

# “NERVES NORMAL, BREATHE NORMAL<sup>1</sup>.”

## READING FOR COMFORT

Sarah Wood

### What is a “comfort read”?

Chances are that you’ve heard the term “comfort read” used to describe a book. In essence, the term refers to a story that provides comfort to the reader, often an old favourite or a book from a particular genre. Wendell (2012) describes this breed of book as being “the reading equivalent of your favorite pajamas, the most fuzzy blanket, the familiar recipe, warm beverages, and everything that makes your body feel cared for...” (para. 2). The definition of comfort, of course, will differ from reader to reader.

I can recall exactly the scene in *A Wrinkle in Time* when Meg Murry goes toe-to-toe with her cold school principal, Mr. Jenkins. I felt as exasperated with Mr. Jenkins as Meg did... and I was years, miles, and a reality away from the scene. To this day, I cannot read that scene without grinning or giggling to myself. It perfectly sums up the strength and courage of Meg’s character, and comforts me in some small way.

### Start a discussion at your library or school:

- **What is your go-to “comfort read”?**
- **When do you find yourself reaching for it?**

### Characteristics

A cherished story can offer a means of escape for a reader on any day... but a cold, dreary, rainy day is the perfect excuse to indulge oneself. Once the time to read is carved out, a reader can select the book – but what are the characteristics of a comfort read?

In my experience, two features are common: the book will likely be familiar and engaging. A familiar writing style paired with

engaging character development, for example. Each reader will have a different idea of what makes a story engaging. These books need not be old favourites, though readers seeking this breed of book often turn to stories that satisfied these requirements in the past. Some “comfort readers” might focus on reading a particular genre – for example, cozy mysteries or classic romance.

Finally, some comfort readers have the dreaded misfortune of returning to a book at a moment, only to find that it no longer holds the same charm. Is this book a comfort read or not? The reality is this: there is no formula to predict what will be a comfort read for any one person, and people and tastes will change. Further, while some comfort reads stand the test of time, others offer a single afternoon of escapism. Comfort reads are as diverse as the readers who select them.

### **Positive associations**

Similar to the way that music can provide a link to personal memories, books can connect a reader to a favourite moment or period of time. A familiar story can vividly call back comforting memories and offers the reader an opportunity to re-visit a place, time, or event – fictional or not. Positive experiences – a family vacation or winter break, for example, can be relived as many times as the reader chooses.

Sometimes the positive association is with the feeling the reader experiences while reading the book. Comfort reads are sometimes known as “feel-good reads” and in these cases, when the weather is gloomy and grey, these books can be an uplifting resource.

### **Escapism**

Often cited as the reason for engaging in leisure or pleasure reading, escapism is the process of leaving the present behind through the use of imaginative literature. However, escapism can be viewed in a negative light. Gerrig states that historically “escapism was used as a derogatory term with the implied meaning of either being reluctant or unable to participate fully in the real world” (as cited in Usherwood and Toyne, 2002, p. 34). During times of great emotional or physical distress, Schutte and Malouff argue that escapism, and the emotion-altering power of reading, can prove to be an effective coping strategy (as cited in Begum, 2011, p. 742).

### **Stress relief**

A comfort read can also act as a soothing balm for minor stresses. Begum (2011) affirms that stress – both personal and professional – can often lead an individual to seek a means of reprieve and relaxation. Students are faced with serious pressures throughout the school year and this stress can evolve into much larger, long-term problems. If a student is pressed for time, how can he or she benefit from this positive side-effect?

While entire books can provide comfort to a reader, sometimes all it takes is a passage or two. Need a pep-talk from a beloved character? Crave a laugh with a favourite family? Desperate for a game of Quidditch in the backyard? (provided that *someone* gets hold of a better broomstick). If I am feeling sick or down, I often reach for my copy of L'Engle's classic. This "emotion-focused coping strategy" is applicable to situations on both a large and small-scale; the strategy allows individuals to take small breaks from the stresses and anxieties of their daily lives and return ready to continue with the necessary activities and responsibilities. These breaks can mean the difference between working effectively and burning out.

Whether the reader is actively seeking comfort or not, picking up a favourite story or genre can renew the lease on an old memory and offer a welcome break from the pressures of daily life. Encourage your students and teenage patrons to take a breather and re-visit a good book.

## References

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