived by participants in a bibliotherapeutic intervention for women with feelings of sadness and anxiety after giving birth. It thus focuses on the participants' experiences of engaging with these genres and not on researchers' or librarians' ideas about these genres' bibliotherapeutic potential. Consequently, this study uses empirical data to describe what characterizes bibliotherapeutic-

appropriate literature from a participant perspective. This approach has been sought by scholars such as Liz Brewster, one of the leading names in bibliotherapy research in the United Kingdom (2011; 2013). The study aims to contribute in-depth knowledge of suitable literature for bibliotherapy to enable librarians and others who work with bibliotherapy to make more well-founded selections of literature in the future. A further aim is to investigate what specific functions the selected literature and the discussions about it had for participants in the study. In traditional bibliotherapy, fiction has often been used to achieve identification and insight or to deal with a concrete problem (Shrodes 1978; Hynes and Hynes-Berry 2012; Shechtman 2009). But, as psychologist Jonathan Detrixhe so aptly writes, fiction should lend itself to a much broader field of use in bibliotherapy (Detrixhe 2010). By examining the statements given by the women in this study about what reading and talking about literature meant to them, I intend to examine whether one can discern the kind of broader field of use as mentioned by Detrixhe. This issue is also highly relevant to both researchers and librarians because it clarifies what claims can be made about bibliotherapeutic interventions and what functions bibliotherapy may serve.

Theoretical starting points

The study takes its theoretical starting point in the user-centered bibliotherapy that has emerged in the twenty-first century, especially Brewster's research on bibliotherapy reading groups in the United Kingdom (2011). Brewster distinguishes four different functions that bibliotherapy had for the participants in her studies: emotive bibliotherapy, meaning that reading and talking about literature led to catharsis, empathy and insight; escapist bibliotherapy and social bibliotherapy, which instead involves relaxation and opportunities to take a break from everyday life; and informative bibliotherapy, which involves gaining in-depth knowledge of one's problem or circumstances in life (Brewster 2011). Several of the other user-centered studies carried out around the same time or shortly after Brewster's have also drawn attention to the health-promoting potential of escapist and social bibliotherapy (Walwyn and Rowley 2011; Pettersson 2016). These studies and Brewster's have reflected on what literature has been used, and thus can be said to have contributed positive bibliotherapeutic effects. Examples of the genres discussed are fantasy, historical fiction, crime fiction, chick-lit and feel-good literature. British scholar Emily Troscianko emphasizes in her study on people with eating disorders that fiction that depicts eating disorders had a negative impact on participants' well-being, while fiction with other themes instead had positive impact (2018). Her research thus disputes the traditional notion that literature depicting the same problems that participants themselves are preoccupied with is always the most suitable literature for bibliotherapy.

Thus, the decision to include a broader spectrum of genres than just classics and realistic fiction in the present study relies on findings from user-centered research. This study seeks to test both the observations of this research into the bibliotherapeutic potential of different literary genres, as well as the previously prevailing notion that the most suitable literature is realistic fiction depicting the same problems that the participants in bibliotherapy are themselves preoccupied with. It can therefore be said to be of an exploratory nature.

Material and method

The group leader

The material on which this study is based consists of interviews and participant observations of all ten sessions of a bibliotherapy reading group for women with feelings of sadness after giving birth. The sessions were carried out in Gothenburg, Sweden's second largest city, in collaboration with Folkuniversitetet in Gothenburg, Gothenburg's House of Literature, and the Swedish Arts Council. Since there is no training to become a bibliotherapist in Sweden, the program was led by a trained psychologist. The reason why this particular psychologist was hired was her previous experiences in

working with both art and literature. Besides being a psychologist, she was also an artist herself and she had taken several university courses in Comparative literature. Thus, she was deemed especially suited as a leader for the group. In collaboration with the researcher, she designed the reading group activities and selected the literature used in the group. The researcher, who carried out the observations and the interviews, was a literary scholar with several years of experience in researching bibliotherapy.

