NEW YORK — How many of us know what a bibliotherapist is? I confess that I had no idea until I read a little pamphlet which came to me the other day about Dr. Sadie T. Delaney of Tuskegee, Ala.

Mrs. Delaney has achieved state, national, and international recognition for her work as a librarian, but more especially as a bibliotherapist. She has been the chief librarian at the Veterans Hospital in Tuskegee.

She was born in Rochester in 1889, attended Poughkeepsie High School, the College of the City of New York, and received her library training in the New York Public library system.

NOW I HOPE YOU are wondering, as I did, what bibliotherapy is. The term is taken from "biblio," meaning book, and "therapy," meaning treatment, and Mrs. Delaney describes her work as the "treatment of a patient through selected reading." It requires the librarian not only to read every book in her library but to be familiar with the case history of every person for whom she selects a book.

Each patient receives the same individual attention as that given to him by his physicians and psychiatrists. Mrs. Delaney hesitated when she was asked to go into the South and undertake this work in a veterans' hospital where it had never before been done.

SHE ARRIVED in Tuskegee Jan. 1, 1924, and on Jan. 3 the library was opened. She had only 200 books and a table, but in two weeks' time she moved to more adequate quarters with reading tables, chairs and an office of her own.

She gathered flowers, plants, wall maps and posters, and within a few weeks she began to carry her books to the wards so that the patients who were confined to their beds could begin to read. By Jan. 15 she had begun to collect a medical library for the use of the doctors and nurses. At the end of the first year she had 4,000 volumes in the hospital library and about 85 volumes in the medical library.

SHE THEN HAD 500 patients and about 300 employees to serve, but by 1925 the number of patients had gone up to 1,000 and the reading had increased proportionately. A year later she started a special library binding service to give patients vocational experience, and in 1930 she organized a disabled veterans' literary club which became the nucleus of the active literary press club that exists today.

In 1934 she started a department for the blind. She learned Braille herself, and little by little she started one project after another to give her patients new interests and broaden their outlook on the world. As a result, the Veterans Hospital Library of Tuskegee has the highest circulation per patient of any library in that area.

Mrs. Delaney has received many honors and has deserved them all. But I am sure that what she treasures most is the knowledge that she has helped countless individuals.

E.R.

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Sadie Peterson Delaney: Pioneer bibliotherapist

BY BETTY K. GUBERT

A beacon of hope in the segregated South, Sadie Delaney brought books—and pride—to recuperating black veterans.

In 1983 New York Public Library’s Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture received seven bound volumes of letters, clippings, and photographs attesting to the accomplishments of Sadie Peterson Delaney, a librarian who became an outstanding twentieth-century practitioner of bibliotherapy. Through these letters from major and minor figures—both black and white—in the fields of literature, politics, library service, hospital administration, and race relations, there emerges a portrait of a woman of determination, energy, enthusiasm, patience, and magnetism. She chose to use these considerable attributes to bring books into the lives of people who were unable to get them for themselves, working with hospitalized black veterans in the segregated South from the 1920s to the 1950s.

Sadie Peterson Delaney was for 34 years (1924-58) the chief librarian of the U.S. Veterans Administration Hospital in Tuskegee, Ala. In this capacity, she not only provided library service to thousands of physically and mentally disabled African Americans, but also developed the art of bibliotherapy to such an extent that her methods received worldwide recognition.

Born Feb. 26, 1889, in Rochester, N.Y., to James and Julia Frances (Hawkins) Johnson, Delaney completed high school in Poughkeepsie, where her family had moved. She also attended Miss McGovern’s School of Social Work there for one year. As Mrs. Peterson*, she began her professional career at the 135th Street Branch of New York Public Library, and received her training at its library school from 1920-21. This branch played an important role in the community as Harlem shifted from a neighborhood of native-born and European whites to one of African Americans and blacks from the Caribbean.

