

Narrative Healing: Unveiling Therapeutic Journeys in Nicholas Sparks' *The Notebook* and Jodi Picoult's *The Storyteller*

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Abstract

*In literature, storytelling has long been recognized as a powerful tool for healing and understanding. It allows individuals to process their experiences, connect with others, and find meaning in their lives. This concept is vividly illustrated in the works of Nicholas Sparks and Jodi Picoult, two contemporary authors who have masterfully employed storytelling to explore themes of love, memory, trauma, and redemption. Sparks' *The Notebook* (1996) and Picoult's *The Storyteller* (2014) are exemplary in this regard, each offering a unique perspective on how narratives can serve as a remedy for emotional and psychological distress. This paper aims to uncover the underlying mechanisms through which storytelling facilitates healing and to highlight the enduring significance of narratives in shaping our identities and relationships. It showcases the ways Sparks and Picoult not only tell compelling stories but also invite readers to reflect on the transformative power of sharing and preserving personal histories.*

Keywords: *Storytelling, Literature, Healing, Memory, Trauma*

INTRODUCTION

Storytelling has been a fundamental aspect of human culture, serving as a tool for healing, understanding, and connection. In literature, it often allows characters and readers alike to process experiences, find meaning, and forge connections. Nicholas Sparks and Jodi Picoult are two contemporary authors who have effectively employed storytelling to explore themes of love, memory, trauma, and redemption. Their novels, *The Notebook* and *The Storyteller*, respectively, exemplify the healing power of narratives. This paper examines these two works to uncover how storytelling smooths healing and highlights its significance in shaping identities and relationships.

Storytelling for Therapeutic Reminiscing in *The Notebook*

Storytelling possesses a remarkable healing power, impacting both patients and clinicians. Dr. Annie Brewster, an HMS (Harvard Medical School) assistant professor of medicine, discovered this firsthand after being diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. Realizing the lack of authentic patient stories, she founded the Health Story Collaborative to address this gap. In her book, "The Healing Power of Storytelling: Using Personal Narrative to Navigate Illness, Trauma, and Loss," co-authored with health reporter Rachel Zimmerman, Brewster emphasizes how storytelling can help patients integrate their diagnosis into their identity, strengthen patient-physician relationships, and ease the path to healing and thriving. Whether within therapy sessions or online support groups, sharing experiences through storytelling fosters connection and promotes healing. The unconscious exploration facilitated by storytelling allows individuals to process trauma, find meaning, and regain a sense of control (Brewster & Zimmerman, 2019).

Storytelling in general, and autobiographical narratives in particular, have grasped the interest of a number of AD (Alzheimer's disease) researchers as a discursive therapy, especially for their temporal and referential aspects. They mainly emphasize the ability of the person with AD to retrieve memories of certain events correctly, elaborating and connecting them into a story (Örülv & Hydén, 1998, p. 670).

Usita et al. considers that persons with AD do not tell about certain events that researchers together with spouses claim to be salient in their lives; thus, they are thought of as less competent tellers of their autobiographies. This approach tends to preclude other ways for persons with AD to use autobiographical

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narratives in order to sustain their identity. Aspects that have been neglected—and that we find essential—are how the story is told, what other communicative resources are used, and whether there are other ways of establishing a relation between the past and the present (Usita, Hyman, & Herman, 1998, p. 196). According to Kellett et al., involving family members in biography work has other additional benefits. One significant finding in their study is that it enables the family to turn their thoughts to their relative as a person who has lived, enjoyed accomplishments and has meaningful events in their lives. It allows the relative to “step out” of his/her everyday experience and see beyond Alzheimer’s ((Kellett et al., 2010, p. 1712).

The Repercussions of Alzheimer on Personal Life

The loss of memory is an important concern to the medical humanities. The important function of memories in shaping one’s personal experiences, relationships and sense of self makes their loss a devastating experience that causes changes in personality and behavior. Alzheimer’s disease (AD) patients have issues remembering events and persons from the past, as well as forming new memories of the present. Therefore, they undoubtedly need a caregiver, often a family member, for activities of daily living.

Alzheimer’s disease is a progressive neurologic disorder that results in memory loss, personality changes, global cognitive dysfunction, and functional impairments (Soto et al., 2009, p. 708). Age represents the most significant risk factor for developing this disease (Yaari & Corey-Bloom, 2007, p. 34). Its prevalence clearly increases after the age of 65 and doubles approximately every 5 years between the ages of 65 and 95 (34). Genetics is another important risk factor for acquiring it. Having a first-degree relative with Alzheimer’s disease increases one’s risk two to fourfold (Turner, 2006, p. 500).