The selected literature

The selected literature that the participant read and discussed consisted of short stories, poems and excerpts from novels. In line with the inspiration drawn from user-centered bibliotherapy, these literary works were chosen from many different literary genres. There were examples of realistic illness narratives, portraying a situation in life that had similarities to the women's own life, that is, the experience of feeling low after having a child, such as Lotta Lindeborg's *En mekanisk mamma* [A mechanical mother] (2012). There was also realistic fiction in which motherhood was thematized without foregrounding the state of mind or the early childhood years, for example, Inger Edelfeldt's short story "Slutspel" [Endgame] (2017). In this study, the term realistic fiction is used in the broad sense it has in Comparative literature and refers to fiction depicting reality as we perceive it through our senses and interpret it with our reason. In other words, the term refers to fiction that does not contain any magical elements.

Some of the selected realistic works, however, depicted worlds and situations that could be expected to be quite different from the women's own lives, such as Bodil Malmsten's *The Price of Water in Finistère* (2006), about a 50-year-old single woman who leaves her life in Sweden and moves to France. Several of the short stories and novel excerpts in the selection had characteristics of fantasy, such as Tove Jansson's short story "The PE Teacher's Death" (1987), Marie Hermanson's "Det finns ett hål i verkligheten" [There is a hole in reality] (1986) and Anna-Karin Palms "Prags klockor" [The Bells of Prague] (1992). More specifically, they were examples of "low fantasy", that is stories set in a world similar to ours, but that has magical elements (Zahorski & Boyer 1982). One of the narratives, Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892), can be read as an illness narrative with magical elements. The selected poems consisted of formally structured lyric poetry, free verse, and conceptual poetry. Examples of the first are Karin Boye's "On the move" and "I want to meet...", (1927) and of the last, Ulf Karl Olov Nilsson's "Det är inte förbjudet" [It is not forbidden] and "Min sanning" [My truth] (2011). For a complete list of the literature used, see Appendix 1.

The design of the group sessions

Each session followed the same arrangement. It began with a warm-up exercise which consisted of a conversation about a reproduction of a work of art that the group leader had chosen and copied for distribution at each meeting. Using a warm-up exercise is quite a common way to open sessions of creative interactive bibliotherapy (Pettersson 2020). The purpose of this exercise was to stimulate a free conversation about the artwork and the thoughts and associations it aroused and, in this way, make the participants more comfortable before they began to read and discuss the selected literature.

After the warmup exercise, the actual bibliotherapy began. In creative interactive bibliotherapy as well as in Shared Reading, all reading is usually carried out in the group (Hynes & Hyens-Berry 2012; Rydbeck 2022). In this intervention, we had chosen to combine reading in advance with an element of reading aloud in the group. The reason for this decision was findings from a previous study, which indicated that this combination could have beneficial effects on the well-being of the participants (Pettersson 2018). The participants had been sent, in advance and at no cost, the short stories, novel

excerpts and poems mentioned above. They read one of these literary pieces (in case of the poems, three or four poems) before each meeting. At the meetings, the first pages of the day's text were also read aloud in the group. The poems were read in their entirety. The reading aloud was supposed to create calm and concentration in the group and to remind the participants what the text was about.

At the first meetings, the group leader did the reading, but when the group had been running for a few weeks, the participants were also invited to read aloud. All participants read aloud on at least one occasion. After the reading, the conversation about the literature took place, which can be regarded as the very core of creative interactive bibliotherapy. The conversations were led by the psychologist. The participants were given the opportunity to express their reactions to the text and what reading it had meant for them quite freely. In my capacity as a researcher, I had prepared, together with the group leader, several questions that could be used to stimulate the discussion. Some of these questions centered on the participants' life situations and possible similarities between them and the characters in the texts, while others focused more on the participants' thoughts, fantasies, and associations concerning the texts. (Pettersson 2022) Although we thus prepared explicit questions as a starting point for the conversations, these questions did not need to be actualized to any great extent as they flowed on by themselves.

