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ANALYZING THE REPRESENTATION OF MENTAL HEALTH IN HEALING FICTION: A CASE STUDY OF *BOOK'S KITCHEN* NOVEL

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Abstract: This article explores the narrative of mental health within the realm of healing fiction, using Kim Jee Hye's novel *Book's Kitchen* as the primary focus of analysis. By concentrating on the characteristics of the 'healing fiction' genre, we connect the novel's narrative to the broader field of medical narratives and consider the potential benefits of this relationship. Through an in-depth analysis of the novel using narrative analysis method, we conclude that healing fiction, *Book's Kitchen* offers a form of therapeutic aid to its readers. It offers a self-reflection, and transformative tool to understand oneself mental health.

Keywords: Healing Fiction, Mental Health, Narrative Analysis, Self-Reflection, Therapeutic Aid

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, during the post-pandemic era, a popular literary genre known as healing fiction has emerged. This genre was pioneered by Korean and Japanese literature before gaining global popularity through translations into numerous languages. Healing

fiction typically revolves around ordinary people dealing with everyday issues such as grief, regret, trauma, heartache, and loneliness, set in mundane locations like coffee shops, libraries, convenience stores, laundromats, and bookstores. These stories commonly about ordinary individuals in ordinary places offer

readers a cozy, heartwarming, and self-care-oriented experience.

One of the most famous healing fiction novels, which also marked the beginning of the translation of similar works into English, is *When the Coffee Gets Cold* by Toshikazu Kawaguchi. The novel has sold over 6 million copies and has been translated into more than 29 languages. It tells the story of ordinary people grappling with loss and regret, yearning to change their past. Similarly, one of the Korean popular novel *Welcome to the Hyunam-Dong Bookshop* by Hwang Bo-reum follows a woman who rediscovers happiness and the meaning of life by starting a bookstore business. Many other works of healing fiction also follow a similar narrative formula, addressing themes of inner struggles, self-discovery, and the search for life's meaning—issues that resonate deeply with individuals in today's world. It is no wonder that healing fiction provides a cathartic climax for readers in this post-pandemic era.

Another novel in the healing fiction genre, which also serves as a case study in this research, is *Book's*

Kitchen. It employs such similar narrative structure, focusing on mental health issues experienced by its characters. The novel is episodic, centering on each character's emotional transformation. Translated and published by a major Indonesian publisher, Gramedia Pustaka Utama, *Book's Kitchen* has piqued the interest of the researcher to explore further the unique narrative it offers to Indonesian readers.

Healing fiction as a genre has its roots in Japanese and Korean literature, evolving as a response to the social dynamics in each country. In Japan, the genre first emerged in the 1990s as a reaction to two traumatic national events: an earthquake that killed tens of thousands and a sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway by the Aum Shinrikyo cult (Roquet, 2009). Meanwhile, in Korea (Kim, 2018) healing fiction gained traction in the 2000s as a response to various social issues collectively referred to as "Hell Choseon"—a period marked by significant social inequality, gender discrimination, irrational societal pressures on the younger generation,

and intense competition in education and the workplace. These conditions led to widespread anxiety, depression, and even suicide among Korean youth.

In the post-pandemic era, healing fiction has grown in global popularity as societies worldwide face similar social challenges. The global community experienced a shock in adapting to a new way of life, and mental health has become a central theme in contemporary discourses. World Health Organization (2022) has emphasized the importance of mental health programs, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic, which has had a profound impact on various age groups, from teenagers to adults. Amid increasing life demands and the accelerating pace of modern civilization, individuals are required to develop resilience that is not only physical but also mental. The COVID-19 pandemic became a test of human endurance, both physically and psychologically, further reinforcing the relevance of healing fiction as a form of reflection and support for global mental health.

Meanwhile, in medical narratives, fiction has long been recognized as a tool for healing. Research by Androutsopoulou (2001, p. 285) in her article *Fiction as an Aid to Therapy: A Narrative and Family Rationale for Practice* explores how fictional stories can inspire readers to understand their own emotions. Fiction aids in the emotional regulation of its readers. Looking further back, fiction served as a tool for Freud and Jung in developing their psychological theories, which later evolved into the framework of psychoanalytic literary theory (Hillman, 1983). Therefore, fiction and medical narratives are complementary in offering healing support to individuals dealing with mental health issues.