In *the Notebook*, a novel by Nicholas Sparks, Noah Calhoun, Allie’s husband and lover, is her caregiver. He is a devoted faithful lover who struggles to help Allie remember and keep in touch with her family and environment. Noah continuously reads the notebook that Allie writes about her life. It tells about her life with Noah from the first time they met until they could live together.

Among the major difficulties that face AD patients is recalling new information and disorientation in time and place. It gradually affects the patient’s activities of daily living to the point that s/he requires full-time care and assistance (Alzheimer’s Society). Allie has dramatically forgotten everything about her husband and family; her whole life has been erased with all its events. Noah laments, “Alzheimer’s are almost completely lost. They wake up hallucinating and confused. They repeat themselves over and over” (Spark, 1996, p. 77). Desperately, he adds describing Allie’s status:

Allie, of course, has her own problems. She is terribly afraid in the mornings and cries inconsolably. She sees tiny people, like gnomes, I think, watching her, and she screams at them to get away. She bathes willingly but will not eat regularly. She is thin now, much too thin in my opinion, and on good days I do my best to fatten her up. (p. 77)

Obviously, it seems that not only does Alzheimer impact and change the patient’s life; it also drastically affects the lives of the whole family, especially that of the caregiver.

Noah’s Responsibility as a Caregiver

Living with diagnosis of AD entails suffering and results in poor quality of life. Caregivers voluntarily involve in this duty of caring for their loved one, with a certain amount of burden associated with such a demanding task. The caregiver burden has been defined as the physical, psychological, emotional, social, and financial problems that can be experienced by family members caring for impaired older adults (Schulz, Beach, Czaja, Martire, & Monin, 2020, P. 636).

Noah and Allie have grown old living together. Yet, Allie’s Alzheimer’s diagnosis has no power over their love. The novel portrays Noah’s care for his first love. He never turns away from Allie and keeps waiting for her until she is back to him again. As a caregiver, Noah devotes his entire livelihood to Allie and her illness, serving as her primary family caregiver. Despite his children’s pleadings that he should return home, Noah lives in the nursing. Even Allie’s nurse Janice testifies about Noah’s devotion and commitment; she says, “Noah, I’ve seen

hundreds of couples struggle with grief, but I've never seen anyone handle it like you do. No one around here has ever seen anything like it" (Spark, 1996, p.86).

Beyond Allie's Diary: The Notebook as a Reminiscence Therapy

In Sparks' *The Notebook*, Noah reads to a woman in his nursing home. He tells her about his love life after his return from the war. The story goes like this: Noah fell in love with a woman named Allie, but had not seen her in 14 years. Her mother has done everything to break off their relationship because of social class differences; Noah was from the working class while Allie was from a wealthy family.

While he is reading, Allie suddenly remembers Noah, "I say, 'I love you deeply and I hope you know that.' Of course, I do," she says. "I've always loved you, Noah." *Noah*, I hear again. The word echoes in my head. *Noah*. . . *Noah*. She knows, I think to myself, she knows who I am." Noah at that moment feels victorious and defeats the doctor's opinions, "And I, who could not accept the doctors' words, have triumphed again, at least for a moment" (Spark, 1996, p.79). Noah adds, "This is why Allie is considered a miracle, because sometimes, just sometimes, after I read to her, her condition isn't so bad. There is no explanation for this. 'It's impossible,' the doctors say, "she cannot have Alzheimer's." But she does. On most days and every morning there can be no doubt" (p.77).

Kontos argues that telling such stories is an act of accessing personal memories and organizing them into a narrative in order to sustain identity over time. Some researchers argue that in order to know who we are, we need to remember some central events that make up our lives and hence our identities. From this perspective, a profound challenge for persons with AD is the fact that their cognitive and linguistic problems affect their possibilities to tell such stories, and hence threaten their ability to sustain their identity (Kontos,2005, p. 556).

In much research on identity in Alzheimer's disease, remembering "facts" about oneself and events (marriage, having children, etc.) has conventionally been the center of interest. According to Schechtman, it is not necessarily those kinds of events and their circumstances that are of primary importance. Rather, it is the moral and significant points of the lived life that are more important, because they do not tell so much who you are as what you are. These moral points are often found in the performance of the narrative, and listener jointly underscore them. The part of the narrative that is of primary importance is here the evaluation or the point of the story (Schechtman, 1996, p. 53). Actually, the human brain is naturally attuned to stories, which activate multiple brain regions simultaneously, including those involved in language, sensory processing, and emotion. This polygonal engagement makes storytelling a potent tool for cognitive stimulation. By following the narrative arc, individuals with Alzheimer's can engage more fully with the material, making it a more effective method of communication compared to straightforward factual information.