The participants

In addition to the group leader and the researcher, four women participated in the reading group sessions. All of them lived in Gothenburg or the surrounding county, Västra Götaland. Before taking parental leave, they were employed as a doctor, a government agency librarian, a teacher, and a design manager. As such, the women's occupations allow them to be considered a relatively homogeneous group, belonging to the middle class. One had already returned to work, another did so while the reading group was in progress, and two were on parental and/or sick leave.

At the first meeting, the women were given both oral and written information about the study and gave their consent for participation. The written information detailed that the material for the study would be collected through interviews and observations and that all material would be anonymized during transcription so that it could not be traced back to the participants by anyone other than the researcher. Consequently, the names appearing in the article – Frida, Nina, Tilda, and Therese – are fictitious names. It was also emphasized that the participants could withdraw from the study at any time without having to give a reason and that according to the EU General Data Protection Regulation, they had the right to access the personal data about them processed in the study, free of charge. They could also request that data about them be deleted and for the processing of their personal data to be restricted. All participants gave their written consent to participate in the study. None of the participants subsequently asked for any information about them to be deleted.

Observations and interviews

The participant observations can be described as structured observations, where the observer is known to the participants. They are based on Patty Sotirin's four points for observations in groups, especially the points "People" and "Talk" (Sotirin 1999). The category "Literature" was also added to Sotirin's model because it was important to the specific aims of the study.

The individual interviews were carried out by the researcher after the final reading group session, during the period of 11-26 April 2019. They were semi-structured and were based on a question guide that focused on the participant's experience of the reading group and the literature included in the sessions (see Appendix 2). When necessary, these general interview questions were complemented with more detailed questions. Each participant was interviewed once. The interviews took between

30 and 50 minutes. They were recorded and transcribed by the researcher. They were then saved on a password-protected computer, to which only the researcher had access.

Analysis

An analysis of how participation in the reading group led to increased psychological, social, and intellectual well-being has been published previously (Pettersson 2022). Since this article focuses on what characterizes bibliotherapeutic-appropriate literature from a participant perspective and what functions the selected literature and the discussions about it had for participants, the issue of well-being is not central to it (although the fact that the participation in the reading group actually led to increased well-being is an important prerequisite for the relevance of the present study). However, to answer this article's research questions, the interview material has been analyzed again, with a specific focus on the women's statements about the literature, readings, and discussions. The parts of the interviews where they express themselves about this were extracted, coded, and categorized by theme, based on an inductive approach.

Concerning the observations, the analysis concentrates in a similar manner on what the group discussion was about, with a specific focus on what was said about the selected literature and the function of reading. In the analysis, both the observations and the interviews are examined in relation to previous research on bibliotherapy. By combining these different qualitative methods, material triangulation was achieved (Rothbauer 2007). This enables in-depth analysis and a more multifaceted perspective on the research questions. The results of the analysis are presented below, followed by a discussion and a conclusion, where both the limitations of the study and its usefulness for research and for staff in the library sector are highlighted.

Results

The participants' opinions about the selected literature

When it comes to the first research question, what characterizes the suitable literature in creative, interactive bibliotherapy, the themes that the analysis of the material resulted in were: realistic prose that thematizes subjects other than motherhood; fantasy and classical lyric poetry with existential themes. Regarding the second research question, which specific bibliotherapeutical functions the selected literature and the conversation about it had, the themes consisted of the escapist, identifying and knowledge-conveying functions, as well as the intellectual function. Concerning the three first-mentioned functions, both the reading and the conversations in the group appeared to be important in order for them to be realised. For the last one, the intellectual function, it was clear that it above all was connected to the conversations in the group.

