

Spring has sprung

“The dearest ones of time, the strongest friends of the soul, books...”

Emily Dickinson

I last put together a list of books for New Year with the semi-ironic title, *These Books Will Change Your Life*. While I was taking a swing at self-help books and their grandiose claims, I do feel passionately about the power of books to effect a change. What I feel more ambivalent about is the idea of New Year as a time for change. If I’m honest, it’s a time to batten down the hatches – not one cell of my being wants to change in January. For me, the two great well-springs of change in the year are the beginning of spring, and September. September is tied up with school days, the start of the new school year with its promise of a move up the education ladder bringing the heady pleasures of adulthood a step closer. As a grown up, there’s still something about a sunny September day that suggests a new way of being is just one Adult Education course away. The coming of spring is different, it’s that primal, animal feeling that winter’s over, something has been survived, and boy this winter felt like it would never end. Stepping outside this week and feeling the warm sunshine on my face felt delicious. That simple, embodied pleasure at being out in the world once more brings with it the possibility of change. Chaucer opens *the Canterbury Tales* with just this sense of promise, as “fair April with his showers sweet” brings nature back to riotous life and works its magic too on human nature. In Chaucer’s time folk “all long to go on pilgrimage” and though we live in a more secular age, the desire for change still rises within us as the weather warms and nature flowers. So, for me, this time of year is the perfect time to discover something new.

“To acquire the habit of reading is to construct for yourself a refuge from almost all the miseries of life.”

W. Somerset Maugham

The books I’ve brought together here are a real mixture - psychology, philosophy, spirituality, travel, and a good dose of fiction - but what they all share is a sense of new possibilities. *Bibliotherapy* is the name given to the positive effect of reading on our mental health and what I’m offering with this selection, is a choice of books that all offer something fresh and invigorating to match the promise of the season. I’m particularly excited at the moment by the discoveries being made in neuroscience, and even more by the ways in which neuroscience is beginning to mesh with the wisdom of both psychology and Buddhism, showing how our brains are shaped by our early experiences, and how the practices of therapy, mindfulness and meditation can remedy early privation. As a therapist the discovery that our brains remain plastic, or open to change, throughout the lifespan, gives me renewed faith in what I’m doing. Sue Gerhardt’s wonderful book *Why Love Matters* in particular, remains a touchstone for me, and at the heart of my work. My non-fiction selection also focuses on what has been termed *the negative path to happiness*, a reaction against the Western world’s focus on positive thinking and acquisitiveness, and the harm this has caused. From Existential thinkers and psychologists, through the Jungian focus on our deeper archetypal ways of being and attachment theory’s attempts to root us in relationship, to Buddhist techniques that seek to train the mind to remain in the moment, loosening our attachments to those things we feel we *must* have to be ‘happy’, what all these approaches share is the view that in opening up to the totality of our experience, both positive and negative, and sometimes painful, we can achieve a deeper and more sustained experience of living. Oliver Burkeman’s *the Antidote* is a great place to start in exploring the many alternatives out there to the cul de sac of only thinking positively.

“Reading a book is like rewriting it for yourself. You bring to a novel, anything you read, all your experience of the world. You bring your history and you read it in your terms”

Angela Carter

I’ve also given equal space to fiction, as I’m passionate too about the power of fictional worlds to renew us, as places to explore, seek refuge and get back in touch with our creativity. The novels I’ve chosen all share one thing, they focus on characters on the brink of change, at the start of new, exciting chapters of lives that had become blocked or limited. While fiction offers us the opportunity to explore the idea of change through imagining ourselves into another’s shoes, it also offers much else. We may be seeking fictional experiences that mirror our own and help us extend our emotional self-expression, or maybe we need a break from the here and now and feel the need to explore a different part of the world or historical period, or we maybe we’re in need of stories in bolder and stronger flavours that excite and amaze, offering escape and respite from both day to day stresses and difficult times. Having worked in books for many years one thing I’m passionate about is for everyone to see books as a medium like any other, like film, television or music. Books can bring with them a whole heap of oughts and should – so often people buy the books they feel they *should* be reading and too often those books languish unread. Advice I give my clients from time to time is to ‘dial down the oughts and shoulds’ when it comes to reading. Instead of reading the books you feel you *should* read, find the books that bring you joy. There’s a whole world of books out there and this selection is just one version, my version. How about you? Think back to your childhood, which books did you love? Let your child guide your adult, maybe you’re in need of some excitement, a thriller or the first book in a crime series, or perhaps something darker, a horror or SF novel. Maybe it’s the broad canvas of a fantasy epic or some swashbuckling historical fiction you’re craving or just some old fashioned romance, a dose of chicklit or a big fat 1980s sex and shopping blockbuster. Or maybe you’d like to discover something new - this time of year is busy with literary prizes, the Women’s Prize shortlist has just been announced and it’s a great list, as has the Orwell Prize list for non-fiction, and Granta have just announced their list of the best Young British Novelists which they produce every 10 years. Whatever you choose, spring is the perfect time to dive into something new. If you enjoy any of the books on my list, I’ve included a further reading title listed as FR below each selection. I’d also love to hear from you, send me an email – meirion.todd@gmail.com - a tweet - @meiriontodd – or visit my website – www.meiriontodd.co.uk - letting me know your own experience of reading them, or those books that have changed how you see the world. Happy reading!