Building on such relationship, this research aims to examine how mental health narratives are portrayed in the novel *Book's Kitchen*. The study seeks to provide insights into the potential of healing fiction as a transformative tool for its readers. Specifically, it explores how the narrative of *Book's Kitchen* helps readers not only understand their own mental health but also gain a broader perspective on mental well-

being, enabling them to support those around them in their healing journey. Ultimately, the novel offers what fiction does best: a deeper understanding of oneself.

METHOD

To gain the best insights from the novel, this study employs a narrative analysis method, focusing on elements such as plot, theme, characterization, conflict, and symbolism. The reading process utilizes the close reading technique to uncover the narrative meanings embedded within the text.

In the novel *Book's Kitchen*, the narrative structure crafted by the author brings forth a discourse on mental health through the journeys of its characters. Mental health is portrayed through the stories of each character, divided into several episodes within the novel. There are at least six characters who represent how mental health is narrated in the story. Therefore, this study analyzes each character's story, connects it to the mental health discourse in the novel,

and correlates it with medical narratives from relevant literature.

The portrayal of mental health in the novel can serve as a tool for readers to reflect on their own mental well-being. This is particularly relevant in today's society, where many people face mental health issues but still lack a full understanding of what they are experiencing and how to respond to them. In this context, the novel can be an effective medium to deepen readers understanding of mental health and assist them in their healing process

RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS

Mental Health in in Book's Kitchen

Da-in's Anxiety and Identity Crisis

Da-in, a talented singer known by her stage name Diane, is celebrated for her exceptional vocal skills and her proficiency in broadcasting. However, her career does not begin smoothly. Da-in starts her journey with a small label and struggles to break into the Korean idol industry because her appearance is deemed not up to standard. Her fate changes dramatically when a famous idol group

covers one of her songs, drawing public attention.

Da-in's life takes a sudden turn. From being a small-label artist, she becomes a figure dubbed as "Korea's Sister." She receives an overwhelming number of opportunities, ranging from stage performances and talk show guest appearances to becoming an advertisement model. Her song tops the charts on various music platforms, and she gets numerous collaboration offers. Yet, beneath this success, Da-in is plagued by deep fear and anxiety.

Da-in is haunted by the fear that the praise she receives might one day turn into criticism and scorn. She fears that the people who love her now will leave or even come to hate her. To her, her popularity feels like a soap bubble, fragile and ready to burst at any moment.

"That night, as she lay on her bed, her heartbeat suddenly echoed in her ears. It pounded like the distant sound of a train, growing louder and louder until it felt as if the train was passing right beside her. Her breaths became shallow, as though

something in the darkness was slowly choking her. She could feel her breath weakening." (Jeehye, 2022, p. 21)

These negative thoughts gradually develop into excessive anxiety, sometimes leading to panic attacks. Da-in often experiences shortness of breath when imagining worst-case scenarios that have yet to occur. Ultimately, this anxiety brings her to an identity crisis. She begins questioning who she truly is and what she genuinely wants. She feels that the image she presents to the public is not her real self.

This identity crisis is further exacerbated by the loss of her beloved grandmother, who has been her safe haven. Losing her grandmother means losing her anchor—the person who sees her as she truly is and reminds her of her true self. In this phase, Da-in finds it increasingly difficult to manage her emotions.

One night, after experiencing a severe panic attack, Da-in impulsively decides to visit her hometown, Soyang-ri. This decision marks the beginning of her healing journey. Returning to

Soyang-ri becomes a way for her to reconnect with her identity, as it is the place where her dream of becoming a singer first begins.

There, her grandmother's house has been transformed into a bookstore and inn called *Book's Kitchen*. Despite its new purpose, the warmth of her grandmother's home remains intact. The owners of *Book's Kitchen* preserve this atmosphere, creating a safe haven for weary souls. Da-in finds more than she hopes for when she decides to return to Soyang-ri.

While in Soyang-ri, Da-in reminisces about her childhood and the peaceful times spent with her grandmother. She realizes that being a singer is her true dream, a dream her grandmother has always supported. She also comes to understand that she needs time to rest from the overwhelming demands of the entertainment industry, which drains her energy and emotions.

