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The “Fit for Life” Literary Award – Writing as an Addiction to Life. A Qualitative Study on Literary Creation in the Context of Substance Use Disorders

Birgitta Schiller ^a, Kurt Neuhold^b, Harald David^c, and Kathrin Mörtl ^d

^aInstitute for Qualitative Psychotherapy Research, Faculty of Psychotherapy Sciences, Sigmund Freud Private University Vienna, Vienna, Austria; ^bDer Grüne Kreis, Art in the Green Circle (Kunst im Grünen Kreis), Vienna, Austria; ^cFaculty of Psychotherapy Sciences, Sigmund Freud Private University Vienna, Vienna, Austria; ^dInstitute for Psychoanalytic and Psychodynamic Research, Faculty of Psychotherapy Sciences, Sigmund Freud Private University Vienna, Vienna, Austria

ABSTRACT

The “Fit for Life” literary competition focuses on literary creation, specifically designed for individuals with substance use disorders who seek counseling, support, or therapy. The competition invites participants to submit their own texts, whether in the form of short stories or poems. Often, autobiographical material takes center stage, providing insights into the world of drug use and addiction, with all its facets and challenges. The submitted texts are unique and profound, and each year the best works are showcased in a ranking of the winners. This study was initiated in collaboration with the “Fit for Life” association and the Institute for Qualitative Psychotherapy Research at the Sigmund Freud University Vienna to explore the artistic expression and significance of literature for the writers. Eight authors share their experiences with the early developed urge to write and emphasize the importance of creating high-quality literature. Grounded Theory methodology was used for the analysis. The results show that the willingness to disclose creates a distance from the experienced traumatic events, while simultaneously fostering a closeness to oneself and others. Writing thus becomes a tool to overcome an inner struggle and for self-discovery.

KEYWORDS



Literature; autobiographical writing; art therapy; addiction; qualitative research; psychotherapy research

Introduction

Literary writing can exert a profound influence on human experience. In the context of substance use and recovery, it often mirrors key dynamics of addiction: obsession, repetition, immersion, and transformation (Goodwin, 1995; Klepuszewski, 2018; Rost, 2010). Writers throughout history have explored substance use in their work, drawing on personal pain while challenging cultural taboos and stigma (Djos, 2023; Forseth et al., 1990; Horstmann, 2005; Lowe et al., 2013; Warner, 2012).

This study reverses the usual direction of inquiry. Rather than examining the influence of alcohol on literature, it explores how literary creation affects individuals with a history of substance use disorder. While both addiction and writing can exert an almost compulsive pull, the consequences are radically different (Rost, 2010). Substance use leads to loss of control and often to physical and psychological decline. Literary writing, in contrast, is a demanding but potentially healing process, requiring effort, self-confrontation, and perseverance. The satisfaction it offers derives not from immediate gratification, but from the delayed reward of creative flow, completed work, and recognition (Deveney & Lawson, 2022; Ehrenzweig, 2015; Gansel, 2021; Konzelmann, 2021; Thatcher, 2023).

From a psychodynamic and relational perspective, writing can be understood as a form of self-encounter and self-regulation (Rost, 2010; Winnicott, 2015). It may offer containment (Winnicott, 2006) and mirroring (Kohut, 2021) where these were absent in early life (Jaeger, 2023; Tiedemann, 2010). The act of writing creates an inner dialogue between the writing and reading self, and between past and present identities (Bolton, 2011; Coetzee & Kurtz, 2016; Hof & Sonntag, 2020; Lehnen, 2021; Nelva, 2021). These dynamics

CONTACT Birgitta Schiller  birgitta.schiller@sfu.ac.at  Institute for Qualitative Psychotherapy Research, Faculty of Psychotherapy Sciences, Sigmund Freud Private University Vienna, Freudplatz 1 (4002), 1020 Vienna, Austria

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are particularly relevant in recovery, where identity reconstruction, emotional regulation, and relational repair are essential therapeutic goals (Heimes, 2012; Kreuter et al., 2022; Marxen, 2011; McArdle & Byrt, 2001; Schmanke, 2017).

