

Back to School

“We both shivered slightly and ran to collect our clothes, and as we walked home we could hear the leaves curling and turning brown on the trees, and the birds deciding where to go for winter, And the whole sound, the whole sound of summer packing its bags and preparing to leave town”

— [Pulp, David's Last Summer](#)

There's something so evocative about this time of year. I still feel that disappointment in the pit of my stomach as the evenings turn cooler in the second half of August and you know summer's almost gone. And yet, September always promises so much as a new school year brings that childhood sense of new beginnings. There's something about September that makes me feel anything is possible as the rankness of summer gone to seed is replaced by the freshness of a new season. I can still remember the excitement of childhood trips to WHSmith to buy new stationery and pencil cases and the vertiginous shocks of the really big shifts in the educational journey, moving to comprehensive school, taking GCSEs and A-levels, leaving for University. These transitions all brought that strange swirling feeling of change in the air, of anything being possible.

When I retrained as a psychotherapist after many years in the book industry, it was both exciting and strangely comforting to be returning to the academic year: September once again became a time of new shoots and new directions. I'm probably not alone in the fact that having worked fairly hard for my GCSEs and A Levels, my first degree was a fairly hit or miss affair (I just about scraped it). Having a second chance at studying was an opportunity to do it right and I relished the experience. In the place of missed lectures and getting by on the minimum of work I found myself having the immensely rewarding experience of exploring through reading, writing and discussion with wonderful peers. I felt as if I'd found my path, I was on a journey to somewhere for the first time. It also led me to reflect on how the experience of University first time round had often been an unhappy one, shorn of the support systems I'd built up during my comprehensive school years, the unhappiness of my childhood came back to me in a feeling of lostness I now see as a mild to medium depression. Looking back I wish I'd had some counselling. It was a healing experience to take as my first placement as a therapist working in a busy University counselling service: it felt good to be able to work with young students who were feeling as lost as I had done.

“I have never let my schooling interfere with my education.”

— [Mark Twain](#)

Studying for my M.A. in Psychotherapy allowed me to explore the different models of psychotherapy, to find which resonated with me and to begin to discover what kind of therapist I wanted to be. I trained as an Existential therapist and this approach is still at the core of how I practice. The Existentialists were the rebels, they rejected the way psychoanalysis (back in the mid-20th century the dominant form of therapy) could have a tendency to reduce people to their pathology, to turn them into a puzzle to be solved. They encouraged clients to discover their own personal meanings and make sense of the crises in their lives in their own way. A crisis wasn't a failure or an illness but an opportunity to better understand who you were and wanted to be. This approach is still vitally important today when the medical model in alliance with Cognitive Behavioural Therapy is now the dominant form of therapy. Though it can be useful to view your experience through the prism of mental health, there is a danger that your own experience can get lost in labels such as depression and anxiety. And while CBT is a clear and positive approach that

helps many, it doesn't work for everyone and in the wrong hands can have a tendency to bypass individual meaning. What I discovered through my studies and my client-work is that there is a fundamental tension between when as a client you need space and content. Existential psychotherapy gives me the courage to allow a client the space to help them explore their individual meaning. But where do I turn when I need content, helpful models of human being that reassure my clients that their experience isn't atypical and that there are ways of thinking and seeing the world that can open up their process and help them attain a more fluid way of being in the world?

Despite the antipathy of the early existentialists psychoanalytic approaches are a major part of how I work as a therapist. Psychodynamic therapy emphasizes how our early life shapes us and can cast a shadow, and seeks to redress some of things we may have missed out on as children. Looking again at how my family dynamic had shaped my view of myself and the world was a powerful and healing experience and has had a strong effect on how I choose to work with my own clients. I draw on a number of approaches when it comes to looking at our family dynamics. John Bowlby's attachment theory took psychoanalysis's emphasis on how we grow in relationship closer to a more scientific study of how children develop in families, and recent discoveries in neuroscience have underscored how true the insights of psychoanalysis and attachment theory have been. Transactional Analysis or TA also focuses on how our early life impacts on our present and seeks to help us to remain in our adult, and resist the vivid memories we have of painful child emotions which can play out in our present interactions. Exploring your own family dynamic allows you to better understand and care for the wounded child in yourself and respond with your adult when these painful feelings are triggered. The final pieces of the pie for me are the Buddhist approaches that have integrated with Western psychology in the last decades. Mindfulness and compassion are at the heart of both my life and how I practice as a therapist. So many of us in the more individualized West suffer from a persecutory inner critic that hampers our process. Mindfulness like good therapy strengthens the observing ego, allowing us to see ourselves doing the things we do, and allied with self-compassion we can learn to be gentle not hyper-critical with ourselves. Change will only happen when we observe ourselves being the person we are and doing the things we don't like over time. We need to be both patient and gentle with ourselves if we are to notice the many times we fail at changing and still keep trying.