To start with the first of the research questions: The texts that participants enjoyed the most were Bodil Malmsten's *The Price of Water in Finistère*, Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper," Tove Jansson's "The PE Teacher's Death," Marie Hermansson's "Det finns ett hål i verkligheten" [There is a hole in reality], and the classical lyric poetry of Karin Boye, Edith Södergran and Pär Lagerkvist. Generally, they enjoyed both reading these works before the group-sessions and discussing them during the sessions. When asked if there was any text they preferred to read before the sessions, one of the participants also mentions Lotta Lindborg's *En mekanisk mamma* [A mechanical mother] (interview with Frida). When asked if there was any work that they particularly liked to discuss during the meetings, another participant highlights Anna-Karin Palms "Prags klockor" [The Bells of Prague] alongside the aforementioned works. She felt that this short story "came alive more in the discussion" than when she read it (interview with Tilda). A common thread is that the literary works, that the participants preferred to both read and discuss, are low fantasy, and poems or realistic stories that do not thematize illness or motherhood. In this context, where participants

had the opportunity to choose between literature that thematizes life after childbirth and literature that does not, they tended to prefer the latter. They also tended to prefer low fantasy to realistic stories, with one important exception, discussed in the next section.

The exception referred to above is the extract from *The Price of Water in Finistère*, which was included in the literature selection. Regarding this work, which can be described as an autobiographic novel, not addressing illness or life with young children, two participants said that it contributed to their reading pleasure and hope for the future (interview with Therese; interview with Nina). The observations confirm the participants' assertion that above all, the novel was associated with and seemed to generate positive feelings. It was described in the reading group session, for example, as "a good read," that it "flowed," that it expressed life experiences in a positive way, and that there was a freedom in the text that was associated with the main character's freedom. One of the participants also said that it was nice to read about a female protagonist who was not defined by her relationships, which she believed was the case with the female protagonists in several of the other stories that the group had previously read and discussed (Observation record 8, Gothenburg, 22 March 2019). The women were also able to absorb and enjoy the aesthetic qualities of the text rather than merely its content, as illustrated by comments such as "a good read" and "flowed." The atmosphere in the group on this occasion was calm and quite relaxed. The participants were able to be quiet for a while, without seeming to feel uncomfortable. This may both be due to the positive experience of the text, but also to the fact that this occasion occurred at the end of the reading circle, when the participants had had time to get to know each other a little more than in the beginning (Observation record 8, Gothenburg, 22 March 2019).

Fantasy

Another story that allowed participants to focus on something other than their own lives was "The Yellow Wallpaper." Admittedly, this is a short story that manifestly deals with illness after childbirth in the sense that the female protagonist is portrayed as weak and bedridden. However, it uses the settings of horror, romance, and supernatural elements to depict her condition and can thus be categorized as low fantasy. When participants expressed their thoughts about what the story contributed, it was again the supernatural features, and not the theme of motherhood, that captured their interest. They focused on aspects such as the fact that it was not obvious what the text was about and that it was "special" and "strange," with a protagonist who did unexpected things, such as crawling across the floor (interview with Therese; interview with Tilda; interview with Frida). Through the observations, it emerged that the discussion of this short story primarily focused on how the female protagonist was dominated by her husband, what is considered sick or healthy behavior, and how this can be connected to the society one lives in (Observation record 7, Gothenburg, 15 March 2019). Although the topic of mental illness was also touched upon in the discussion, the central issues were those related to norms and society.

Similar arguments can be made about "The PE Teacher's Death". This is also an example of low fantasy. Just as in the case of "The Yellow Wallpaper", the participants focused on the strange elements in this short story, for example when the main character lies down to sleep on a lawn in the middle of a dinner. The themes discussed at the session were guilt, escape (from the past), and a wish to communicate, that is, quite common themes with no specific connections with motherhood or unhealth. Despite these serious themes, the participants were quite happy and excited on this occasion, which probably mirrors the fact that they appreciated reading and discussing the short story at hand. Even in this session, they also appeared to be comfortable in the group. This was expressed, among other things, in that they interrupted each other, me and even the group leader when they wanted to say something. No one in the group seemed to bother being interrupted. For the first time,

one of the participants became quite personal and started to talk about her children, even though the children appearing in the short story play a very marginal role in it (Observation record 6, Gothenburg, 8 March 2019).

