



Read Yourself Happy

How a good book habit
can ease your anxiety

Daisy Buchanan

CONTENTS

Introduction

1. Read Yourself Calmer: the healing power of books
2. Read Yourself Secure: how books can shape our identity for the better
3. Read Yourself Romantic: rom-coms, tropes and real-life love
4. Read Yourself Sexy: erotic literature and our sexual awakening
5. Reading Our Relatives: family, feuds and finding our place
6. Reading The World: making sense of huge moments in history
7. Read Yourself Free: overcoming addiction and forming healthy habits
8. Reading Like a Writer: reading, creativity and the worlds that we make
9. Reading For Courage: on finding bravery through books
10. Read It And Weep: catharsis, connection and emotional release
11. Read Yourself Funnier: on humour writing and laughing out loud
12. Turning the Page: an introverted way to become more outward-looking

©DK CONFIDENTIAL

Introduction

Dear reader,

How are you feeling right now? Really?

I hope you're sitting somewhere comfortable and quiet. I hope you're feeling calm, still, and unhurried. I hope your heartbeat is steady, and your breath is even. I hope you're here.

But I understand that's an awful lot to hope for.

Realistically, you might be reading this on the bus, sitting in traffic, and trying to fight the rising feeling of panic and anxiety as you calculate how late you're going to be. You might be reading this in the bathroom, because it's the one place you can go where your kids will give you five minutes peace. (Maybe just two or three minutes.) Perhaps you're reading because you can't sleep, and you're trying to distract yourself from the list of unfinished tasks that keeps circulating in your head. We all have so much on our minds that simply stopping to read might have caused your anxiety to spike.

This might be the first time today that you've had a chance to think about how you're feeling. You might be checking in with your body and be surprised to discover that the anxiety seems to be sitting in your jaw, or that there's tension in your toes.

Many of us are struggling right now. We've been struggling for a while. The world is full of things to react to and worry about – and sometimes managing our anxiety seems like another exhausting task to add to the list. I have Generalised Anxiety Disorder, and I know that it

©DK CONFIDENTIAL

has made me feel frightened, isolated and lonely. It's ironic- anxiety has never been more widespread. (According to the mental health charity Mind, in the UK six in a hundred people are diagnosed with General Anxiety Disorder every week. According to Mental Health UK, eight million people are experiencing an anxiety disorder at any one time.) But when my anxiety has been at its worst, it has made me feel like the only person in the world who couldn't cope.

So the first thing I'd like to tell you is that you're part of a gang. Here, you don't have to worry about worrying. It's fine to let yourself feel anxious if that's the way you're feeling right now. Our anxiety works like an oversensitive smoke alarm. It's hyperresponsive, and it's trying to keep us safe. We don't feel this way because something has gone wrong, and we don't feel this way because something is wrong with us. I wish I could switch your brain off for a while; what I can do is tell you that you're safe here, in this moment, and I'm with you. What I won't do is tell you about CBD oil, or the benefits of regular exercise, or long hot baths, or ask you if you've tried mindfulness? (In the spirit of full disclosure, I've found all these things to be useful and enjoyable. However, when I've been on the floor, figuratively and literally, I could have punched anyone who suggested that I could be fixed if I took a bath.)

But what I would like to tell you about is an anxiety-easing habit that I believe in with my whole heart. Ever since I was little, long before I understood what anxiety was, or why I had it, I've instinctively reached for this habit, and used it to self-soothe. You're doing it right now.

When I'm feeling anxious, I read. Reading makes me feel calm, curious and connected. Stories hold me, absorb me, and deliver the stillness I am seeking. And – I can't stress this enough – I am not Ron Burgundy, and I do not have many leather-bound books. If I'm feeling really anxious, I don't pick up the sort of book I might want to show off about at a dinner party. I'm looking for old friends, stories I might already be familiar with. Soft places to land. We're talking *Sweet Valley High*, *The Princess Diaries* and *The Babysitters' Club*. I know *Bridget Jones' Diary* almost off by heart, because I've been turning to it since I was a teenager.

You can read any book you like. You'll know what your comfort stories are – you might take refuge in a Mick Herron, you might crave Adrian Mole, or Spot the Dog, or *The Unbearable Lightness Of Being*. (Hey, I'm not fancy, but you might be!) But I'd love to show you – or perhaps remind you - that reading isn't a chore; it's not an adult homework task, or another overwhelming activity to add to your enormous list. It's a happy habit, and it's just for you. No-one needs to know what you're reading, or when you're reading, and how much you're reading. But I believe that if you can find a tiny bit of time to read, you'll be finding a way to ease your anxiety. With a book, you can be completely present in your body, while escaping the world for a while. Sometimes it takes me a while to find the silence, but reading turns the volume down on the increasingly hectic world around us.

Before we get started, I'd like to make one thing very clear. It's important that you don't feel guilty or ashamed about not reading 'enough' or reading the 'wrong' sort of book. Most of all, I want to make the case for reading in an accessible way, and I want to explore why so many of us *do* feel bad about what we read, and how much we read. During my most anxious periods, I've picked up serious books, searching for solace – and sometimes those books have left me confused and alienated. When a painful experience at work left me feeling burned out and broken, I tried to read *How To Be Both* by Ali Smith, which had just won the Women's Prize for Fiction.

It did not go well.