"Do not read, as children do, to amuse yourself, or like the ambitious, for the purpose of instruction. No, read in order to live."

— [Gustave Flaubert](#)

The books I discovered through my studies helped me to integrate these different models of therapy and gave me the courage to see that clients need both to be heard and helped to discover their personal meaning, and to be introduced to new ideas and ways of thinking that can help them with their process. Studying for my masters in psychotherapy made me realise that while many of the books I had to read were difficult and theoretical, many weren't, and the new insights and ways of seeing the world I was discovering shouldn't be limited to students of counselling and psychotherapy, they've valuable insights for all of us in understanding better this business of being human. Bibliotherapy is the name given to how books can affect our mental health for the better and what I've tried to do in making this selection of books is to give a flavour of each of the therapy models that I've integrated into how I practice as a therapist. What these different models give me is not just a template for how I work as a therapist but also a template for living. Before retraining as a therapist I worked for many years in book publishing and what both my careers share is a belief that books can offer us new perspectives and be the vehicles for growth. I've included in this list as

with all my book selections, some fiction titles. I'm passionate about the power of fiction to offer us new perspectives, reignite our creativity and crucially to exercise our ability to enter into the experience of others in a truly empathic way. The selection of books I've put together to celebrate the hopefulness of a new September and the beginning of a new academic year is one that encompasses all the things that get me excited as a therapist and a reader, I hope there is something here that does the same for you. As ever if there's any book that either resonates with you or you've already read I've included a further reading title below it. Happy Reading.

Psychotherapy & the Quest for Happiness by Emmy Van Deurzen

9780761944119 Sage £24.99

FR: Everyday Mysteries by Emmy van Deurzen

9780415376433 Routledge £25.99

Existential Therapy seeks to mine the wisdom of the great philosophers to help us with our unhappiness and crises. The Existential therapists rebelled against the prevailing orthodoxies of psychoanalysis and medicine which they believed turned distress into disease and robbed us of discovering the meaning of our experiences. Emmy van Deurzen is the queen of British Existential therapy and in this book she brings the wisdom of philosophy to bear on the Western search for happiness and suggests that meaning and not happiness is the key to a fulfilled life. If you enjoy the book, check out Van Deurzen's wonderful and unconventional training institute the NSPC (New School of Psychotherapy and Counselling) in North London which runs many short courses as well as Psychotherapy and Counselling trainings - www.nspc.org.uk.



Man's Search for Meaning by Viktor Frankl

9781844132393 Rider £7.99

FR: Staring at the Sun by Irvin Yalom

9780749928780 Piatkus £8.99

Renowned Existential Psychiatrist Viktor Frankl was a contemporary of Freud, Reich and Adler in pre-war Vienna, he survived the death camps and went on to found Logotherapy, a form of existential therapy that argued that meaning was key in human life. *Man's Search for Meaning* is Frankl's classic memoir of survival and transcendence, what he takes from Auschwitz is Nietzsche's belief that 'he who has a why to live for can bear with almost any how'.



Love's Executioner by Irvin Yalom

9780140128468 Penguin £9.99

FR: The Examined Life by Stephen Grosz

978099549031 Vintage £8.99

Irvin Yalom is perhaps the most famous living Existential psychiatrist and psychotherapist, the author of both academic works and novels, Yalom is best loved for his humane collections of case studies, of which *Love's Executioner* is the first and best known, as striking for his warts and all presentation of his own flaws as a therapist as for the vivid pen portraits of his clients. A more recent addition to the genre is psychoanalyst Stephen Grosz's moving account of a wide variety of clients undergoing psychoanalysis. In simple and jargon free prose Grosz offers us redemptive portraits of lives moving into greater clarity through the analytic process: "*The Examined Life* ought to be given out free at birth" The Times.



Lectures from the Tavistock by Neville Symington

9780946960309 Free Association Books £19.95

FR: Revolution in Mind by George Makari

9780715639627 Duckworth £12

The triumph of the Nazis in the early years of World War 2 saw the flight of psychoanalysis from central Europe to Britain and America. Freud's arrival in London in 1938 led to Hampstead becoming a key centre and in the middle years of this century a new and very British form of psychoanalysis developed which focussed less on drives, sex and death and more on our fundamental relationships. Object Relations, as the British School of psychoanalysis became known, featured key players such as Donald Winnicott and Wilfred Bion and led to John Bowlby's Attachment Theory. If you've ever wanted to understand psychoanalysis, this is the book for you. However if the wilder shores of psychoanalytic theory fill you with unease try George Makari's brilliant history of psychoanalysis *Revolution in Mind*.



