



# Turning Pages to Healing Illness: A Bibliotherapeutic Reading of Stephen Chbosky's *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*

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## Open Access

Manuscript ID: BIJ-2026-JAN-013

Subject: English

Received : 17.12.2025

Accepted : 23.12.2025

Published : 31.01.2026

DOI:10.64938/bjri.v10n2.26.Jan013

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## Abstract

*"A book being a literary prescription it should be carefully put up"*

(Crothers 45).

*The present study examines the effect of bibliotherapeutic reading in healing Charlie's illness through bibliotherapy in Chbosky's novel The Perks of Being a Wallflower. According to Samuel Crothers, the concept of bibliotherapy is that words contain the healing power to cure the illness of the human psyche. Bibliotherapy is the therapeutic application of literature that promotes a sense of connection with characters and themes, offering emotional, mental, and physical support. The Perks of Being a Wallflower has a story of quiet moments between laughter and a poignant theme of loss lingering in the atmosphere. The shadows of love and loss of temper, the moment of joyful memory and painful trauma. The protagonist and narrator, Charlie, captures the turbulence of teenage life with honesty and emotional depth. The novel unfolds the character Charlie, who has been subject to the childhood loss of loved ones and adult love. One of his teachers, Bill Anderson, significantly influences Charlie's development by allowing him to engage with a choice of books and compose written reviews of their content. The impact of the fiction he reads helps in the healing process of the mental trauma he has gone through during his adolescent period. Unknowingly, Charlie finds his way out of trauma through characters, themes, and thoughts that function as medicine. This study focuses on the character Charlie's way out of trauma through the approach of a bibliotherapeutic reading.*

**Keywords:** Charlie, Bill Anderson, trauma, literature, bibliotherapy, psychological counseling

Adolescence is a delicate and critical life development period during which a person experiences emotional, psychological, and social changes, as well as cognitive development. During this period, if a person is affected by a traumatic experience, it will have an impact on his/her physical and mental growth and well-being. In the twenty-first century, individuals encounter innumerable forms of trauma, as they are

vulnerable to violence, personal and professional conflicts, childhood abuse, unsettling situations in the family, the loss of a dear one, pandemics, natural disasters, and more. Adolescent trauma can occur from various sources. These include experiences such as physical, sexual, or emotional abuse and neglect within the family or from other trusted adults or friends. Bullying, sexual abuse by relatives, the



suicide of loved ones, general social anxiety, feelings of being an outsider, and sometimes family dynamics such as lack of communication, ineffective support, and inherited mental health issues. Regardless of an individual's encounter with various forms of trauma, they will undergo several therapies in life to deal with it.

Therapy is a wide range of interventions formulated to help individuals address various psychological, physical, emotional, and traumatic issues. The major motive of therapy is to treat a traumatized mind. Therapy typically involves one-on-one sessions, counseling, personal meetings, and other modalities. Cognitive behavioral techniques, mindfulness practices, and the use of various assessment tools to address traumatic issues can all be included as therapeutic components. The numerous types of therapy include Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), Psychodynamic Therapy, Humanistic Therapy, Gestalt Therapy, Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT), Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), Interpersonal Therapy (IPT), Family Therapy, Couple Therapy, Play Therapy, Mindfulness-Based Therapy, Art Therapy, Music Therapy, Group Therapy, Solution-Focused Brief Therapy (SFBT). This study focuses specifically on the therapy known as bibliotherapy.

Bibliotherapy was originally derived from the Greek words *biblion*, which means book, and *theropeia*, which means healing. It is "a form of therapy that uses structured reading material. Bibliotherapy is often used as an adjunct to psychotherapy for such purposes as reinforcing specific in-session concepts or strategies or enhancing lifestyle changes" (American Psychological Association 117), which has been progressively adopted in educational settings and clinical studies. Bibliotherapy helps discover a fundamental interaction between the reader and the text. Bibliotherapy is grounded in the principle that books can be powerful tools for healing, psychological and emotional development, and self-discovery. Its theoretical underpinnings are drawn from psychology, education, and literary studies. A key aspect of bibliotherapy is its alignment with behavioral theories. Reading can challenge negative thought patterns and foster positive perspectives. Readers may identify with characters or situations,

allowing them to process their emotions, reevaluate their viewpoints, and learn constructive coping strategies. Further, informed by humanistic psychology, bibliotherapy aims to develop self-actualization, emotional comfort, and overall well-being. Specifically selected literary works ensure several opportunities for conflict, empathy, and personal growth.