Creative writing has increasingly gained attention in psychotherapeutic research. Numerous studies report its positive effects on mental health and addiction recovery, including enhanced emotional expression, trauma processing, and psychological resilience (Algristian, 2019; Baikie et al., 2006; Esterling et al., 1999; Glass et al., 2019; Mundy et al., 2022; Pennebaker, 1999; Pizarro, 2004; Tarp et al., 2020). At the same time, writing about emotionally charged experiences can trigger vulnerability, lowered self-esteem, shame or retraumatization, particularly in individuals unaccustomed to writing or lacking appropriate support (Hellum et al., 2017; Marlo & Wagner, 1999; Rodriguez et al., 2015, Rodriguez et al., 2016).

While most studies focus on structured therapeutic interventions, such as expressive writing programs (Algristian, 2019; Forster et al., 2023; Kreuter, 2025), recent research suggest that creative writing may also serve as a meaningful adjunct in addiction counseling (Tarp et al., 2020). For example, Hellum, Jensen, and Søgaaard Nielsen (2017) found that creative writing workshops enhanced participants' self-confidence, group cohesion, and their relationships with care providers.

This study diverges from such therapeutic frameworks in a key way: it examines individuals who voluntarily submitted literary texts to a national writing competition designed for people with lived experience of addiction. These texts – often deeply autobiographical – were not written as part of a treatment program but emerged from the participants' own literary aspirations. The competition was initiated by an addiction-focused organization with the explicit aim of destigmatizing substance use disorders and celebrating literary expression. One of its unique features is that all submissions must be published under the writers' real names. This personal exposure, combined with public recognition, is framed by the participants as both empowering and transformative.

The competition creates a unique cultural space: one where people from diverse social backgrounds can connect through literature, and where the focus shifts from illness to artistic agency. It offers a safe framework for autobiographical narratives to be shared not as case histories, but as works of art. By acknowledging the quality of the writing rather than solely its content, the initiative contributes to both destigmatization and recovery.

From a research perspective, little is known about the subjective meaning of voluntary literary writing outside of clinical settings. Most existing studies examine therapist-led interventions. This study addresses that gap by adopting a qualitative approach grounded in constructivist epistemology. Its aim is not to assess efficacy, but to understand how individuals make meaning through the process of writing, and how they experience literary creation in relation to their substance use histories.

Our findings contribute to the growing recognition of writing not only as a potential psychotherapeutic tool, but also as a cultural and relational practice that can support long-term recovery. While structured interventions remain important Baikie et al. (2006); Heimes (2012); Hellum et al. (2017); Kerner and Fitzpatrick (2007); Megranaahan and Lynskey (2018); Mundy et al. (2022); Tarp et al. (2020); Thatcher (2023), the creation of voluntary, low-threshold spaces – such as literary awards – may offer an additional resource for those navigating recovery. Supporting and studying such initiatives is essential to understand the broader spectrum of healing practices that extend beyond the clinical encounter.

This article therefore asks how individuals with a history of substance use experience voluntary literary writing and what personal, emotional, and relational functions this act may serve. By examining the meanings attributed to creative expression outside formal therapeutic settings, the study seeks to broaden our understanding of recovery-oriented practices and the role of creative expression within them.

Materials and methods

Study context: the “Fit for Life” literary award

Since 2017, the “Fit for Life” Literary Award has been granted annually to individuals who have undergone care, therapy, or rehabilitation due to substance use disorder.

The competition invites literary submissions – including poems, short stories, and autobiographical prose – that often reflect personal experiences with addiction, particularly alcohol dependence. Over the

years, most contributions have drawn upon autobiographical material and explore the complex emotional terrain of addiction and recovery.

Unlike traditional therapeutic settings, the competition does not focus on pathology or diagnosis, but instead emphasizes the literary quality of the texts. The top four winners receive a monetary prize, and the top ten entries were published annually on the association's website until June 2025. The award ceremony offers a platform for public recognition and dialogue, fostering exchange between authors, practitioners, and a general audience. The initiative was founded by Dr. Harald David in collaboration with the director of the Green Circle Association (Der Grüne Kreis) in Vienna, Alfred Rohrhofer, and is organized by Kurt Neuhold, a cultural manager in the fields of art and social development.

