

I Am the Book : the Bookwitch's Reading Potter

For positive, possible selves in the future, through books and fortune letters

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I am the Book is a book tipping service that provides fortune letters for 13-25 year olds. The young respondent answers the sentence I am... twenty times and then tells a story concerning themselves, staying anonymous. The bookwitch will, in an illustrated answer, mirror and strengthen the respondent by gently looking into their possible future. Research in Anorexia Nervosa and Possible Selves has shown that this group has more negative visions and needs help to fantasize. In the same way, I am the Book can come in as a piece of help also for other patients. The Swedish Arts Council is so far sponsoring the project.

Introduction to the service

I am the Book is a communicating book tipping service that also provides fortune letters. It is held by BUS-biblioteket, library of *The Queen Silvia Hospital for Children*, in Gothenburg, Sweden. The service is found, viewed and used in <http://www.bokcirklar.se> or in <http://epi.vgregion.se/sv/BUSKUL/Startsida-interna-delar/Bocker/Jag-ar-boken/> (Click on the arm chair, choose *läsa* and then click on *Jag är Boken* in the left list.) The service is globally accessible.

The target group is 13-25 year olds. Something will happen in *I am the Book*, between the respondent and the answering librarian, the bookwitch. An invisible meeting takes place. Both agents anonymously go into a playful contract that is magical and practical at the same time. For the respondent, the service concerns thinking about themselves, writing down thoughts, sending the text and receiving it back, thoroughly viewed by an unknown adult who is the bookwitch. (At the moment all bookwitches are females.)

The young respondent answers the sentence *I am...* twenty times and will thereby tell a story concerning themselves, using an alias. Anything can be the subject, it is completely chosen by the respondent. Everything is important and taken seriously at the receiving end. The bookwitch will, in an illustrated fortune letter, mirror and strengthen the respondent in several ways but always in a personal and adult style and voice.

The bookwitch also gives personal book tips. The titles are chosen to fit in with different components such as interests, mood or way of thinking. Intuition and association is used. The fortune letter will be an invisible bridge between the books recommended and the filled in formulary, often not even commenting on the chosen books at all. This is meant to create a special situation of curiosity within the respondent. "Is this me? Is this about me? Am I this book? I want to find out."

Theory

The bookwitch can sometimes gently look into the respondent's possible future, in a playful and positive way. Many respondents have a natural interest in who they might become later. This is a good starting point for the bookwitch. "Will I change in the future? Who can I turn into? Who can I be?" Future can mean the nearest ten minutes, later this week, next year or further away in time, when the respondent is older and free from their illness. Future is no guarantee, but to fantasize is a human right. A person's thoughts, dreams and wishes are as real as that person's actions and spoken words. We have several possible selves inside us. Some we act, some we think and some we dream. The bookwitch can help to create possible, positive images of oneself.

Possible Selves is a subject of psychological research. "Possible selves are conceptions of our selves in the future, including, at least to some degree, an experience of being an agent in a future situation." This definition belongs to Martin G. Erikson, University of Borås, Sweden.¹ He has studied patients with anorexia, focusing on terms of possible selves. "[T]he participants with anorexia differed from the control group both in content and evaluation of their possible selves. In particular, the negative expectations of the anorectic group were much more profound."² This shows that patients with anorexia need help to positively fantasize about their future. Hereby, *I am the Book* can come in as a help. The service can be interesting for individuals in any patient group as well as for respondents from outside the hospital walls. Young people benefit from positive thinking about who they can be later in life, in small details as well as in long terms. The filled in formulary and the fortune letter can be a part of that process. Evaluations on the service tell us that receiving the answer from the bookwitch often provides a good feeling to the young respondent. It is impossible to say if the evaluation formulary is filled in by a person from inside or outside the hospital. But what is nice for anyone is probably extra good for someone with a health problem.

Method

The formulary with twenty unfinished *I am...* is taken from the *Twenty Statements Test*, an American psychological test from the 1950s'. For the bookwitch, it is a question of being a close and open reader, a careful and intuitive answerer and writer as well as a skilled book tipper. She can use humour, intuition, experience, feelings, intellect, fantasy and seriousness. Her inner child will give guidance. The bookwitch will try to communicate in a straight way,

¹ "The meaning of the future: toward a more specific definition of possible selves"
Review of General Psychology, 2007. 11(4), 356.

