

"AN AXE FOR THE FROZEN SEA WITHIN US"

Text and Photography: Sophia Cosby

Self-Improvement is a noble pursuit, but the modern self-help book industry is ineffective. Enter bibliotherapy: the gentler and more profound guide to addressing what ails you.

Every December 31st, millions of people across the world make a promise of betterment to themselves. They vow to lose weight or quit smoking, exclaiming "This is my year!" as they clink their champagne flutes with someone who has sworn they will start their own business and finally learn how to speak French. Mostly, however, they are just looking to become happier, more fulfilled versions of themselves.

Self-improvement is unquestionably a noble pursuit. Seneca, the stoic philosopher of the Roman Imperial period, mused upon the idea of self-improvement in his letters, calling for constant reflection in order to achieve personal growth. He writes that life provides mirrors so that we may know ourselves – ut homo ipse se nosset. Much in the Socratic tradition of "know thyself", Seneca insisted that taking the time to look inwards is a necessary first step towards attaining personal ambitions. One must look at the state of one's life, often, to assess what is lacking and make a plan for improvement. Without meditative self-reflection there can be no happiness.

Happiness is a business, however, and so is self-help. Anyone with a skill, talent or experience can sell their knowledge in the form of books, CDs, DVDs and

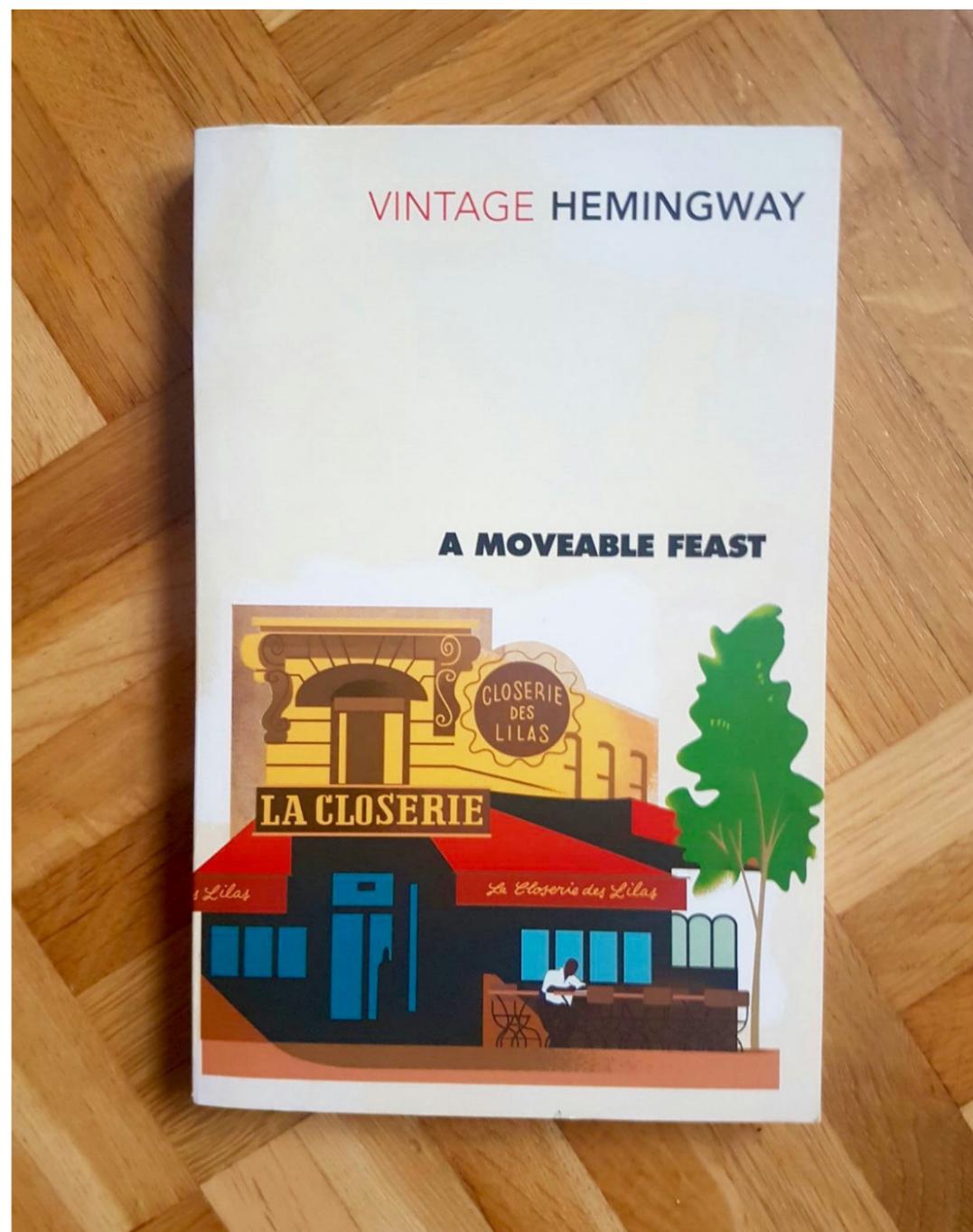
speaking engagements. As long as they can believably peddle their product, there will always be someone to buy into it. With self help books on any topic imaginable, one would think that making New Year's resolutions would be a thing of the past. The truth of the matter is, the mainstream self help industry is ineffective. Common self help books like "Change your Brain, Change your Life" or "Getting Things Done" do not address the needs of the individual, which should always be the focus.

