

These Books Might Save Your Life: Brilliant Reads For Bleak Times

MOLLY FLATT: Hello and welcome to our Big Book Weekend session, 'These Books Might Save Your Life: Brilliant Reads For Bleak Times'. I'm Molly Flatt, the author and co-founder of Big Book Weekend and I'm delighted to be here with the bibliotherapist Ella Berthoud, who over the next 40 minutes is going to prescribe some fiction tailored to make lockdown that bit more bearable for the actor and comedian, Greg Davies. She will then also be making some recommendations to Big Book Weekend viewers who have been sharing their dilemmas with us on social media over this weekend and boy, do we all have a few of those over the past year. Now, Ella, welcome. Wonderful to have you. You have co-written two books, promising that just the right read can help people conquer everything from anxiety to a broken heart. *The Novel Cure* for adults and *The Story Cure* for kids. But you've also made a whole new career out of one-on-one sessions like the one we are about to witness. So, could you start by quickly explaining exactly what bibliotherapy involves?

ELLA BERTHOUD: Hello! So, bibliotherapy is the art of curing life's ailments by using fiction. So, the idea is that if I give the client the right book at the right time in their life, they will be transformed in a positive direction by that book. And I'm a great believer in fiction rather than non-fiction as being the cure because it actually gets into your subconscious, whereas non-fiction speaks to your conscious brain. So, with fiction, you actually live the lives of the characters and become them and take on their essence and that's what has the power to affect you very deeply.

MOLLY: I love it - I love the kind of slightly witchcrafty element we have going on here. How many books do you read, Ella?

ELLA: About 3 a week. Though they are quite regularly on audio, rather than physical books. I probably read more by audio book than I do by sitting down and reading as I'm always multitasking.

MOLLY: And do you have an amazing memory? Is this one of the reasons you went into this because you always remember books?

ELLA: I've got a brilliant memory for books and not for anything else. And I also keep a notebook, a trusty reading notebook, and I think the act of writing in the notebook is incredibly powerful for me, it really works as a way of helping me remember those books. So, I live in a completely fictional universe!

MOLLY: So, Greg, are you a 3 books a week kind of man?

GREG DAVIES: Well, what do you think, Molly?

MOLLY: Absolutely. You look suitably mined and brought to the surface.

GREG: I wish I were a 3 books a week man. It is partly why I am here; I think probably. I do aspire to ... well, you all know, when I first agreed to do this, the initial press release was

sent to me, and it described me as avid bookworm, Greg Davies and I had to phone everybody and go "no! " that is not who you are dealing with here. Someone who aspires to be a bookworm, and I certainly aspire to be one, and I think that the session is about to ruin any chances of me going back to teaching when I reveal the horrible truth!

MOLLY: Have your reading habits changed during lockdown? Have you found more or less time to read?

GREG: They have not changed during lockdown ... in that I haven't read anything! I mean, I have ... I sort of consume factual information for reasons I'm sure we will come on to. And I sort of go down internet rabbit holes about people's lives. I have become obsessed with people's biographies – people who are no longer with us. But in terms of picking up a book, no! I mean from where I am, I can see a bookshelf that is quite impressive to look at but honestly, I looked at it this morning and honestly, I think I have read 5 of the books on it in total. Which terrifies me. I probably started and I've stroked their covers affectionately and romanticised about me reading all of them!

MOLLY: Well, look, I'm sure there will be quite a few people out there relating. Frankly, I'm just going to shut up as I just want to watch this happen. So, Greg, are you ready to be bibliotherapised?

GREG: Bibliotherapise me!

MOLLY: Excellent! Go for it Ella...

ELLA: Greg, describe your current relationship to reading?

GREG: Shame!

ELLA: Constant shame?

GREG: Constant shame and guilt. Genuinely that is the case. Especially if you are someone who is aspiring, not aspiring but literally writing things, there is a great shame that you don't put in the time to broaden your thought. I mean, it's a funny thing, though, when you are writing. I am a terrible sponge. So, if I read a book, then what I'm writing that day would suddenly start to have flavours of that book. So, there is a reason that I steer from reading while writing but the truth of it is, when lockdown started, I thought, perfect, here we go, I'm going to read countless novels I should have read in my formative years, and I have not read one.

