

Sick-Day Banquet

When I was first asked to curate a day that celebrates the sanctuary nature of the library here at Bootle, I was immediately drawn to a central focus of what this particular sanctuary setting does so well; food. I first came to Bootle Library back in February of this year, where after a wonderful workshop morning filled with plants, propagation and winter fragrances, I was greeted with a bowl of dahl made by the libraries core volunteer group. It was served to me in a handmade pinch-pot ceramic with a saffron coloured glaze that matched the aromatic tea that accompanied the meal. I felt instantly at home; cared for and looked after in a way that put me at ease and made me relax into a savory slumber.

This experience is what lies at the heart of the Sick-Day Banquet. As someone with chronic illness, food is an essential source of happiness for me. When pleasure is in such short demand living amongst pain, discomfort, uncertainty and stress, the food we eat and the way we experience it can be profoundly transformative in supporting our mental wellbeing. This experience is particularly significant for those of us living under such demands, a practice that goes far beyond comfort food. There is ritual to be found here; those boiled sweets we reach for stored plentifully in dressing-gown pockets when our mouths turn to syrup and nausea sets in; the kindness that is distilled into cups of tea and fermented in cheese on toast, cut into soldiers with dollops of Branston pickle, made by those who care for us. Nostalgia plays its part in these moments too, spotlighting tastes and textures that tap into such tender memories of pleasure, transporting us through time to softer, gentler places in every mouthful. And those of us who are lucky enough to have that care filtered through love, these acts of support become such expansive moments of joy that cannot be quantified like the hourly doses of pain management, and clinical, medicated maintenance. To have food prepared for you undoubtedly changes the experience of it, but to place that experience within the disabled and chronic illness context illuminates it, making it shine in ways that brighten up our darkest days.

There is an unfortunate privilege to these experiences in how we encounter them both in frequency and quality. Not all of us are so fortunate to have this very basic need fulfilled, and the ever-politicized nature of food and who gets to eat it, only further perpetuates this tragic lack of support. Lets face it, you don't have to be sick to know the power of what a cooked meal can provide in more than just sustenance alone. The Sick-Day Banquet is a chance to highlight the importance of what these meals do for us and why they are so essential to our wellbeing. Designed by disabled artists, this series of free lunchtime meals will represent their ideal sick-day foods. The meals will focus on comforting, simple, accessible and soul-warming foods that celebrate and prioritise joy. Cooked and prepared by the real stars of the show, the Bootle Library Volunteer Group, the banquet will be an opportunity to create meals that bring pleasure when we need it most, and offer library-goers an experience of foods that acts as important components of day-to-day mental health nourishment.