Katy Roy is the bibliotherapist behind La Bibliothèque Apothicaire based out of Quebec, Canada. "Bibliotherapy is a practice in which novels or poetry are recommended for whatever it is that ails the patients," says Roy. It's fiction as a cure for the soul.

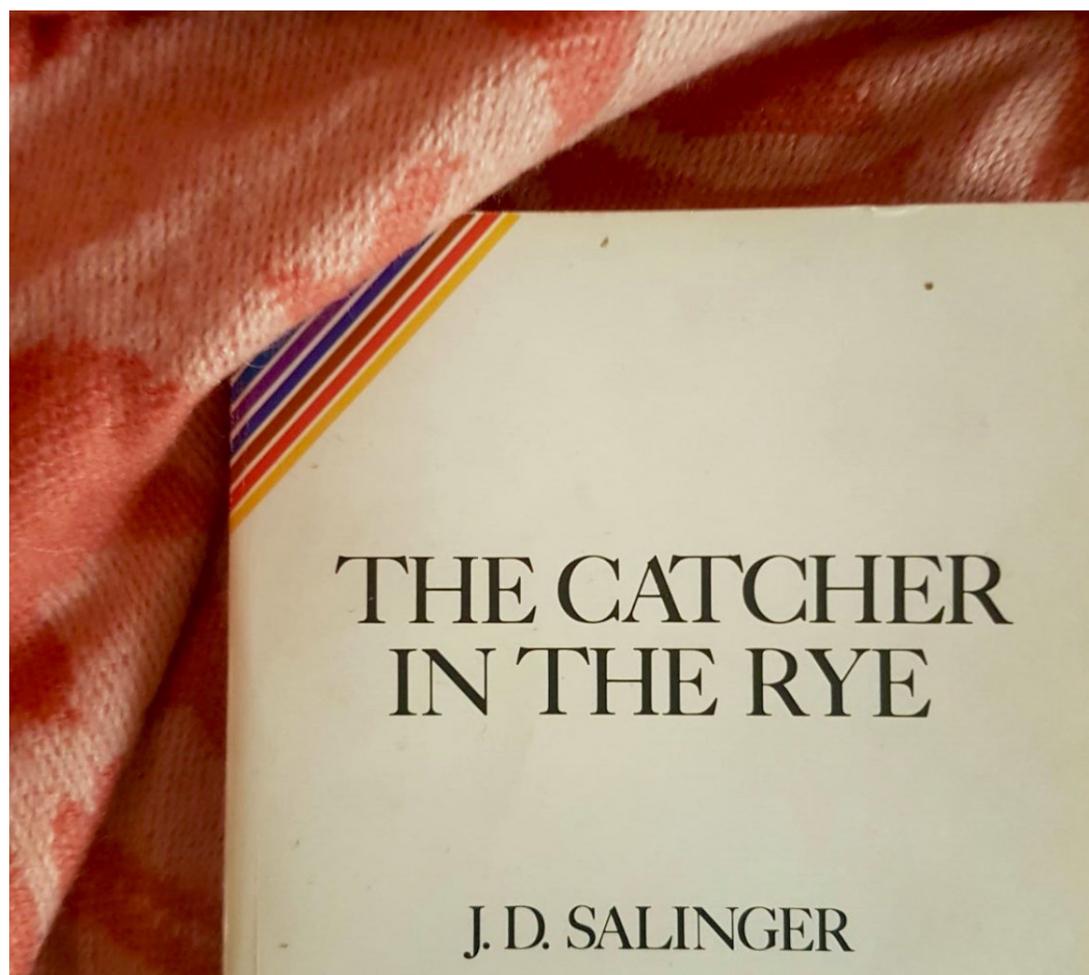
Schooled in mental imagery, Roy is currently developing a special kind of bibliotherapy that is based on symbols. "I specifically look at what I like to call the 'movie inside the reader'," says Roy. "Contact with a book has an effect on feelings, emotions, perceptions and memories. It's different for each reader." She maintains that reading fiction is a gentle yet effective path to personal development. "With bibliotherapy, the relationship to a book is both playful and educational, but mostly it is a way to let us connect to ourselves and perceive our difficulties through imagination."