Classical lyric poetry with existential themes

If *The Price of Water in Finistère*, *The Yellow Wallpaper* and, in most senses also *The PE Teacher's Death* encouraged conversations that veered away from the participants' own lives, the opposite was true with the poems of Karin Boye, Edith Södergran and Pär Lagerkvist. None of the poems depict motherhood or emotional states after childbirth, but other, less specific life situations in which themes such as personal growth, courage, change, life, and death are foregrounded. However, the observations of the occasion when the group discussed these poems revealed that the participants tended to draw parallels between their own lives and the world of the poems and between their experiences of motherhood or uneasiness and that which is depicted in the poems. For instance, one of the women linked Karin Boye's stanza "In places, where you go to sleep but once/ Your sleep is safe, your dream is full of song" to her lack of sleep after having a child. Another of the participants noted that the line "All is given man as a loan" in Pär Lagerkvist's poem "It is the most beautiful at dusk" reminded her of having one's children on loan, and not forever. (Observation record 5, Gothenburg, 28 February 2019). It seems that in these cases, the absence of themes of motherhood and difficulty adjusting after having a child liberates the participants to approach these themes on their own. Perhaps the poems worked so well in bibliotherapeutic terms because they are characterized by several of the more general criteria that previous research has ascribed to suitable bibliotherapy literature, such as easily recognizable emotions and situations, powerful and concrete imagery and, in some cases, a distinct rhythm (Hynes and Hynes-Berry 2012).

The escapist function

In answering the first research question of what characterizes the suitable literature in creative, interactive bibliotherapy, it has already emerged in the above account that one of the bibliotherapeutic functions the reading group had for the participants coincides with what Brewster calls escapist bibliotherapy (2011): the reading and the conversations in the group allowed participants to turn away from their everyday lives, immerse themselves in the literature and in the discussion about it, and thus forget how they felt for a while.

This function has also several similarities with the way of reading that literary scholar Rita Felski has called enchantment (Felski 2008). Just as in the case of enchantment, escapism has traditionally had a very low status in literary studies. Felski, who does not write about bibliotherapy in particular, but about literature and reading on a more general level, wants to revalue enchantment in a literary context. Based on the participant's statement about the functions of reading and conversation in this study, it is possible to argue that escapism should also be valued more in a bibliotherapeutic context than has previously been the case.

The identification function

However, reading and discussing the literature also had other bibliotherapeutic functions for the participants. One of these functions brings to mind an important feature within traditional bibliotherapy, that of identification (Shrodes 1978, Hynes and Hynes-Berry 2012; Shechtman 2009). Two of the participants explained that reading and discussing helped them identify with the main characters in two of the texts included in the reading group. One of those texts was *En mekanisk mamma* [A mechanical mother], which depicts a new mother who feels anxious and depressed after giving birth. The woman who identified with the protagonist of that story said that she could recognize herself in the character and in her condition: "I could recognize myself in her as well. How she felt..."

it was easy to read too” (interview with Frida). This indicates that in some cases, a shared experience – in this case a feeling of sadness after childbirth – was important for the possibility to identify with a literary character, even for the women in this study.

In the aforementioned example, there were more similarities between the participant and the character she identified with than the health condition. For instance, both of them were new mothers and they were about the same age. However, in the second case of identification that could be clearly distinguished in the study, the connection between the participant’s own life and the character’s circumstances or the theme of the story is much more tenuous. The second woman identified with the main character of *The Price of Water in Finistère*, a middle-aged, single woman who leaves her old life behind and moves abroad. In other words, there are significant differences between the participant and the fictional character in terms of age, life circumstances, et cetera. Instead, what seems to trigger identification in this case is the departure itself: “because in *The Price of Water in Finistère*, it started with her driving away... well, partly something in that I... I can identify with her somehow... her, in the book...” (interview with Therese). The same woman also explained how, when the group read and discussed Karin Boye’s poem “On the move,” she experienced a kind of recognition in the line, “Move on, move on! The new day dawns ahead,” which is another portrayal of a decisive departure in life. In the interview, she explained how she felt that the poem in general, and this stanza in particular, confirmed an important choice she had recently made that led to a decisive change in her life. Here it becomes clear that identification is taking place on a much more abstract level and is not the result of the greatest possible similarity between the participant and the voice in the poem, but rather from a way of reacting to a certain situation.