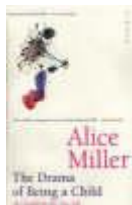
The Drama of Being a Child by Alice Miller

9781860491016 Virago £8.99

FR: Dibs: In Search of Self by Virginia Axline

9780140134599 Penguin £9.99

Alice Miller took the developments in psychoanalysis towards relationship and made of it a startling polemic. A forceful defender of the rights of the child against parental projections and desires, Miller takes up arms against what she terms *Poisonous Pedagogy*, a way of schooling and educating our children that she believes does them terrible harm. Miller's ideas alas are as timely now as they were when this book was first published. Take a deep breath and dive in, it's one of those books that can change how you see the world.



They Fuck You Up by Oliver James

9780747584780 Bloomsbury £8.99

FR: How Not to Fuck Them Up by Oliver James £8.99

9780091923938 Vermillion £8.99

Another psychoanalytically trained polemicist, Oliver James, author of *Affluenza* and *Britain on the Couch*, offers in *They Fuck You Up* an exhilarating tour through psychoanalysis and attachment theory. This is another book that can change how you see the world as James gets you thinking about how your childhood experiences have shaped how you see the world and others, and argues that these ways of relating are always open to the possibility of change.



Counselling For Toads by Robert de Board
9780415174299 Routledge £15.99
FR: I'm Okay, You're Okay by Thomas Harris
9780099557555 Arrow £7.99

Transactional Analysis is a form of psychotherapy that has simple yet persuasive basic model – as a result of childhood pain we spend much of our lives either lost in our child, fearful, needy, manipulative or sad, or we lose ourselves in parent mode, seeking to dominate others and puff ourselves up with ersatz importance. What is much harder is to stay in adult mode, and to treat others with similar complexity. De Board's book is a funny and smart take on TA that employs characters from Kenneth Grahame's *Wind in the Willows*, and follows Toad through crisis, therapy and beyond. Brilliantly done.



Why love matters by Sue Gerhardt
9781583918173 Routledge £12.99
FR: A Secure Base by John Bowlby
9780415355278 Routledge £14.99

Before Freud stumbled upon the talking therapy that became psychoanalysis, he was a scientist and neurologist, and one of his most cherished hopes for Psychoanalysis was that science would catch up with his new talking therapy and 'prove' his discoveries. As psychotherapy has matured, it's moved away from Freud's early model of drives and repression and increasingly has focussed how we grow in relationship, and these early relationships mould our behaviour and ways of relating, and sometimes cast a shadow. Attachment Theory is the name given to the study of how we develop in our early relationships and excitingly, as Freud hoped, neuroscience has finally caught up with the working model of human being that therapists have been trusting for many years. Sue Gerhardt has taken the many discoveries made in neuroscience in the last 25 years and synthesized them into a approachable, easily digested and at times beautiful articulation of how quite literally our early relationships shape our brains.



Plastic Mind by Sharon Begley

9781845296742 Constable £9.99

FR: Radical Self-Acceptance by Tara Branch

9781591793212 Sounds True Inc. £22.99

The Dalai Lama has a keen interest in science and holds Buddhism up to stringent self-regard, if science disproves a key aspect of Buddhist doctrine, his merry response is 'into the garbage'. *The Plastic Mind* grew out of the annual gatherings organised by the Dalai Lama in Dharamsala where he'd invite scientists to his compound for a week of debates where leading scientists would talk about key discoveries in their fields, and the common ground between science and Buddhism. In many ways a companion piece to Sue Gerhardt's book, leading U.S. science journalist Sharon Begley brings the most recent discoveries in neuroscience which refute the old dogmas that the hardware of the brain is fixed. A new branch of neuroscience, neuroplasticity, has made exciting discoveries that reveal the brain's potential for change, altering its structure and producing new neurons. And what's really encouraging is that though we never regain the neuroplasticity of early childhood we retain throughout the life span the ability to change, particularly through relationship.