Samuel McChord Crothers's article "A Literary Clinic" was published in *The Atlantic Monthly* in August 1916. *The Atlantic* is known for its publications on the themes of culture, politics, and literature, which gave a fitting space for Crothers's essay, reaching a wide range of audiences interested in intellectual discourse and innovative ideas in the United States. This place is marked as the starting point of the term "Bibliotherapy," which has been used in psychology, education, and medicine. This essay explores how printed texts or books function as "literary prescriptions" applied to people's psychological and emotional aspects. Crothers coined the term "bibliotherapy through the fictional Bibliopathic Institute and its founder, Dr Bagster, in "A Literary Clinic". He handled both medical applications and the therapeutic effects of treatments through the fictional Bibliopathic Institute and its director, Dr. Bagster. This work highlights the importance of analyzing the reader's state of mind rather than commenting on or criticizing the work of art and compares books to medications with notable qualities, such as stimulants, sedatives, and counter-irritants. Crothers explained how literature can interrogate preoccupying notions, offer consolation, or evoke thought through the experiments of the protagonist, Dr. Bagster. He stresses the therapeutic advantages of books by endorsing specific texts for conditions such as intolerance, depression, and mental stagnation. This article playfully examines the proliferation of shallow literature while encouraging a deeper connection with books that inspire reflection and meaning. The current study's theoretical framework attempts to contemplate how bibliotherapy is applied in Charlie's life in Stephen Chbosky's *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*. Analyzing the narrative structure, character development, and thematic depth highlights the therapeutic benefits of Chbosky's work.



Charlie, the protagonist and narrator of *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, writes a series of letters that form the framework of this popular tale about coming of age. He is an introvert by nature, moving to high school and fighting with loneliness and trauma caused by events from the past. When Charlie makes friends with his step-siblings Sam and Patrick, who expose him to a thriving world of music, parties, and self-expression, he finds comfort and a sense of belonging despite his loneliness and trauma. Charlie experiences happiness and heartache when he gets exposed to the world of friendship, love, and identity. He finds it difficult to cope with dynamic relationships while surviving high school and his love for Sam. The novel also presents Charlie's mental illness as composed of past trauma, such as the loss of loved ones and childhood abuse, which leads to a psychological and emotional breakdown that prompts him to seek out healing therapy. The story depicts the bittersweet reality of growing up and the essence of finding solace through love, loss, and identity, learning to embrace life's imperfections. Charlie's English teacher, Bill Anderson, is a typical advisor and crucial mentor in his path to self-exploration and resilience. Unlike most teachers, Bill recognizes Charlie's potential early on and helps him nurture it by assigning him more reading assignments while challenging him to think critically about literature and life. Bill gives Charlie a sense of purpose and intellectual affirmation by supporting him as he develops his voice and confidence. Through reading and writing assignments, Charlie experimented with bibliotherapy. Thus, this research article investigates how bibliotherapy works in the traumatic life of the protagonist, Charlie.

This study focuses on how the practice of therapeutic formulas and methods would work in Charlie's life, how books treat his mind and soul, and how this might help him cope with his trauma and provide explanations and solutions for his feelings. In the novel, Charlie's English teacher Bill Anderson gave him to read and write a review of the following books *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee, *The Catcher in the Rye* by J.D. Salinger, *A Separate Peace* by John Knowles, *This Side of Paradise* by F. Scott Fitzgerald, *On the Road* by Jack Kerouac, *Hamlet* by William Shakespeare, *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott

Fitzgerald, *Naked Lunch* by William S. Burroughs, *The Stranger* by Albert Camus, *Peter Pan* by J.M. Barrie, *Walden* by Henry David Thoreau, and *The Fountainhead* by Ayn Rand.

First, Charlie receives *To Kill a Mockingbird* from his English teacher, Bill Anderson. He mentions this book in a letter that he wrote to his imagined 'Dear friend' as his all-time favorite. The novel is set during the Depression and centers on the characters Scout Finch and her brother Jem as they observe their father, Atticus, a lawyer who defends a Black Man wrongly accused of assault. Charlie encounters prejudices, moral dilemmas, and childhood innocence, and realizes how the world is filled with complexities everywhere. He identifies how Scout, Jem, and Dill navigate this complex world. The word Boo connects both novels. When Charlie spots a group calling a young kid 'weird' and 'boo', he is reminded of his own sister's assault. However, he thinks about Scout's naive courage and her defense of Boo Radley despite her fear. When Atticus Finch articulates,

"I wanted you to see what real courage is, instead of getting the idea that courage is a man with a gun in his hand. It's when you know you're licked before you begin, but you begin anyway and see it through no matter what" (149).

Charlie emphasizes courage as something more profound than physical bravery and connects his feelings of paralysis. He was overwhelmed by the trauma caused by the past incident of his sister's assault. He realizes that real courage is not in the physical body, but in how a person tackles challenges without fear and hesitation. Here, the therapeutic quality of a literary work helps Charlie cope with his trauma and wish to be as bold as Atticus Finch in his defense of others.

The Symbol of 'Tunnel' is mentioned in the novels *A Separate Peace* and *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*. Charlie, Sam, and Patrick often drive through a tunnel and hear songs that trigger their memory, and suddenly Charlie becomes nauseous, and the tunnel becomes a kind of dark and unforgiving abyss. He realizes that his fear is like Gene's innocence lost between the walls of the Devon School, more like the walls of a tunnel



mentioned in the novel *A Separate Peace*. Charlie feels disconnected from the happiness that Sam and Patrick are experiencing. As John Knowles states, ‘Sarcasm... the protest of those who are weak’ (27), Charlie strengthens his mind from Knowles’ words in *A Separate Peace*.