Noah and Allie's relationship is not only that of a 'husband- wife'; they are best friends. Their love is so deep, pure and strong that even in the darkness of oblivion; it brightens their lives. In a letter for Noah, Allie writes:

I love you so deeply, so incredibly much, that I will find a way to come back to you despite my disease, I promise you that. And this is where the story comes in. When I am lost and lonely, read this story-just as you told it to the children-and know that in some way I will realize it's about us. And perhaps, just perhaps, we will find a way to be together again. (Spark,1996, p.88)

It seems as if she has predicted what she is going to undergo and she has found the way of being with her family within the story; she has written *The Notebook* from which Noah would read her.

She knows that Noah would suffer but would not give up; therefore, she apologizes, "Please don't be angry with me on days I do not remember you-we both know they will come." Then Allie ensures him, "Know that I will always love you, and no matter what happens, know that I have led the greatest life possible. My life with you." She reveals to Noah her deep feeling towards him, "Noah, wherever you are and whenever you read this, I love you. I love you deeply, my husband. You are, and always have been, my dream" (p.88). Noah devotedly reads Allie's diary and gives her all the care despite his health difficulties; he says, "When I finally reach her room my body is weak. My legs wobble, my eyes are blurred. I struggle with the knob and in the end,

it takes two hands and three truckloads of effort” (p.87). Finally, as they have lived together, they have gone away together:

I close my eyes and become a mighty ship in churning waters, strong and fearless, and she is my sails. I gently trace the outline of her cheek, then take her hand in mine. I kiss her lips, her cheeks, and listen as she takes a breath. She murmurs softly, “Oh, Noah ... I’ve missed you.” Another miracle-the greatest of all! -and there’s no way I can stop the tears as we begin to slip towards heaven itself. (p.88)

The next morning, a nurse finds them in bed together, having both died peacefully holding each other’s hands. The last scene shows a flock of birds flying away.

Trauma and the Dynamics of Narrated Power in *The Storyteller*

Trauma is an intense emotional response to distressing events that overwhelms an individual's coping abilities, arising from sources like natural disasters, violence, accidents, and war. It significantly impacts the mind, body, and spirit, disrupting a person's sense of security and leading to long-term psychological and physical effects. Understanding trauma is vital for fostering empathy and supporting survivors. When traumatized individuals are reminded of past events, their right brain responds as if the trauma is occurring in the present (van der Kolk, 2014, p. 61). Bessel van der Kolk explains in his book *The Body Keeps the Score* (2014) that psychologists have generally assumed that telling the trauma story in great detail will help people to leave it behind. That is also a basic premise of cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) (van der Kolk, 2014, p. 218).

The Physical and Emotional Scars of Trauma

Jodi Picoult highlights the importance of accepting one’s own scars, whether visible or hidden, as a part of the healing process. In *The Storyteller*, scars symbolize hidden narratives and trauma stories. Sage Singer, the protagonist, states that when you tell a story, you share something with someone else that changes them in some way, large or small. And in doing so, you change yourself. She claims, “The person may have a scar, but it also means they have a story” (Picoult, 2014, p. 28). Minka, Sage’s grandmother and Holocaust survivor, provides a powerful backdrop for the novel. Minka’s story is one of trauma, resilience, and healing. Through her narrative, Picoult explores themes of forgiveness, identity, and the impact of historical atrocities on future generations. She argues that "Everyone has scars. The only difference is that yours are on the outside and most peoples are on the inside" (Picoult, 2014, p. 309). Storytelling allows characters to confront their past traumas by verbalizing and sharing their experiences with others. This act of narrating their stories helps them to process their emotions and begin the healing journey.

In *Trauma and Recovery* (2015), Judith Lewis Herman examines the profound effects of trauma on the human psyche, exploring its origins from various sources, including domestic abuse, incest, and rape, which were largely unexplored before the 1970s. Herman’s insights reveal the lasting effects of trauma on survivors. She emphasizes that trauma disrupts the very fabric of a person’s life, affecting memory, identity, and relationships. Survivors often grapple with dissociation, flashbacks, and a sense of unreality. As Herman eloquently states: “Recovery can take place only within the context of relationships; it cannot occur in isolation” (Herman, 2015, p. 133). Through storytelling, characters gain a deeper understanding of each other’s pain and trauma, fostering empathy and compassion. This shared understanding helps to bridge gaps and create connections that are essential for emotional healing. Sage explains, “I pointed to the wound. 'It's missing,' I said. My grandmother smiled, and that was all it took for me to stop seeing the scar, and to recognize her again. 'Yes,' she said. 'But see how much of me is left?'" (Picoult, 2014, p. 342).