Why Love Matters by Sue Gerhardt
9781583918173 Routledge £12.99
FR: *A Secure Base* by John Bowlby
9780415355278 Routledge £14.99

Before Freud's discovery of the 'talking cure' 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 an approachable, easily digested and at times beautiful articulation of how quite literally our early relationships shape our brains.



The Plastic Mind by Sharon Begley
9781845296742 Constable £9.99
FR: *Quiet* by Susan Cain
9780141029191 Penguin price: £8.99

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 Mind & Life gatherings organised by the Dalai Lama at his home in Dharamsala where leading scientists would talk about key discoveries in neuroscience, 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.



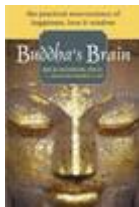
Buddha's Brain by Rick Hanson

9781572246959 New Harbinger Publications £14.99

FR: *Radical Self-Acceptance* by Tara Branch

9781591793212 Sounds True Inc. £22.99

While *The Plastic Mind* and *Why Love Matters* are guides to the exciting new breakthroughs being made in neuroscience and how they affect us all, *Buddha's Brain* offers a more practical guide to how we can benefit from these discoveries. Marrying modern neuroscience with the ancient contemplative practices of meditation and mindfulness, *Buddha's Brain* offers practical exercises and techniques aimed at training your mind to work towards greater emotional and spiritual well-being. Warmly recommended by key figures in the field such as Jack Kornfield and Jon Kabat-Zinn, this book is a wonderful fusion of ancient wisdom and modern science.



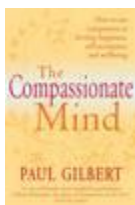
Compassionate Mind by Paul Gilbert

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: *True Love: A Practice for Awakening the Heart* by Thich Nhat Hanh

9781590304044 Shambhala Publications £6.99

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!'



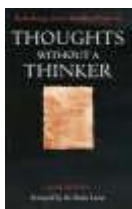
Thoughts Without a Thinker by Mark Epstein

9780465020225 Basic Books £8.99

FR: *The Wise Heart* by Jack Kornfield

9781846041259 Rider £13.99

Mark Epstein is a New York Psychoanalyst but in this book he argues that therapy and meditation go hand in hand: the one can't exist without the other, they are parallel and mutually beneficial journeys. Epstein's book entwines the wisdom of Buddhism with that of British Psychoanalysts such as Bion and Winnicott who sought both to explore the intricacies of relationship while acknowledging the sometimes unknowable and mysterious nature of being. The key in both journeys is the slow and painstaking task of learning to observe our experience and become more present to our way of being in 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

Psychoanalytically trained polemicist, Oliver James, author of *Affluenza* and *Britain on the Couch*, offers in *They Fuck You Up* an exhilarating introduction to how psychoanalysis and attachment theory can help reshape your view of yourself. This is a book that can subtly 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.



The Velvet Rage by Alan Downs

9780738210612 Da Capo Press £9.99

FR: *Love Me As I Am* by Ade Adeniji, Darren Brady & Francois Lubbe

9780957330108 the Quest £9.99

The *Velvet Rage* is the book that gay men everywhere are talking about and sometimes arguing about. U.S. therapist Alan Downs looks at how childhood shame can hamper the authentic development of gay men, and how deprived of the usual rituals and shared life events this can hamper their path adulthood. Though Downs' book can be a little one-size-fits-all (not all gay men go through a 'fabulous' stage) his theory is sound and feels like the right book at the right time. If the book strikes a chord check out the personal development workshops and social events run in its wake in London by the Quest - www.thequestawaitsyou.com. They've also produced a really great book, *Love Me As I Am*, which is a kind of response to the *Velvet Rage* which gives voice to the childhood experiences and biographies of 24 gay men from a wide range of backgrounds. Important stuff.