"At that moment, Da-in smiled faintly. It was a smile that resembled a sigh of relief." (Jeehye, 2022, p. 30)

At *Book's Kitchen*, Da-in begins processing her emotions, accepting her circumstances, and allowing herself time for reflection. She learns that understanding her feelings, embracing her fate, and granting herself a moment of rest are essential steps in overcoming anxiety and her identity crisis. The place offers Da-in a chance to reconnect with herself and rediscover her passion as a singer.

Thus, Da-in's journey in Soyang-ri becomes a symbol of healing and reconciliation with herself. *Book's Kitchen* provides her with a space to shed the dark shadows that weigh her down, while also rediscovering hope and purpose in her life.

Na-yun's Existential Crisis

As Na-yun approaches her 30s, she reflects on her younger self's expectations of who she would become. Looking at her current self, she realizes that her life is far from what she imagined in her 20s.

"When she was 20, she pictured her 30-year-old self as a confident, accomplished woman. Now, nearing 30, she isn't sure if

this is what she had envisioned.”
(Jee-hye, 2022, p. 35)

Entering her late 20s, Na-yun, an employee at an IT company, begins questioning her life. She wonders if her current job aligns with her true desires. Na-yun feels unmotivated by her repetitive tasks, which mostly involve following established procedures. By the time she turns 30, she dreams of living a different life—one that allows her to be a thriving career woman. She vaguely hoped to become a successful professional by the age of 30, envisioning herself as a “superwoman” in a silk blouse and black skirt, capable of solving any challenge. However, the reality IS far different. She remains the youngest employee in her office, performing menial tasks for the past four years. (Jee-hye, 2022, p. 58)

Na-yun confronts her existential crisis by reconnecting with her college friends. Reminiscing about their youthful days filled with passion and optimism helps her gain perspective. These moments remind her of the freedom they once had before being consumed by work responsibilities.

Ultimately, Na-yun realizes she doesn’t necessarily want a different career. What she truly needs is to reconnect with people who remind her of the vitality and joy of her younger days. She acknowledges that every job, whether as an employee or a professional, has its pros and cons. The key lies in regulating one’s emotions and finding meaning in what one does.

For Na-yun, *Soyang-ri Book’s Kitchen* becomes a place where she can explore her emotions. There, she learns to accept her sadness, exhaustion, frustration, loneliness, confusion, and fear. Previously, she had avoided these feelings, which only left her life feeling meaningless. However, by confronting her emotions—acknowledging and accepting them—Na-yun discovers that her feelings are not as chaotic as she had feared.

Na-yun’s existential crisis stems from her dissatisfaction with herself and her life choices, which in turn were rooted in her neglect of her emotions. Instead of facing her feelings, she used work as an escape. This approach, however, transformed her job—which

should have supported her life—into a burden.

The reflective space offered by *Book's Kitchen*, combined with the presence of her friends, enables Na-yun to embrace her life path with wisdom, either in her twenty-ish or thirty-ish. She comes to the conclusion that everything is fine; her existence and life choices are not mistakes. By adopting a mindset of accepting herself and her emotions, Na-yun finds a renewed sense of meaning in life.

So-hee's Emotional Suppression

"The world demanded that she wins the competition, demands that she is the best. The world expects her to excel and become someone unique with equally unique dreams." (Jee-hye, 2022, p. 90)

Born into an academic family and blessed with strong cognitive abilities, So-hee grows up as a child who consistently excels in academics. Over time, this unspoken expectation for excellence becomes a social rule that she internalizes. The world requires her to always showcase her

best self and never falter in the race to success.

Throughout her life, So-hee meticulously plans every step. She attends the best university, secures a promising job, and sets her sights on becoming a judge at a young age—the pinnacle of a legal career. In her relentless pursuit of this path, she never allows herself a break, sacrificing vacations and leisure for the sake of her ambitious plans.

However, life does not always unfold according to plan. Just as she nears the peak of her career, So-hee confronts a harsh reality: she is diagnosed with thyroid cancer. This chronic illness forces her to pause, abandon her relentless ambitions temporarily, and escape from the suffocating demands of society.

So-hee finds solace in *Soyang-ri Book's Kitchen*, a haven where she reconnects with the simple joys of her childhood—music and books. It is as though she rediscovers a part of herself that has been lost. She realizes that the life she lives since her childhood has been dictated by societal

expectations, leading her to neglect her true emotions and desires.