² *Possible selves in women with anorexia nervosa*
Abstract on publication for conference.
Martin G Erikson et al, University of Lund, 2007
<http://www.lu.se/o.o.i.s?id=12588&postid=642256>
[2012-05-31]

using positive phrases without the words *but* and *not*. She will avoid the question *why*? That word contains a *because*, and can also carry a guilt. "Why did you do it?" She will also use the softer "It seems to me that..." instead of the harsh "You are..." Under all circumstances she will stay on the side of the young respondent, taking their perspective and try to understand them in a warm and empathic way. The fortune letter keeps the respondent in focus. The bookwitch will not try to fix a problem but she can maybe show some alternatives. "Are there other ways to look upon the things you are describing here?" Normalising, "you are not alone", as well as emphasising on the uniqueness of every individual, "you have something special", are important bricks. Free and independent thinking is encouraged. "You have your own style, and that is a very good thing. Trust yourself."

The organisation *Children's Rights in Society* (BRIS) partly provides with the basic method to answer in *I am the Book*. The bookwitch is a traditional mature, a present and an interested adult as well as a professional librarian. Aaron Antonovsky's *Sense of Coherence* (SoC) makes up an important foundation for the method, and so does *The Children's Convention of the United Nations* (FN:s Barnkonvention). SoC will possibly increase a little in the respondent when telling about oneself and receiving an answer. Words release energy. Writing contributes to a process of creating structure in life. The story can, after making a stopover in the hands of the bookwitch, take off and continue its flight and development, now with more fuel inside than before. The bookwitch creates good stories about the respondent. These can be kept within the respondent for a long time and are maybe a part of enhancing coping strategies for the individual.

I am the Book as an integrated partner of treatment and rehabilitation

The bookwitch is a device. She will mediate something important. The situation can be normalised. "Here, inside the hospital, are several young people like yourself with many different kinds of diseases, physical, psychiatric..." She will offer something that does not have to be accepted. And that refusal can, paradoxically, be a part of the process of a self determination that *I am the Book* works for. The right to reject is a moment in space that the bookwitch wants to give. It is the respondent's choice what is told and shared in the formulary. "You own your decisions. You don't need to be tidy and polite here. You can write exactly what you want, without need for achievement. You are anonymous and so am I. If we meet next week or later today we don't recognize each other."

"Someone has taken time for me, especially." That is, as such, affirming, and often mentioned in our evaluations. Everything that can strengthen a person from within will help build up a fence against illness and depression. *I am the Book* can be seen as an integrated partner of treatment and rehabilitation through the fact that the respondent here is active and not just a passive receiver. The respondent can, in the formulary, describe his or her special experiences and preferences. Something takes its just place in the world, a story that is new and important finds its form. In this process the motivation increases, which is recognized as an important component for cure.

The participation in *I am the Book* can create a hook-up through the fact that the respondent has started a chain by writing about themselves and sent it on for someone to read. An eagerness is forthcoming, to see what the answer will bring. Many respondents, after receiving the answer, write back with a confirmation that they are about to read the given

books as soon as possible. The reading itself then activates the brain and thereby the patient increases his or her chances to come back.

Certain matters can be important concerning the patient's book desires. The formulary contains traces and tracks that are for the bookwitch to find. The patient often wants to escape from a prisonlike situation. Books, music and films can help the inner self to some relief away from agony, pain, nausea - like a lifeline. To listen to something that creates a feeling of safeness can help the patient to sleep - and the mind gets a rest from the illness. The patient will maybe go into a regression, as being ill. They will maybe want to hear the same stories from when being younger. General age divisions in books can therefore be totally invalid in these cases. Foreseeability in a story can be extra critical in a positive way, and especially wished for. Different style of reading voices in talking books can be of certain weight. The patient can wish for a calm voice that simultaneously provide an excitement and thrill. Overdramatizing in a voice can be quite distressing. A restful book can still pass on activity for the reader. The brain will continue to search for stimulance, but in different forms depending on the reader's condition. The given books can normalise the extreme situation in being a patient in a hospital as well as the fortune letter can. "Other people have been through the same situation as you are in now." It can be a comfort to know the existence of that particular book even if the strength is not there to grab it just now. Books can be mirrors and followers in life. Books can open windows, give dynamic new thoughts and pictures to the reader that lie beyond agony, pain and fear.

Life is not *life as usual* for the seriously ill person. There can be a shadow hanging above. All this needs confirming, considering the fact that it has been said in the formulary. "Yes, you are ill." Endorsement is given, but no idealization is passed on. "This is totally unfair - but yes, you are ill." The bookwitch will not talk in terms of percentage of cureness for this or that particular diagnosis. She will not say "I hope..." unless it is hoping for the books to come in handy in some way. There might be an existential rumination in the formulary. "Why me? Do I have a bad karma?" Nothing is too difficult and too hard for the bookwitch to answer. But she is of course aware of and can direct to other professionals, such as psychologist, priest, nurse or doctor, so the respondent has the chance of getting the answers required. The bookwitch can be affected by what she reads, and she will say so, if appropriate. "Your formulary made me think/remember/wonder..." Thereby the respondent becomes a subject with power and a possibility to influence other people. "One word from me and another person had a long fantasy about what I meant by that word!"

