

Books and reading, Children, young people and families, Sex and gender

Books that shaped me... Dr Tara Porter

Clinical Psychologist and author of 'You Don't Understand Me: The Young Woman's Guide to Life', Dr Tara Porter, on the books that have made their mark on her.

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psychologist

As a child and adolescent, before I had even heard the word psychology, I satisfied my interest in people through books: Why was George a tomboy, and how are only children different to bigger families? Where did Scarlett get her fighting spirit? How did John, Susan, Titty and Roger differ from each other, and do duffers drown?

Enid Blyton's *Famous Five*, Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind*, and Arthur Ransome's *Swallows and Amazons* were some of the first books that I returned to again and again. Details of any plot are lost in time, but the psychological make-up of each character I could describe fully today.

Discovering psychology

Arriving at Cardiff University for my psychology undergraduate, many of the academic books were unfortunately somewhat drier. But I was fascinated by *The Social Animal* by Eliot Aronson. It was simply a good read, as well as being packed with theory and research.

Throughout my career I've been attracted to read, practice and write psychology in an accessible way, using informal language, storytelling, plot, pace and humour to get the point across. Of course, Aronson was blessed with some of the most dramatic and fascinating research studies in Psychology, but he wrote in a way that was easy to read and stuck in the mind.

In my Clinical Psychology training at the University of East London, the book that I clung to was Hawton et al (1989) *Cognitive Behavioural Therapy for Psychiatric Problems*. Less accessible than *The Social Animal*, and packed full of serious science psychology, I turned to it as an instruction manual of what to do.

I have such a strong memory of being in the 'trainee room' (unheated) in the old Claybury Hospital wrapped in scarves, pouring over each word, looking for the answers. I wanted a recipe book approach to satisfy my anxiety about being with actual patients! I don't know where my copy is now, but I'm sure it is well-thumbed and underlined.

Books that supported my work

As a newly qualified psychologist, I moved to Collingham Gardens Psychiatric Hospital for children and adolescents, and it was there that I learnt how to be with a child in therapy. *Windows to our Children* by Violet Oaklander was a book that stood out for me during this time.

I was working with 7-10-year-olds and even though the science of course is important, so is the ability to engage with a child, make them comfortable during therapy, give them hope and motivate them to want to change. I bought a fair few copies of that book, as colleagues regularly 'borrowed' it.

When I moved to the Royal Free Hospital, I specialised more in eating disorders and found Rick Kausman's *If Not Dieting Then What?* the most accessible and helpful book about food, eating, weight and shape. His analogy of eating being like a rowing boat, with a nutrition oar and an intuition oar, and that if we use only one oar, we end up going around in circles is so true. He sees this pattern over and over in failed dieting, as people try to reduce eating to calories, or food types and ignore what they want to eat. I have used this analogy with countless patients over the years.

Unfortunately, I do find when working with adolescents and young people, that I am often fighting against the social messaging about restrictive, so-called 'healthy' eating. In their attempts to numb any intuition, they often end up starving or bingeing: two sides of the same coin. If only school education programmes used Kausman as a guide.

As psychologists, I think we need to be developing and owning more of a view about what is psychologically healthy eating in these times of plenty, rather than letting the debate be dominated by dietitians.

Baumeister and Tierney's *Willpower* is also an interesting book in this context that is easily readable. It looks at how we live in an obesogenic society which perversely has high-fat, high-sugar food available cheaply on every corner, and then look to a reliance on individual willpower to manage restraint, when we know that willpower is eroded by hunger. It hurts my head just thinking about the contradictions in this state of play! No wonder obesity and eating disorders are at an all-time high!

In my clinical work though, it was Chris Fairburn's writing that influenced me most. He writes both in the academic and popular genres and *Cognitive-Behaviour Therapy and Eating Disorders* can be a tough read but *Overcoming Binge Eating* covers a lot of the same ground in a more accessible format. One of my most salient memories about the former book is what a fight I had to get the NHS to buy us copies for work. The lack of funding and investment in training and staff in the mental health service leaves us unable to do our best work. I wrote about this issue for *The Guardian* with a sad heart when I left the NHS after 28 years.

Seeing Fairburn teach and talk about his work, however, gave me even more idea about how to engage patients than his books: the interest and curiosity he has in each patient, and how to create a formulation that marries their experience with the theory and the research.

Words that help me as a writer

As I started writing myself, I think it was by looking at the skills a therapist uses that interested me: How do you engage people enough that you can get the serious science or research across? In my books, I like to weave the ideas I get from my patients and my own experience into the theory and research.

Of course, I fear sanctions from my more academic colleagues and have a dose of imposter fraud in doing so. I was inspired a lot by the psychotherapist, Julia Samuel in my writing: like me, her first book was published when she was in her 50s after decades in the NHS. She too is fascinated by the applicability of science in the day-to-day work of relieving distress. My favourite book of hers is probably *This Too Shall Pass*.

I also love Stephen Grosz's book, *An Examined Life*.

I remember reading the epigraph at the start of the book (which is from Dubus' *Broken Vessels* about loss and gratitude) with the startling realisation that all change involves loss. That is something I think about a lot in therapy with my patients, 'what are they going to lose if they make the change we are talking about?' This helps me think with patients who come week after week without change, stuck in a pattern of distress and unhappiness and seemingly hopeless to change it.

My final choice is Lisa Darmour's brilliant book about teenage girls, *Untangled*. Lisa was a psychologist in a girls' school in Ohio and writes beautifully about the challenges girls now face in the Western world. I recommended it to so many parents who would then ask for a book they could give to their daughters to read. I couldn't find one, so I wrote one myself, *You Don't Understand Me: A Young Woman's Guide to Life*.

I wrote about what I'd heard from listening to my patients in CAMHS and in my private practice, and how I understood it through the lens of psychological theory and research. It was a Sunday Times Bestseller and has now sold to about 20 countries around the world.

I even get messages from girls in countries I have to look up on maps saying that I wrote the book about them. I find it fascinating that what I heard in a tiny windowless office in a North London NHS hospital, through the universality of psychology, can touch people half a world away.

The You Don't Understand Me Journal by Dr Tara Porter

...reviewed by Deputy Editor *Jennifer Gledhill*

This is the follow-up to Porter's best-selling self-help book, *You Don't Understand Me*. In the Journal, readers have a chance to get their pens out and scribble down their unique self-reflection, giving them an insight into their own psychology. Not everyone can access their own private therapist, and we know all about the endless waiting lists, even for those in crisis.

This, while no replacement, is a great hand-holding tool, where Porter gives young people an opportunity to name their feelings, get curious about their thoughts, behaviours and physical feelings, and, above all, view themselves and their struggles with absolute compassion.

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