ELLA: Were you a big reader in your formative years?

GREG: I wasn't. No. Here is the great shame, that I may as well ... A, Part of my university - half of my degree was in English literature and B, I used to be an English teacher for a period. Most of my teaching years were spent in teaching drama. But I was an English teacher for quite some time! And I was literally reading the books the weekend before the

children. I would say my most avid reading time was as a teacher when I panicked and thought, they are going to find me out. That's how I discovered John Steinbeck for example. Who I came to love. I consumed a lot of Steinbeck's books anyway and that was because I was forced to read Steinbeck with children.

ELLA: Would you consider listening to audio books or do you think that wouldn't work?

GREG: Yeah. I try. If I looked on my phone now, there are probably 25 novels waiting but things get in the way. I just don't give the time to it. And subsequently, it is a faint, constant guilt. And I'll bet I'm not alone!

ELLA: Absolutely. Well, that's one of the things that I try and help people with is finding ways of reading more and fitting it into their day. Is there anything that you do in your day that requires little brain but some kind of activity, such as houses work, gardening, driving ... some kind of opportunity to listen to an audio book while doing something?

GREG: Yeah, I have no excuses Ella, I go for a walk every single day and there is nothing else to do other than walk and even I can process things whilst walking. So that's the perfect time. But I don't know quite why I don't, but I don't.

ELLA: Okay, you've got to try it - I am definitely prescribing trying audio books.

GREG: Audio books on the walk, tick!

ELLA: Yeah, Definitely. Another thing that I frequently suggest to people who don't find that they have that much time to read is reading aloud with a friend or a partner. Can you imagine that? Would that work for you?

GREG: My closest group of friends all just flash through my mind and the idea of me saying to any one of those people, "I'd like to read to you." I think it would throw up problems, Ella! I think it would! But you know what, I quite like the idea of trying it!

ELLA: It is a lovely thing to do.

GREG: There's a couple of dysfunctional men and I'm going to tell those men that I am going to read to them.

MOLLY: Pin them down and read to them!

GREG: I don't want to physically restrain them, but I am up for reading to them. I am going to suggest it!

ELLA: Tell them that your bibliotherapist said...one of your prescriptions is to try reading aloud...

MOLLY: Greg, can you please report back on that using the hashtag Big Book Weekend!

GREG: I will! And honestly if you like, I will bring one of them with me so that ... he, it will be a he, so that he can tell you how it affected him being read to by me.

MOLLY: I mean it sounds like a BBC series to me, doesn't it?

GREG: Doesn't it? And hand on heart I am going to do this. I am going to read to one of my friends.

ELLA: Excellent. So, the next question is what to read – both for you and as a reading aloud exercise. And I do frequently suggest short stories as a good place to start for reading aloud.

GREG: Very good place, yeah.

ELLA: And this is actually a volume that I very often recommend because it is very short stories. It is called *Sum* by David Eagleman. And it is subtitled: 'Forty Tales from the Afterlives', which makes it sound sort of a bit off-putting - it is not all about death. It is actually all about fictionalisations of what happens after death. But in a very secular non-religious fashion. So, it's ideas like, when we die, we all go into this sort of afterlife world where we wait until the last person speaks our name. So, if you are Napoleon, you are there for 1,000 years but if you are Joe Bloggs, the traffic warden, you might only be there for two days. So, each of these 40 stories is an idea like that, and they're very short. They're only a couple of pages long. And they are really nice – they are also very funny. He is a neuroscientist - the author - and he has also got a great sense of humour. So, they are fun as a short place to start.

GREG: Again I am just imagining saying – I am picturing one particular friend now – and I am imagining saying to him "I want you to come to my house and I am going to read you a short story about the afterlife to you" and already it's turning into an incredible evening!

MOLLY: Rich with comic possibilities!

ELLA: Great.

GREG: Great! Sounds wonderful. And it being a short story, like a lot of people now, I think that my attention span has been so dramatically reduced in recent years, it will be a great way for me to start getting back into reading.

ELLA: Excellent. You said that the author you enjoyed least in your life was Bret Easton Ellis.