I remember sitting on a train and feeling the weight of the book in my lap, and the weight of my phone in my hand. Trying to read a sentence, and skidding over the words too quickly, unable to find a purchase, or process their meaning. It was as though my mental tire treads were completely worn out, and I couldn't direct my thoughts to get where I wanted to go. I'd look at the book, and then blink and realise that I was looking at my phone. Then I'd look out of the window and wonder what was wrong with me. Then I'd look at my

Read Yourself Happy

phone again. It was no wonder that I felt so scared at work, and so bad at my job. I was so useless that I couldn't even read the first page of an important, prize-winning novel!

I felt sad, and stupid. Reading had *always* been there for me. When I was being bullied at primary school, I turned to books to make me feel happy and safe. As a teenager struggling to navigate the world, books made me feel hopeful. In sleepy, conservative rural Dorset, I sat in the library and fell in love with Tennessee Williams and Truman Capote. I dreamed of cities, parties and revolutions. During lonely moments at university, I cheered myself up with old friends from home – Marian Keyes, Noel Streatfeild, Armistead Maupin. Books had *always* been good to me. They had offered me safety and escape, comfort, joy *and* adventure. All they'd ever asked from me was my attention, and now I couldn't even give them that.

At the time, I didn't realise that I was badly burned out. I was furious with myself for being unable to switch off, concentrate or get into a flow state. Back then, I didn't think of myself as a human being, having human responses to some relatively new stimulus. I had a love-hate relationship with social media and my smartphone. I felt 'addicted', and I was angry with myself for being unable to control myself. It did not occur to me that I felt addicted to something that had been *designed* to be addictive.

When I'm describing a book I love, I often find myself falling back on the old cliché, 'I couldn't put it down.' When I say this, it's true – the experience of being immersed in the story is so powerful that I don't want to be anywhere else. With a book, this experience has *only* ever made me feel good - connected, exhilarated, and present. Yet, my phone is the ultimate 'I couldn't put it down' read. I pick up my phone when I want to feel connected, but it has never made me feel exhilarated or present. It has made me feel overwhelmed, lonely, scattered, and exhausted.

Don't worry – I'm not asking you to give up your phone. I am asking you to give yourself a bit of grace and generosity, when it comes to understanding your existing habits, and how they might be exacerbating your anxiety. Here is what I wish I'd known, back then.

My reading habit is a muscle. And just like a physical muscle, I need to use it regularly to keep it strong. Also, just like a physical muscle, I needed to build it up slowly. On the train, I'd attempted the book version of going to a brand-new gym and picking up a 200lb weight, with no training or guidance.

Of course, I dropped the weight, hurt my back, and felt sulky and unfit. I needed to work out, very gently, for just a few minutes every day. I needed to strap on some smaller weights and let myself remember the way that they felt. Perhaps you can consider this book to be your set of tiny training weights. I'm inviting you to come with me, so that we can explore a wide range of subjects, themes and genres together, and discover the books that will help us to navigate our biggest, smallest and most confusing emotions. As your paper-turning personal trainer, I promise not to push you into anything before you feel ready. But I hope to deliver the results *you* want – a reading habit that brings you happiness and joy, one that makes you feel so good that you don't care what anyone else thinks about it.

After struggling with *How To Be Both*, I returned to a childhood favourite, *The Babysitters' Club*. I read for comfort, and for calm. I discovered that a beloved book can be like a favourite sweater, and all that matters is that it makes you feel soft and warm. I needed to heal and spend time repairing my relationship with reading before I was ready to move on.

Some years later, I opened *How To Be Both*, and tried again. I felt anxious, and trepidatious – but this time, every sentence drew me closer to the story. The book captured my attention and held it. I felt myself relaxing into its universe, and I felt confident and connected. I had been training, regularly. My strength had been increasing, slowly and imperceptively. As I read 'I fell in love the way you fall asleep: slowly, and then all at once.' At last, I was ready to attempt the 200lb weight.

If you've ever lost yourself in a story, this book is for you. It's a celebration of books and reading – and it's an invitation to reconnect with an instinctive, human part of yourself. We have been sharing, telling and listening to stories, even before we had written language.

We are all descended from generations of story lovers.

This book is also for anyone who just feels lost. If that's you, I believe you can find yourself in a story. Maybe it's been a while since you loved a book so much that you couldn't put it down, because switching off is such a struggle. I want to help you to find the right book. I promise, it's a passport that will let you take a holiday from your own head. If you reconnect with reading, you can bring some order to your thoughts, and ease that seemingly endless feeling of dread.

Together, we're going on a grand tour. We'll be exploring how books can bring us comfort and support when we're at our lowest, and how they can enhance our lives, increase our capacity for joy, and make us feel more connected to the people we love. We'll look at how books can help us to make sense of our complicated families, how they can help us to find meaning and purpose when global events make us feel powerless, and how reading can ease the physical and mental symptoms of intense stress. We'll even find out how books can make us funnier, braver – and hornier. At the end of every chapter, I'll be sharing some book recommendations, and I hope these will bring you inspiration, comfort and joy. I hope you'll spot some of your old favourites – and also that I'll introduce you to some brand new books that bring you an enormous amount of pleasure.

