

Shared Jan Raes  
Reading  
*The Ultimate Therapy*

**Lannoo  
Campus**

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# Prologue

I was repairing a flat tyre on my bike and had just sworn at the fifth patch I had failed to place properly, when the telephone rang.

– He has fallen over. It’s probably nothing serious. But perhaps it’s best if you come and have a look?

Grumbling at this unnecessarily exaggerated female sense of concern, I rushed over to the playground where I had ditched my son for the holidays, so that I could enjoy a bit of peace and quiet.

She walked towards me, holding the boy by his hand. The universe came to a halt. I was deaf. I was dumb. My soul shrivelled in ecstasy.

A quarter of an hour later, I went home, dragging along Pieter-Jan like some kind of excess baggage, with him no doubt planning to find a lover for my wife who would be more reliable than myself.

On the way, I bought a new tyre for the bike. Having fixed it to the wheel, I locked myself away and wrote a poem.

Out of this poem, a strategy gradually emerged.

All day and half the night I sat in my room, mumbling, muttering but stubbornly proving my point. I was proving that she was the most beautiful woman in the world, that she loved me, that God existed and that our love was His will. I was proving that she got up during the night to be melancholy, reducing her

diary to no more than thoughts of me and stretching out her hands in the mirror towards mine. After ten whiskies, I finally proved that her tears would one day wet my grave and that her fame for later generations would be assured. And all this I did in no more than twelve quatrains, so that the power of proof in each line was overwhelming.

*Fragment from: Charles Ducal, 'Judith'*



In the building where my office is located a session of Shared Reading<sup>1</sup> was organised for a group of people who were interested. I had already heard something about it – people coming together to listen to stories read aloud and then discussing them – but I was still sketchy about the details. In the corridor I bumped into my friend Dirk. He invited me to come along to the session. ‘Who knows, perhaps it’s something for you, Jan,’ he said. ‘So why not pop in, if you’ve got the time. Then you’ll know!’ I am curious by nature and I did have a bit of free time, so I thought: ‘Why not?’

When I walked into the room, I saw nine people sitting in comfortable chairs. On the table in the middle there were tea and biscuits. It looked relaxed, like it might be fun. I joined the circle and after a brief introduction the woman leading the session explained what text we would be shared reading.

Everyone opened a book that they had been given before the session began. ‘Great,’ I thought, ‘now I’m sitting here like a right idiot. Why on earth did I agree to come? It’s not as though I haven’t got lots of other things to do!’ A little voice inside my head told me to stop moaning and make the most of it. And so I decided to just

1 In this book I use the term Shared Reading to refer to the specific methodology used by Het Lezerscollectief, based on the Shared Reading methodology developed by Jane Davis for the British organisation The Reader.



listen to the text and see what, if anything, it did for me. After all, I was here now, wasn't I? The least I could do was to play my part.

It was a nice text, about a father doing some odd jobs at home. I'm a bit of an odd-job man myself, so I soon found myself getting into the swing of things. To my surprise, I discovered that I felt calm and relaxed in this new setting, reading along with someone who is used to reading out loud at a gentle pace. It made me think of my teacher in the fifth form at secondary school, who used to read in this same pleasant way on Fridays after the mid-afternoon break, provided we had been good. I was starting to enjoy the simple act of listening. All thoughts about work and its associated pressures had disappeared and I immersed myself in the emotions of the main character.

Oh dear! Suddenly he falls madly in love with his son's teacher! He needs to pick up the lad from the playground where he has fallen over and the moment he sees her... Bam! Head over heels! He is no longer interested in his son. All he is concerned about is his own exaggerated feelings. In my mind's eye, I can see it happening! What a plonker!

The rest of the text continues to explore his infatuation and his behaviour, fictional though it is, starts to irritate me. A whole string of none-too-complimentary comments flash through my brain. *'What on earth does the idiot think he is doing? Is he planning to just dump his wife? Instead of trying to come to terms with the situation, he immediately wants to find a radical solution to satisfy his own emotions. My God, this man has some really aggressive fantasies!'*

I realise that the main character is making me angry and am surprised that the story has such a powerful and lifelike impact on my imagination. Funny, I thought that only happened when you were reading to yourself, but the sensation seems to be even stronger with reading aloud.

There is a short break. 'And?' asks the woman leading the session. 'What are your first impressions?'

'Romantic,' says a woman with greying hair. 'It reminds me of my own youth.'