Narrative as a Path to Empathy and Understanding

Trauma survivors need supportive connections to heal. Isolation prolongs suffering, while compassionate relationships foster resilience. Herman also notes, “The most common response to atrocities is to banish them from consciousness” (Herman, 2015, p. 7). Society often denies or minimizes trauma, making it harder for survivors to seek help. Acknowledgment is essential for recovery. Furthermore, Herman explains, “The conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud is the central dialectic of

psychological trauma” (Herman, 2015, p. 1). Sharing one’s trauma narrative is a powerful step toward healing. It breaks the silence and validates survivors’ experiences.

In *The Storyteller*, Jodi Picoult demonstrates the healing power of narrating. Through the interconnected stories of Sage, Josef, and Minka, the novel reveals how sharing personal narratives can be a profound act of healing. It allows individuals to confront and process their trauma, seek forgiveness, and ultimately find redemption. In the novel, forgiveness is portrayed as a personal act of liberation, untethering us from the past. Storytelling becomes a tool for justice as Minka seeks acknowledgment of her suffering, ensuring perpetrators are not forgotten, while reclaiming power over her past and asserting her identity and agency. Sage's involvement in the stories of Minka and Josef leads to her transformation, evolving from grief and isolation to self-forgiveness and a new path in life. She asserts, “The only person who suffers, when you squirrel away all that hate, is you” (Picoult, 2014, p. 420).

On a broader scale, storytelling impacts the community by fostering collective understanding and empathy, influencing perceptions of morality and justice. Picoult writes, “Forgiving isn’t something you do for someone else. It’s something you do for yourself. It’s saying, ‘You’re not important enough to have a stranglehold on me.’ It’s saying, ‘You don’t get to trap me in the past. I am worthy of a future’” (Picoult, 2014, p. 42). As Sage processes the stories of those around her, she comes to realize the importance of creating a coherent narrative out of her fragmented past. This insight is crucial for her own journey of healing and self-acceptance. She advocates that “Fiction comes in all shapes and sizes. Secrets, lies, stories. We all tell them. Sometimes, because we hope to entertain. Sometimes, because we need to distract. And sometimes, because we have to” (Picoult, 2014, p. 427). Stories, actually, are the way one preserves the past and hands it down to the next generation. They are the threads that connect people to their history and to each other. Minka shares wisdom with Sage as she recounts her experiences during the Holocaust. By passing down her story, Minka ensures that the horrors and lessons of the past are not forgotten, fostering healing and understanding in the next generation.

Surviving through Rewriting One’s Narrative

Rewriting one’s narrative can provide clarity and a sense of control, which are essential for healing. The main characters, in *The Storyteller*, find healing by reinterpreting and rewriting their narratives. This process allows them to regain control over their stories and redefine their identities beyond their traumatic experiences. Sage narrates, “‘This is my story,’ my grandmother continues. ‘It’s not the one you’re looking for, about what happened during the war. That’s not nearly as important.’ She meets my gaze. ‘Because this story, it’s the one that kept me alive’” (Picoult, 2014, p. 121).

By giving voice to their stories, Picoult’s characters embark on a transformative journey that underscores the enduring power of storytelling in the human experience. The relationship between Sage and Minka is pivotal. Minka’s storytelling bridges the generational gap, imparting wisdom and resilience to her granddaughter. Sage’s struggle with her own grief and moral dilemmas is mitigated through the insights gained from Minka’s experiences. This intergenerational exchange highlights the transformative power of shared narratives, fostering understanding and emotional healing.

CONCLUSION

The Notebook and *The Storyteller* illustrate the profound impact of storytelling on emotional and psychological healing. Nicholas Sparks and Jodi Picoult, through their compelling narratives, demonstrate that sharing and preserving stories are crucial for personal growth and understanding. Despite their different genres and settings, both novels offer poignant reminders of the enduring power of storytelling in the human experience. Through detailed character dynamics, dual narratives, and rich thematic explorations, these works invite readers to recognize the transformative potential of storytelling in navigating life's challenges and preserving identities. Sparks’ *The Notebook* is one of the few novels that have discussed Alzheimer’s disease, depicting the struggle of a husband and lover to help his AD wife remember their love story. Through daily reading and devotion, Allie regains her memories for a while. Their story and love transcend medical treatments.

In *The Storyteller*, Jodi Picoult illustrates how storytelling and narration can be powerful tools for healing trauma. Through the act of sharing stories, characters confront their past, foster empathy, gain validation, rewrite their narratives, and connect with future generations. These processes are integral to their emotional and psychological healing. Minka, a Holocaust survivor, finds release and healing through narrating her traumatic past, confronting horrors, processing pain, and preserving the memory of those who perished. Her storytelling fosters a deeper connection and empathy across generations, particularly with her granddaughter, Sage, who initially hides behind her grief and guilt. Listening to Minka's story helps Sage understand her own pain, leading her to grapple with forgiveness and justice, ultimately finding solace and personal transformation.

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