I'm here to reclaim reading for all of us. It's so good for us, but possibly not in the way that we have been led to believe. Yes, reading can increase our knowledge, fuel our curiosity, and strengthen our empathy. It might make us clever, wise and kind. Books allow us to travel all over the world, and can teach us history, philosophy and geography. But, in all honesty, those aren't the lessons I remember. The most lasting thing I've learned from reading is that we're never alone. Firstly, it doesn't matter how mad, sad or obscure our dilemma is. Someone else has lived it and written down everything they discovered and everything they felt. Secondly, during those moments when our feelings are overwhelming and difficult to bear, a book is the most generous friend we could hope to find. A book meets us where we are, absorbing our sadness and distracting us from it.

Reading is a way of celebrating curiosity. When my anxiety overwhelms me, I feel very scared of uncertainty, and unable to deal with the unknown. But the best books remind me that uncertainty is unavoidable, and it's worth embracing. I want to read a story *because* I don't know what's going to happen, or how it will end. The more I enjoy the uncertainty of stories, the better I get at tolerating uncertainty in life.

When we pick up a book, we're choosing the scenic route. It's an act of courage, and a celebration of uncertainty. We have no idea what we're going to discover, which parts will stay with us, and how that book will make us feel. It's a magical, mysterious act. A book invites us to get lost within it, while finding ourselves. And some books fill me to the point of transcendence. They present other universes to immerse myself in, making my own much easier to live in.

But let's take a beat and get our breath back. If you're already feeling anxious, words like 'mystery' and 'transcendence' may frighten you away. When I've been in reading droughts and slumps, I would not have been encouraged by someone waving a book at me and shouting 'try this – it's *magic*.' First, we need to trust that reading will simply entertain us. When we talk about books, we tend to use words like 'powerful' and 'life changing'. We rarely venerate books by saying 'this was as gripping and addictive as the last box set I binged.'

So how can we do this if we don't allow ourselves to read for fun?

Those of us who were lucky enough to be raised around books probably have plenty of unconscious biases about what makes a book 'good'. We keep a mental list of books we 'should' read before we reach the books we *want* to read. Dickens for dinner, Jilly Cooper or Jackie Collins for pudding – but *only* if we finish our dinner. Unlike *Oliver Twist*, that diet doesn't leave me wanting more. It means I lose my appetite.

If you're starving for something to read, start by having ice cream for every meal. Don't worry if you can't finish your helping, or if the flavour isn't what you were hoping for. Most of all, don't worry if someone else has strong opinions about your choice.

We've all been forced to muddle our way through a book that didn't excite us or engage us. How would you feel if you had permission to

read anything? And just as importantly, you don't have to read everything! You don't have to clear your plate, and you don't have to finish your book. You're allowed to try anything that you like the look of, and you don't have to justify that choice to anyone. You can read any book in the Sunday Times review section, or any book you discover on TikTok, or any book you find on the shelves of local charity shop. It doesn't matter where your books come from. I believe the act of reading will always leave you feeling better than it found you.

It's ironic that our anxiety isolates us. So many of us are suffering, and yet, it makes us feel that we're all alone. When we're in its grip, it can feel impossible to ask for the help that we desperately need. We can't explain ourselves. We can't make ourselves heard. I wish I could cure our anxiety, and make sure that we all feel safe, happy, and confident forever. However, I can do the next best thing, and share everything I know about the habit that has soothed, and restored me, and helped me to forge a path through my darkest moments.

Come with me, and I'll show you how reading has eased my anxiety, and how it can ease yours. I promise there is a book out there that will fill your heart and blow your mind. If you're feeling anxious and isolated, reading will make you feel connected. It's the best medicine I know.

Chapter 7

Read Yourself Free

It's a month before my fifteenth birthday. I'm in my local branch of Help The Aged, looking for something special. Obviously, every time I go into a charity shop or thrift store, I'm hoping to find a second-hand Chanel handbag, reduced to 50 pence. But right now, my goals are vague. I'm simply seeking. I'm looking for a magical passport, a portal, a ticket to a whole new life for under a fiver. After all, I read enough stories to know that this is how things begin. There must be a hat, or a pair of glasses that will elevate me from awkward nerd to sophisticated woman. If I keep searching, I'll find the sacred totem that transforms everything.

My luck is in. I find it. It's not a hat, or a handbag, or a pair of glasses – but a hot pink hardback with a pair of bright green shoes on the cover. It's called *Rachel's Holiday*. It's about an Irish girl in New York, a story of parties and cocaine and luxury rehab. The first few lines make me gasp. I can feel my whole body lighting up, and tingling. 'I was a middle-class, convent educated girl whose drug use was strictly recreational. And surely drug addicts were thinner?'

At this point in my life, I haven't actually managed to get hold of any drugs yet. Drugs, according to all newspapers, are terrifying, mysterious things that will kill you instantly. But I'm a middle-class Catholic girl who hates her body! I'm scared of drugs, but I'm much more scared of spending the rest of my life as a good girl, never having

any adventures. I'm stuck in the middle of nowhere in sleepy Dorset, where my life is run by parents, teachers and nuns, and nothing exciting ever happens to me.

For as long as I can remember, I've felt as though everyone else has been given a manual that contains the secrets of the universe – and they've been reading theirs, when I've been busy with Mallory Towers. But what luck! I've finally found my manual. *Rachel's Holiday* is the book that will tell me what adulthood is really about.

I read it in two days, resenting everything that comes between me and it, like eating meals and sleeping. I get toothpaste in the book, because I'm trying to read it when I'm brushing my teeth. Rachel seems to have lived my dream life, living in New York with her best friend, meeting fabulous people and going to parties. But in other ways, Rachel's life is exactly like mine, now.