GREG: Well, I don't want to trash all of Mr Easton Ellis' work. But you asked me which book I liked the least and that immediately came to mind, *American Psycho*. It may have been my state of mind at the time. But I felt like it was ... at the time, and I may well - before any fans trash me, I may well re-read it and discover its merits. I felt it to be a gratuitous load of hipster nonsense.

ELLA: It is a book that – well it scarred me for life, but it is also the book that me and my husband spent our first date talking about!

GREG: Well, it's certainly one of the most romantic novels I've come across!

MOLLY: Absolutely, that would really to get you in the mood, Ella!

ELLA: It was a case of he loved it and I hated it essentially. But we were discussing, I can't really remember, it's all a bit of a blur but in a way, it was the foundation of our marriage.

GREG: Well, that's incredible. It's also fascinating because the person that I write with most in my – when I'm writing – is a huge fan of it. It's one of the most important novels to him is that. And I despise it so.

MOLLY: All of his work seems to be... you are utterly passionate, or you hate it.

GREG: Yeah.

ELLA: Are there any genres of literature that you avoid? Such as Sci-Fi?

GREG: No, there aren't. I mean I can't say I'm a huge Sci-Fi fan. There's nothing that I actively avoid. But there is something that has crept in at middle age. And it is a broader problem ... and I can describe it, but I can describe it via someone else ... I was at a friend's wedding not that long ago. In very recent years. And someone was enthusiastically preaching about a novel that they had just read. I can't remember what the novel was. And the father-in-law at the wedding, who was part of the group who were having this chat, leant over and went, "Has it got a happy ending?" And the person who was telling the story went, "Well I'm not going to tell you that, am I? I'm not going to recommend a book and then tell you what happens at the end." And he said, "Then I'm out." Was what he said. And when we asked him "why", he said - and I have actually written it down for you before I came on here ... he said, "I know life is bleak, I don't need a long form reminder." And I really felt that ... I really empathised with that. And I had a similar experience when I was touring as a comedian. I was actually on tour overseas with Rhod Gilbert, the Welsh comedian. And he was sleeping off a hangover and I finished off *The Great Gatsby* as I decided it was disgraceful I had not read all of these classic books. And I finished *The Great Gatsby* on my own in the early hours sitting around a swimming pool and I was so distressed by the end of *The Great Gatsby*, by the bleak, or the way that I perceived the bleakness of the ending, that I had to go and wake my friend up to be in company ... so I sort of feel, I don't know. I might be in the minority. But I feel that the older I get, the less likely I am to get stuck into a book that's not going to offer me some hope, Ella.

MOLLY: I'm sure at the moment, that must be a feeling for a lot of people. I don't know if you have had people kind of mention it in your bibliotherapy sessions, Ella, at the moment, when everything is pretty bleak...

GREG: Especially in these times!

ELLA: Yes. The first sessions I did in the first lockdown, everyone wanted to read dystopian novels and was very up for reading kind of *The Road* and *Station 11* and all these bleak - but by now, when I see people, they tend to really want optimistic books or at least books that do have a happy ending which I think is fair enough.

GREG: Or some level of hope. It doesn't need to be a saccharin end to it but for hope to be given to the race to us, to us as a creature, some level.

MOLLY: Is there something about that empathy, Greg but how hard it hit you, I wonder? Because I kind of feel that way about books. I have had a book that I remember reading on holiday. And having to walk out into the sea by myself so I could weep. Because books hit us. They really do. They hit us, right? They hit you hard.

GREG: I remember being on holiday with an exgirlfriend and being in bed and hearing a howl, an awful howl, I thought something awful had happened. And she had just finished Hemmingway, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, that's all the howl was about. And I don't know but it's a shame because you miss out on so much – if you play it safe like this ... the period where I should have been reading, when life seems endless, the teenage years, I think that I really messed up, then. That is when I should have consumed novels and I didn't because I feel you can take things, you can take grittier conclusions as a younger person. Anyway sorry, Ella – carry on.

ELLA: I do think one book that comes to mind, apart from a couple up my sleeve which could be great for reading allowed with your friend, that you mentioned earlier. I don't know if you have heard of *Leonard and Hungry Paul* by Ronan Hession?

GREG: I have heard of it! I've not read it.