In 2023, a printed volume featuring winning texts was published with the support of the Anton Proksch Institute. The overarching aim of the award is to destigmatize addiction and create a public literary space that foregrounds the dignity and creative potential of individuals with lived experience of substance use.

In a society where alcohol use is often normalized or trivialized (David & Kubin, 2009; Uhl & Gruber, 2004), this platform offers an accessible and culturally resonant way for the public to engage with the realities of addiction. The high literary quality of the winning texts contributes to their wide readership, making them relevant not only to those with lived experience but also to family members, practitioners, and literature enthusiasts.

Research objective

The aim of this study was to explore how individuals who voluntarily participate in the literary award experience the act of writing and the potential impact of literary creation in the context of their substance use history. Although participation in the award was not embedded in a therapeutic framework, and writing was not offered as a therapeutic intervention, the study is situated within the field of psychotherapy science. It investigates the experiential meaning of creative writing beyond clinical contexts, focusing on self-initiated practices that may hold therapeutic relevance.

In contrast to structured expressive writing interventions, this study examines a literary process that is both autonomous and motivated by personal narrative agency. The interviews were conducted by a registered psychotherapist (BS) with expertise in individual psychology in the tradition of Alfred Adler and trauma. Participants were informed that they could end the interview at any time and withdraw from the study without consequences. Contact details for the interviewer were provided for follow-up or crisis support, should any issues arise.

Ethics and confidentiality

This study was conducted in accordance with established ethical standards and received formal approval from the Ethics Board of Sigmund Freud University on July 21, 2020. The ethics proposal is linked to the university's digital international signature: MBRPHQDLAQOGPC88066. All participants provided written informed consent for their contributions to be included in this research. To protect participants' identities, all data were processed and presented in a pseudonymized format.

Research design and sample

This qualitative study employed a semi-structured interview design (Froschauer & Luegner, 2020; Schütze, 1983) and was conducted between July 2020 and March 2021. All winners of the top ten texts from 2017 to 2019 were contacted by e-mail ($N = 30$). Eight individuals agreed to participate, resulting in a response rate of 26.7%. The final sample included four women and four men; no other gender identities were reported. The average age was 50.25 years ($SD = 11.76$). Given the exploratory nature of the study, a convenience sample was used (Conlon et al., 2020; Ligita et al., 2019).

Participants' current status regarding abstinence or treatment was not a selection criterion and varied considerably: some had been abstinent for many years, while others were in active recovery or therapeutic processes at the time of the study. The interviews, totaling approximately 9.5 hours of

recorded material, were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. To preserve confidentiality, and given that the winning texts were published under the authors' real names, further biographical details have been withheld.

Data analysis

The analysis followed the methodology of Grounded Theory Charmaz and Thornberg (2021); Glaser and Strauss (2017), with the aim of generating an initial theoretical understanding of the phenomenon. Grounded Theory was chosen to explore meaning-making processes inductively, building on previous research into creative practices as recovery resources (Dourdouma & Mörtl, 2013; Rennie, 2000). As an exploratory first study, no theoretical sampling was conducted (Conlon et al., 2020). Future research may expand upon these findings by including interviews with organizers, readers, or individuals in related support roles.

An open coding process was applied using MAXQDA (VERBI Software, 2022). In total, 1,521 first-level codes were identified, reflecting the fine-grained nature of early-stage analysis.

These initial codes were developed in a cyclical process including memo-writing, and captured single ideas, metaphors, emotional expressions, and narrative shifts within the interview data. Coding was conducted iteratively and in constant comparison with new material, accompanied by memo-writing and ongoing analytic reflection. The evolving code system was regularly reviewed in group discussions among the authors and in analytic workshops at the Institute for Qualitative Psychotherapy Research. These dialogs supported the identification of recurring patterns and connections across interviews.

In a second phase, codes with thematic overlaps were compared, clustered, and condensed into broader second-level codes. This process was guided by the principles of axial and selective coding, focusing on linkages between individual experience, narrative form, and relational meaning.