She never feels good enough. She's yearning for glamour and escape, and that yearning is getting her into trouble. She's desperate, restless and secretly very sad. She has too many feelings. She's constantly overwhelmed by guilt and shame – and she felt that way long before she took any drugs. She's suspicious of everyone who is kind to her. And she nurses a suspicion that life might be easier, and she might be more loveable if she weighed less. I read on. Rachel argues with her mother. 'I was getting the plummeting sensation so often that I felt sick. Guilt and shame mingled with anger and resentment.' I gasp with recognition. That's exactly how I feel, most of the time. How can someone else *know*?

Rachel's Holiday is the grown up guidebook I've been searching for. I don't so much read it as digest it, directly into my heart. But at almost fifteen, I'm too young to heed its biggest messages. It's a cautionary tale, I think. A warning about what might happen if I go a little too far. *I won't go too far, though*, I silently assure myself at the time. *I'll have fun, but in moderation...*

Over the next few years, I go too far whenever I have the opportunity.

When I first read *Rachel's Holiday*, my understanding of addiction was limited. The novel was the first story I'd ever read that suggested

addiction was emotionally complex. It didn't focus on Rachel's drug of choice – cocaine – but on how Rachel struggled with her biggest feelings. It was also revelatory to learn that Rachel didn't get 'cured' in rehab. She learns better tools for dealing with her painful feelings, but those feelings didn't go away. As a teenage reader, I didn't have the life experience to fully appreciate or absorb the many lessons of this rich novel. However, it helped me to begin to broach some serious ideas. I could see that the key to understanding addiction might lie in focusing on the feelings, rather than zoning in on what you were addicted to.

At that time, the very end of the nineties, drugs were a media obsession, and the tabloids were full of scare stories about overdoses, and instant deaths. Leah Betts died in 1995, shortly after her 18th birthday. Her death was caused by water intoxication and hyponatremia, which led to swelling of the brain. But the news shouted about a 'drugs tragedy'. The first thing I learned about Ecstasy was that it could kill you.

I was also intrigued and frightened by a different book, *Trainspotting*. Irvine Welsh's acclaimed novel was made into a film, and the posters and advertisements for this were everywhere. The impact of the film was so unignorable that I couldn't look away from it – and I was a child living in the countryside, with no access to the internet. All I knew was that *Trainspotting* was cool, and clever, and my parents had forbidden me from ever watching it – and it was all about heroin. I did manage to secretly read a copy of *Junk* by Melvyn Burgess, the Carnegie award-winning YA novel about teenage heroin addicts. The book became another tabloid totem, proof that the kids *weren't* alright. It was explicit and uncompromising in the way that it depicted the squalor of the lives of its protagonists. *Trainspotting* and *Junk* both followed the death of Kurt Cobain, who died by suicide in 1994, aged 27. Cobain was a heroin user, and the media were quick to conflate his death with his drug use.

Addiction was presented to the public as something both grimy and glamorous, and a problem that was exclusively linked to the use of illegal drugs. I added it to my secret list of mysterious things to be

obsessively frightened of. (This list included quicksand, being in a car accident, and – honestly – accidentally eating a bay leaf and dying from a punctured oesophagus.)

Rachel's Holiday humanised its addicted main character by showing me why she was drawn to drugs, and what she was trying to escape from. I saw myself in Rachel. But it would take me a long time to understand that I was even more frightened of my own feelings than I was frightened of hypothetical heroin.

Food was my first drug. In Keyes' novel, Rachel remembers being a child, and bingeing on an Easter egg that she has stolen from her sister – an episode that leads to euphoria, then shame and remorse. 'This time I ate it all...the terror and shame returned, far, *far* worse than the last time.' I was shocked. I'd stolen sweets from my sisters, and those awful feelings still lived inside me, I was still disgusted with myself for my greed and selfishness. But I loved Rachel, and I responded with empathy, not judgement – and thanks to Keyes' words, I could begin to forgive myself and let go of some of my own disgust.

Fiction can be an instrumental part of helping us to grow, develop and understand the lands and lives that are wholly unlike our own. *Junk* and *Trainspotting* are both brilliant novels that are about class and privilege, as much as drugs. Burgess and Welsh both focus on the kinds of protagonists who never usually get to be the main characters – smart, dark, funny people who aren't interested in broadcasting their vulnerability. I didn't need to relate to them. I read those books and learned about lives wholly different from my own. They opened my mind and made my small world bigger. But I identified instantly and entirely with Rachel. It didn't matter that our circumstances were so different – her emotional state seemed to mirror mine.

Johan Hari wrote 'the opposite of addiction is not sobriety. It is human connection.' That's what books bring me. They can make us feel tended to, nourished, nurtured and held. They never judge us. I've struggled with addiction, and if I hadn't stumbled upon the stories that reflected my feelings, I would never have known that I was allowed to name my problems, let alone talk about them.

So how do stories make us feel better about wanting to feel better? And how do books help us to find connection, after we've looked for it in all the wrong places?

Your drug of choice

I believe that each of us has our own Kryptonite – a drug of choice that makes everything seem brighter and more bearable, for a short period of time. But sometimes we find ourselves reaching for our drug whenever life gets a little bit too hard. In the long run, the drug starts to make things harder. Some of us instinctively know our lines and limits. Some of us only discover what those limits are when we exceed them. During my darkest hours, I've crossed my lines over and over, and stretched my self-esteem completely out of shape.