At *Book's Kitchen*, So-hee allows herself to open up. She re-enters the world she once cherishes, filled with writing and reading. Free from societal expectations, she embraces meaningful days, connects with genuine people who accept her without judgment, and shares her deepest emotions about her health struggles. She comes to understand that her health condition is not a signal to give up but an opportunity to live a more authentic life.

Since childhood, no one ever asks So-hee what kind of life she wants—not the adults around her and not even her adult self. Both the younger and older So-hee simply follow the path that life lays out for her. In doing so, she suppresses her emotions to focus solely on winning life's race. Instead of viewing her health condition as a misfortune, she chooses to accept it as a turning point—a chance to pursue a life of vibrancy, meaning, and true fulfillment.

Ma-ri's Ripley Syndrome

Family is often seen as a space for shaping one's true identity. However, for Ma-ri, her family suppresses her individuality, forcing her to construct a false identity to hide her wounds and sadness. Behind a mask of deception, Ma-ri seeks acceptance from her surroundings, ensuring no one glimpses her most shameful secrets.

Oddly, while she crafted a fictional world and built a home on carefully constructed stories, her real life appeared problem-free. After all, life was an intricate blend of truth and lies, wasn't it? A sweet, comfortable, and special world emerged amidst the fabrications. (Jee-hye, 2022, p.132)

Ma-ri's life takes a turn when she meets Ji-hun, a man vastly different from her. Ji-hun comes from a family she has always dreamed of, embodying a stability and warmth she lacks. Despite Ji-hun's love for her, Ma-ri feels unprepared for a future together. She realizes she must first find and heal herself.

At *Soyang-ri Book's Kitchen*, Ma-ri discovers a safe space where she can reveal her secrets without fear of judgment. A discussion on *Where the Crawdads Sing* becomes an anchor for Ma-ri, encouraging her to break free from the sea of lies she has created. Ji-hun's presence further strengthens her resolve to confront her falsehoods and rediscover her true self.

Ji-hun and *Book's Kitchen* provide Ma-ri with a secure and comforting environment where she can unburden her heart and start anew. It is here that Ma-ri begins her journey of healing. Diagnosed with Ripley Syndrome—a mental condition characterized by the fabrication of multiple identities to mask inner pain—Ma-ri is supported by Ji-hun, who accepts her as she is. However, her priority remains her recovery. She acknowledges that she cannot embark on a new life with Ji-hun until she fully heals from her condition.

Throughout her life, Ma-ri has been running away from her true self. Now, as an adult, she commits to embracing her authentic self and confronting the deep wounds caused

by her family. Ultimately, Ma-ri realizes that she only has herself and her steadfast determination to heal. With this realization, she resolves to leave behind her fabricated identity and walk the path toward self-acceptance and wholeness.

Su-hyeok's Prolonged Grief Disorder

The best way to confront grief and longing is through open communication. However, Su-hyeok chooses a different path—suppressing his emotions. This ultimately leaves him feeling empty and disconnected. Since his mother's passing, his family has struggled to function. His relationships with his younger sibling and father have grown distant, as they each cope with the loss by isolating themselves and immersing in personal routines. The harmony in their family vanished alongside his mother's death.

Su-hyeok found himself unable to control his emotions or make sense of what was happening. He could not understand why life had brought him to a dead end, why his peace and happiness seemed to have betrayed him

and slipped away. He lacked the strength or resolve to pinpoint where everything had gone wrong. (Jee-hye, 2022, p. 167)

Amidst this turmoil, Su-hyeok discovers *Soyang-ri Book's Kitchen*, a haven where he can release his sadness and share his grief. There, he meets Yu-jin, a compassionate listener who attentively hears his stories of longing for his late mother. In this space, Su-hyeok begins to reveal a side of himself he never knew existed—a version unbothered by how others perceive him.

By unburdening his heart through storytelling and finding someone who listens with sincerity, Su-hyeok learns to cope with his grief. This process enables him to rebuild his relationships with his younger sibling and father. Su-hyeok's journey serves as a poignant lesson in addressing unresolved grief and the mental toll it can take when left unspoken.