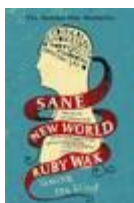
Sane New World: Taming the Mind by Ruby Wax

9781444755756 Hodder £8.99

FR: Buddha's Brain by Rick Hanson

9781572246959 New Harbinger Publications £14.99

Comedian Ruby Wax puts the lie to the maxim 'there are no second acts in American lives'. Following life long battle with depression a serious breakdown led Wax to study first psychotherapy & latterly Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy at Oxford University, she is now the self-confessed 'poster girl for mental health' in the UK. Bringing her trademark wit and life experience she outlines the benefits of mindfulness to all our lives and cheers on our own move from doing mode to being mode, providing useful & graspable exercises that can bring the benefits of mindfulness to our own lives.



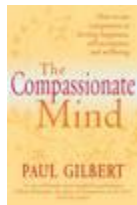
Compassionate Mind by Paul Gilbert

9781849010986 Constable £9.99

FR: Mindful Path to Self-Compassion by Christopher Germer

9781593859756 Guildford Press £11.99

Compassion is the third key technique of Buddhist practice alongside mindfulness and meditation, and as many Buddhist teachers have noted, one that's badly needed in the West where so many of us have a highly-developed inner-critic. The key difference in Eastern approaches to compassion is one of practicality - Buddhism sees compassion as a discipline that can be taught and practised. Through simple exercises you can become more centred and more compassionate to yourself and others. Paul Gilbert is one of the most senior CBT therapists in the UK and in this easy to follow and engagingly written book, shows how focussing on compassion can bring real benefits to you and those around you.



Miracle of Mindfulness by Thich Nhat Hanh

9780712647878 Rider £9.99

FR: When Things Fall Apart: Heart Advice For Difficult Times by Pema Chodron

9780007183517 Harper Collins £9.99

While the other books on mindfulness I've selected are written by Western Psychologists, Thich Nhat Hanh is an eminent Buddhist monk and teacher. This luminously written short book was originally offered as a guide for volunteers working for peace in the Vietnam War, but is as relevant today as a guide to help us to stay, however briefly, in the moment. I love Thich Nhat Hanh's books, he shares with the best Buddhist writers a beautiful simplicity along with a humorous ear for the pithy epigram: 'washing the dishes to wash the dishes,' 'everything can be a rite,' and my favourite, 'don't just do something, sit there!'



Daring Greatly by Brene Brown

97806709235340

Penguin

£8.99

Dr Brene Brown became a word of mouth success based on her TED talk about vulnerability and how many of the things we think we know about vulnerability and shame are simply wrong. Striving to fight our feelings of vulnerability and seeking to appear perfect or to put off the things we yearn to accomplish until we feel confident enough are the enemies to becoming the people we want to be. Dr Brown dispels the idea that vulnerability is a weakness and argues that in order to act, in order to be courageous we need to accept and hold our feelings of vulnerability and shame: "This is vulnerability, this is daring greatly".



The Antidote by Oliver Burkeman

9781847678669

Canongate

£8.99

FR: Smile or Die by Barbara Ehrenreich

978-1847081735

Granta £8.99

In this brilliant book, Guardian Magazine columnist Oliver Burkeman argues that self-help books and the quest for happiness are actually making us miserable and echoing existential and Buddhist ideas argues that an acceptance of the unpalatable and oft avoided truths about life (that it's short, hard and often painful and disappointing) can lead to a deeper fulfilment that he terms the 'negative path to happiness'. Taking us on a journey that leads from the Stoic philosophers of the Greek and Roman world, through contemporary Buddhist thinkers, psychologists and U.S. Academics, Burkeman's wonderful book is much needed riposte to the so called 'law' of attraction and its adherents. If you like this book, please do also check out Barbara Ehrenreich's *Smile or Die*, a forensic demolition of the positive-thinking movement, exploring its roots in 19th Century America, its manifestation in the junk physics of *the Secret* and *the Law of Attraction* and how its insidious influence contributed to the world financial meltdown of the 2000s.



The Psychopath Test by Jon Ronson

9780330492270 Picador £9.99

FR: Them by Jon Ronson

9780330375467 Picador £8.99

I've been a fan of Ronson's writing since *Them*, his brilliant book about extremists which featured a memorable and oddly likeable cameo by the now notorious Abu Hamza. The Psychopath Test is even better, an odyssey through the mental health industry that is far more fun than a book about mental un-health has any right to be and leaves you with more questions than answers about everything from the labelling of mental illnesses, the benefits of feeding LSD to psychopaths, the dangers of the drug industry and the question of just how high you would score on the psychopath test (yes it exists).