My emerging need for a food-fix was followed by alcohol and shopping. When I felt overwhelmed by anxiety, these three things offered distraction and numbing relief.

Perhaps you're nodding along and thinking 'me, too' or even 'I'm not exactly sure what the problem is here. Those aren't really drugs.' Most of us will overconsume at least one of them, at some point – by that I mean we'll use more than we need, and regret it. I've worked in offices where alcohol, food and shopping seemed as significant as work itself. They were the subjects that punctuated the day. I'd compare hangovers with my colleagues, someone would go and buy a new jumper at lunchtime, we'd binge on cakes and crisps and cookies when we were stressed, or bored. I saw myself and my co-workers in books like *Bridget Jones's Diary*, and *The Secret Dreamworld Of A Shopaholic*. These were funny, relatable stories about women like us, struggling with Chardonnay, self-control and credit card debt. 'I can't have just *spent* sixty quid without realising it, can I?' asks Becky Bloomwood, Sophie Kinsella's most celebrated heroine. The line could have been directly transcribed from a conversation from any day in my office at the time.

Throughout my twenties, I kept my three drugs on rotation. If I'd been overdoing it with the booze, I'd turn my attention to ASOS, and buy yet more dresses I'd never wear. And when it came to food, I lived,

literally, in a state of feast or famine, starving myself as punishment for the binges – until hunger made me feel tense and tearful, and I binged again. I rationalised my behaviour. I drank too much, and I shopped too much, but didn't everyone? I usually managed to get to work and pay my rent on time. That meant I was fine.

But as I entered my thirties, I started to feel scared. My anxiety was becoming harder to manage. I was offered a dream job as an editor on a national newspaper – and I quit after three months, because I couldn't cope. I was crying constantly and having regular panic attacks. I started to see a therapist, and we talked about my low self-esteem and self-worth. I didn't want to talk about the pints of white wine, the shame, the feeling of not being able to trust myself to start drinking or eating, because I couldn't stop.

I didn't feel good in my body. I was constantly on a diet and feeling guilty about it, because only a bad feminist would hate the way she looked as much as I did. My 'diet' consisted of starving myself until about 3PM, and then eating my way through the kitchen cupboards. The drinking was almost always social. I told myself I was normal. I never drank in the mornings – unless I was at brunch, or at the airport, in which case there were no rules. I never drank on my own, unless I counted the drink I'd make myself when I was getting ready to go out, just to take the edge off my anxiety. I never blacked out. Unless it was day-long event drinking, like a wedding, or a birthday, or I was really, really stressed.

In my twenties, I frequently experienced blackouts, put myself in strange situations, and had woken up in unfamiliar places with people I didn't remember. So did almost everyone else I knew, at least some of the time. We laughed it off, and if anyone expressed concerns for our safety, we shrugged and drank more. At the time, I believed drinking was part of the general chaos of my life. It's a period when many of us experience practical and emotional insecurity. We were fledging, and sometimes falling. We were trying to establish ourselves in the adult world, meeting new challenges and learning from our mistakes. For many of us, binge drinking was normalised. How else were we meant

to bond with brand new colleagues or get through a first date?

But my thirties were supposed to be different. I was married, and secure, and stable. If I couldn't be happy with my lot, there was no hope for me. But I felt *baunted* – overwhelmed by strange, nameless dread. Bingeing was the only thing that would briefly silence it. I was always hungry, hungover, tired, sad, anxious and looking for something – anything – to take the edge off.

The shopping was another assault on my body. I could barely stand to look at myself in the mirror, because of the weight I'd gained. At the time, I couldn't process the fact that this had happened because I was abusing food. I just needed to keep buying dresses until I found the one that would make me look and feel better. I couldn't stop shopping for the woman I wanted to be when I grew up. And yet every new purchase was a disappointment. Scrolling on screen, I'd see words like 'SELLING FAST' or 'JUST ONE LEFT' and soon I'd be typing in my card details, while my heart was pounding. It felt frightening. It felt like being in thrall to a drug I didn't want to take.

During the day, I'd tell myself that I was a bon vivant, a woman living for pleasure and fun. But I'd wake up in the middle of the night, feeling as though my heart was going to beat its way out of my body. If I'd been drinking, the anxiety was so overwhelming that I'd have to grip my pillow for support. The shame was visceral, chemical. I'd lie in the dark, crying quietly, skirting around a painful question. *Bingeing makes me hate myself. So why can't I stop?*

Searching for stories

In Laura McKowen's memoir, *We Are The Luckiest*, she suggests that we all have a problem with something – that many of us are drawn to overconsumption, because we're struggling to accept ourselves.

'Everyone I knew was running, numbing, escaping from themselves and their lives somehow. Something big was amiss. This was bigger than alcohol, or addiction. There was hiding and denying, everywhere. Why did we try so hard not to see this? Why were we so afraid to tell the truth?'

McKowen's book helped me to realise that I didn't need to wait for

an external force to make me change. I told myself that my bingeing wasn't a problem because I wasn't hurting anyone else. But I was hurting myself constantly. No-one watching me from the outside would have said that I was 'out of control'. But I knew that I wasn't enjoying my habits – in fact, every time I 'indulged', I felt miserable, worthless, and frightened. But I didn't feel capable of stopping, either.

