

Institution:	Goldsmiths, University of London
Unit of Assessment:	29: English Language and Literature
Title of case study:	Blake Morrison and bibliotherapy
1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)	

This ICS exemplifies wide-reaching impact emanating from Morrison's creative outputs and his subsequent exploration of public reactions to it. Thus he has used different genres of writing to articulate the complexity of human relationships and emotions – for example via two critically acclaimed memoirs, an account of the Bulger trial, and, since being at Goldsmiths, a novel, *South of the River* (2007). Numerous readers described these books as resonating with them, highlighting the potential therapeutic benefits of reading serious literature ('bibliotherapy'). Morrison explored this idea systematically in a detailed review published as an essay in *The Guardian* (2008). The ensuing surge of public interest in bibliotherapy manifested in a transformative expansion of The Reader Organisation [TRO], which promotes and supports the establishment of community-based reading groups. In the UK these multiplied more than 5-fold over the following 3 years, and there was similar interest in Australia, the US, Denmark and Germany. Morrison subsequently became chair of TRO's Board of Trustees, and has promoted its activities to the public and policymakers internationally through public presentations, the media, and participation in policy fora.

2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)

Morrison took up his current appointment as Professor of Creative and Life Writing at Goldsmiths in 2003, having previously offered poetry workshops here since the late 1970s. His interest in the therapeutic potential of literature dates back those early workshops, when he was struck by how many of the participants described using their writing to explore personal experiences and feelings. His 1993 autobiographical memoir about the death of his father, *And When Did You Last See Your Father?* elicited numerous responses from readers saying how cathartic they had found it. He has pursued similar themes in subsequent books: in 2003 a partner memoir, *Things My Mother Never Told Me*, and in 2007 a novel, *South of the River*,^[1] which portrayed and analysed relationship issues. This was described in one review as "a marvellous account-taking of our hopes, lifestyles, careers and even souls in an age where communication has never been easier, but to find someone who'll listen has never been harder."

At around this time, Morrison began systematically to investigate the thesis that reading may alleviate emotional pain or mental distress. He did this via ethnographic fieldwork in which he observed therapeutic reading groups running under the auspices of The Reader Organisation [TRO], then a small charity based in Merseyside. Their 'Get into Reading' scheme operated in libraries, day centres, and residential homes for the elderly, and participants discussed 'great' and serious literature by authors such as Dickens, Hardy, Eliot and Steinbeck rather than 'easy' or 'feelgood' books. In parallel with this he reviewed the current status of bibliotherapy schemes in the UK – for example, their recommendation by GPs, and Arts Council support – and compiled observations made by many numerous authors and philosophers over many centuries suggesting that reading rich, difficult or even dark literature can yield catharsis or comfort.

Morrison articulated this research in the form of a long (3,540-word) essay, 'The Reading Cure,' in *The Guardian's* Books section (January 2008);^[2] the article was republished in an Australian newspaper, *The Age*, in March 2008.^[3] The literary sections of both newspapers are widely read by academics, professionals, and the wider public (readerships exceeding 800,000 in both cases). In the article Morrison set out a short history of the concept of reading as therapy and a well-evidenced argument that serious literature is a powerful alternative to 'feelgood' books, self-help books, and 'misery' memoirs. He suggested that bibliotherapy groups which encourage people to read for cathartic purposes ought to take complex and challenging literature as their material, and he criticised many of the current UK bibliotherapy schemes for shying away from such works. He subsequently developed a related argument (drawing on different examples) in his invited

Impact case study (REF3b): GOLDSMITHS - Bibliotherapy

contribution, 'Twelve Thoughts about Reading', to the anthology, *Stop What you're Doing and Read This!* published by Vintage in 2011.^[3]

The essay has been much cited, constituting a reference point for academic research into reading as therapy by teams at the University of Liverpool's Centre for Research into Reading, Information and Linguistic Systems [CRILS], at Leeds University, and at Aarhus University in Denmark. CRILS and TRO have recently secured NHS R&D funding to set up over 100 reading groups across four south London boroughs and to evaluate their effects on mental health; Morrison and Professor Elisabeth Hill from the Psychology Department at Goldsmiths are formal collaborators in this project, with a full-time research assistant based and supervised from here. Creative Writing PhD students supervised by Morrison will run some of the groups.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

Evidence of the international quality of the underpinning research (creative output) is indicated below Reference 1.