NYPL and its staff were deeply committed to meeting the needs of this changing population, who had a growing interest in African and diasporic cultures. The library director’s annual report for 1920 notes: “Special attention has been given this year to the development of the 135th Street Branch. Two interesting and significant features are the progress in children’s work and the employment of colored assistants.” The report further states that use of the children’s reading room had greatly increased and that both circulation of books and registration of new readers had gone up. “The interest of the parents is evident; they have curiosity and sympathy and well understand what such a room can mean to the community life.”

Cited for exceptional service, Delaney worked with children from public and parochial schools, with juvenile delinquents and boy scouts. While serving special groups, Delaney became interested in blind people, and so learned not only Braille but also Moonpoint, a simpler system of embossed reading invented in England by William Moon in 1847.

This period, known as the Harlem or Negro Renaissance, was a time of artistic creativity and political activity. Black Americans were looking at their roots in Africa, the Caribbean, and Southern ways. Jazz was the music of the day, and literary salons where black writers could meet white publishers flourished. The 135th Street Branch was part and parcel of the intellectual, musical, and artistic venues of the day, offering hundreds of programs from 1920-23 that Delaney often arranged. These programs included W.E.B. Du Bois on Negro creative literature; James Weldon Johnson on Haiti; and the employment of colored assistants.

Delaney belonged to a writer’s club and was politically active as well. In 1923 she sought the help of prominent people to restore a French government scholarship Augusta Savage had won to study sculpture in Fontainebleau. The award had been withdrawn after two other winners, who were from Alabama, protested they could not be expected to travel or room with a colored girl. Despite appeals to the French and to President Harding, Savage was denied her scholarship. (Savage went on to have her work exhibited at the 1939 World’s Fair and collected by the Schomburg Center, which in 1986 added a gift of nine sculptures to its holdings of works by this artist and teacher.)

James H. Hubert, the executive secretary of the New York Urban League, wrote to Delaney Apr. 23, 1923, to remark upon “the growing esteem of which the people of Harlem hold the work of the 135th Street Branch. I deeply appreciate your share in this.” He went on to thank her for the many times she had helped him. On Oct. 25, 1923, Jessie Fauset, a novelist and the literary editor of Crisis (the magazine of the NAACP), wrote her that “Dr. Du Bois [a founder of the NAACP and Crisis editor from 1910-34] sailed Wednesday, October 24th. He wishes me to express to you his deep appreciation for what you have done to make his trip to the Third Pan-African Congress and to Africa possible.”

"Greater and better work"

Famous for her tireless energy and creativity, Delaney seemed perfectly matched to this stimulating branch in the vibrant Harlem community. Yet, when the opportunity came to serve in Tuskegee, she took it.

* Divorced from Edward Louis Peterson in 1928. For consistency’s sake, Sadie Peterson Delaney is referred to as Delaney throughout this article.
Delaney saw the library as “aiding [the patient] in his upward struggle to lay aside . . . all sense of defeat . . . by the means of books.”

Delaney arrived in Alabama Jan. 1, 1924, and on Jan. 3 opened the library with one table and 200 books. In a Jan. 25, 1925, article she wrote for Crises, she detailed the experiences and accomplishments of her first 10 months there.

Two weeks after her arrival, the library moved to a larger room that included space for an office. Delaney used plants, flowers, wall maps, and posters for their positive psychological effect. Pictures of eminent African Americans—Douglass, Washington, Du Bois, Moton—and an autographed photograph of President Calvin Coolidge adorned the walls.

Delaney borrowed fairy tales from Tuskegee Institute because “there seemed no books suitable for mental patients.” Men confined to bed received books and magazines brought to them in wire paper carriers. Circulation rose with these efforts, as well as when atlases, dictionaries, newspapers, and encyclopedias were added to the collection. Monthly programs and book talks were instituted, as was a weekly story hour in the mental wards.

The doctors and nurses were not overlooked. Within two weeks of Delaney’s arrival, they too had a library of books and journals. At the end of the year, the veterans’ library had 4,000 volumes for 500 patients, and the medical library 85 volumes for 300 staff members. Overall, book circulation rose from 275 a month to 1,500.