At first, I looked to addiction memoirs for proof that I didn't need to change my behaviour. I thought they would comfort me by showing me that I wasn't 'that bad' and bring me some reassuring context for my habits. After all, I wasn't crashing cars or burning down houses! I was just prone to a bit of hangxiety. But I saw some aspect of myself in every addiction story that I read, and I started to realise something important. I wasn't the only one who was terrified of my feelings. I wasn't the only one who was struggling to administer the correct emotional medicine.

McKowen writes that before she got sober, she looked to addiction stories too. 'My bookshelf was proof: [addiction] memoirs were stacked there like a small, private support group...in those voices and stories, I recognised something specific about myself.' I spoke to Catherine Gray, the author of one of my favourite memoirs, *The Unexpected Joy Of Being Sober*, about the writers who reached her, when she was getting sober. She said 'I read *Dry* by Augusten Burrows because I was desperate to prove to myself that I didn't have a problem with alcohol. I was expecting it to be a sensationalist story that I couldn't relate to. His life, and his drinking would be nothing like mine, and I'd have evidence that I was fine, and I didn't need to make any changes. I was quite chastened to discover that we were emotionally very similar. Even though I wasn't doing my drinking in New York, or taking quite as many drugs as he did, I was startled to discover that we both felt sad and lost.'

Gray's book begins with an anecdote from her drinking days, in which she wakes up in a police station cell, with no possessions apart from a small, sparkly child's hairbrush. I've never had that specific experience, but the emotions she describes are painfully resonant: 'I feel stuck in a pre-destined sequence, a rut of kismet. Drink, hangover,

squirm from beneath the consequences, recover, drink, hangover, squirm...'

When I read Gray's book, it took me back to the beginning of my drinking. We'd both started out doing 'dream' jobs on magazines – poorly paid roles with 'perks'. We both went to the same parties and product launches and drained the same open bars. We'd experienced the same flavour of restlessness, insecurity, and anxiety. In her book she shares: 'My friends kept telling me how jealous they were of my job...but inside cracks were beginning to show. Fear ate away at me like invisible termites inside the walls of a house.' Again, my body buzzed and shivered with recognition. All I wanted to do was freeze my fear and become so numb that I never had to acknowledge it. I was trying so hard to kill it, but I kept feeding it.

I chased Gray's book with *Quit Like A Woman* by Holly Whitaker. I loved the first chapter, in which Whitaker describes a friend turning up at her apartment with whisky, declaring that after a break-up, she was going through an 'alcoholic phase'. 'I saw not only looks of relief but also ones of deep knowing – we'd all experienced something close enough to that to empathize,' writes Whitaker. As I read that line, I breathed out, grateful for my own feelings of relief. Maybe I was just going through a phase. It would sort itself out, eventually.

However, when Whitaker writes about the chemical composition of alcohol – ethanol- and considers exactly what it's doing to our bodies and our brains I felt furious: 'You can't drink the same thing we fuel our cars with and expect a much different outcome...we drink-for fun-the same thing we use to make rocket fuel, house paint, antiseptics, solvents, perfumes and deodorants...' Addiction memoirs and stories were supposed to bring me comfort and solace. This was confronting. I didn't want to believe Whitaker, or her book. I just wanted to learn to moderate, take control, and most of all, feel happy.

I tried another book, *Glorious Rock Bottom* by Bryony Gordon. I'd read and loved Gordon's other work about living with and managing mental illness. Even when she was writing about the messiest parts of her life, Gordon appeared to be talented, glamorous and successful.

She writes ‘I was two people in one, having to hide every more shameful secrets under an increasingly impossible-to-maintain list of professional triumphs.’ This was also confronting. In fact, this seemed to be a theme of every addiction book I read. Every author was a high achiever, chasing accolades and promotions and proof of their value, constructing a shiny shell for the outside world to admire – while living in terror that all the fear and darkness inside was going to burst through and shatter it. None of these books were just about drugs or alcohol. They were about women who felt as though they could never get life right, no matter how hard they tried. Talented, ambitious women, with very high standards for themselves. Women whose lives looked enviable, from the outside. Women I had a lot in common with.

Reading and reckoning

It took me a lot of reading, and *thinking*, before I started to join the dots. At one point, I threw *Quit Like A Woman* across the room. But I started to notice something important. Being with these books, and hearing these voices, made me feel safe, and seen and connected. The reading experience gave me everything I’d been seeking from my binges – pure *relief*. These stories forced me to pay attention to myself, and to treat myself with compassion and respect – because this is the way I felt about the women I was reading about.

My appetite for addiction memoirs was insatiable. I was binge-reading. But I noticed that reading always left me feeling better than it found me. When I was in the throes of a food or drink binge, it was as though a fog had descended, and I had temporarily paused my life and checked out. But reading brought clarity. It made me feel sharp, and present. I also noticed a sharp contrast between reading a book and scrolling on my phone. Particularly using Instagram, which made me feel as though my chest was being scratched from the inside out. Perhaps you have a healthier relationship with social media than I do but for me, it engendered a restlessness, and a hopelessness. An Instagram session seemed to trigger my excessive spending. It made me feel that wasn’t good enough, and I needed a different life – *but I*

could buy one. However, books seemed to meet me where I was. Even if I wasn’t ready to hear what the book had to tell me, books never pushed me away. They touched me. They made me feel held.

