



## Writing the Past to Right the Future:

### *The Cure for Dreaming*

*This article is also available in an online format that allows direct access to all links included. We encourage you to access it on the ALAN website at <http://www.alan-ya.org/page/the-alan-review-columns>.*

I promise you, my family is not a rascally bunch of pyromaniacs; however, we do enjoy the bonfires we regularly build in our outdoor fire pit. Sometimes we use a fire to bake potatoes, roast ears of corn, or melt marshmallows for s'mores. Other times we use a fire to warm ourselves when the evening's breezes stir the flames as they dance about the wood.

Our absolutely favorite part of bonfires, though, is to simply stare into the glowing embers as we sit beneath a million acres of stars. For us, that is the moment when fire becomes more than utilitarian—that is the moment when fire becomes magical. From us, the grownups, to our soon-to-be-adult teens to our middle school adolescents, all of us are stripped of our sense of time and obligations, our minds relax, and we enter a realm of speaking and listening that doesn't seem to occur at any other time or place during our regular routines.

It was during one of these recent fire conversations that my high school senior son, Craig, began lamenting how there exists so little honesty in his world. He listens to friends rave about each other's outfit or hair or (insert latest must-have gadget) only to hear them separately ridicule each other.

Craig's conversation then turned to his teachers. He explained how the faculty solicited recommendations from the students on themes for the senior prom. Once several themes were identified, the senior

student body voted on the one they preferred. Unfortunately, to many of the students' surprise, not only were they not able to vote on many of the themes they thought would be on the ballot, but the theme that won did not seem to be anyone's favorite. Eventually, Craig overheard a comment from a crass, ready-to-retire history teacher that confirmed what he and his classmates suspected already: the administration and faculty never intended for the students to have a say in their senior prom because they could presumably never be trusted to make a "good" decision. The entire democratic process was a sham put in place to placate the students.

Such reality is harsh, especially when embedded so deeply in false hope. On the other hand, isn't that the case with many situations in our lives?

With this issue of *The ALAN Review* focusing on the theme, "Remembering and (Re)living: Probing the Collective and Individual Past," I sought a book that explores an issue of the past that was once considered a false hope but that was ultimately rectified. I sought a book that deals with injustices such as the one Craig experienced—situations in which people were marginalized and patronized—but I wanted, again, an injustice that was put right.

Our anchor text for this issue is *The Cure for Dreaming* (2014) by Cat Winters. This book is equal parts historical fiction, fantastical, mystical, (dare I say it) educational, and wholly entertaining. The core of Winters's story focuses on inequities women experienced during the early 1800s, specifically their inability to participate in the democratic process and the right to vote. Still, *The Cure for Dreaming* is so much

more, as it is sprinkled with other societal inequities that many people experience in our modern world, tyrannies that convolute reality and hope—tyrannies that history demonstrates can be overcome.

As Shel Silverstein invited his readers in his poem “Invitation” (1974), “come sit by my fire.” There, let’s discuss how *The Cure for Dreaming* can be used in our classroom communities to help us consider the adolescent experience and reinforce our shared existence as members of the human community.

## About the Book

### The Characters and Plot Synopsis

Olivia Mead is a strong-willed, independent young woman on the verge of transitioning from a high school student to an adult. She dreams of going to college, becoming a journalist, and participating in the electoral process. Unfortunately, the year is 1900 in Portland, Oregon, where females are expected to be submissive and obedient to the men around them. Olivia’s father, who doesn’t want her following the whimsical ways of her absent mother, recruits Henri Reverie, a stage hypnotist, to use his mesmerizing powers to purge the rebelliousness from his daughter.

Instead, the mysterious and handsome Henri gives Olivia the horrifying ability to see the world as it truly is and people as they truly are, whether they are vile demonic creatures or innocents surrounded by a soft glow of light. What’s more, Henri makes it impossible for Olivia to give voice to her true thoughts, limiting her to the expression “All is well” at the times when she is angry.