All outputs are available in hard copy on request from Goldsmiths Research Office.

1. Morrison, B (2007) *South of the River*. Chatto & Windus, London. ISBN 10: [0701180463](#) / ISBN 13: 9780701180461 [novel]

This was submitted to RAE2008. The book was widely reviewed and debated on publication: The *Times*, for instance, described it as having achieved 'that rare thing: the creation of something substantial and important in fiction out of history as it unfolds in the here and now.' It has subsequently become a standard point of reference in articles discussing 'state of the nation' novels.

2. Morrison, B (2008) '[The Reading Cure](#)'. The Guardian Books section, Saturday 5 January (print and on-line circulation reaches over 9 million readers): [essay]

Republished as '[Prose Beats Prozac](#)', in *The Age* (Melbourne), Saturday 29 March 2008 (circulation 857,000): [essay]

3. Morrison B (2011) 'Twelve Thoughts about Reading'. In *Stop What You're Doing and Read This!* Vintage, pp. 13-36. ISBN-10: 0099565943 ISBN-13: 978-0099565949 [chapter in book]

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

In addition to raising public awareness of bibliotherapy and of The Reader Organisation [TRO], Morrison's *Guardian* essay has been widely recognised as the inspiration for hundreds of bibliotherapy groups that have since been set up under TRO's aegis across the UK and internationally, as well as for other 'reading for therapy' schemes in Australia and Europe. TRO, which refers to it simply as 'The Article', credits it with a huge surge in interest and activity over the past five years, and with transforming the organisation from a hub with just 12 staff for 50 reading groups on Merseyside to an international bibliotherapy charity with 60 staff members.^[1] Thus:

- over 300 people contacted TRO in the week following the essay's publication
- of the 22 press and media reports listed on TRO's website, all but one short piece appeared after the essay.
- it is cited by hundreds of on-line articles and blogs about bibliotherapy.^[2]
- in the two years following its publication, the number of TRO reading groups grew from 50 concentrated in the Merseyside area to 280 nationally.

This growth led TRO to develop its '*Read to Lead*' courses which, in the 3 years between 2008 and 2011, trained 600 people to lead reading groups in the UK, Denmark, Australia, the US and Germany. The Director of TRO has provided a letter verifying this, and will provide further corroboration on request.^[3]

Impact within the UK

TRO currently has c. 300 people registered as operating its *Get Into Reading [GIR]* groups, with most running more than one group each. Groups average around eight participants at any one time, so at a conservative estimate several thousand people have engaged with bibliotherapy in this country alone. Amongst numerous individual initiatives which have reported being stimulated by Morrison's article:

- In Sandwell (West Midlands) two librarians undertook TRO training, with funding from Sandwell Primary Care Trust as part of the Community Libraries Programme, and established GIR groups in 2009/10. They describe their experience, and how it was triggered by reading Morrison's essay, in *Panlibus* (a library-focused quarterly magazine).^[4] Both groups continue to meet, and their contribution to a broader scheme which sought to address mental health issues in the local community is described in an Arts Council *Museums, Libraries and Archives Council* report.^[5]
- NHS East Lancashire funded the establishment of a TRO reading group scheme in Burnley,^[6] initiated and run by the library service's Reading Development Officer who had been prompted by reading Morrison's essay to undertake an MA Reading in Practice at Liverpool University.

Recently, TRO has gained the support of the Sainsbury charitable foundation, The Headley Trust, which provides funding for projects relating – among other things - to the health and welfare of vulnerable groups such as those with mental health problems or dementia. This funding contributed to a pilot study associated with the Department of Health National Dementia Strategy, and entailed offering bibliotherapy groups to people with dementia living in BUPA care homes. 162 reading group sessions were run, attended by a total of 138 people, and yielding nearly 1300 'beneficiary experiences'. The outcomes were highly positive; for example 81% of participants showed improvements in mood during the sessions, the care home managers felt that it had been beneficial in various ways, and all 22 of the staff trained to run the groups said they would recommend it to colleagues.^[7] TRO has recently received major funding from Guys and St Thomas's hospitals to set up 150 new reading groups in South London over the next three years. As noted in the previous section, Goldsmiths is now participating in a collaborative research project to evaluate the effects of these groups on mental health outcomes.