Delaney also established the Disabled Veterans’ Literary Society to raise the reading standard and create a cultural atmosphere. An official letter from the Veterans Administration informed her that Tuskegee was the only veterans hospital library with such a group, and that the caliber of reading was higher than that of any other veterans hospital. Delaney wrote that she hoped to do “greater and better work,” concluding: “Though in the extreme South, we try to bring to these veterans new material, recent current events, popular and helpful reading.”

Delaney was to fulfill this hope during her lifetime. The “greater and better work” she did as a pioneer in bibliotherapy brought her recognition both nationally and internationally. It came from both the general public—attested to by articles in Look (“Look Applauds,” Sept. 26, 1950, p. 29) and the Christian Science Monitor (“Librarian Hailed as Pioneer,” Aug. 28, 1957)—and from her colleagues in the library profession, as well as from black organizations.

Delaney defined bibliotherapy briefly as “the treatment of a patient through selected reading.” In Bibliotherapy and Its Widening Applications (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1975, p. 16), Eleanor Frances Brown called this “one of the most concise definitions to be found anywhere if one interprets patient as anyone with a physical, mental or emotional problem, and not necessarily hospitalized, institutionalized or under medical treatment.”

Reconnecting through reading

To treat patients through bibliotherapy, Delaney and her staff had to know patient case histories, which they obtained from regular consultations with the medical staff. They also had to know the contents of the books, which they learned by reading them. Delaney used the whole world of literature, regardless of the genre or the na-
tionality or color of the author. But, in 1932 in a Wilson Library Bulletin article, she addressed the special reading interests of black veterans, writing that they display interest and enthusiasm at any “mention (favorable or not) of the Negro.” Noting that her patients were trying to “fit themselves for life,” she wrote that their preferred reading included biographies, history, anything about Negro soldiers, and songs, poems, and books about Africa. She saw the library as “aiding him in his upward struggle to lay aside prejudice, all sense of defeat, and to take in that which is helpful and inspiring by the means of books.”

“Books about the Negro cannot be written fast enough . . . . His great happiness will be in . . . knowing more about his people.”

Dark Princess by W.E.B. Du Bois was popular with the veterans because “it depicts international interest in the darker races.” (The heroine of Dark Princess is Indian, thus extending the readers’ geographic ken.) The men also admired the novels of Jessie Fauset because “they depict the higher type of Negro life.” (Although Fauset’s novels, There Is Confusion [1924], Plum Bun [1929], and Chinaberry Tree [1931], later suffered neglect for just that reason, there is now a renewal of interest in them, especially from a feminist point of view. Fauset’s heroines, although “privileged” by their middle-class status and fair skin, face racial and sexual barriers. They transcend their problems by a return to, or a recognition of, human relationships, instead of an unquestioning allegiance to empty societal formulas.)

Melville J. Herskovits, the great anthropologist, wrote to Delaney on Dec. 4, 1934: “I am glad that you liked our book and that you are going to be able to use it.” The book was either An Outline of Dahomean Religious Belief (1933) or Rebel Destiny: Among the Bush Negroes of Guiana (1934). (The letter concludes with an invitation to see Herskovits’s collection of Bush Negro Art and pieces from West Africa and Haiti. By coincidence, Herskovits’s 945-piece collection was donated to the Schomburg in 1986, the same year as the Augusta Savage sculptures. The anthropologist’s voluminous field notes were also donated to the Schomburg.)

Delaney noted in that same Wilson Library Bulletin article that, although the veterans read “race” books, they also asked for literary classics and posed reference questions on every subject. In conclusion, however, she pointed out that, “Books about the Negro cannot be written fast enough to satisfy the insatiable desire of these veterans. Nothing can beat back this longing to know race history and facts . . . . His great happiness will be in chanting his verse and singing his songs and knowing more about his people.”

Library as laboratory

The aim of bibliotherapy, usually practiced by a team of librarians, social workers, and psychiatrists, is to enable patients to connect—or reconnect—themselves with a broad community of ideas and add significance to their experience, with the emphasis always on individual attention. These patients were greatly in need of assistance, having experienced the horrors of World War I and an attendant loss of values, factors likely to trigger anti-social, impulsive, or regressive behavior. Some soldiers were confined to wheelchairs or had been blinded, and did not know how to return to normal life. But, for these black veterans, normality included racial prejudice that was particularly virulent after the first world war. Chronic alcoholics and tubercular patients were also hospitalized there.