Olivia’s supernatural condition serves only to make her more determined to become a “responsible woman” and speak her mind. What follows is a mesmerizing tale of Olivia’s precarious relationship with the mysterious hypnotist, who seems to be hiding his own secrets, and her surreptitious fight for the rights of women.

### The Author

Cat Winters knew early in her life that she was to be a writer. She explains, “I’ve wanted to be a writer ever since I could first string letters together to make words. I can’t remember a time when I wasn’t writing or inventing stories in my head” (Lyons, 2014). Still,

the road to publication was long. Winters began writing for publication once she graduated from college. It wasn’t until after she turned 40 that her first manuscript was accepted (Sarson, 2014).

Perhaps it was growing up in the shadows of Southern California’s Disneyland that cultivated Winters’s fondness of haunted mansions, fascination with fantasy worlds, and nostalgia for the past. Both her books, *In the Shadows of Blackbirds* (2013) and *The Cure for Dreaming* (2014), are built on a foundation of historical fact then layered with fantastic accounts of ghosts or monsters; however, the fantasy elements of her stories always occur within the realm of subjective human experience, which make them even more eerie.

Cat Winters resides in Portland, Oregon, with her husband, Adam, and their children. Every Thursday morning, Winters gathers with up to four other authors at a local coffee shop to write or research or generally discuss each other’s writing projects (Winters, 2014, July 18).

## Using the Book in the Classroom

### Interdisciplinary Connections

Cat Winters weaves her stories with various and sundry entwined threads of interdisciplinary connections. In *The Cure for Dreaming*, Winters begins with the women’s suffrage movement and includes other unexpected, yet fascinating, topics. Explore the resources below to connect some of Winters’s topics to various content areas.

### Women’s Suffrage Movement

“Reforming Their World: Women in the Progressive Era” (The National Women’s History Museum):  
<https://www.nwhm.org/online-exhibits/progressive-era/suffrage.html>

“The Fight for Women’s Suffrage” (The History Channel):  
<http://www.history.com/topics/womens-history/the-fight-for-womens-suffrage>

“Battle for Suffrage” (PBS: The American Experience):  
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/general-article/eleanor-suffrage/>

### **Hypnosis**

“From Magic Power to Everyday Trance” (History of Hypnosis):

<http://www.historyofhypnosis.org/>

“What Is Stage Hypnosis?” (Learn Stage Hypnosis):

<http://www.learnstagehypnosis.com/>

### **Dentistry**

“Dentistry” (Encyclopedia Britannica):

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/158069/dentistry>

“History of Dentistry” (IncisorsandMolars.com):

<http://www.incisorsandmolars.com/history-of-dentistry.html>

“A Pictorial History of Dentistry” (DentalAssistant.Net):

<http://www.dentalassistant.net/pictorial-history/>

### **America in the 1900s**

“Progressive Era to New Era, 1900–1929” (The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History):

<http://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/progressive-era-new-era-1900-1929>

“America at the Turn of the Century: A look at the Historical Context” (Library of Congress):

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/papr/sfamcen.html>

“Inventions: 1900 to 1990” (History Learning Site):

[http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/inventions\\_1900\\_to\\_1990.htm](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/inventions_1900_to_1990.htm)

### **Prereading Activities**

Teachers generally use prereading activities to provide their learners with specific information about a text they are going to read. Prereading activities are a way to “front-load” factual information. For *The Cure for Dreaming*, I would like to repurpose the prereading activities to focus more on Cat Winters’s writing craft—and inspire students to engage with writing as authors themselves. Winters uses her writing to entertain as well as take on weighty cultural issues. Flannery O’Connor (1952) wrote, “If you don’t hunt it down and kill it, it’ll hunt you down and kill you” (p. 85). In other words, writing is a way of reflecting

as well as a way of exploring—a way to take on the world before the world has the chance to swallow us.

Listed below are two writing strategies designed to help teachers and students reflect and explore as they begin their own stories.