The second-level codes were then grouped into nine thematic code families:

- Trauma and lost relationships – difficult life experiences
- Remembering the good – identifying with writing as a lifeline
- Writing as a bridge to relationship building – voice to the world and its reflection
- 'Fit for Life' as a space for dialogue and recognition in the present
- Creative work as the restoration of individual life movement
- Therapy as support for one's own path
- Individual functions and effects of writing
- Writing as an addiction and the ambivalence of passion
- The relationship between bio-fiction and the courage to show oneself

Through this process of collaborative analysis and thematic condensation, a core category gradually emerged. It captures the central integrative function of writing across all cases:

Writing as a self-empowering process of identity formation, in which integrated experiences of previously ambivalent relationship aspects are established and disappointing as well as painful experiences become bearable.

Triangulation and validation

To enhance interpretive depth and analytical rigor, a deep-structure hermeneutic approach (Buchholz, 2019; König et al., 2020; Lorenzer, 2006) was applied to selected literary texts produced by the participants. In moderated group sessions, unconscious and latent themes were explored through scene-based understanding and symbolic interpretation (König et al., 2018). While detailed findings are not presented here, in order to preserve anonymity, the hermeneutic perspective served as a valuable triangulation (Flick, 2020) of the interview data.

Analytic validation was further supported through regular research meetings involving the authors and colleagues at the Institute for Qualitative Psychotherapy Research (Flick, 2022; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Morrow, 2005). These intersubjective discussions enabled critical reflection

on emerging codes, themes, and theoretical constructs. This collaborative approach strengthened the credibility and transparency of the analysis, in line with current standards of qualitative research.

Focus of this article

This article presents selected findings from the study, focusing specifically on two of the nine second-level code families:

- (1) Writing as an Addiction and the Ambivalence of Passion
- (2) The Relationship between Bio-Fiction and the Courage to Show Oneself

These two themes were selected for their particular relevance to the intersection of autobiographical writing, identity construction, and the public visibility of addiction-related experiences. They illustrate how literary creation can act as both a personal process of transformation and a relational resource in the broader landscape of recovery, recognition, and resilience.

By examining these dimensions in depth, this article seeks to contribute to a nuanced understanding of how literary writing – beyond therapeutic settings – can serve individuals in recovery as a medium of self-exploration, meaning-making, and connection.

Results

As mentioned, this article focuses on the act of writing itself and the processing of autobiographical material through literature. Two thematic areas are discussed in detail: “*Writing as an Addiction and the Ambivalence of Passion*” and “*The Relationship between Bio-Fiction and the Courage to Show Oneself*.”

Writing as an addiction and the Ambivalence of Passion

The act of writing and substance addiction share striking structural parallels. Both can involve an overwhelming, all-consuming drive. The key distinction lies in their outcomes: while addiction often leads to deterioration and loss of control, writing leads to creation, agency, and self-exploration. The ambivalence of both practices reflects an inner struggle – addiction as a battle against fear, depression, and emptiness; writing as a fight for coherence, identity, and meaning. Several participants described how writing provided a form of substitution during withdrawal phases, as the underlying mental processes – obsession, repetition, emotional intensity – mirrored the addictive cycle, albeit without harmful consequences. Rather than a pathological dependence, writing was described as an urge or obsessive pull. Participants reported being mentally preoccupied with writing even when not actively engaged in it. Ideas might emerge while riding the tram or walking, prompting a spontaneous need to jot them down. Conversely, sitting in front of a blank page could provoke inner turmoil and frustration.

Some interviewees described episodes of intense inspiration, resulting in trance-like writing sessions – only to feel disappointment upon re-reading the work the next day, in a way that metaphorically resembles the emotional crash after a high.

As long as it's in the process of creation, it drives me crazy. I don't know if you know this, but when you're working intensely on a text, sometimes the simplest words don't come to you. It's maddening. You know the word, it's sitting somewhere in your mind, but you can't reach it. So, I use my phone or grab a dictionary, and then I get into a flow. It drives me nuts, and I know I have to keep going, keep going. I have to calm my mind somehow, or I won't find the right word. It's such a, such a tug-of-war. On one hand, I want to be calm, but on the other hand, I'm agitated. And I know that when the text is finished and I'm satisfied with it, I'll feel good. And @@@ that's why I have to get into this state. (Interview 1)

Then there's this thrill, how do I phrase it. Then I lose it, and I don't know. And. . . boom, at half-past three in the morning, my brain wakes me up – really. And presents me with the solution right away. This is how I'll write it. I've gotten up at half-past three in the morning, made myself a coffee, and written until six in the morning. And then I went back to sleep. (Interview 6)

The painstaking process of writing – revising, deleting, rewriting – was experienced as both tormenting and deeply rewarding. For some, it stretched over decades. Capturing the emotional truth of a scene without becoming overly verbose was a delicate balance.