Bibliotherapists seek to reduce internal pressures such as aggression, guilt, or anxiety by using catharsis or sublimation, and attempt to substitute verbalization for acting-out behavior. Practitioners aim to alleviate boredom or a sense of futility in patients by helping them develop new interests to promote personal growth and new ways to behave. They also seek to decrease loneliness by stimulating a sense of a shared fate with others, reducing self-absorption by investment in people and ideas, stimulating aesthetic awareness, and promoting socialization and group identity.

Delaney, by design, instinct, and deeply held religious and social beliefs, promoted a full range of activities to accomplish these aims. Besides launching literary clubs, monthly programs, and story hours, she started clubs for stamp and coin collecting, debating, bookbinding, and nature study in the 1930s. She and the patients participated in book discussions on radio broadcasts. She also brought in talking books and equipment that projected books on film onto the ceiling or wall for patients who were immobilized.

Delaney started a special department for the blind at the hospital library in 1934.
She taught Braille to over 600 patients, some of whom then taught the system to others. After work, she volunteered to work with the town’s blind who were not hospitalized. The scrapbooks at Schomburg contain a letter from a blind psychologist who wrote Delaney Sept. 15, 1954, the day before he left for Europe on a Fulbright to study methods of affecting psycho-social adjustment of blind people. He expresses his gratitude to her “for helping me to know that blindness is no more than a relatively simple barrier, placed there for challenging the heart to higher goals. . . . You, a Negro woman of the South, helped me to know that skin color and creed are not important, but that the fundamentals of human beings are the same the world over.”

All of these activities were not just pastimes, but were designed to increase patients’ knowledge of the world, and served to make the men communicate with each other instead of staring blankly in silence, as they had before. In an article that appeared in the February 1938 issue of Opportunity (the magazine of the National Urban League), Delaney noted that the library had become a laboratory and workshop for the improvement and development of the whole individual. “Here minds long imprisoned in lethargy are awakened. . . . And once again he is alive with the enthusiasm and joy derived from activity.”

Healers or handmaidens? Although the term “bibliotherapy” is relatively new, the concept is not. Both the Greeks and Romans associated medicine with reading, the Greeks inscribing over library doors, “Place of Healing for the Soul.” By the middle of the nineteenth century, many U.S. mental hospitals had libraries. E. Kathleen Jones reported in the July 1912 ALA Bulletin (“Library Work among the Insane,” p. 310–24) on the 75 years of bibliotherapy practiced at McLean Hospital in Waverly, Mass.

When Samuel McChord Crothers first used the term in September 1916 (“A Literary Clinic,” Atlantic Monthly, p. 291–301), he did so in a satirical essay that suggested bibliotherapy be used to treat bigotry. His “case history” was a man whose opinions had ossified. Although early in life he was an imbiber of new ideas, now that they don’t agree with him, he is a total abstainer. Crothers wrote that, “Bibliotherapy is such a new science that it is no wonder that there are many erroneous opinions as to the actual effect which any particular book may have.”

Crothers’s observation contains the germ of most literature on bibliotherapy, which debates whether it is an art or a science; which books should be prescribed, the Bible or novels, and by whom, the doctor or the librarian; and how the effects can be measured. Of course, wags have had a field day with bibliotherapy, speaking of using books “freighted with the ana- dyne of slumber as any poppy field” for insomnia, or using two volumes of an encyclopedia to straighten an arm as the only proven therapeutic use of books.

So, hospital librarians like Delaney continued to provide books for patients, but without much notice being taken until November 1937, when William C. Menninger wrote about a five-year program at the Menninger Clinic (“Bibliotherapy,” Bulletin of the Menninger Clinic, p. 263–274). Menninger stated that since reading was a treatment method, it must be directed by the physician. The librarian is only the tool that carries out the mechanics—purchasing and distributing the books—and reports observations. The physician should approve books before they are purchased and prescribe the first reading assignment not only to ensure a wise choice, but also to enlist the patient’s interest.