### **REMEMBERING AND RELIVING OUR LIVES: CONSTRUCTING MEMORY MAPS**

As I mentioned in a previous column, a writer’s home area can have a tremendous impact on his or her writing (Collins, 2014). In a television interview with *Oregon Art Beat*, Cat Winters explains, “I really do like writing about the area where I live. The longer I live here, the more history I see and the more fascinated I am with what’s around me” (Sarson, 2014).

Place was such an important aspect of poet William Stafford’s writing that he developed a strategy he called “memory mapping” to help him develop a bevy of writing topics tied to specific locations of his everyday life (Stafford, Merchant, & Wixon, 2003). To prepare students for discussions regarding the importance of setting and place as they read *The Cure for Dreaming*, invite them to think about their own experiences and memories related to specific locations in their lives.

Begin by asking students to think of places that are incredibly special to them for whatever reason. These places may center on their houses when they were young, a clearing beside a creek, a park, their neighborhoods, their bedrooms. Invite students to close their eyes and see as clearly as they can the places that come to their minds.

Next, have students begin sketching a map of one special location. Critical to this process is that everyone understands that the map is not intended to be a beautiful piece of art. Although the pictures should contain enough detail to begin pulling out memories, using rudimentary symbols or rough shapes is enough to get the memories churning. Coax students to pay attention to the memories that begin surfacing while sketching their rooms or houses or farms or neighborhoods. Begin with only a word or two, but label these memories on their maps.

As I work with students on this strategy, I model the process by sketching and “thinking aloud” about my own memories that are meaningful to me. I try to make each memory as personal, specific, interesting, and natural as possible. This is no time for posturing

or insincerity—students must see that what I write comes from the core of who I am. I narrate the story behind each topic in as much detail as possible while attempting to be concise.

Once the students have placed a few memories on their maps, invite them to share with the person beside them. Each writer/listener should pay attention to the details that surface during the sharing. These details are the nuggets that will develop into full-fledged topics to get them going later as writers. Lucy Calkins (1994) writes of how Malcolm Cowley refers to such details as “precious particles” from which the students will be able to grow meaning and pieces of writing.

Once everyone has had an opportunity to share, go back to thinking and writing as individuals. Everyone should take the event/experience about which they just shared and write down as many key words and details noted from the conversation as they can. Capturing these words now allows students to more easily begin a longer, sustained piece of writing later. For our purposes here, the focus is on the power that specific places have on our memories, our imaginations, and our writing.

#### **FACING THE MUSIC: FREEWRITING YOUR WAY INTO A STORY**

In an interview with the bloggers of *The Corsets, Cutlasses, & Candlesticks*, Cat Winters describes the genesis of what would become her second book, *The Cure for Dreaming*. Winters explains, “At the time, I was listening to Kristen Lawrence’s eerie and dreamlike Halloween music (see [HalloweenCarols.com](http://HalloweenCarols.com)), which put me in the mood to write something theatrical and Victorian, with a dash of horror” (Long, 2014).

Next, Winters simply began freewriting—an exercise that writers use to warm-up their minds and to get ideas and language flowing (Elbow, 1998). Although many writers use freewriting as a strategy to overcome being stuck, freewriting is the perfect tool to generate topics and ideas for extended pieces of writing. The ultimate goal of freewriting is to help writers grow in the long run rather than produce good writing in the short run. When combining freewriting with a variety of media (specifically, pictures and music), teachers expand writers’ possibilities by appealing to several different learning styles and preferences of the individual or the class.

Begin this exercise by collecting samples of music you wish to present to your learners. Three to five di-

verse tunes will be adequate. Explain to students that they will listen to various styles of music and write down whatever comes to their minds without worrying about what shows up on the page. An example of a five-song compilation created by a local National Writing Project site (the Upper Cumberland Writing Project in Tennessee) using iMovie and Garage Band can be accessed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=luVIGkBKSnE>.

Play the first segment of music. Ideally, allow the writers 20–30 seconds to listen and soak in the feel of the music before asking them to write. Then, with the music continuing to play in the background, have everyone write continuously and quickly (without rushing) for the next minute and a half. Repeat this process of listening and freewriting with three to five different pieces of music for a maximum of 10 minutes.

