



When a book isn't the answer

SARAH ANJUM BARI

If you're thinking about the title of this article, let me clarify: I've always believed the opposite.

I was reading *Harry Potter and The Philosopher's Stone* while I kept my grandmother company in Bangkok as she battled cancer; I remember, there was magic in the hospital ward every bit as much as the smell of chemicals and doom. Not being able to put down Nicholas Sparks' *Message in a Bottle* (a book I didn't even love that much) the night before a final exam made me realise I needed to change majors before I failed out of college. Cecelia Ahern's *How to Fall in Love* and the sheer insanity of Bulgakov's *The Master and the Margarita* at once supported and entertained me through a painful breakup. Last year, reading about the banal inner workings of a provincial library in Chris Paling's *Reading Allowed* kept me sane when my grandfather died, while I was alone in a foreign country writing 3,000 words a day for my Master's thesis. All my life, I've devoured text after text, starting a book at 5 AM having just finished a previous one, because in their pages I found just what I needed to get through every kind of crisis. Hope when it seemed lost around me; adventure when things got too boring; peace when the world was pissing me off. Company, always.

As the *New Yorker* article "Can Read-

ing Make You Happier" acknowledged in 2015, "Reading has been shown to put our brains into a pleasurable trance-like state, similar to meditation, and it brings the same health benefits of deep relaxation and inner calm. Regular readers sleep better, have lower stress levels, higher self-esteem, and lower rates of depression than non-readers." Hence the widespread popularity of book clubs that function like support groups and, more interestingly, the publication of books like *The Novel Cure: An A-Z of Literary Remedies* which prescribes "reading cures" for culture-specific ailments in the 18 countries that it's been released in. (The Indian edition supposedly includes remedies for public urination and cricket obsession).

But some recent events left an impact on me that I would never have seen coming: I lost my taste for reading.

Any avid reader who relies on literature for emotional support will know how unsettling that can feel. We bookworms put so much faith in the healing powers of a book because it isn't a singular, but an endlessly plural solution. You can revisit an old favourite for comfort. You can reaffirm your faith in life by picking up something sappy or feel-good, or educate and hence distract yourself with science, history, satire, self-help, or a good old blood-and-gore thriller. A book can be anything you want it to be, like a pocket-sized Room of Requirement.

But what do you do when none of these options seem to help? What do you do when your favourite characters remind you of people you've lost, when a random handwritten inscription sets off a montage of painful memories, when relaxing your mind for long enough to process the printed words also unleashes other toxic thoughts that you've been keeping tethered all day long? Or when simply no story, regardless of genre, setting or author, interests you?

I haven't found an answer to the question yet. But it got me thinking more critically about the things a book can offer its readers.

The first, I realised, is its presence. My bedside table currently holds a copy of Dickens' *Great Expectations*, Jane Green's *Mr. Maybe*, Jhumpa Lahiri's *In Other Words*, Zadie Smith's *Feel Free*, and Jeffery Deaver's *The Burial Hour*, none of which I've finished. At least one of them I always carry around in my bag. It doesn't run out of battery, it doesn't malfunction. The text inside doesn't expire from my neglect. There's something reassuring about knowing that the book is always there with me, along with all the voices inside it, ready to offer support when I'm ready to receive it. Just the act of carrying its weight, of tucking myself within its pages and its sentences, of smelling the paper and inscribing on it, offers solace.

The second is the freedom it allows

me. I realised I don't have to commit to an entire story in order to read it. On the most stressful of days, a sentence here and a paragraph there— Dickens' platitudes, the sass in Jane Green's chick-lit and the soothing lilt in Smith and Lahiri's prose mix with Deaver's impersonal unspooling of murder mysteries to form a strange concoction that actually retains my attention. At the end of the night, I realise I've brewed up a text that would make no sense to anyone else, made up as it is uniquely for and by the reader in me. It's a book that works for my mind and my mind only.

The third and (so far final) thing is its ever-changing relationship with the reader. These past months of not being able to read have brought a shift in our dynamics—the book and me. I used to think of it as a perfect, magical solution to everything. But I've been forced to realise that I can hate a book today that I loved yesterday, that I can find pain in sentences I thought would permanently hold joy, and vice versa. The meanings of words, and stories, I thought I understood perfectly are now in flux. The book, as a result, is now more than just a cure for my problems. It's pain and compassion, distraction, entertainment, memory, and escape, and so many more things. It's a creature more alive than I believed it to be and for that, I'm grateful.

Sarah Anjum Bari is a member of the *Star Weekend* magazine team.