The Potential of Book's Kitchen Narrative as an Aid to Therapy

There are six types of mental health issues narrated in *Book's Kitchen*, each represented by its five

main characters. Every character embarks on a journey of healing, or at the very least, reaches a deeper understanding of their psychological struggles. *Book's Kitchen* serves not only as a setting but also as a symbol of healing for these characters. Their suffering begins to ease the moment they step into the bookstore and inn, where they find solace through interactions with others. Each character's story unfolds in separate episodes throughout the novel. The characters in the novel are introduced through a series of personal struggles that shape their lives.

First, Da-in is portrayed as a celebrated figure in the entertainment industry. However, beneath her fame, she harbors a deep fear that the love and admiration she receives from the public could one day turn into rejection—or even punishment. This anxiety weighs heavily on her, eventually leading to panic attacks. Second, Na-yun battles intense anxiety about aging. She feels as though she hasn't lived her twenties to the fullest and is haunted by the fear that her thirties will be just as unfulfilled. She longs for an alternate life—a different

job, a different path, a different version of herself. Third, So-hee struggles with emotional turmoil rooted in the immense pressure she faced since childhood. She was expected to always be the best—to stay ahead, to push herself beyond limits, to meet the highest standards set by others. She lived strictly according to societal expectations, never questioning the path laid out for her. But everything changed when she was diagnosed with cancer. Suddenly, her world collapsed, and she realized that she had never truly lived for herself. Her life had been dictated by others' expectations, not by her own desires. Fourth, Ma-ri suffers from severe mental health issues that require serious therapy, all stemming from the very people who were supposed to be her source of security—her own family. Instead of providing safety, they became the root of her suffering. She struggles with Ripley Syndrome, which prevents her from experiencing the joy of a sincere and loving relationship. To heal, Ma-ri must undergo intense therapy and fight to reclaim her sense of self. Lastly, Su-hyeok is trapped in prolonged grief

after his mother's death, compounded by a series of personal failures. He never openly expresses his sorrow, bottling it up until it corrodes his relationships—especially with his father. The pain of loss and unspoken longing leaves a void inside him. Life gradually loses meaning, and the once optimistic Su-hyeok transforms into someone apathetic, detached from the world around him.

At some point, each character comes to a realization about their mental health struggles. This reflects what Jung described as humanity's innate ability to heal—to seek help and find a path toward recovery. Just as they become aware that something is wrong within them, *Book's Kitchen* finds its way to them—whether through an internet search, a recommendation from a friend, or simply by chance. Drawn by the need for an escape, they take a step away from their world and into a new one—*Book's Kitchen*—a space for reflection, a sanctuary where their journey of healing begins.

Da-in returns to Soyang-ri, her grandmother's hometown—a place

where she once wove sweet memories while building her dream of becoming a singer. Book's Kitchen now stands in what was once her grandmother's house. Welcomed by warm-hearted people, Da-in rediscovers a sense of comfort, as if she were once again embraced by her beloved grandmother. Here, she allows herself to step away from the relentless noise of the entertainment industry, returning to the purest version of herself—the Da-in who simply loves to sing. Book's Kitchen becomes a space for her to reconnect with the essence of her dream, reminding her that choosing a life as a singer was something she truly wanted all along. It reassures her that she doesn't need to fear being hated or abandoned—because there will always be people who love her unconditionally, no matter what happens, including Book's Kitchen and the memories of her grandmother. Da-in simply needed time to pause—a break she had rarely given herself for years. Her story serves as a reminder that the dreams we once longed for can sometimes become our greatest fears. And when that moment comes, we owe it to

ourselves to take a step back. That pause can bring us the clarity we need—to see our dreams once again as a source of joy, just as they were on the day we first imagined them.

From Da-in's story, readers are then guided into Na-yun's journey of healing. She arrives at Book's Kitchen, brought there by her friends. For her, this place is not just a retreat—it becomes a reunion with her old college friends, the ones she once shared a vibrant and exciting youth with. Their gathering reminds Na-yun that she hasn't missed out on anything. She *did* live her twenties to the fullest—embracing student life, stepping into young adulthood, and experiencing it all as she should. Immersing herself in work as she approaches her thirties is simply another phase of life, not a sign of wasted time. At Book's Kitchen, Na-yun comes to a realization: amid the demands of work, she also needs the warmth of friendship, the joy of shared moments. She doesn't need a different life—she just needs to balance working hard with living fully. And whenever she feels exhausted by the weight of adulthood, Book's Kitchen will always be there—a place where the laughter

of her youth remains, waiting to welcome her back.