Menninger portrayed a handmaiden indeed. He concluded that one cannot evaluate the role of bibliotherapy because it is only one part of a total program, but “we have repeatedly been able to see a close parallelism between the recovery or improvement of the patient and his renewed or awakened interest in books.”

Compensation for the soul
By the time of Menninger’s article, Delaney had been practicing her form of bibliotherapy for nearly 14 years, and had published five articles (see bibliography). Three months after Menninger’s article, Delaney published a sixth, “Bibliotherapy in a Hospital,” in Opportunity, which was reprinted in the April 15 issue of Library Journal that same year. A year later, in 1939, ALA formed its first committee to study bibliotherapy.

Nonetheless, Delaney’s influence on bibliotherapy came less from her writings—which were anecdotal, inspirational, and brief—than from her actual hands-on practice of it. An active participant in professional organizations, she trained other librarians for hospital library work and instructed library school students sent to Tuskegee from the universities of Illinois, North Carolina, and Atlanta. The Veterans Administration also adopted the practice of having its hospital librarians study her policies and practices. Delaney, who represented U.S. hospital librarians at a conference in Rome in 1934, gave lectures on bibliotherapy in American universities in conjunction with courses on psychiatry, and spoke at community churches. Librarians from England and South Africa came under her influence.

For her pioneering work as a bibliotherapist, humanitarian, and leader in professional and social circles, Delaney received numerous awards and honors. There are over 50 citations to her work in general, library, medical, psychology, and black-interest serials. She was selected Woman of the Year by the Iota Phi Lambda and Zeta Phi Beta sororities in 1948 and 1949, respectively, and won two more important honors in 1950, when the National Urban League also named her Woman of the Year and she received an honorary doctorate from Atlanta University.

In her acceptance speech at Atlanta, Delaney said: “There has been a tremendous satisfaction in aiding hundreds of individuals to return to normal living. Thought of compensation has been obliterated for there is soul compensation in helping those who are ill. . . . Another lesson learned is the value of a busy life, the utilization of every minute of the day for something worthwhile. . . . Tonight I know more than I shall be able to express, if I live to be 100, of the contentment one gains through service to humanity. If I have contributed anything at all, it has been in exploring new fields in hospital library service by using empirical methods until perfection could be attained. . . . I have tried to share my discoveries with other libraries.”

Delaney concluded with a favorite poem:

There is a destiny that makes men brothers.
None walks this way alone.
All that we send into the lives of others
Comes back into our own.

Sadie Delaney died of a heart attack in May 1958. Family and friends established a scholarship fund in her name at the Atlanta University School of Library Science that same year. In 1962, Delaney was inducted into the Alabama Library Association Roll of Honor for 1981–82.

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Selected bibliography

By Sadie Peterson Delaney:


“U.S.V. Hospital, Library No. 91, Tuskegee, Ala.” Crisis (January 1925) 116–117.


“Bibliotherapy as an Aid to Rehabilitation.” Journal of the National Association of College Women (1933) 9–11.

“Bibliotherapy in a Hospital.” Opportunity (February 1938) 53–56.

“Place of Bibliotherapy in a Hospital.” Library Journal (April 15, 1938) 305–308 (Reprinted from Opportunity above.)


About Sadie Peterson Delaney:


Sprague, Morteza D. “Dr. Sadie Peterson Delaney: Great Humanitarian.” Service (June 1951) 17–18.
January 17

Mrs. Sadie P. Delaney

EXTENSION OF REMARKS
OF HON. JAMES E. MURRAY
OF MONTANA

IN THE SENATE OF THE UNITED STATES
Thursday, January 17, 1957

Mr. MURRAY. Mr. President, there has come to my notice an excellent article by Clyde H. Cantrell, director of libraries, Alabama Polytechnic Institute, Auburn, Ala., on the life and work of Mrs. Sadie P. Delaney, chief librarian at the Veterans' Administration Hospital in Tuskegee, Ala. I ask unanimous consent to have printed in the Appendix of the Record.