The knowledge-conveying function

The example of “On the move” also shows that one work of fiction can have several bibliotherapeutic functions for a single individual. In connection with this poem, the same participant quoted above also emphasized that the poem put a feeling that she had experienced herself into words and that it thereby gave her confirmation that it was right to move on in life. Literature can be said here to have functioned as a kind of authority that strengthened her confidence in a decision she had already made. This manner of gaining knowledge or advice from fiction is reminiscent of the notion of literature as constituting a kind of knowledge of life that can be found in philosophers such as Aristotle and Martha Nussbaum (Aristotle 1967, 1994; Nussbaum 1990) and in more recent literary scholar as Felski (2008). Thus, it is an old and familiar idea of literature within literary studies, which is periodically subjected to some scholarly criticism. When examined from a bibliotherapy perspective, however, it is not as commonly emphasized that the knowledge or advice that literature can convey can have a positive effect on health or well-being. Brewster is certainly tapped into this when she talks about “informational bibliotherapy,” which means that literature is used to inform the participant in bibliotherapy about problems relating to health. But the literature used for this purpose in Brewster’s research was not primarily fiction, but self-help and factual literature about various medical conditions (Brewster 2011). During interviews with participants in the bibliotherapeutic reading group, however, it was emphasized that fiction in particular could have such a knowledge-conveying or advisory function. It is clearest in the interview with Therese, who at one point summarized how not only “On the move,” but all the literature that was part of the reading group sessions could contribute to a greater understanding of life and different ways of looking at it:

“Yes, but I think of it as... generally, in the texts... that I get a more nuanced picture of how I can view life or think about life in different situations or at different stages. That this is life ... and in literature, there, someone can have written about life, quite simply. So, I think that it kind of opens you up ... or expands your outlook on life.”

The intellectual function

This tendency to obtain knowledge through literature and reading has certain points of contact with the last bibliotherapeutic function that can also be discerned in the material of the study. It is the one that crystallizes into the clearest function that the reading group has had for the participants and which I have called the intellectual function. The intellectual function differs both from the knowledge-conveying function expressed in the interviews and from the notion of literature as a source of knowledge that among others Felski writes about by originating from the conversations about the literature in the group and not, primarily, from literature itself. Although previous research has emphasized the importance of conversation in interactive bibliotherapy, it has not focused on how it can stimulate the intellectual life and well-being of the participants. Some researchers, including Hynes and Hynes Berry, rather associate an intellectual focus with pure literary analysis and warn against confusing bibliotherapy with this type of activity (Hynes & Hynes-Berry 2012). In the following, I will show that what I have called the intellectual function does not imply a concentration on literature but rather a greater focus on the conversation and on how the participant's reflections can lead to a deeper understanding of both literature and life. In this sense, the intellectual function has no concrete equivalent in previous research on creative, interactive bibliotherapy.

All the women participating in the reading group said that they were intellectually stimulated by the sessions. It was Tilda who expressed this experience most clearly when she said that the conversations about literature have been "food for thought" and "an intellectual shot in the arm." More specifically, what the conversations have given the participants in an intellectual sense is the opportunity to talk about literature together. Nina expressed this as that she had gotten more out of the texts after the group had discussed them. Therese said that she gained a different understanding of literature after their conversations and that she took that new understanding with her to the next week's meeting. The discussions thus fostered intellectual growth in her. In a similar way, Tilda emphasized that the conversations about literature led the participants to learn from each other and that collective learning broadens one's own perspective. "I've always left [the group] with a different understanding of the text... or maybe not an understanding but a different angle. [...] It has been good because then you learn from each other too, I think. And broaden your own perspective." Nina was onto something similar when she said that literature "strikes different chords in different people" and that one person can think about and make associations based on one aspect of the text, while another person makes associations based on some other aspect. Thus, it is clear that the intellectual function stands out as an important result of the bibliotherapeutic reading group. In this respect, the study contributes new knowledge in the research field of creative interactive bibliotherapy.