It’s worth mentioning that the goal is for students to constantly be writing whatever comes to mind until the next song is presented. Elbow explains, “Never stop to look back, to cross something out, to wonder how to spell something, to wonder what word or thought to use, or to think about what you are doing” (1998, p. 94). Should the writer run into a dead end or draw a blank, she/he should simply keep writing the same word or phrase over and over again until something else comes to mind.

Once the writers have had a chance to write in response to each segment of music, ask everyone to read through what they have written independently. (Allow approximately five minutes.) As they read, encourage writers to pay attention to their words. Although there is not a specific set of questions they should ask themselves, they might ponder the following:

Which of my words are surprising to me?

Is there a “voice” that comes out in any of the writing that interests me?

Are there any potential characters or stories or poems hiding in the words?

Does any of the writing remind me of another author or book?

Is there an idea that emerges more than once despite the changes in pictures/music?

As the writers read through and think about their writing, encourage them to circle or underline the words/ideas that interest them, as well as jot down in the margin any further thoughts they have that might be useful for future writing projects.

Finally, direct each writer to partner with another writer to share the specific words/ideas/thoughts that are emerging. (Again, allow around five minutes for this process.) By the end of the session, the writers should have at least one idea that they can take to a longer, more focused piece . . . just as Cat Winters did with *The Cure for Dreaming*.

### Group Discussion Questions

Try some of the following discussion-starters with your students.

- Cat Winters opens *The Cure for Dreaming* with the following paragraph:

Portland, Oregon—October 31, 1900  
The Metropolitan Theater simmered with the heat of more than a thousand bodies packed together in red velvet chairs. My nose itched from the lingering scent of cigarette smoke wafting off the gentlemen’s coats—a burning odor that added to the sensation that we were all seated inside a beautiful oven, waiting to be broiled. Even the cloud of warring perfumes hanging over the audience smelled overcooked, like toast gone crisp and black. (p. 1)

How many details about the setting is the reader able to discern? What mood is author Cat Winters establishing? Judging from the opening scene, what projections might the reader have regarding the type of story the author has created?

- During a performance by the mysterious mesmerist, Monsieur Henri Reverie, 17-year-old Olivia Mead agrees to volunteer to allow Reverie to hypnotize her. Henri asks the audience, “Is this raven-haired beauty known for her brute strength? . . . Would you like to see this delicate young feather of a girl become as strong and rigid as a wooden plank?” (p. 11)

What do the juxtapositions of “beauty”/“brute” and “delicate young feather”/“strong and rigid as a wooden plank” suggest about the complexity of Olivia’s personality? As students read further, what additional details reinforce the paradoxical nature of Olivia’s character?

- In a letter to the *Oregonian* newspaper, the father of Olivia’s initial love interest writes what was, at the time, a well-reasoned argument as to why

women should be silenced (pp. 85–86). What are at least two of the rhetorical devices Judge Acklen employs to coerce his readers?

- In response to Judge Acklen’s letter, Olivia anonymously pens an incendiary rebuttal in which she not only repudiates each of the Judge’s points as to why women should not be in politics, she goes even further and makes the case as to why a woman “would probably make a far better president than the pampered male you gentlemen vote into office this Tuesday” (p. 88).

After thoughtfully considering several signatures that would simultaneously conceal her identity and emphatically conclude her letter, Olivia chooses the inscription, “—A Responsible Woman” (p. 89). What is another word that might replace “responsible” in Olivia’s signature without changing her intended meaning (connotation and tone)?

- Once Henri Reverie hypnotizes Olivia and allows her to “see the world the way it truly is” (p. 64), Olivia has monstrous visions of her father. The first time Olivia sees her father she describes, “The brute’s red eyes gleamed . . . and his skin went deathly pale and thin enough to reveal the jutting curves of the facial skeleton beneath his flesh” (p. 66). Later, when explaining her father’s head, Olivia remarks, “His ears turned as pale and pointed as the Count’s in *Dracula* . . . horrifying flaps sticking out from the sides of his pasty-gray head with its fierce and bulging red eyes” (p. 92).