Writers navigated the tension between grandiosity and self-doubt, between the desire to tell their story and the fear it may not be good enough. This effort required not only creativity, but also perseverance, restraint, and resilience.

Unlike substance use, which is often driven by the pursuit of a quick fix and inner calm, writing demanded effortful engagement with discomfort. Yet despite the psychological toll, all participants emphasized that they could not imagine living without writing.

I always wanted to be a writer as a teenager. Of course, that didn't happen. But since about the age of 20, I've been writing something now and then. Destroying it, starting over, correcting it. That went on for about 30 years. Always throwing it away because it wasn't good enough or something. (Interview 7)

Of course, I always have this. . . this perfectionism in my writing. Yes, it could be more, I don't have enough talent. Is this even, isn't it childish what I'm doing, that I'm immersing myself in this topic; as an amateur writer claiming something for myself that I might not be good enough at. But I let that go immediately, that's absolutely important. (Interview 8)

Live not to, but for a why. I now have a why, one is writing [. . .]. The talent comes from my mother. She read to me. Not like a teacher forcefully, but in a way that it transferred to me. That's why I also have fantasy images and so – always outside in nature, that's my second pillar, a resource somehow. (Interview 3)

For all participants, writing was not a mere hobby – it was a deeply embedded part of their identity, as vital as eating, sleeping, or breathing.

Interestingly, when asked what helped them most, many first named other resources such as nature, music, animals, or relationships. Writing, however, was the constant: a lifelong companion that underpinned their recovery journeys and had been present long before they sought therapy or joined support groups.

In contrast to the self-destructive nature of substance use, writing generated enrichment. It led to recognition, meaning-making, and connection. The act of publishing – and the reception of their texts by others – became a powerful validation of the self. Even though publication could be emotionally taxing, participants found that external feedback from readers and audiences helped strengthen their sense of identity and belonging.

While the road to publication was often paved with rejection, frustration, and anxiety about visibility, none of the writers gave up. They continued to write, revise, and submit their work – an ongoing cycle of creative commitment.

The relationship between bio-fiction and the courage to show oneself

All submitted texts in the literary competition draw on autobiographical episodes or personal experiences related to addiction.

However, these works are not mere confessional narratives. Rather, they are literary creations that incorporate and reframe autobiographical content through artistic form. This distinction is crucial: while the impulse to express one's lived experience remains strong, the authors aspire to more than testimony – they aim for literature. Once released into the public realm, the text becomes a self-contained artwork, separated from the author's personhood and open to interpretation.

What many say jokingly “*You could write a book about that*” has here become a lived and intentional practice. The motivations expressed by the interviewees include communication, reflection, testimony, closure, recognition, and self-affirmation. Writing about oneself, in this context, is experienced as therapeutic and potentially transformative.

There are many personal accounts, but very little literary work [. . .]. This book is well presented and solved in a literary way, that was important to me too. So it's about the literary aspect. [. . .] When I write a personal account, I want to tell a story as it happened, and when I write a novel, I want to find a literary form for something that might have happened. But I want. . . it's about the form. Yes, that's the difference. (Interview 2)

It wasn't writing for myself, or to process something, but to create something valuable, something of quality. Ultimately, yes exactly. (Interview 8)

Writing functions as a mirror of the self. When read by others, it can generate validation and recognition. Even if fictionalized, the emotional terrain remains recognizable. Their texts resonate with a depth and authenticity that likely stems from firsthand experience. Stylistic choices – such as minimal punctuation, lowercase writing, or unfiltered narrative tone – contribute to a heightened emotional immediacy. While one usually distinguishes between manifest content and latent meaning in literary texts, these writings blur the boundary: what is latent is often made explicit.