Discussion

As the analysis has shown, the use of literature from different genres of fiction in the bibliotherapeutic reading group turned out well. One of the most important results of the study is that the genres the participants enjoyed reading and discussing most were low fantasy or literary realism that thematizes something other than the health issues they were themselves facing. These are genres that have not been used to a great extent in previous studies in bibliotherapy. In this regard, the study confirms conclusions drawn within user-centered research, indicating that several genres of fiction can be used in bibliotherapy, with good results. The study even shows that fantasy can sometimes seem more appropriate to use than realistic fiction. At the same time, it also problematizes the ingrained tendency within traditional bibliotherapy research to recommend literature that directly thematizes life circumstances or health-related issues that are similar to those that the people participating in bibliotherapy are facing (Magaji 2016; Shechtman 2009). The study thus clarifies the importance of empirically examining literature selection in bibliotherapy based on the participants' perspective,

rather than assuming that certain genres are particularly suitable for use, as has been the case in some previous research.

The analysis also shows how creative the participants were in both their interpretations and discussions of the literature. Particularly the observations show that they often made free associations based on the fictional texts, without necessarily discussing the issues of motherhood and illness in texts with those themes, such as "The Yellow Wallpaper." On the other hand, they sometimes inserted that perspective into literature that depicts more general existential questions, such as in the poems. The women's active reader engagement is reminiscent of theories found within branches of reader-response research, which is a field of literary research interested in how readers make use of literature in different contexts (Felski 2008; Freund 1987; Fish 1980). The results of this study make clear that it would be advantageous for bibliotherapy researchers to delve into this field to better understand the complex issue of literature selection in bibliotherapy.

However, one explanation for why the selected literature worked so well for this particular group could be the participants' reading habits. It emerged in the interviews that the women were all habitual readers. In line with literary scholar Jonathan Culler, one could say that they had a satisfactory level of literary competence (Culler 1975). Previous research has shown that both experienced and less experienced readers have been able to benefit from creative, interactive bibliotherapy (Shechtman 2006; Brewster 2011; Walwyn and Rowley 2011). In this case, however, literary competence may have had a positive effect on the participants' ability to absorb and make use of the varied literary genres that was part of the literature selection. Had the participants been less experienced readers, the varied genres might have posed a difficulty or not led to results that were as positive.

When it comes to the issue of bibliotherapy functions, this study confirms previous research at some points. Two of the bibliotherapeutic functions discernible in the study – identification and escapism – is well-documented (identification) and documented (escapism) in previous research, though identification sometimes takes place on a more abstract level for the women in this study compared to earlier studies. However, the function that I have called the intellectual function is quite specific to this study in that it draws attention to an aspect of the bibliotherapy conversation that has not been discussed much before. One explanation to why this intellectual function is crystallized as a distinguishing quality of this study might be the particular life circumstances of the women at the time the reading group sessions were held. Three of them were on full-time parental leave when the reading group sessions started and thus spent much of their time taking care of small children and household chores. One of them returned to work while the reading group was still ongoing, and the fourth worked part-time for the entire duration of the reading group. They each thus had very little time for personal leisure activities such as reading. One of the participants explicitly stated that she did not think she would have indulged in reading if it had not been for the reading group and its regular meetings (interview with Nina). She thus underlines the importance of a structured context to allow for reading and for the realization of its associated identifying, escapism, knowledge-seeking and/or intellectual functions. Another participant emphasized that her life circumstances in general did not allow room for what she calls "good discussions." This space was provided for her, however, by the reading group (interview with Tilda). The reading group, with its focus on literature, reading and conversations, thus seemed to fulfill an important but often de-prioritized need among the women. As such, there is reason to suspect that the intellectual function resulting from the discussion is particularly important to groups of women with young children who are interested in literature and that it could be so for other target groups who have an interest in literature but also have little free

time. For other target groups, the intellectual function might not be as important as for the women in this study.