The exhausting journey of adulthood is something So-hee experiences as well. But unlike Na-yun, who realizes she has the freedom to live a different life, So-hee never even considered such a possibility. Since childhood, she had been set on a single path—studying hard, achieving top grades, building a well-planned career, and securing the highest position. Then, suddenly, an illness strips her of everything she had worked for. That's when So-hee finds Book's Kitchen. Here, she discovers an entirely new life—one that pulls her back to childhood, to the passions she had long abandoned. So-hee loved books. She loved reading and writing. And now, as an adult, she finds herself in a world that her younger self would have cherished. For the first time, she realizes that for over thirty years, she had not been living *her* life. She had been living the life dictated by others. Cancer becomes her turning point—a moment that forces her to reevaluate everything and recognize the life she had buried deep within herself in order

to meet others' expectations. Book's Kitchen opens a door to a different path—one she now chooses for herself.

While So-hee lost her sense of direction in life from an early age, Ma-ri lost *herself*. She suffers from Ripley Syndrome, a condition that compels her to live under different identities, masking the pain and trauma inflicted by her own family. Caught in this cycle of deception, Ma-ri can no longer distinguish between what is real and what is fabricated—even when it comes to love. But then, she arrives at Book's Kitchen. There, she unexpectedly reunites with an old friend—her *sweetheart*. And for the first time, she realizes that beyond all the falsehoods she has built around her life, there is someone who has loved her sincerely, all along. For the first time, and to this one person alone, Ma-ri dares to reveal her deepest secret. With the strength of that unconditional love, she makes a commitment—to begin her healing, to undergo therapy, and to finally be honest with herself and her feelings.

In a different way, deep loss is also experienced by Su-hyeok. He lost

his beloved mother. And in grieving her absence, he also lost himself. Because he kept everything bottled up—his sorrow, his longing—never expressing it, never sharing it. As if grief and longing were burdens meant to be carried alone. Su-hyeok drifted through his days, hollow and detached, distancing himself from his family. His empty journey eventually led him to *Book's Kitchen*—a place where he rediscovered the man he once was, the ever-optimistic Su-hyeok before life took away the woman he loved most. At *Book's Kitchen*, he found people who were open, willing to listen, and ready to receive his emotions. For the first time, Su-hyeok allowed himself to let go—to release the sadness, the fragility, and the emotions he had buried deep within. Here, he found himself again. Here, he found a home once more. And perhaps, he even found someone who could fill the empty space his mother had left behind. That sense of fulfillment allowed Su-hyeok to reconnect—with the world, with his family, and most importantly, with his father. Su-hyeok's story is a powerful reminder to his readers: express your emotions, especially grief and longing.

Because no matter how trivial it may seem, open communication is the foundation of every healthy relationship, either with oneself or others.

Through the healing journeys of the five characters in *Book's Kitchen*, readers can learn how to confront mental health challenges and explore different paths to healing. Beyond clinical therapy, literature itself can also play a significant role in addressing psychological struggles. Stories with mental health narratives can offer solace and guidance, much like the research conducted by Androusoyopoulou (2001), who used fiction to help patients better understand their emotions. In a world that grows increasingly exhausting and overwhelming, healing fiction serves as a space for reflection and inspiration—helping readers navigate their own emotions, make sense of their struggles, and embrace a healthier mindset in understanding both themselves and the world around them.

CONCLUSION

The representation of mental health in the healing fiction narrative of *Book's Kitchen* by Kim Jee-hye has the potential to serve as a therapeutic aid for its readers, or at the very least, help them gain a deeper understanding of their own psychological state. The characters' journeys—from their initial awareness of mental health struggles to their healing process—can serve as a transformative inspiration, guiding readers toward self-recovery or encouraging them to support others facing similar challenges.

This analysis seeks to further explore the practical function of literature in our lives. Literature, in its own way, plays a vital role in the continuity of human civilization, offering both comfort and emotional healing. Therefore, the researcher hopes that future studies will delve deeper into the novel's potential as a self-therapy tool, employing research designs that directly engage readers and provide real-life insights into their responses to the mental health narratives in *Book's Kitchen*.

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