

Reference Books

Susan Elderkin and Ella Berthoud

THE NOVEL CURE

An A to Z of literary remedies

464pp. Canongate. £17.99.

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Not sure which of the 170,267 books published in Britain last year to place on your bedside table? “Consider booking a consultation with a bibliotherapist, who will analyse your reading tastes, habits, and yearnings.” This advice comes in *The Novel Cure: An A to Z of literary remedies*, written by two self-styled bibliotherapists at the London-based School of Life. Whether in a book-filled ambulance or a Bloomsbury consulting room complete with a Freudian couch, Susan Elderkin and Ella Berthoud listen to your problems, take note of your favourite books, and send you away with a “reading prescription”. A fee of £80 buys an hour-long session.

The price of sanity, however, has dropped: for £17.99 you can buy a copy of Elderkin and Berthoud’s list of “restorative reads”, alphabetized by ailment. “Our apothecary contains Balzacian balms and Tolstoyan tourniquets, the salves of Saramago and the purges of Perec”, the authors explain, though one occasionally strains to discern anything pharmacological about their lively summaries of a varied literary canon. Some entries are allopathic: racing through *The Thirty-Nine Steps* will cure apathy. Others are analogic: the authors prescribe short stories for diarrhoea. Still others are thematic: if you’re single, turn to their side-splitting parody of *Bridget Jones’s Diary*. If you suffer from “Holiday, not knowing what novels to take on”, look no further than “Ten Best Novels to Take on Plane Journeys”: “Buy *The Enchanted April*. Then book a villa in Tuscany and read it on the way out”.

The joke isn’t entirely new. R. H. Schaufler’s popular anthology *The Poetry Cure* (1925) anticipated *The Novel Cure*’s psychosomatic gimmick, offering “sedative” poems for “raw and jumpy nerves” and “stimulant” poems “to redden pale blood-corpuscles”. By reshelving Fiction in the Self-Help section, the authors register a larger shift from description to instruction. Instead of calling his latest book “An Introduction to W. H. Auden”, Alexander McCall Smith has titled it *What W. H. Auden Can Do for You*. A book that once would have been called “On Literature” was published last year as *How Literature Saved My Life* – though David Shields might have boosted sales if he’d chosen “How Literature Will Save Your Life”. In 1934, Ezra Pound’s *ABC of Reading* called literature “news that stays news”. This book might suggest an updated definition: news that stays news you can use.

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