Being ill is an adventure. It doesn't happen to everybody and it creates a special experience. A story is formed and can be told, with the young respondent as the total voice-over. This individual has specific circumstances around him or her that cannot be generalized to others with the same diagnosis. "You are unique and so is your personal narrative. You are the expert of your history. But you are not alone. This that has happened to you also come about other people at your age, all around the world. You are something more than an exception; you are also a part of a group."

Formulary example

Alias: *angelbird* Age: 15

- 1: I am... very ill.
- 2: I am... angry with everyone who comes in and says hello, how are you today?
- 3: I am... sad most of the time.
- 4: I am... /love the colour of purple lilac.
- 5: I am... not interested in small talk.
- 6: I am... sometimes wondering: why me?
- 7: I am... /want to get out of here.
- 8: I am... /want to be left alone.
- 9: I am... tired and in pain.
- 10: I am... longing for a special person to come and visit. I just want to see his face.
- 11: I am... /can't eat.
- 12: I am... thinking about something my father read to me when I was little, it was about two girls with names starting with the same letter.
- 13: I am... /the girls went mad and ate a lot of food, I loved hearing it, it was horribly good and disgusting at the same time.
- 14: I am... /don't know if I want to read, I don't have the strength to hold up a book but would like to listen.
- 15: I am... /think male voices are often the best, they sometimes make me more relaxed.
- 16: I am... sleepy, must try and rest now. My psychologist is coming at 3.
- 17: I am... longing for the sound of birds in the spring.
- 18: I am... talking to my grandmother inside my head, she tells me important things.
- 19: I am... /my grandmother has been dead since I was 10.
- 20: I am... afraid, not afraid.

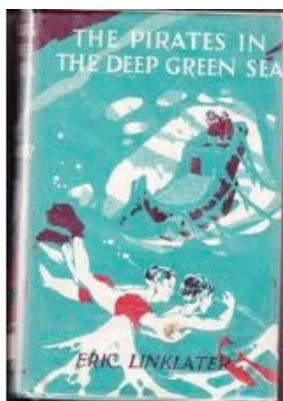
E-mail address: angelbird@hotmail.com

Fortune letter example:

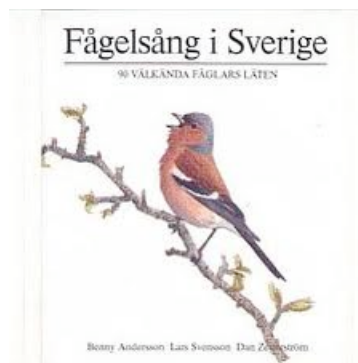
Hello angelbird!

From my window I see two kinds of purple lilac, one darker than the other. Which one do you prefer? Can you recall the smell? You write that you are seriously ill. That is indeed unfair and beyond all answers. I imagine you are in hospital, is that correct? No wonder you are sad, sometimes frightened and longing to go out. You have the right to decide who to be nice to of all the people, staff mostly I guess, that come into your room. It is for someone else to keep them in a good mood. You are entitled to your decisions. And you are the expert of your situation. The person in line 10, can you ask him to come and visit? Maybe he would feel chosen and flattered? How would you react if you were him? It is amazing how those who have helped us in life often continue to do so even after they are dead. The two novels below are available for listening if you want. Dina and Dorinda are in one of them. Is the cover the same as you had?

Book tips:



The Pirates in the Deep Green Sea
by Eric Linclater



Birds songs in Sweden
CD



The Wind on the Moon
by Eric Linclater

Page number 7 shows a fortune letter with illustrations made by *Foajé*. The bookwitch can choose between several different jugend motives, all with an animal and a milfoil or a plant. BabaJaga, the first bookwitch, will during the fall of 2012 get 10 new colleagues by the names of Artemis, Babalon, Belladonna, Circe, Dulcinea, Hypatia, Kraka, Lillit, Polgara and Wu. The service of *I am the Book* will hopefully grow in the future and continue to inspire young people to read, write and think their own thoughts.

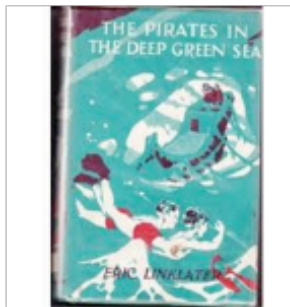


Jag är Boken

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Love from

BABA JAGA

your librarian