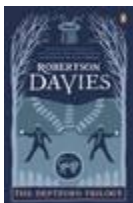
The Deptford Trilogy by Roberston Davies

9780241952627 Penguin £15.99

FR: Memories, Dreams, Reflections by Carl Jung

97800006540274 Fontana £9.99

Roberston Davies is my favourite writer and the Deptford Trilogy is his best book, an interlinked series of novels whose middle novel, *the Manticore* is a rich and exhilarating account of Jungian analysis. Peopled by brilliant and strange characters and characterised by a rejection of the standardizing commodification of the modern world, it's a book that seeks to return to a way of approaching the world that is mythic and archetypal in its language and meaning: *The Deptford Trilogy* provides an exhilarating antidote to a world from where 'the fear and dread and splendour of wonder have been banished'.



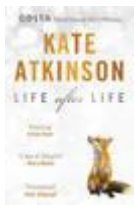
Life After Life by Kate Atkinson

9780552776639 Black Swan £7.99

FR: Behind the Scenes at the Museum by Kate Atkinson

9780552996181 Black Swan £7.99

Every so often you come across a book that's so immediate and so fluently readable you know it's going to leave a big fat hole in your life. I've been a fan of Kate Atkinson's writing since her debut *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*, she passes both my tests of great writing, fluency of prose and characters that are vividly immediately real, with a psychology that feels oh so true. Also, she delivers that ever so slightly heightened zing of my favourite fiction, characters who are *more* than they are in real life but they are still recognisably people we can care about and love. In this, her most ambitious work, she imagines the life of a woman condemned to live her life over and over, creating a beguiling tapestry of imagined lives that serves to send our own thoughts to how different our own lives could be if at each fork in the road we opted instead for a different outcome. I'm still mourning finishing this one.



Miss Wyoming by Douglas Coupland

9780007179824 Harper Perennial £8.99

FR: Eleanor Rigby Douglas Coupland

9780007162529 Harper Perennial £11.99

Douglas Coupland can be a frustrating writer, best known as a novelist who can summon the zeitgeist at will, for me his best novels are the simpler studies of character, that ache with a genuine compassion and loneliness. These two novels are my favourites and both are portraits of frustrated lives opening up to new and more authentic ways of being in the world. *Miss Wyoming* is one of his most underrated and catches up with former Miss Wyoming and washed up soap star Susan Colgate as she walks away from the wreckage of Flight 802, unscathed, the sole survivor, and seizes this moment to walk away from the wreckage of her life. If you liked this one, then try *Eleanor Rigby* another atypical mid-period Coupland classic telling the story of Liz Dunn, a woman who's spent her whole life alone and lonely, until now.



The Earthsea Quartet by Ursula le Guin

9780140348033 Puffin £10.99

FR: The Other Wind by Ursula le Guin

9781842552117 Orion Children's £7.99

Northern Lights by Philip Pullman

9781407130224 Scholastic £6.99

FR: The Subtle Knife by Philip Pullman

9781407130231 Scholastic £6.99

Fantasy literature often gets a bad press and it's true that there's nothing worse than bad fantasy. Partly this is because writing good fantasy demands so much of a writer, not just the ability to create believable characters and plots, but also to dream up an alternate world that actually works, has a believable history, mythology, sociology, religion - there are so many ways to fail. When fantasy works though there is no other genre that can take me back to childlike joy in reading. Good fantasy shares Jungian psychology's concern with the archetypal ways of being, the hero, the quest and the lurking darkness. At those moments in life when we're hit by a crisis or things are looking shaky, these big bold themes can both be consoling and offer new possibilities. The two fantasy series I've chosen were originally written for children but were embraced by adults the world over, they've also both got great female characters, not necessarily the norm in the world of fantasy fiction. Ursula le Guin's Earthsea books follow the magician Jed as he pursues his sometimes painful destiny, caught at a time when magic is leaving the world and the time of man is coming. Though there are echoes of Lord of the Rings, le Guin's vision is more nuanced and ambivalent, with an ecological and Buddhist undertow. And if you enjoy the quartet don't miss the last book, the Other Wind, a glorious and joyful final chapter that also features lots and lots of dragons. Philip Pullman's epic trilogy *His Dark Materials* takes quantum physics and from this unprepossessing beginning spins a beguiling and at times terrifying sequence following tomboy Lyra Belacqua in a journey through a parallel world that mirrors our own in many ways but one which is ruled by a religious dictatorship, where magic still lingers and everyone is born with a 'daemon', an intelligent animal companion with whom we share everything. Never has science been richer, stranger, more terrifying or more fun.