There are, of course, limitations to this study. One such limitation is that it included few participants and no control group. This affects what general conclusions can be drawn from it. However, previous research on self-help groups for women with poor postpartum mental health shows that this group is difficult to recruit from (Ugarriza 2004). Within the Swedish healthcare system, discussion groups for women with sadness after giving birth have had to be cancelled due to too few participants (Lidbeck, e-mail to author, November 1, 2017). Considering this, the number of participants in the present study can nevertheless be viewed as satisfactory. Considering that there have neither been previous studies of bibliotherapy for the target group of women with sadness after giving birth in general, nor of their perceptions of bibliotherapeutic literature selection in particular, this study can be considered a pioneering study. Additional and larger research studies that are similar should be carried out, however, both for women with difficulty adjusting after giving birth and other target groups, to enable generalization about literature selection, and about the possible different functions of creative, interactive bibliotherapy.

Conclusion

Despite the limitation mentioned above, this study is nevertheless highly relevant to both researchers and librarians. It contributes new, empirically based knowledge about what characterizes suitable literature for creative, interactive bibliotherapy and what functions a bibliotherapy reading group can have for a particular target group. Given that bibliotherapy is an activity that has gained an increasing impact in public libraries in several parts of the world, research into it is an important subject for librarians. Research on literature selection seems especially urgent because literature selection is an important part of librarians' daily work with recommending literature and providing bibliotherapy. This study also makes it clear that different bibliotherapy functions can be more or less relevant for different target groups, depending on life circumstances and reading habits. It thus makes it possible for librarians to make more informed decisions about literature and intended bibliotherapeutic functions when planning bibliotherapy activities for different target groups. It also suggests that researchers should take such aspects into account when designing bibliotherapy interventions.

Conflict of interest statement

The author declares that there were no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research and/or publication of this article.

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Appendix 1: The literature used in the reading group

Short stories and extracts from novels

Edelfeldt, Inger. "Slutspel" [Endgame], In *Kläderna*, 2017.

Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. "The Yellow Wallpaper," 1892.

Hermanson, Marie. "Det finns ett hål i verkligheten" [There is a hole in reality], In *Det finns ett hål i verkligheten*, 1986.

Jansson, Tove. "The PE Teacher's Death," In *Travelling Light*, 1987.

Lindborg, Lotta. *En mekanisk mamma* [A mechanical mother], 2012.

Malmsten, Bodil. *The Price of Water in Finistère*, 2006.

Mannheimer, Sara. *Urskilja oss* [Setting ourselves apart], 2016.

Palm, Anna-Karin. "Prags klockor" [The Bells of Prague], In *Utanför bilden*, 1992.

Poems

Boye, Karin. "I rörelse" [On the Move], In *Härdarna*, 1927.

Boye Karin. "Jag vill möta..." [I want to meet], In *Härdarna*, 1927.

Lagerkvist, Pär. "Det är vackrast när det skymmer" [It is most beautiful at dusk], In *Kaos*, 1919.

Nilsson, Ulf Karl Olov (UKON). "Levande begravd" [Buried alive]; "Ovissa system" [Uncertain systems]; "Det är inte förbjudet" [It is not forbidden]; "Min sanning" [My truth], In *Bråkaren*, 2011.

Södergran, Edith, "Triumf att finnas till" [Triumph to exist], In *Septemberlyran*, 1918.

Appendix 2: Question guide, interviews

Can you tell me about your experience of reading fiction?

How did you experience participation in the reading group?

Is there any occasion of the reading group sessions which has been particularly important for you? (If yes, which occasion and why?)

What do you think about the literature used in the reading group?

Were there some short stories, poems or extracts from novels you enjoyed reading and discuss more than the others? (If yes, which ones?)

Was there any piece of fiction that you preferred to read before the meetings? (If yes, which one?)

Was there any piece of fiction that you preferred to discuss during the meetings? (If yes, which one?)

What do you think about the conversations in the group?

How did you experience being a part of the reading group?

What do you think about the group leader?

Did your participation in the reading group affected your well-being? (If yes, in what way?)

If you met someone else in the same situation as you, would you recommend her participate in a bibliotherapeutic reading group like this one? (Why/Why not)