I asked Gray about whether she read more or read differently in sobriety. She said ‘When I was little, I was a big reader. Every week, I maxed out my library card. I’m not sure I even consciously identified as a booklover but reading felt as necessary as breathing. But when I started drinking in my teens, I stopped reading. Not deliberately – I just replaced one habit with another.’

Now, Gray definitely identifies as a booklover – so how did she find her way back to reading? She tells me ‘As I stopped drinking, I drifted back to books, but it wasn’t until I got pregnant that I focused on it. Everyone warned me that I would never read again, so I threw myself into reading as much as I could, before the baby came. I had at least three books on the go at any given time. And I don’t think my mental health has ever been better.’

Gray explains that she has to protect her relationship with books, because they bring her so much solace. Reading doesn’t just bring her pleasure and joy – for her, it’s a key part of maintaining her mental health. ‘Writing - and reading - for me have a similar mental effect to going for a run or swim; they declutter the overcrowded room of my mind and throw back the curtains, letting some light in. They bring me the kind of space, clarity and brightness that I was seeking from drinking.’

Like Gray, I’ve been paying attention to the way reading makes me feel. I’ve noticed how reading brings me home to my body, and makes me feel safe, within it. When I read, I am still, and my breathing is even. If the words are holding my attention, there’s no room for my anxiety. I can’t rush to escape myself, and I’m not overwhelmed by the impulse to binge. And the books themselves have changed the way I speak to myself, about the bingeing. They have helped me to see myself as a vulnerable, struggling human, and taught me that I have nothing to be ashamed of.

I didn’t quit drinking overnight, but after reading, and rereading these memoirs, I started to understand something vital. For a long time, I’d

believed that going without alcohol would be a punishment for being 'bad' – but for me, a life without alcohol would mean a life with more freedom. Everyone's addiction story was unique. So was mine. The fact that it looked as though I was holding everything together didn't matter at all. The way I felt was the only important thing, and if alcohol made me feel out of control, and anxious, and heartbroken, it didn't need to be in my life. Letting go of alcohol allowed me to reset my relationships with my other drugs of choice. I still had difficult days, but I was much calmer. I slept more deeply, and I wasn't experiencing the anxiety spikes that usually accompanied my hangover. Put simply, without the extra chemicals in my body, I didn't have as many negative feelings to escape. I started to reach for stronger tools to help me through them when they arose. Books succeeded where booze had failed.

Partying on the page

However, when I wasn't reading addiction memoirs, I was reading different drinking stories. I'd always loved boozy books, and tales of wild parties and celebrations. When I stopped drinking, I realised that I was a vicarious party girl. Every time I drank, I was hoping to experience a little of the Bacchanalian magic that my literary heroes and heroines seemed to enjoy. In real life, I found parties stressful, overwhelming, and exhausting. Sometimes they were fun – but often, they made me feel insecure. Sober, I realised that for me, the best part of a party was the morning after, and waking up rested, with a clear head – sometimes I still felt embarrassed about what I'd said and done, but I could remember all of it, with perfect clarity.

However, a party in a book has a purpose. It's an imaginary playground in which everyone must meet with triumph and disaster, and readers can indulge in as much second-hand hedonism as they like, without having to deal with any of the consequences. In *Octavia* by Jilly Cooper, the titular heroine turns up at a fusty drinks party in 'a short tunic in silver chain mail...I didn't wear anything underneath apart from a pair of flesh-coloured pants, which gave the impression I wasn't wearing anything at all.' It's thrilling to experience Octavia's

audacity. I can empathise with her insecurity – she wants to dazzle in an attention-grabbing dress, because she worries that she can't hold anyone's attention on her own – but I can also experience the thrill of her exhibitionism without having to deal with disapproving neighbours, my body consciousness, or the cold.

Cooper's novels are filled with lunches, affairs, and extravagant parties. Someone pops a cork on almost every page. Famously, Bridget Jones is tossed around on a tide of Chardonnay. Bridget is always trying and failing to drink less. And we love her for it. (In one chapter, Bridget goes to a party sober, and celebrating, because she's reached her goal weight. But no-one wants to celebrate with her. 'I felt so pleased with myself for not drinking, but as the evening wore on, and everyone got drunker, I began to feel so calm and smug that I was even irritating myself.') Every Jean Rhys heroine begins her adventure with a cocktail, in a dark bar. PG Wodehouse and Kingsley Amis have made the hangover into a major part of the literary canon.

When I was starting to reconsider my relationship with alcohol, I read *Tales From The Colony Room*, Darren Coffield's oral history about one of the most infamous bars in Soho. It was an advertisement for excess. Why would I want to be sober and boring, when I could be like Francis Bacon, drinking pints of champagne? My love of drinking was bound up with my love of books. Growing up, I had idolised Dorothy Parker, and alcohol was intrinsically linked with her legend. The idea of never drinking another martini broke my heart. Partly because I loved smooth, icy vodka, and the sensation of numbness creeping down my throat, and across my cheeks. But mostly because a martini glass is a symbol. It means capital cities, style, and adventure.

Reading between the lines

When my relationship with alcohol, and myself, reached its nadir, I felt very lonely. I was convinced that a mythical 'everyone else' could enjoy drinking in moderation. 'Everyone else' could, I was sure, drink a beer, and feel as though they could be in an advert for that beer – relaxed, golden, and with perfect body confidence. 'Everyone else' had 'normal'

hangovers that consisted of headaches and mild nausea. They didn't feel as though they were sweating their soul out through their pores. Anxiety and addiction both lie to us. They isolate us. They tell us that if we have problems, it's because we *deserve* to have problems.