The scene of a party at the lake house, where Charlie, Sam, Patrick, and his friends portray how Charlie is disconnected and feels detached, watching from the sidelines and observing how people try to project themselves unrealistically. *The Great Gatsby* explores the superficiality and emptiness of the Twenties and resonates with Charlie’s sense of alienation and disconnection. Like Nick Carraway, Charlie behaves as an observer on the outskirts of the social scene.

Generally, writing is a key tool that heals the protagonist in various ways. Charlie writes everything he experiences throughout the day in the form of letters. Similar to how the characters Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty in the novel *On the Road* seek self-discovery through travel, Charlie starts to see his path through his writing. As Kerouac states, ‘The best teacher is experience and not through someone’s distorted point of view’ (38). This quote emphasizes the clarity of exploring everything in Charlie’s life through experiences.

In a used-book shop, Charlie spots a frayed copy of Thoreau’s *Walden*. He reads about independence and simplicity while seated in a peaceful corner of the garden. He is lured by the notion of withdrawing from the world’s turmoil and finding comfort in introspection. He sees himself living in a tiny hut, far from humans, in the woods. For him, this is a potent image, a thought that brings him some kind of calmness. Specifically, pursuing one’s passion and living in nature inspire Charlie.

An incident where Patrick insists Charlie ‘get over’ his trauma creates disagreement between both of them. Charlie feels frustrated, and his mind suffers from the pain of loss and the childhood discomfort of frustrated scenarios. He has been with the character Hamlet when he compares himself to his traumatic past and is unable to get it out of his mind. In general, people learn from errors. Here, Charlie learns from Hamlet’s mistakes.

Charlie challenges several social conventions and questions directly. Why is being “normal” necessary? Why are grownups so interested in what constitutes “normal” behavior in others? He observes the absurdity of life and how people attempt to fit it into a predetermined pattern. He wonders if there is any purpose in life. He concludes that there is most likely no answer, which makes him feel both anxious and, in an odd way, liberated. He even seems to value the small things that other people do.

Charlie witnesses *Peter Pan*’s portrayal of childhood’s frailty on stage. He realizes that he has lost touch with that aspect of himself after witnessing how children attempt to cling to their innocence. He was unsure how, but he wanted to rekindle that feeling of wonder and excitement. He misses the days when he was not burdened by the world’s evils as he observes his younger siblings do.

*The Catcher in the Rye* tells the story of a character and narrator, Holden Caulfield, a teenage boy struggling with angst and alienation after being expelled from a prep school. He started to mingle with various people in New York City, where he struggled with feelings of loneliness, disenchanted with the world of adolescence. Charlie uses this kind of exposure from this book to cope with his trauma.

*The Fountainhead* lies on themes like individualism, integrity, creativity, the dangers of conformity, and the power of the human inner being. Ayn defines freedom as ‘‘To ask nothing. To expect nothing. To depend on nothing’’(678). Through Ayn Rand’s words, moral and philosophical concepts are explored. Charlie filters what he needs for his own life to get out of his trauma.

Charlie connects to the concepts of morality, justice, and childhood innocence, and understands the world’s complexities in *To Kill a Mockingbird*; he identifies with the character Holden’s feeling of being an outsider including loneliness and disillusionment with the adult world in *The Catcher in the Rye*; he reflects on friendships and the theme of internal conflict concerning the book *A Separate Peace*; he sees parallels between the character Amory’s youthful search for purpose and his life in *This Side of Paradise*; he sees the book *On the Road* as representative of a desire to break free from conformity; he discusses the Protagonist Hamlet’s



struggle with justice and deeds which resonates with his internal conflicts, themes of unrequited love and the illusion of past in the novel *The Great Gatsby* impacts the mind of Charlie; he explores the main character's indifference to life and society in *The Stranger*, he reflects over how the book *Peter Pan* makes him want to stay in his innocence and not grow up; *Walden* provides Charlie with a model for introspection and self-discovery, and a lens through which to examine society's pressures; *The Fountainhead* helps him find out and understand the struggle among conformity, authenticity and individuality that is something to be valued. While the novel *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* holds immense bibliotherapeutic value, several limitations are acknowledged. The novel's themes and most of the imagery are admirable, influential, and carefully crafted. The integration of bibliotherapeutic reading in the book *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* helps readers, educators, and therapists harness tremendous power to enhance the psychological and emotional well-being of individuals. Similarly, in Charlie's life, his English teacher, Bill Anderson, uses the concept of Bibliotherapy to heal Charlie. Charlie practices his mind to get out of his trauma caused by the past by allowing himself to be healed by learning from the characters in the novels how to tackle internal and external conflicts, understand family dynamics, overcome hurdles faced as an introvert, develop decision-making skills in crucial situations, and so on. The purpose of this study was achieved, as evidenced by Charlie's bibliotherapeutic healing.

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