'Wonderful,' adds a man. 'That feeling of butterflies in your stomach: there's nothing like it.'

I remain silent, but think: '*So they both go along with his infatuation, as though there is nothing wrong with it. But what about the wife? Just trade her in like a used car? A new model to replace the old one? No, that's not on!*

It suddenly strikes me that *my* reading of the story is not the only possible reading, and that the interpretations of the other participants are both surprisingly interesting and valid. By listening to what they have to say, a number of doors open inside my head, each leading to alternative paths for the continuation and completion of the story. Yes, this first meeting with my fellow readers has been an interesting one. Or should I say my fellow travellers in our literary love bubble? I find it admirable that they are so willing to throw themselves into this emotional maelstrom!

During the first round of questioning and discussion, I hold my peace. Slightly worried, I ask myself whether or not I am so quick to make black-and-white judgements in daily life. The others in the group seem milder and more forgiving. Next to me sits a teacher, who is clearly enjoying herself. Opposite there is a pensioner, who says that precisely the same thing happens to him whenever he falls in love, although it no longer happens as often as it used to! '*Hm,*' I think, '*perhaps that's something to think about after the session.*' 'I'm curious to find out how it all ends,' says another man. 'He is so passionate, anything could happen.'

The story continues, steadily going from bad to worse. The man convinces himself with each new whisky that he is truly in love and that she, impassioned by his romantic verses, will one day melt in his arms. No doubt about it... But that's not how I

see it. This can only end in disaster... 'Fun, isn't it,' says someone next to me during the next break. I nod affirmatively. But it's actually more than just fun, it's wonderful...

After this first introduction to Shared Reading, I was fascinated by the concept. It all seemed so simple: people meet to listen to or to read along with a literary text, pausing every now and then to discuss the contents. You can't get much simpler than that, can you?

Yet simple or not, it is super-effective. The more testimonies I heard from people who regularly took part in the reading sessions, the more I realised that this kind of interaction focused on literary texts had made a real impact on them. I heard stories of people who rediscovered their courage during the sessions, saw the first glimmer of light at the end of the long tunnel of their depression, found something to hold on to, notwithstanding the difficult circumstances in their private and/or professional lives. They made a point of faithfully attending every reading group, no matter what else was noted in their diaries and busy agendas. Even people who never said a word during the discussion moments explained to me that the sessions were important to them: 'It is just being at the meetings that counts,' said one regular participant.

Impressed by these testimonies, I decided to put my shoulder behind the praiseworthy efforts of Het Lezerscollectief, a network of people who organise and conduct Shared Reading sessions throughout Flanders. This makes it possible for people who have little or no access to literature to experience the transforming effect of powerful stories and poems.

## A simple methodology that makes great things possible

At first glance, the methodology of Shared Reading is very simple: people meet on a regular basis (for example, every week or every fortnight), either in a reading group or individually with a reading companion. This companion, who is a member of the Lezerscollectief team, chooses an ambiguous literary text in advance and reads it aloud to the group or the reading partner. In a single session it is usual to read a short story and a poem. The participants are given a copy of the texts, so that they can follow them silently while they are being read. At certain moments agreed in advance the companion will stop reading and ask a number of questions about the texts and their contents. The focus is placed primarily on the thoughts, associations and feelings that the texts arouse in the participants, so that an authentic conversation can be developed. After this period of expression and/or dialogue, the companion resumes reading. Within this simple format, the most remarkable things can happen; things that are powerful or subtle, therapeutic, liberating, heart-warming, etc. – but only if the process is approached with a sufficient degree of care and nuance.

In practice, Shared Reading usually takes place in a group rather than an individual context. Twelve participants and a single reading companion is the maximum number for this process to be comfortable and effective. Eight participants and a companion is ideal, but smaller groups are also possible. The advantage of the group is that it promotes a wider range of interaction, so that a greater number of different insights and perspectives are raised, which enhances the growth and learning processes of those taking part.

Reading aloud to just a single person is possible, but more difficult. It demands greater attention and a more specific approach from the companion to sense what is going on inside the listener. It is also necessary for the personalities of companion and reader to click, so

that sufficient trust and openness can be generated to make possible a deep and meaningful conversation. In a duo, the companion plays a more active role in the conversation, since this is the best way to help the listener to view the story from different perspectives. Within this conversation, it is important for the companion to find the right balance between making his/her own suggestions and drawing suggestions from the listener. The advantage of a reading duo is that all the attention is focused on the listener, so that he/she can benefit from a personal experience rather than a shared experience with others.

