

# Reading to Stay Alive

## How possible is that?

David Zigmond

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A short review of a short book surveying a vast area of humanity's tribulations.



*Reading to Stay Alive.* **Christopher Dowrick, Anthem Press, 2022**

This book is unusual: a mixture of personal rumination and credo, academic literary criticism, and occasional medical schemata. These are beckoned variously to convey Dowrick's belief and mission: that literary fiction is particularly well-suited to arrest and counter our most hazardous self-harms. Or – more simply – many people can be deflected from suicide by reading the right novels.

Much of this author's core belief-system will find much agreement amongst emotionally literate clinicians: most suicides are responses to perceived cumulative personal losses – of resonance, recognition, significance, belonging and meaning amongst their Kith and Kin. Equally valuable is his iteration that anything that restores such losses will be therapeutic. And it is here that Dowrick invests his particular interest, enthusiasm and scholarship – a kind of vocational mission in the therapeutic influence of literary fiction.

His thesis is sometimes true: literature *can* catalyse a change or enlargement of personal view and thus experience. Literature does this (perhaps) by opening the door or window to find an exit from incarcerated subjectivity (a good index of mental illness).

But such therapeutic effects are common to many other, and very different, activities – those without literary or analytic content. Dance, art, music, craft, exercise, gardening ... all offer therapeutic possibilities to escape our incarcerated subjectivities and thus expand and change our experience. All these are potential therapeutic portals, yet can only 'work' if compatible with the subtle vagaries of

each individual: prescription is frequently duff, it must – somehow – be the patient's choice. Dowrick only fleetingly alludes to this, thus eluding its importance.

There are other caveats. Literature is certainly not only therapeutic – how else do we account for the frequent suicide of its practitioners? Koestler, Hemingway, Plath, Woolf, Bettelheim, Primo Levi, Hunter S Thompson and David Foster Wallace are just a few of the better-known suiciders among them. Insight can cut both ways, as many psychiatrists have found for themselves.

What about the nature and quality of this book's writing? What are its assets and impediments?

Christopher Dowrick is a veteran GP and esteemed mental health academic; he previously worked in Social Work and psychotherapy. His writing conveys both ardent, even missionary, commitment to his project and assiduous academic framing and phrasing. This compound-mix is certainly diverse: personal ruminations, reveries and pleas morph into densely written and referenced academic discourses. Psychology, sociology, ontology, anthropology, nosology ... all are meticulously referenced, alongside many literary quotations and interpretations. Most chapters contain more than fifty references.

Dowrick's compassionate intelligence – and his evident love of both literature and his healthcaring – fuel all this. His 'human condition' questions and thoughts are deep and wide. So his academic framing and phrasing will find likely respectful affirmation among consonant scholars. Others will find his worthy and rich

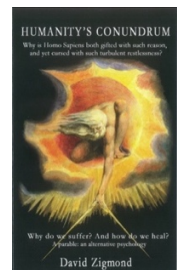
investigations more difficult to assimilate.

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David Zigmond is author of

*Humanity's Conundrum: Why do we suffer? And how do we heal?*

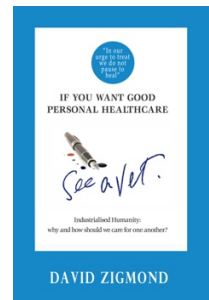
Filament Publishing (2021)



and

*If You Want Good Personal Healthcare See a Vet: Industrialised Humanity: Why and how should we care for one another:*

New Gnosis Publications (2015)



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