Her approach is simple: she listens to someone's story or concern, then chooses texts out of her repertoire of appropriate therapy books. "Sometimes a character from fiction will intertwine with what a person is recounting to me. What I don't do is prescribe a particular reading for a particular disease. We humans often seek a quick solution to a problem, outside ourselves. But the best solution is within ourselves."

"The subject matter of fiction helps us engage with



In the case of alcoholism, pick up Ernest Hemingway's "A Moveable Feast."



Angsty and alone? "Catcher in the Rye" by J.D. Salinger is recommended.

our selves and our relationships much more than nonfiction," emphasizes Keith Oatley, emeritus professor at the University of Toronto department for Applied Psychology and Human Development and author of the book *Such Stuff as Dreams: The Psychology of Fiction*. "The subject matter of novels enable us to identify with others, to become them in imagination." Oatley compares reading fiction to meditation, finding that it puts the reader in a kind of calming trance. This kind of serenity can be more conducive to self-improvement than the stern dictation of a common self-help book. Instead of mandating a certain type of process or change, novels employ the power of identification. We see ourselves as a certain character and learn from their trials, their tribulations and their successes. In this way, we drop the "musts" and "have-tos" and embark on the journey for change in a much more organic manner. Novels are subtle, but highly effective in improving the reader's sense of self, a kind of reflection that Seneca would have endorsed.

Although bibliotherapy has been gaining steam for a few years now, therapists in this field aren't as common as more conventional forms of therapy. Luckily, there is a way to self-medicate. In 2013, Susan Elderkin, author of *The Voices*, critic and teacher of creative writing, along with fellow School of Life bibliotherapist Ella Berthoud, have written a book called *The Novel Cure: an A – Z of Literary Remedies*, published by Canongate. It's written in the style of a medical handbook, but instead of prescribing two aspirin and some sleep, the book recommends a specific novel to help ease pain. For example, if it's a medicine for feelings of abandonment you're after, try reading Kent Haruf's "Plainsong". Stir-crazy? Jack Kerouac's "On the Road" or Cormac McCarthy's "All the Pretty Horses" are your best bets.

Bibliotherapy provides a kinder and more fulfilling approach to self-help. Not only is there no lifehacker screaming at you to get your life in order, you receive professional help catered specifically to your needs. Even if you go at it on your own, reading a novel can only be beneficial. As Franz Kafka correctly surmised: "A book must be an axe for the frozen sea within us."