

Read, Relax, Recharge!
at Glasgow Women's Library
by Magi Gibson

"More enjoyable than the telly, meeting up and sharing stories, laughing contentedly at seeing we're all so different and so alike." Anne, March 2014

Imagine a woman who's retired, or been ill for a while, or lost her job unexpectedly. Let's call her Fiona. Perhaps Fiona has no family nearby, but even if she does, they're all so busy. Always rushed.

One day Fiona realizes she's rarely going out. It's such an effort. She could join a group, but she's lost her self-confidence. So many things she used to do she's lost the habit of.

One day Fiona picks up a Glasgow Women's Library programme at her local GP surgery. Her eye catches on *Read, Relax, Recharge!* It doesn't sound too challenging, and it's not a big commitment. But she's still not sure, so phones the library to find out more. She tells me she'd like to come along, but she's nervous about meeting others. I reassure her that the group is friendly, that she won't be asked to do anything that will make her feel self-conscious or out of her depth. It's a lunchtime group, I explain, we share food while the story's being read out loud, so why doesn't she come just the once, see how she likes it.

Fiona brings along some sandwiches and in the merry chaos of food-sharing and tea-pouring I introduce her to a woman I know will be warm with her. Once everyone's settled in a circle, I hand out photocopies of the piece we're going to read.

I've chosen the first chapter of a novel, *The Woman Who Went to Bed for a Year* by Sue Townsend. I read part of it out loud, then stop so we can discuss why we think the woman in the story has gone to bed fully clothed in the middle of the day. Is she just fed up? What's pushed her to this point? Has anyone ever felt like doing this? One or two women talk about their low points, how they felt. We listen sensitively. We discuss ways of coping. There are sounds of recognition, words of advice, an appreciation that what might work

for one person might not work for another. Then we pick up the story again. The woman's husband comes home. She refuses to get out of bed. He phones her mother. The mother's having her hair permed, so even if her daughter is having a breakdown, she points out nippily, she can't stay on the phone; the perm needs rinsed off. Suddenly we're talking about daft hairstyles and hairdressing disasters. Fiona joins in. She was once in the hairdressers, hair full of foils, when the fire alarm went off. She had no choice but to run into the street. She's a good storyteller. We're all laughing. Her face is shining. I tell the group a little of the author, Sue Townsend's personal story, how even when she was in a wheelchair and blind she kept writing. We all agree that she was an inspirational woman. Then it's time for a break to fill our cups and chat. Fiona, I notice, is chatting to women who've been coming to the group for a while.

But the session's not over yet. We still have a poem to read. The poem will either complement or contrast with the main theme of the story. This week I've chosen *In Praise of Dreams* by Polish poet, Wislawa Szymborska, using the bed/dream link. We take it in turns to read the poem out loud, a few lines each, before we discuss it. Fiona chooses to read. She reads well. We talk about what we dreamt our lives would be like when we were very young, and what came to pass, about dreams we still have and would like to fulfill.

At the end of the session I offer the Sue Townsend book for borrowing. Fiona says she'd like to give it a go. There's no pressure to return it soon, I assure her, she can take her time.

She comes back the following week. While the food's being set out, she tells me she's amazed, she's finished the book – the first she's read in years! Once we're settled in our circle, I invite her to share her thoughts on it with the group. As she talks and answers their questions I see her recovering her sense of who she is: a woman with a mind, opinions, sensitivity, a sense of humour, a woman with something to offer others. After a few weeks, Fiona fills in an evaluation form, and writes, "A wonderful lunchtime yet again! Thank you for the chance to look at stories and poetry in a more enlightening way and to meet so many interesting women." She also reports increased self-confidence and improved wellbeing.

'Read, Relax, Recharge!' sessions with Glasgow Women's Library aren't just another book or reading group. Our model differs in many ways.

- Participants don't need to be able to read. Literacy levels are not an issue.
- Each session is self-contained. Participants don't need to prepare, to have been the week before, or to commit to coming every week. Absences are not an issue.
- Sharing food while listening to stories taps into age-old traditions of sitting round the fire, of co-operative living and community.
- Because the reading's not one set text, if you don't like the story one week, no problem, the following week will be totally different.
- Participants get tasters of lots of different authors and styles.
- Photocopies can be kept. Jean, a recovering alcoholic with concentration problems, likes to dip into her 'collection' at home.
- Difficult issues can be explored, ways of coping can be shared, through discussion of the fictional characters and situations.
- Through fiction and poetry horizons can be broadened, rigid thinking patterns challenged, new ways of coping imagined. As author, Margaret Atwood says, "*I read for pleasure and that is the moment I learn the most.*"

If you're thinking of running a group like this, you may want to bear in mind:

- The needs and interests of the group determine the choices of texts, in terms of content, language level and length of story.
- The facilitator has overall responsibility for welcoming, creating a safe space, leading the reading, and guiding the discussion, which may range from reminiscence to personal experience to literary quality. She is constantly observing and listening to participants, looking to achieve as positive an experience as possible for each.
- The space is important. Seats should be comfortable. Arrangement should be informal, and a circle is perfect. Facilitator must have eye contact with everyone.

- Choose short stories as well as extracts from novels, memoir, travel writing and autobiography. Pieces might last anything from 10 to 25 minutes. Read expressively. If you enjoy reading, others will enjoy listening.
- Photocopy texts to allow participants the option of following on the page.
- Vary the texts from week to week to cover a wide range of topics, themes, styles.
- Choose accessible poems, and never a poem that might trouble or depress
- Sharing food, whether lunch, tea or cakes, adds a dimension of conviviality and hospitality, promoting a sense of community and sharing.

For further information on bibliotherapy groups and bibliotherapy training at Glasgow Women's Library, <http://womenslibrary.org.uk/>
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