So I'm happy if it gets published, I have no problem with it at all. Even if it's a tough text [...]. So I have no inhibitions anymore about saying what might not be suitable for the garden party. (Interview 1)

For some people, what I write is very brutal somewhere. But I need that brutality in writing, so I don't have it in life. (Interview 2)

They say, keep going. It's liberating. I have the courage to not sugarcoat anything anymore. Yes, not portray it as bad as it really was. Just a little bit. And I don't sugarcoat anything anymore. It was the way it was. (Interview 6)

This kind of radical honesty is only tolerable – and even possible – within the imaginative framework of literature. Deep-structure hermeneutic readings of the texts reveal symbolic patterns in the narration of trauma, addiction, and relational wounds. Substance use often appears as a substitute for failed relationships or as a means of coping with overwhelming emotions such as grief, anger, or loneliness. The stories also speak of love – love that was unreachable or had to be relinquished for the sake of autonomy. Where direct communication failed, writing emerged as an indirect yet potent mode of connection.

The process of writing provides containment. Unlike spoken confession, the written word can be revised, deleted, or hidden. Authors maintain control over when and to whom their story is shown. What was once internalized chaos becomes structured, external order. The act of writing, in this sense, offers a form of safe exposure.

Moreover, literary estrangement techniques – such as exaggeration, sarcasm, dark humor, or fantastical invention – are not used solely to impress readers. They also help the authors to process painful content by creating distance from raw reality. Caricature and irony diminish the emotional weight of trauma and enable access to material that would otherwise be unbearable. Thus, while personal truth is central, fiction is vital for creating the emotional and psychological distance needed to process it.

When writing, I don't have that pressure, there is nothing to destroy. I can delete it, I can try again. Nothing actually happens. It's the most nerve-saving thing there is, this writing. (Interview 8)

I wanted to write my story, or rather my family's story, in a novel to work through all this madness, which is probably the same in every family, but no one lets you look into their family. Every family is crazy, there are enough studies or books about that. To process that. And on the other hand, I thought, I have to exaggerate the whole story so much that it's so dark and so funny that I can bear it. If I had just written down the reality, it wouldn't have been so good for me. (Interview 7)

I apparently had to go through hell. Then there was peace again. I have to admit it so that people understand why sometimes you feel this way and then that way. (Interview 4)

Fiction, when interwoven with autobiographical details, produces a level of authenticity that pure fantasy cannot. This oscillation between reality and imagination is not only a literary strategy – it is also a psychological necessity. Authors write not merely to help others, as in classical self-help narratives, but to share emotions, to be heard, and to be seen. Feedback from readers plays an important role in this process. When others identify with the text, the writer's inner world feels validated.

To make oneself visible in this way requires courage. But when the externalized parts of the self are recognized and affirmed by others, they can be safely re-integrated. What was once fragmented or hidden becomes part of a new narrative identity. This process strengthens the self. Although the primary motivation may be literary recognition, the psychological benefit is profound: the writer gradually internalizes a more empowered self-image.

It's a self-affirmation, confidence-boosting. When it's appreciated, when people say it's great, they're waiting for a sequel. Everywhere this encouragement. (Interview 5)

I try to avoid being asked what I do. And if asked, I say yes I write, I write books. That's something I have to tell myself often as an affirmation, so I get it. (Interview 8)

For individuals who have often experienced relational trauma or marginalization, writing can become a space of retrospective healing. It is not only about producing well-crafted prose. It is also about making inner experiences – thoughts, feelings, memories – visible and meaningful. Spoken words may disappear, but the written word remains. And because it is framed as fiction, there is no risk of overexposure. Literature provides a transitional space – a safe territory where reality and imagination, inner and outer world, dependency and autonomy, pain and potential – can coexist and evolve.