ELLA: It is a very lovely, quite short novel and it would actually be brilliant to read aloud. It has a gentle optimism. It's a very unusual story about two men, both of whom still live at home in their 30s. And they both have quirks. And it is quite a quiet book. But I think it is one of the most lovely books that I read in the last year. That everyone I prescribed it to has loved. It's just got a gentle, loveliness about it. I think it would be quite a great reintroduction for you into reading.

GREG: I'm writing it down, Ella!

ELLA: Excellent. And another one that comes to mind...leaping into giving a prescription for you, one of my favourite books of all time: *Jitterbug Perfume* by Tom Robbins, he wrote it in the 80s. It is totally mad. It's about a man seeking immortality and he does, to some degree achieve his goal because he - it starts off in the 8th century AD and it ends up in the 1970s. And it's kind of all about that desire to live forever. Pan is also in the book as a quite major figure. And so, there is an element of magical realism in it. But it is very funny. And also, not beating around the bush about real issues. I think you would really like it. I think it is a book that would make you laugh, and also give you that sense of hope and positivity.

GREG: Good. The reluctance to read something that is bleak is not fuelled by my desire to live forever, just so you know. I'm accepting of my mortality!

ELLA: I think that I read somewhere you did have a complex relationship with death which also made me think about another book to recommend which is Selena Godden's new book – that she's just written – which is called *Mrs Death Mrs Death*. And it's a very poetic book – actually brilliant to listen to on audio. That ought to be your first audio book I'd say. Try that when you next go on a walk.

GREG: And why is *Mrs Death Mrs Death*, why is that good for me?

ELLA: It's quite a ranting book. Selena Godden is a poet who is known for fantastic performances, and you get that performance really with the audio book as it is her reading it. It's talking about the Grenfell Tower disaster, that is where it starts and then it goes through all kinds of extreme death situations. I'm making it sound like a really fun read ... but she's also very funny!

GREG: I don't know if you are!

ELLA: She's got a great sense of humour. And it's a book that is celebrating life, even though it is about death. It is hard to explain, it does go all over the place in history, we meet Jack the Ripper. We've got lots of kind of murders going on ... but it is a book about the abandoned people, the lost people. It also talks about the NHS. I mean it was a book that was written very recently, and you can really feel current events if it. But I think it would appeal to you as it is about real matters but also very funny and it's beautifully written.

GREG: That's great and quite a trick to give us hope whilst talking of matters of substance!

ELLA: Absolutely.

MOLLY: Any final suggestions for Greg, Ella? We will get on to the viewers' questions in a minute. But do you think there are one or two to cap it? Or do you not want to scare him off too much?

ELLA: Well Greg was mentioning earlier that he is writing about a character who is a mad psychotherapist, and I was remembering a couple of great novels with such characters. One is called: *Lying on the Couch* by Irvin D. Yalom, which is excellent and exactly that character. And then there is also Philippa Perry's *Couch Fiction* which is a graphic novel and in fact the psychotherapist in that book is not nutty psychotherapist, they're a good psychotherapist but it is a great story, and it is lovely to read a graphic novel. Do you ever read graphic novels?

GREG: No, I haven't, and I've got friends who are obsessed with graphic novels and I never caught the bug. It will impress certain people that I am reading a graphic novel for sure.

ELLA: I think this could convert you...

MOLLY: I don't know about you, Ella, I think it's such an under rated genre, particularly in the UK, strangely in the US I do find there is a bit more of a public culture and things but they're absolutely fantastic. I used to be obsessed with them when I was younger and even my young daughter is obsessed with George O'Connor's series of Classical graphic novels all about Greek Gods and Goddesses which are just thrilling and beautiful and fun – Greg, a great mix: Short stories, we've had a graphic novel, a couple of solid novels. Greg how are you feeling?

GREG: 'G'd up and ready to go! I do. And I genuinely will read or listen to them all. The fact you are providing me with research for what I am writing as well. Ella, it's been a tremendous service.

ELLA: Well, I'm going to be checking up on you, Greg. I look forward to hearing how they go down.

MOLLY: I think we all are. We all want to see those videos...

GREG: I will be happy to bring my friend online at any point – at any point - so that he can describe how it was to be read to by me!

MOLLY: This has to happen! This has to be a Big Book Weekend follow-up exclusive!

GREG: And if there isn't a follow up exclusive, if anyone who is watching wishes to contact me personally and see me reading to my friend, I can arrange that too.