International impact

Examples of the interest and activity stimulated by Morrison's essay outside the UK include:

- **Australia:** The republication of Morrison's essay in the Australian newspaper, *The Age*, led a librarian in Melbourne to take a TRO course. She was awarded a scholarship by the Library Board of Victoria to study reading groups in the UK, and then to implement and evaluate a similar group in a Melbourne care home, looking at its effects on healing, health and wellbeing. Her encouraging findings are described in a detailed report^[8a] and in 2009 were published in a widely-read professional journal for Australian librarians.^[8b] Anecdotal comments on the responses of her participant included: '*It [the reading group] is the only reason I got out of bed this morning*'; and '*There are a lot of activities offered here, but the reading group is the only thing I come to. I really look forward to it*'.

Another librarian went on to set up a *Book Well* programme for the Victoria State Library. Her report, citing Morrison extensively as the inspiration for her work, describes a project to train group facilitators on TRO's GIR model and then to implement and evaluate five pilot schemes.^[8c] She notes that "*everyone involved in the facilitator training has been especially transformed in some way, shape, or form – further testament to the power of a Get Into Reading group*".

- **Denmark:** A researcher (Mette Steenberg) at Aarhus University set up The Danish Reading Association (*Læseforeningen*) which now runs a number of Get Into Reading schemes in various Danish cities, following the TRO model.^[9]

Morrison continues to support TRO's work in promoting bibliotherapy.^[10] In 2010 he spoke at its *Get into Reading* event in Lancashire and at its National Conference in Liverpool. He has spoken about bibliotherapy at several literature festivals in the UK, including Hay and Bath. In January 2012, he chaired a British Council seminar in Berlin focusing on the relationship between reading, health and well-being. As noted previously he will also be a consultant on the collaborative project, with health service funding, to set up and evaluate reading groups in London over the next 2-3 years.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

All sources can alternatively be accessed in hard copy by request to Goldsmiths Research Office.

1. Expansion of [The Reader Organisation](#).
2. A compilation of blogs and articles citing Morrison's essay is available on request from Goldsmiths Research Office. The following examples can also be accessed directly:
 - [Blake Morrison on Bibliotherapy](#)
 - [Eleanor's Blog](#)
 - [January Magazine Blogspot](#)
3. The Director of TRO will provide corroboration on request [*contact details provided separately*].
4. Musgrave C and Neale G' (2010) Bibliotherapy in Action: Bringing "Get Into Reading" to Sandwell. [Panlibus Magazine](#), 19, 4-5.
5. Reading groups in the West Midlands: [Community engagement in public libraries](#) (see paras 9.48 to 9.76)
6. Reading groups in Lancashire:
 - [Corporate News Press Releases](#)
 - [BBC Lancashire News](#)
7. TRO delivering schemes in care homes for people with dementia: [Get Into Reading](#)
8. Australian Get Into Reading schemes:
 - a) Bolitho J (2011) Reading into wellbeing: bibliotherapy, libraries, health and social connection. [Final project report](#):
 - b) Bolitho J (2011) *Australasian Public Libraries and Information Services*, 24(2): [Reading into Wellbeing: Bibliotherapy, Libraries, Health and Social Connection](#)
 - c) McLaine S (2010) 'Healing for the Soul: The Book Well Program'. [Australasian Public Libraries and Information Services](#), 23 (4), 141-147.

An [edited version](#) was presented at the Alia Access conference (Brisbane, 2010):
9. Danish (Aarhus) reading schemes: [Study Tour: Shared Reading as a cognitive tool](#)
10. A compilation of material relating to these activities is available on request from Goldsmiths Research Office. Examples can be found at:
 - Manchester [Get Into Reading showcase](#) event (Manchester, 21/10/08):
 - Get into Reading National Conference (Liverpool, 08/01/10): [New Beginnings](#)
 - ['Pies, Peas and Poetry'](#) event (Nelson, Lancashire) - the Get Into Reading East Lancashire project.