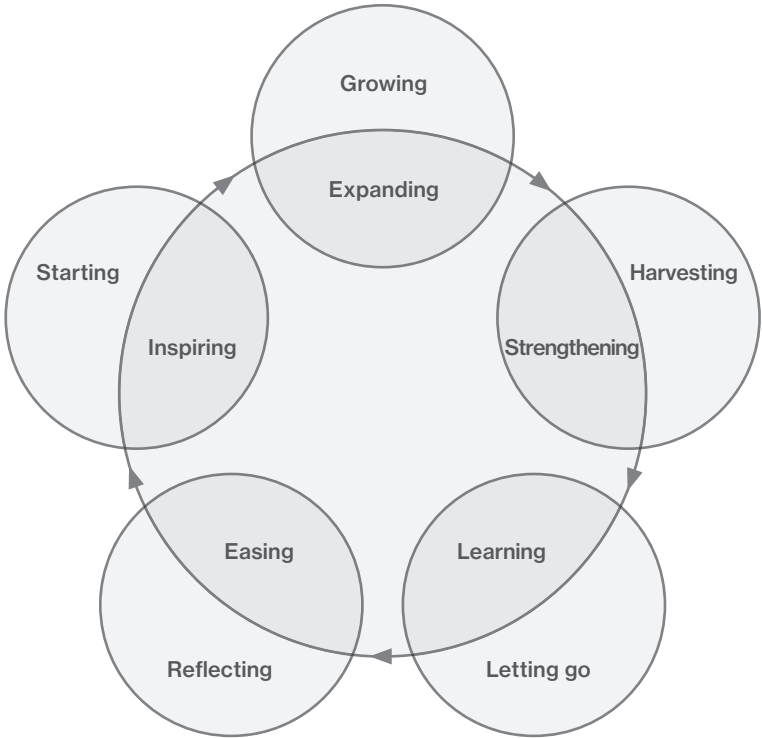
Shared Reading seeks to reach, among others, people who are vulnerable: persons with physical or mental difficulties or limitations, those living in poverty, those confined to prison, etc. People in these categories do not always have access to thought-provoking literature or else their social background often leads them to be categorised as ‘people who are not interested in books’.

But practice has shown that nothing could be further from the truth! People who read or listen to powerful literature and then discuss it not only experience connection with others and a deepening of their own thoughts, but also come to see new possibilities in their lives and achieve a level of calm that allows them to make well-considered decisions. They integrate new insights into their thinking and learn to let go of the things they no longer need. By exchanging reactions and experiences with others they realise that their own perspective is not the only perspective and that other views on reality – and on their own life – are possible. The Shared Reading process, especially if it is regularly repeated in a series of reading sessions, opens the door to a whole range of unexpected sensations and emotions that can have a deeply healing effect on people, irrespective of whatever literary baggage they might carry.

# A cyclical dynamic of change in five phases

Shared Reading initiates a process of change in people that operates in accordance with a universal pattern. It is possible to observe the same dynamic in many aspects of our world: in nature, in our personal development as human beings, in companies and organisations, etc. This process is cyclical and takes place in different phases.

- 1 Every change begins with a **start phase**, in which people take the initiative and seek to make something happen. This is the phase of dynamism and action.
- 2 The energy of this initial burst of activity **grows** and expands, so that old habits and limiting patterns of thought are pushed aside. This growth creates more room for people's true thoughts and emotions, so that their thinking and feeling becomes freer and more flexible.
- 3 When the growth phase has passed its zenith, the moment has arrived for **harvesting**: people fully integrate the insights they have acquired during the growth phase into their being. This gives them new strength.
- 4 Deeper understanding and greater strength initiates a new phase of **learning**: through a process of slow and careful introspection people become able to distinguish which parts of their inner harvest they wish to retain and which parts they wish to let go.
- 5 By letting go of the things they no longer need, people are able to achieve a true sense of **ease**. This is the phase of calm, which allows people to glean even deeper insights. This relaxed process of reflection generates new reserves of inspiration and willpower, which makes it possible to start with new initiatives – and so the circle is completed and the cycle can begin again, but now at a higher level.