There being no objection, the article was ordered to be printed in the Record, as follows:

SADIE P. DELANEY: LIBRARIAN AND LIBRARIAN
(By Clyde H. Cantrell, director of libraries, Alabama Polytechnic Institute)

Dr. Sadie P. Delaney, of Tuskegee, Ala., has achieved State, National, and International recognition as a professional librarian, but more especially as a bibliotherapist. She has made a great contribution to the field of librarianship and has been a leader in the profession. Her work has been recognized by many awards and honors. She has a reputation for being a tireless worker and a devoted professional.

In 1920 Mrs. Delaney was assigned to the 135th Street branch of the New York Public Library. She was the first Negro librarian to work in the New York Public Library system. In 1932 she was appointed to the Veterans' Hospital in Tuskegee, Ala., where she continued her work as a bibliotherapist.

Mrs. Delaney's work has been characterized by her dedication to the improvement of the lives of patients through the use of books and literature. She has contributed to the development of bibliotherapy as a therapeutic tool and has been a pioneer in the field.

Mrs. Delaney is well known for her ability to provide a wide range of reading materials to meet the diverse needs of the patients in her care. She has been praised for her ability to select appropriate books and to adapt her services to the needs of each individual patient.

In 1943 the National Library of Medicine recognized Mrs. Delaney's contributions to bibliotherapy by presenting her with the J. W. Bollin Award, which is given to those who have made significant contributions to the field of bibliotherapy.

Mrs. Delaney is a member of several professional organizations, including the American Library Association, the National Association of School Librarians, and the Southern Library Association.

In 1952 Mrs. Delaney was honored with the American Library Association's Distinguished Service Award, which is given to librarians who have made outstanding contributions to the profession.

Mrs. Delaney's work has been widely recognized and she has been invited to speak on the subject of bibliotherapy at numerous conferences and seminars. She has also written extensively on the subject and has contributed to several professional journals.

Mrs. Delaney's dedication to her work and her commitment to the improvement of the lives of patients through the use of books and literature have made her a respected figure in the field of librarianship. She has been a leader in the development of bibliotherapy as a therapeutic tool and has contributed significantly to the profession.
the world offered no reason for living; assis-
ting the handicapped was to be found a
fulfill useful roles in society; showing the
permanently disabled how, despite their
handicaps, they may develop hobbies and
vocations for their own personal benefit and
profit; and advancing the general, cultural,
and specialized educations of hundreds or
even thousands of citizens have been self-
satisfying experiences which Mrs. Delaney
looks upon with great joy. Such a life lived
in the interest of suffering humanity has
earned for her the appellation of "great
humanitarian." It is not surprising that she
should have received numerous honors
and awards.

One of the most significant tributes paid
to Mrs. Delaney was written by Morteza D.
Sprague, who has been acquainted with
her and her work for the past 25 years. He
points out that, whereas there is much ado
about bookmobiles today, Mrs. Delaney has
been carting books to patients since 1924.
In New York, says Sprague, Claudia McKay,
Langston Hughes, and others were given
their initial push by Mrs. Delaney. At the
Veterans’ Hospital in Tuskegee, her program
has been so successful that library schools
such as Alabama and Tuskegee Institute
have sent students to study her programs
and methods. The Veterans’ Administration
long ago adopted the policy of having its
libraries operate on the same principles and
practices of Mrs. Delaney. People who have
paid distinguished tribute to her include
Dr. F. D. Patterson, Dr. Charles S. Johnson,
and Dr. G. C. Branch. She has been
claimed by librarians such as Dr. Keyes D.
McElfish, Dr. Luther Evans, Dr. E. W.
McDiarmid (now a dean at the University of
Minnesota) and from Virginia Lacy Jones.

It would require too much space to list
the numerous citations of merit and the
honors which have come to Mrs. Delaney
during the past 25 years. Only some are
mentioned in this article. She and her
work are included or discussed in 51 publica-
tions. The United States Department of
State sent to 100 USH units its "Guides to
the Policies and Practices of Mrs. Delaney.
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