Discussion and conclusions

When literary writing is understood as a force of attraction (Gelo & Salvatore, 2016; Heyman, 2021), it can offer individuals with a history of alcohol addiction a powerful anchor for transformative processes (Goodwin, 1995; Kreuter, 2025; Kreuter et al., 2022; Rost, 2010). On the psychodynamic conflict axis between dependency and autonomy (Arbeitskreis, 2023), writing may help to create a productive balance (Algristian, 2019; Alvarez & Mearns, 2014; Deveney & Lawson, 2022; Glass et al., 2019; Kerner & Fitzpatrick, 2007; Malyn et al., 2020; Pizarro, 2004). As Goodwin (1995) observed, both individuals with addiction and writers tend to experience solitude intensely, with both activities – substance use and writing – being essentially solitary. However, while the former can result in destructive isolation (Rost, 2010), the latter can open up reflective and relational spaces (Kreuter et al., 2022; Tarp et al., 2020; Thatcher, 2023).

Many people with substance use disorders report having experienced painful and unacknowledged relationships (Goodwin, 1995; Reisinger, 2010; Rost, 2010). Rather than secure bonds, they often develop attachment patterns shaped by avoidance or fusion, which are then mirrored in substance use (W. Klepuszewski, 2019; Schmanke, 2017). Writing, in contrast, fosters new relational dynamics (Mundy et al., 2022; Tarp et al., 2020). The literary process creates emotionally secure, symbolic connections – both internally, between parts of the self, and externally, with an imagined readership. It thus allows relational experiences to be rehearsed and re-integrated in a safe and contained form (Alvarez & Mearns, 2014; Glass et al., 2019; Marxen, 2011; Pizarro, 2004).

Discovering and developing one's creative potential can also strengthen the sense of self (Kohut, 2021). Writing facilitates a transitional space between the self and the world – a “play space” (Winnicott, 2006, 2015) where alternative identities and self-perceptions can be explored (Jaeger, 2023; Kreuter, 2025). As shown in this study, writing may help build a relationship with oneself, and through the act of publication, open a dialogical space for recognition by others (Gansel et al., 2021; Hof & Sonntag, 2020). This movement from solitude to resonance (Altmeyer, 2019) offers a valuable psychological resource for recovery and integration (Deveney & Lawson, 2022; Konzelmann, 2021).

These findings are particularly relevant considering that therapeutic relationships are crucial in addiction treatment (Osten, 2007; Reisinger, 2010; Rost, 2010). However, entering into such relationships can be deeply challenging, especially if the addiction itself served as a central coping mechanism (Klepuszewski, 2019). While substance use is maladaptive, for many, it has been the only known strategy to regulate affect and maintain a sense of control (Ghedina & Patricia, 2008; Hildebrandt & Ohlmeier, 2007). Writing, by contrast, arises from an internal impulse (Winnicott, 2006, 2015). It offers an autonomous and intrinsically motivated route to self-exploration (Kohut, 2021; Kreuter, 2025), sometimes enabling the very relational dynamics that therapy attempts to establish (Bolton, 2006, 2011).

This prompts the question: if writing is so powerful, why is psychotherapy still needed? The answer lies in the fact that not everyone turns to writing, and not all forms of writing are inherently therapeutic (Hellum et al., 2017; Rodriguez et al., 2015, 2016). In this study, participants began writing not as part of a therapeutic intervention, but because of their personal desire to make meaning of life experiences. Some brought their texts into therapy and received support, but the impulse to write was self-initiated and rooted in a deeper need for narrative identity and change.

However, writing is not universally beneficial. It can be deeply personal, challenging, and even overwhelming (Hellum et al., 2017) particularly in the context of trauma (Glass et al., 2019; Pennebaker, 1999; Pizarro, 2004). Some individuals experience decreased self-worth or emotional exhaustion when engaging with their own stories in writing (Algristian, 2019; Baikie et al., 2006; McArdle & Byrt, 2001; Pizarro, 2004). Therefore, writing should be encouraged only when it feels meaningful for the person. Structured, trauma-informed approaches may help mitigate the risks of retraumatization or exposure, particularly in therapeutic or group-based settings (Glass et al., 2019; Hellum et al., 2017; Mundy et al., 2022; Tarp et al., 2020).

For clinical practice, this means carefully exploring what creative expression can offer and when. Although a substance use disorder is a structural deficit, working through underlying conflicts (Arbeitskreis, 2023) can unlock creative energies that support long-term recovery (Bolton, 2011; Kreuter, 2025; Rost, 2010). Facilitated writing interventions – when pedagogically grounded and psychotherapeutically supported – may help people give form to internal experience and process painful memories in a contained manner (Gelo & Salvatore, 2016; Ghedina & Patricia, 2008; Hellum et al., 2017; Heyman, 2021; Tarp et al., 2020).