The five phases of change

In this book I will sketch how this dynamic unfolded in five phases in Shared Reading, with examples and testimonies from the field of health care.<sup>2</sup> In passing, I will also highlight the differences and similarities between the Shared Reading methodology and traditional forms of therapy and care. At the end of each chapter you will find a series of tips that will help you to initiate the process in your own work context, via reading groups or reading duos.

## The freedom to be, without labels or a medical file

Given my background as a doctor and psychiatrist, I was particularly interested in what Shared Reading might mean for the care sector. As it turned out, quite a lot! The procedure has now been applied successfully in a number of different care contexts: in residential homes for the elderly (both for the mentally healthy and for those who are in the early stages of dementia); special youth rehabilitation centres; psychiatric hospitals; centres for mental health care; recovery academies; care centres for people with a mental or physical limitation; ordinary hospitals.

Shared Reading sets in motion something that does people good. In a sector that is overflowing with procedures, structures and organisational and therapeutic objectives, it creates a free space for the patient or client; a place where all the clinical labels can be forgotten and where no one has the person's medical file in the back of their mind or assesses them in terms of progress, healing or recovery. In this space, there is only one thing that counts: the freedom to listen, the freedom to read along with the text and, if you so desire, the freedom to discuss its contents.

2 The names of the people in the examples and testimonies have been changed to protect their privacy.



Because even this latter aspect is by no means obligatory: if you just want to sit there and listen in silence, you are free to do so.

This freedom is like a breath of fresh air for the patient or client. He or she does not have to do anything, but has the option to actually do quite a bit, if that is what he or she wants. And that can generate unexpected but unmistakably healing effects. In short, Shared Reading often works better than pills and therapy. And that is the story that I would like to tell in the following five chapters.

## The first steps

Do you want to discover for yourself what Shared Reading can do for you, so that perhaps later you can apply its methodology in your field of work? You do? In that case, you are about to embark on a fascinating voyage of exploration. The best way to learn how to conduct a Shared Reading session as a reading companion is simply to jump in at the deep end and enjoy the unexpected effects you will undoubtedly experience!

Whoever wishes to know more about the finer points of being a reading companion can always seek guidance from Het Lezerscollectief. This organisation has wide ranging experience of the use of the Shared Reading methodology within the care context and understands the specific needs and questions of reading companions in the care sector.

The examples and testimonies in this book are all drawn from the experiences of trained Lezerscollectief reading companions. Together, they form a tight-knit learning network, whose members continue to meet regularly, even after they have completed their basic training, so that they can further refine their individual approaches and themselves benefit from the salutary effect of Shared Reading; benefits that they are then better able to pass on to their own reading groups.

More information about the work and the training courses organised by Het Lezerscollectief can be found at the back of the book.

As an alternative, it is also possible to first experience the power of Shared Reading by arranging an informal reading session for your family or friends (or by having them read aloud for you!), following which you can discuss what has been read. This will allow you to practice in a safe environment, in which you can practice and learn without the fear of making mistakes. In this way, you will soon sense what a discussion of a text involves and what kind of effect it can have. What types of questions stimulate a good dialogue? What kinds of things do you, as a listener, like to experience? Which kinds of approach do you find uncomfortable or even unpleasant? Having these personal experiences in the back of your mind serves as an ideal platform for later Shared Reading with your patients or clients.

Of course, there are one or two other crucial starting points for anyone who wants to become a good reading companion: a good store of empathy, love for literature, and the openness to allow yourself and your listeners to be surprised by the richness and the healing power for growth that sits hidden in stories and poems. Does this sound like you? Then what are we waiting for! Let's go!



This book was originally published as *Samen Lezen*.  
*De ultieme therapie*, LannooCampus, 2020.

D/2021/45/144 – ISBN 978 94 014 7664 5 – NUR 890, 770

COVER DESIGN Sarah Schrauwen  
INTERIOR DESIGN LetterLust | Stefaan Verboven  
EDITING OF ORIGINAL TEXT Mia Verstraete  
LITERARY EXTRACTS ENGLISH EDITION Dirk Terryn  
TRANSLATION Ian Connerty

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Vaartkom 41 bus 01.02	P.O. Box 23202
3000 Leuven	1100 DS Amsterdam
Belgium	Netherlands
<a href="http://www.lannoocampus.be">www.lannoocampus.be</a>	<a href="http://www.lannoocampus.nl">www.lannoocampus.nl</a>