The more I read, the more I realised that there is no 'everyone else'. Just us. Addiction memoirs deal with this directly, but there is truth in novels too. Authors tend to write about sad, scared, confused people courting disaster, and learning from their mistakes. There aren't many characters in books who feel as though they could star in beer commercials. And alcohol is a source of inspiration. Not in the sense that we can all drink a pint of whisky and write like Hemingway – but because in books, people turn to drink because they don't feel at peace with themselves. Just like life.

Drinking might not be your thing, but you might have felt a twinge of recognition when you read *The Secret Dreamworld Of A Shopaholic*, or even *The Wind And The Willows*. Mr Toad is friendly and kind, but his impulsivity and tendency to develop obsessions (horses, and cars) gets him involved in several accidents, and eventually sees him sentenced to 20 years in prison. Mr Toad isn't a villain. His worst characteristic is his boastfulness – he's happy to describe himself as 'such a clever Toad'. He's chastised for this, but I always read it as a sign of insecurity – an arrogance that belies a secret fear, rather than excessive confidence. Aren't we all frightened that we're going to be found out as inadequate? And aren't we always trying to protect ourselves? The more I read, the more evidence I found that we all suffer from the same essential fear. It doesn't matter whether we're burying it in shopping, Chardonnay or motor cars. The important thing is that we offer ourselves a little grace, understanding and latitude. Rather than chastising ourselves for having a drug of choice, we need to start by understanding that this is a human – or in the case of Mr Toad, amphibian – response to life's struggles. What we use is irrelevant. All that matters is that we don't use it in a way that ultimately causes us to hurt ourselves or to those around us.

Now, I turn to books when I'm struggling with my feelings. If I'm

having a bad day, I'll go back to Bryony Gordon and Catherine Gray. Their beautiful words remind me that I'm not alone, and that if I'm finding life hard, it's not a sign that I'm failing, and that I have nothing to be ashamed of. Reading about addiction hasn't just helped me to understand myself better. It's made me more appreciative of our shared humanity. Even if you don't have a complicated relationship with your drug of choice, I believe that reading an addiction memoir can boost our empathy and give all of us a huge, helpful insight into the minds of anyone around us who might be struggling. These are the stories that will make us all more patient, kinder and wiser.

[TO COME – INTERVIEW WITH BRYONY GORDON]

A different kind of holiday

I'm 38 years old, and it's my anniversary. Midsummer – exactly a year since I decided to stop drinking alcohol. I pick up *Rachel's Holiday* again. I don't know how many times I've read this book. Rachel feels like one of my oldest friends, but every time I meet her, she teaches me something new.

This time, I notice that in rehab, Rachel must learn how to feel her feelings again. Not just the sadness, shame and anger that she's experiencing in the moment – but every single emotion she has bottled up and numbed with drugs and alcohol. She's horrified and frightened, but she discovers that simply feeling makes her stronger. Slowly, she stops being so scared of herself.

And I don't envy Rachel her New York life. I don't even feel a pang of yearning for the wild parties. I feel like a great big grateful nerd. I've spent a year learning not to fear my feelings. It's a work in progress. It's been exhilarating and awful, dark, light, euphoric, intense and hilarious. It hasn't been boring. Sometimes I feel restless, and sometimes I struggle with guilt and shame. But I suspect that's all part of being human. I don't need to escape myself any more. I can always escape into stories when I need them.

{Interview with Bryony Gordon to come}

Five books to make you feel free

The Wind In The Willows – Kenneth Grahame

From the moment Mole says 'Hang spring cleaning!', you'll know you're in the most comforting company. Emotionally speaking, this is surprisingly adult and human for a children's book about animals. It's about friendship, vulnerability and forgiveness, and it always makes me feel better.

The Unexpected Joy Of The Ordinary – Catherine Gray

Through the lens of her own sobriety, Gray explores why we all have such great expectations for our pleasure, happiness and wellbeing, and invites us to embark upon a reset. This is honest, generous, funny and life affirming, and it helped me to understand how appreciating the good is a vital part of staying mentally strong.

Glorious Rock Bottom – Bryony Gordon

A beautiful and uncompromising memoir in which Gordon explores the link between her own alcoholism and mental illness and invites us to be more honest with ourselves. Gordon's greatest gift is that she can prompt a reader to free themselves from their own shame and judgement. She's a generous writer, and incredibly funny.

Rachel's Holiday – Marian Keyes

As the novel begins, Rachel tells us there has been a terrible mistake. She wakes up in hospital, having her stomach pumped, and she's about to be shipped off to rehab. She's *fine*, she's not an addict, everyone is overreacting – but she likes the idea of rehab. She might meet celebrities. There will probably be a spa. Alongside Rachel, we learn that she *is* an addict, but that she can get better as soon as she learns to understand herself and forgive herself. This book is resonant, relatable and hugely loveable.

The Secret Dreamworld of a Shopaholic – Sophie Kinsella

Financial journalist Becky Bloomwood is in debt, and in denial. She's a typical twenty something who loves to go shopping – but she's convinced that her problems will all be solved for her. She just needs the perfect scarf, or coat, or cardigan, and she'll be transformed into a smart, sophisticated woman. But Becky is already capable of so much more than she knows – she's brave, she's loyal, and she can change her life by harnessing these qualities and using them wisely. This book is a funny, forgiving friend.