At a structural and societal level, initiatives that emphasize creativity – especially those outside formal clinical settings – can play a major role (Hof & Sonntag, 2020). A significant proportion of substance use is embedded in cultural norms, making it crucial to shift not only individual but also societal narratives (David & Kubin, 2009; Uhl & Gruber, 2004). Literary prizes such as the ‘Fit for Life’ award offer exactly this: a space where lived experience can be shared through literature rather than pathology. By publicly recognizing autobiographical writing, they create an environment where formerly marginalized identities are not only seen but celebrated.

Publishing fosters an intersubjective dialogue – not only between writer and reader, but between past and present, trauma and recovery, silence and voice (Coetzee & Kurtz, 2016, Gansel et al., 2021). As such, writing becomes not only a personal act of resilience but also a cultural gesture (Hof & Sonntag, 2020) toward destigmatization and social inclusion (Konzelmann, 2021).

The findings of this study, particularly the two second-level code families “*Writing as an Addiction and the Ambivalence of Passion*” and “*The Relationship between Bio-Fiction and the Courage to Show Oneself*,” demonstrate how self-initiated literary creation can serve as a meaningful resource in dealing with the psychological consequences of addiction. Writing appears to facilitate emotional regulation, identity consolidation, and relational repair in a way that is deeply personal and enduring. For psychotherapeutic practice, this suggests that creating spaces for voluntary, non-directive expressive writing – within or adjacent to treatment settings – can provide patients with an alternative means of exploring and articulating their inner world. Especially in contexts where verbal exchange is difficult or trust is fragile (Tiedemann, 2010), writing may act as a mediating process that enables contact with the self and others (Glass et al., 2019; Mundy et al., 2022; Tarp et al., 2020). Supporting such resource-oriented, self-determined activities – without immediately integrating them into structured treatment programs – could enrich therapeutic practice by opening access to creative autonomy and narrative integration.

Limitations

This study analyzed eight individual cases, each with a unique approach to writing. The findings and the specific aspects discussed in this paper can therefore only be traced back to these eight individuals with a history of alcohol dependence. Further research exploring the significance of literary writing in the context of substance use disorders should aim to include transcultural perspectives to compare and refine preliminary insights.

For future research, it would be valuable to conduct additional case studies using theoretical sampling frameworks (Conlon et al., 2020). These could explore writing as a psychotherapeutic intervention or compare it with other creative modalities across different media (Megranahan & Lynskey, 2018). In-depth autoethnographic approaches are also recommended, as introspection may reveal even more nuanced internal processes (Lehnen, 2021). Moreover, participatory projects that focus on writing and foster new creative and literary spaces would make a significant contribution to addiction research.

As this study focused on individuals who voluntarily submitted their literary texts to a competition, a comparison between unstructured, self-guided writing and structured, therapeutically guided writing

workshops would be helpful in future studies. This could enable the evaluation of different outcomes and provide practical insights for clinicians and professionals in the field.

It is also important to note that all participants had already received recognition for the literary quality of their texts through the award. Therefore, the study does not reflect the experience of individuals who are less confident in their writing abilities or who may experience significant writing-related anxiety (Hellum et al., 2017; Pizarro, 2004; Rodriguez et al., 2015).

Furthermore, future studies should examine risks such as retraumatization (Glass et al., 2019), the setting of appropriate boundaries, or the emotional strain that may arise from public exposure. These considerations are particularly relevant when addressing the therapeutic implications of autobiographical writing. These limitations should also be taken into account when transferring findings into clinical or therapeutic practice.

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ORCID

Birgitta Schiller  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3766-8066>

Kathrin Mörtl  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4328-6331>

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Author contributions

Birgitta Schiller: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Project administration, Validation, Writing – original draft Kurt Neuhold: Conceptualization, Validation, Writing – review and editing Harald David: Conceptualization, Validation, Writing – review and editing. Kathrin Mörtl: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Methodology, Validation, Writing – review and editing

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