MOLLY: I thought you were going to say to be read to?

GREG: I would love to be read to. I don't think I have been read to since the 1970's except by school pupils, who, with the best will in the world did not read that well to me.

ELLA: You've got to make it reciprocal, then, your friend must read back to you. I think you have to make that part of the deal.

GREG: Okay. I'll avoid *American Psycho*.

MOLLY: That was just brilliant. Thank you both so much. Ella, are you up now for some speed bibliotherapy? Quick recommendations from the Big Book Weekend viewers who have been writing in on social media. So, I will just hit you with them. First of all, we have Linda from Warwick. She says: I have just got divorced at 50 and I am feeling that I should be more positive about the rest of my life. Instead, I feel like my best years are behind me. Ella? Can you think of something for Linda?

ELLA: *The Private Lives of Pippa Lee* comes to mind which is a fantastic book about a woman in just that position. She's married to an older man in fact, in the book who is 84.

And she is a youth in her 50s. And she decides she has to get on with her own life when he wants to move into a nursing home. So, it is about what happens to her. When she has kinda renaissance in her 50s. And it's great, a really good read. And then there's also *The Bone People* by Keri Hulme which is set in New Zealand which is a brilliant book about a woman doing her own thing really and not needing a man. But it's so much more than that. It won the 1980s Booker Prize in 1984.

MOLLY: Always nice to hear some recommendations for Greg to get a bit of back list and we hear so much also about new books these days but it's lovely to be reminded of kind of books that are sensational that have kind of not been around on the windows of book shops for a while. Next, we have Aaron from Kettering, who says – this is quite a heavy one actually - I'm a new father petrified about the world. I feel irresponsible that I have brought a child into such a terrible situation and I am filled with dread about what the future holds for my child?

ELLA: Yes, that's a serious question, and I've got one slightly humorous answer, which is *Nutshell* Ian McEwan which is all about a child in the womb who is Hamlet waiting to be born. And it's actually telling the story of Hamlet through the foetus's eye – which all sounds insane – but it does despite it being the Hamlet story, it's actually optimistic and funny. So that's one, to make him laugh. And then there is also a lovely book which is very full of optimism and positivity about the world called: *Where the Forest Meets The Stars*. Which is the one you probably out to read first by Glendy Vanderah and that's about a young girl coming to a family seemingly with lots of bad issues from her past and how she heals. It is actually a really heart-warming book that makes you feel positive about the next generation which is what Aaron needs to be thinking about.

MOLLY: I love this. It is like watching an elite athlete springing off the starting blocks. Right finally we just have time for one more...

GREG: It is! It's absolutely fascinating, carry on.

MOLLY: Where has my brain gone – I need to be more like this! Next, we have Kerry from Walsall: I'm a single parent and very close to my daughter who is 26 and we do everything together and I worry I am not leaving her space to live her own life? So how do you tackle that in a book?

ELLA: Well, there is a brilliant book that shows the dark side of what happens when you don't let your daughter do her own thing which is: *Everything, Everything* by Nicola Yoon – which I don't know some of you may have seen the film - read the book because it is much better. It's kind of the Rapunzel story but made into a novel for grownups and I can't say too much about it, but it is about a mother who is a bit too oppressive with her daughter. So that would be the warning side. And then for the positive side, I think she should read *Danny the Champion of the World* by Roald Dahl because it is such a wonderful story about parenthood and actually about being free with your children and letting them do something exciting and sort of setting them up for independence on their own. So, two extremes there which I think reading the two together will give her the right way forward.



MOLLY: Amazing - Ella, you are a wonder! Greg, you are also a wonder. Thank you for exposing your shame!

GREG: Well, I am delighted to, delighted to expose my shame and you are! It is incredible. Ella didn't prepare those responses. It is quite remarkable.

MOLLY: This is what happens when you read lots of books. You have this sort of quicksilver mind.

GREG: It will change me!

MOLLY: Totally. We will check in on Greg and hold him accountable. I do hope everyone watching, this will inspire you to try a little bibliotherapy of your own. Ella, Greg thank you so much for being a part of the Big Book Weekend. Thank you very much for watching.

GREG: Thank you – it's been lots of fun. Thank you.

MOLLY: Goodbye.