Once Olivia confronts her father and stands up for her rights as both a woman and a human, her father becomes silent and Olivia sees him as never before: “All I saw was an eight-year-old boy in a long evening coat and an oversized silk hat. He backed toward the hospital’s front entrance in shoes too big for his feet, his lips sputtering to find something more to say” (p. 321).

What is the significance of the change in Olivia’s visions of her father? What insight into Olivia’s father’s character does the author provide for her readers?

- Read Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s poem “Locked Inside” (1911):

She beats upon her bolted door,  
With faint weak hands;

Drearly walks the narrow floor;  
 Sullenly sits, blank walls before;  
     Despairing stands.  
 Life calls her, Duty, Pleasure, Gain—  
     Her dreams respond;  
 But the blank daylight wax and wane,  
 Dull peace, sharp agony, slow pain—  
     No hope beyond.  
 Till she comes a thought! She lifts her head,  
     The world grows wide!  
 A voice—as if clear words were said—  
 “Your door, O long imprisonéd,  
     Is locked inside!” (1911, pp. 3–4)

How does the theme of Gilman’s “Locked Inside” correspond to at least one of the themes in *The Cure for Dreaming*? What are the nuanced differences between the female’s life experience in Gilman’s poem and Olivia Mead’s life experience?

### Post-Reading Activities

The purpose of post-reading activities is to help readers solidify their comprehension of a text, as well as extend their understanding by applying their comprehension to other thinking and communicative tasks. Consider the strategies below to help students go deeper with *The Cure for Dreaming*.

#### A NOVEL BY ANY OTHER NAME

Cat Winters started off calling her book *The Mesmerist*, but as she explained in an interview, “The [final title] came to me in the middle of one of my title-creating brainstorming sessions. I realized the main issue in the book is that a man is trying to cure his daughter of her ‘unladylike’ dreams of voting and receiving a higher education, and it hit me: why not call the novel *The Cure for Dreaming*?” (Long, 2014).

Create a list of possible alternate titles for the novel. Do the titles capture any of the book’s themes? Are the titles intriguing and able to catch a prospective reader’s attention? Are there any cultural allusions that could be used as one of the titles?

#### IN MY HUMBLE OPINION . . .

School systems across the nation are listing the ability to write argument/opinion pieces as one of their central standards. One of the major junctures in *The Cure for Dreaming*, a point where the plot’s conflict

is ratcheted up, is when Olivia writes her “A Responsible Woman” opinion piece that was printed in the *Oregonian* (pp. 87–88).

Take another look at Olivia’s opinion piece and notice the steps she takes as a writer, namely how she:

- clearly states her opinion in the beginning,
- sufficiently supports her position throughout the piece,
- strategically considers her opponents’ counterarguments,
- assertively restates her position to neutralize the counterarguments,
- ends with a summative and thought-provoking signature.

Using the same general framework that Olivia used to draft her opinion piece, find a topic about which you are passionate and write an opinion piece. In order to make your writing authentic and purposeful, write the piece with the intention of submitting it to your local newspaper as a “Letter to the Editor.”

#### WHOA-OH-WHOA, LISTEN TO THE MUSIC

As mentioned earlier in the column, *The Cure for Dreaming* was inspired by Cat Winters listening to “eerie and dreamlike music,” music that put her in the “mood to write something theatrical and Victorian, with a dash of horror” (Long, 2014). Silas House, whose writing credits include two novels for adolescents, *Eli the Good* (2009) and *Same Sun Here* (with Vaswani, 2013), sometimes creates a play list that he listens to throughout his process of writing a book. House explains, “Music is a big part of my life. I can’t imagine not using it in some way in my fiction. Music inspires me, and it informs my writing. I feel so much when I’m listening to music, and I just want to convey some of those same emotions in my writing” (McMahon, 2003, p. 103).