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.



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.



The Interpreted World by Ernesto Spinelli

9781412903059 Sage £25.99

FR: *Heidegger and the Roots of Existential Therapy* by Hans Cohn

9780826455093 Continuum £17.99

Phenomenology, deriving from the work of German philosopher Edmund Husserl, is one of *the* buzz words in contemporary thought and psychology. Though it can appear abstruse, it's really just an attempt to turn off the meaning-making, doing mind and experience the world afresh, and has parallels with the Buddhist practice of mindfulness. Ernesto Spinelli is one of the key UK Existential Psychotherapists and this is a fluid and readable introduction to an exciting new way of seeing the world.



King Warrior Magician Lover: Rediscovering the Archetypes of the Mature Masculine by Robert Moore and Douglas Gillette

9780062506061 Harper San Francisco £9.99

He: Understanding Masculine Psychology by Robert A. Johnson

9780060963965 Harper & Row £4.99

Women Who Run With the Wolves by Clarissa Pinkola Estes

9781846041099 Rider £12.99

Heroine's Journey by Maureen Murdock

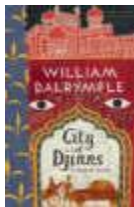
9780877734857 Shambhala £16.99

One of the joys of the different psychotherapeutic modalities is that although they all share key ideas, they all express a particular truth, something that you just don't find anywhere else. The joy for me in Jung's work is it reconnects us with a deeper symbolic truth, embodied most strongly in the archetypes, those deep mythic ways of being that are evoked in art, literature and fairy tales. What both these books argue is that modernity and post modernity have robbed us of our connections with ritual and with these deeper ways of being. There is something truly exciting about reengaging with these archetypal ways of being, and reading Jungian accounts reconnects us with the childlike sense of wonder and awe I got from reading the Greek Myths as a child. Now spring is here, maybe it's time to reconnect with your inner warrior or wild woman.



City of Djinns by William Dalrymple
9780006375951 Flamingo £9.99
FR: *Nine Lives* by William Dalrymple
9781408801246 Bloomsbury £9.99

William Dalrymple is best known now as brilliant and unflinching historian of Empire, and his new book *Return of a King* about England's 19th Century folly in Afghanistan has recently been published to great reviews. His earlier books cover travel, reportage and spiritual writing and *City of Djinns*, one of his first books is my favourite. An account of Dalrymple's move to Delhi in his 20s, the book follows one year in the life of the city as well as a journey back through the history of Delhi through independence and partition, the Mughals in splendour and decline and winding back to its earliest beginnings. A wonderful account of someone discovering for the first time the city and the country that is to become their passion.



A Journey in Ladakh by Andrew Harvey
9780618056750 Houghton Mifflin £9.95
Seven Years in Tibet by Heinrich Harrer
9780586087077 Harper Perennial £9.99

Andrew Harvey is a fascinating character, an English poet who has become a modern spiritual guru, writing on themes ranging from Tibetan Buddhism, Hinduism and spirituality, and is the founder of the Spiritual Activism movement. His first book *A Journey in Ladakh* is a classic of spiritual travel, capturing the rugged spare beauty of the isolated North Indian region of Ladakh, one of the last refuges of traditional Tibetan Buddhism. Harvey's encounters with lamas, monks, a bizarre gallery of Western seekers for enlightenment and ordinary Ladakhis, populate a book that beautifully evokes a landscape suffused with the practical Buddhist spirituality of its people.



How Proust Can Change Your Life by Alan de Botton

9780330354912 Picador £8.99

FR: *The Consolations of Philosophy* by Alan de Botton

9780140276619 Penguin £10.99

De Botton's brief and beguiling book on Proust is a celebration of just how much fiction can change your life. Taking Proust and his very long novel as his starting point, De Botton argues that a love of fiction can ennoble and expand your world like nothing else. If you enjoy this book, look out for De Botton's many books on the practical wisdom of philosophy. Also worth looking out for is the School of Life - <http://www.theschooloflife.com/> - the social enterprise based in a small shop in Bloomsbury that organises talks and small courses and declares itself a place 'free from dogma'. They also offer bibliotherapy which makes me a fan. I share de Botton's enthusiasm for the transformative powers of fiction and my remaining selections will be fiction, all books that in their different ways deal with characters on the brink of momentous change in their lives.



This Book Will Save Your Life by A.M. Holmes

9781862079335 Granta £7.99

FR: *May We Be Forgiven* by A.M. Holmes

9781847083234 Granta £8.99

AM Homes's books prior to *This Book Will Save Your Life* were often explorations of the darker side of American life. This book came as a complete surprise and is both a life-enhancing account of a midlife crisis and a book that celebrates and humanizes Los Angeles, that most inhuman of cities. While it may not save your life it will make you cheer on formerly lost soul Richard Novak as he emerges from the LA canyons and begins to rediscover some kind of meaning. The wisdom of Holmes' book is a kind of refutation of Sartre's 'hell is other people', instead Novak realises that life, while still imperfect and mystifying is made meaningful through our connections with others.



The Forty Rules of Love by Elif Shafak

9780141047188 Penguin £8.99

FR: *The Bastard of Istanbul* by Elif Shafak

9780141031699 Penguin £8.99

Elif Shafak is a Turkish writer who is attracted to the marginal voices within Turkey, embracing the Ottoman legacy of pluralism rather than Ataturk's 20th century Turkish nationalism. In her previous book *The Bastard of Istanbul* she offered a family saga that intertwined a sympathetic examination of women's experience within Islam with the Armenian genocide, while still allowing space for a salty irreverent humour. In this novel she moves fluidly between mediaeval Turkey and modern day Connecticut, intertwining the stories of a thoughtful and frustrated American woman of middle years and the passionate friendship between the mystic Islamic teacher and poet Rumi and the wandering Sufi mystic Shams of Tabriz. A beautiful meditation on love, friendship and the Sufi view of religion as love.



Miss Wyoming by Douglas Coupland

9780007179824 Harper Perennial £8.99

FR: *Hey Nostradamus Rigby* by Douglas Coupland

9780007162512 Harper Perennial £7.99

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 simple studies of character, that ache with a genuine compassion and loneliness. *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, the sole survivor of a horrific crash, and seizes the moment to walk away from her life and into a voyage of self-discovery.



Tales of the City by Armistead Maupin

9780552998765 Black Swan £7.99

FR: *More Tales of the City* by Armistead Maupin

9780552998772 Black Swan £7.99

San Francisco in the 70s in the golden haze of disco and Quaaludes before AIDs crashed the party. Maupin's first novel in the sequence is the perfect escape into a golden past, as Mary Anne Singleton flees suburban Cleveland for the courtyard house on Russian Hill. Peopled by some of my favourite characters in fiction, troubled free spirit Mona, her best friend, insecure, adorable, gay Mouse, unfulfilled ladies' man Bryan and the inimitable and mysterious landlady Mrs Madrigal, this is a book I never tire of re-reading.



Where'd You Go Bernadette? By Maria Semple

9780297867289 Weidenfeld & Nicolson £12.99

FR: *A Visit From the Goon Squad* by Jennifer Egan

9781780330969 Corsair £7.99

A delirious screwball comedy that takes in Modern Architecture, Microsoft, the politics of the school run, and one unhappy family and ranges from Seattle and the Hollywood Hills to the icy wastes of Antarctica. Bernadette Fox, her daughter Bee and long suffering husband Elgin, are characters to cheer on as they risk destruction in their attempt to save themselves and their family, this book is a joy:

'The characters in *Bernadette* may be in real emotional pain, but Semple has the wit and perspective and imagination to make their story hilarious. I tore through this book with heedless pleasure' Jonathan Franzen



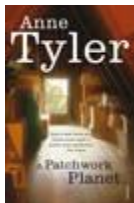
A Patchwork Planet by Anne Tyler

9780099272687 Vintage £8.99

FR: *Digging to America* by Anne Tyler

9780099499398 Vintage £8.99

I love Anne Tyler's books, they're beautiful, humorous touching novels that see the magic in the mundane, the strangeness and wonder that lurks in all our lives. She's got teeth though and reading an Anne Tyler novel can be a tightrope walk as she chooses those moments in our lives when everything could change. Sometimes it does, for the better, but sometimes her characters resist the pull and there is the aching sense that something has been lost that they can never regain. *A Patchwork Planet* is a great place to start, as it features perhaps her most endearing character Barnaby Gaitlin, a disappointment to his ambitious clan, At 30, he has yet to graduate from college, is already divorced and is used to defeat. His mother thrives on reminding him of his adolescent delinquency and debt to his family, and even his daughter is fed up with his fecklessness. But could Barnaby's life be about to change?



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 restore to me that 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 offer consolation and 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 as its starting point, 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.