Below are pieces of music that Cat Winters works into *The Cure for Dreaming*’s story:

Camille Saint-Saëns’s “Danse Macabre” (pp. 5, 184)  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YyknBTm\\_YyM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YyknBTm_YyM)

Stephen Foster’s “Beautiful Dreamer” (pp. 8, 238, 262)  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=onaSQp\\_35qs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=onaSQp_35qs)

Engelbert Humperdinck's "Evening Prayer" from the opera "Hansel and Gretel" (pp. 17, 98, 205)  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4\\_PjlixJBWM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4_PjlixJBWM)

Arthur J. Lamb and Harry Von Tilzer's "Bird in a Gilded Cage" (p. 226)  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gEUmc5Uuwy8>

Various Romantic Piano Music from 1900 (p. 267)  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KpOtuoHL45Y&list=PL0CC24A1A592B4ADC>

Reread sections of *The Cure for Dreaming* while playing the accompanying songs in the background. How does the reading experience change? How is your experience of the story world affected?

Find other passages in *The Cure for Dreaming* and create playlists that match the tone or mood or action of the scene.

### WHO HAS THE POWER?

At the heart of *The Cure for Dreaming* is the question of who is in control of whom. The most obvious struggle is between women and the men who seek to keep them docile and silent. There are also several examples of women seeking to exert their influence on the behavior of other women, a hypnotist who controls Olivia's behavior through memorization, and a disease controlling the life of a young person.

In their book, *Uncommon Core* (2014), authors Michael Smith, Deborah Appleman, and Jeff Wilhelm provide a plethora of strategies, lesson ideas, and activities to help teachers meet the real intent of the Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010) without succumbing to the dangerous misunderstandings being developed around so-called "standards-aligned" instruction. An especially powerful activity, "Who Has the Power," comes from their unit for teaching "Letter from a Birmingham Jail."

Access Smith, Appleman, and Wilhelm's worksheet on "Who Has the Power" by visiting this URL: [http://www.corwin.com/uncommoncore/materials/Figure\\_7.2.pdf](http://www.corwin.com/uncommoncore/materials/Figure_7.2.pdf). Next, determine which group or individual in each pairing you believe possesses the

greater capability to bring about authentic change. With what evidence are you able to justify your decisions?

### WORDS, HUH, YEAH/WHAT ARE THEY GOOD FOR?

One of my all-time favorite books, *Writers on Writing* (Winokur, 1990), is a collection of quotations about the art of writing. In his introduction, Winokur explains, "[Quotations] confirm the astuteness of my perceptions, they open the way to ideas, and they console me with the knowledge that I'm not alone" (p. 1).

Laced throughout Cat Winters's book are quotations connected to the struggles women encountered simply to gain the right to vote in political elections. Some of the quotations elevate women, while others demean their status. All of the quotations, however, expose us to the prevalent ideas of the 1900s.

Choose a quotation that stands out to you, regardless of whether the words are consoling or agitating. Take notice of the emotions and/or thoughts the quotation conjures inside of you. Are there any agreeable words (AMEN!) or disparaging slurs (F\*#% YOU!) that come to mind? If so, harness the energy and begin to freewrite a response to the quotation. The freewrite can serve as the jumping off point to a longer, more refined piece later, but it's essential to capture the energy of the piece early on in the writing process. Using a writer's notebook (or other artifact), begin assembling your own list of quotations that serve as powerful talismans.

### Additional Resources

There are infinite ways to invite students to imagine, explore, and create stories or academic essays based on insights gained from books such as *The Cure for Dreaming*. Below are a few more resources to help deepen your own and students' knowledge of author Cat Winters and the world of which she often writes.

#### Official Cat Winters Website

<http://www.catwinters.com/>

#### Cat Winters on Twitter

@catwinters

#### Cat Winters on Facebook

<http://facebook.com/catwintersbooks>

## The Oregon Historical Society

<http://www.ohs.org/>

## Social Justice Organizations (Extensive List)

<http://www.startguide.org/orgs/orgs06.html>

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