

Can someone be asleep and yet conscious? Can dreams be shaped as they unfold? And what does this have to do with creative writing? **Clare Jay** explores a new route to inspiration.

# Dreamwriting

**A**t the 2005 Dream Writing conference in Kent, I presented a doctoral research paper on the role of lucid dreaming in the creative writing process. As soon as I finished speaking, I was bombarded with questions from sceptical psychologists who doubted the very possibility of 'waking up inside a dream'. So I asked the audience to raise their hands if they had ever been aware that they were dreaming – whereupon fully half of the hands in the room instantly shot up.

Lucid dreaming has been scientifically verified in sleep laboratories since 1978, when a clinically asleep subject wired up to a polygraph machine performed pre-agreed eye movements to signal the onset of dream lucidity. Parapsychologist Charles Tart explains that the lucid dreamer has 'awakened in terms of mental functioning within the dream world'. My own lucid dream experiences took off in my early twenties when, fascinated by the idea of becoming conscious in my dreams, I began to cultivate lucidity. Lucid dreaming may seem a paradoxical concept, but it is in fact a learnable skill and can help writers in specific, practical ways.

**'a lucid dreamer can conjure up a dream theatre and watch her own fictional characters act out the next chapter of a novel'**

Bestselling author Amy Tan is adept at lucid dreaming her way into fiction. In Naomi Epel's book, *Writers Dreaming* (Vintage, 1994), she says: 'I have found in dreams that I can change the setting by simply looking down at my feet then looking up again... The key is realising that it is a dream and that there's a part of me that can control what's happening... when I get into a dream world I can create fiction by going down surprising

pathways'.

For my Creative Writing PhD, I interviewed fiction writers and poets to discover how their lucid dreams informed their work. While writing *Breathing in Colour*, the novel that was an integral part of my doctorate, I drew on my own lucid dreams to determine the usefulness of lucid dreaming in three main areas of the creative writing process: the generation of ideas, the writer's trance, and plot development.

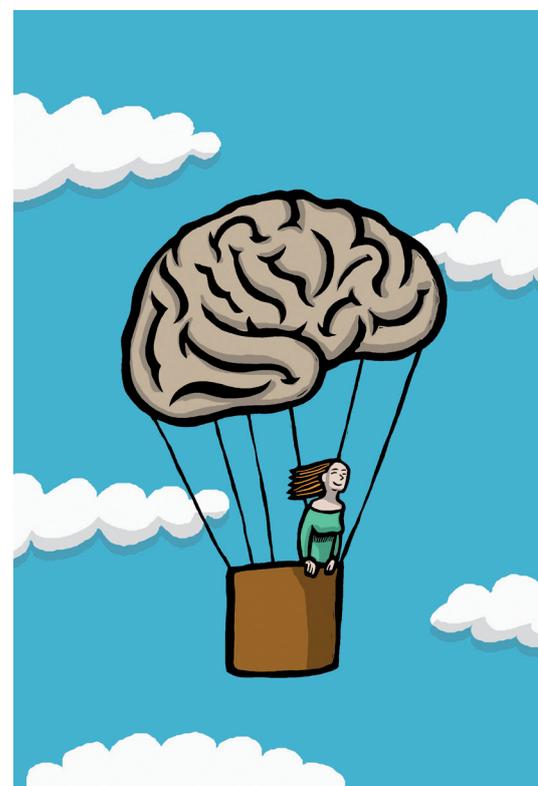
## Generating ideas

The lucid dreamer enters into direct, conscious contact with the creative medium of the dreaming mind. The imagination can be observed unfolding like a film, and the action can be directed if desired. Lucid dreams tend to be incredibly vivid – US author John Locatelli describes the moment of becoming lucid in a dream as 'like the difference between watching a movie in black and white and suddenly having it change to colour'. The imagery is memorable and often contains kinaesthetic, sensual and archetypal elements conducive to the creation of original writing. Anne Rice, author of the *Vampire Chronicles* series, writes: 'The last time I had a flying dream I knew I was really doing it. I was aware but I was also really there. It was fabulously real... a deepening of the sensuous aspect of flying. And I can take that back to the typewriter'.

According to d'Hervey de Saint-Denys (*Les Reves et les Moyens de les Diriger – Observations Pratiques*, Paris, Editions Oniros, 1897) and Stephen LaBerge (*Lucid Dreaming*, New York, Ballantine Books, 1986), lucid dreamers often have a high level of analytical thought and the ability to carry out predetermined experiments within the dream. Writers who are experienced lucid dreamers can even hunt for story ideas while dreaming, or summon their own fictional characters to get to know them better. Dream characters are full of surprises: during one lucid dream chat with the artist in my novel, he huffed,

'You might be the author but you're not God'. That told me! Lucid dream researchers LaBerge and Rheingold advise: 'If you want to learn to paint, summon Rembrandt. Go fishing with Hemingway or Hesse and talk about that novel you've always wanted to write'.

A lucid dream may provide a valuable idea when there's a block in the creative process. When I began *Breathing in Colour*, I had a lucid dream in which I experienced a fistful of sand as having an orange texture and taste. This gave me the idea that my protagonist, Mia, would have synaesthesia, a condition where the senses are mingled. Mia's voice then became a key element of the novel.



CORBIS IMAGES

## The writer's trance

'Part of my function as a writer is to dream awake,' says Stephen King. 'Whether you're dreaming or whether you're writing creatively the brainwaves are apparently interchangeable'. He's referring to the EEG-verified presence of alpha brainwaves in both a relaxed, waking state and during REM sleep. King goes on to say how precious this waking dream state is, how it's 'like finding a secret door in a room but not knowing exactly how you got in'. I call this state the writer's trance, and I have developed a method for going through the 'secret door' (see How to lucid dream, over).

The writer's trance can be seen as a waking version of lucid dreaming, where we sink as deeply as we can into our

unconscious minds while remaining awake, allowing ideas to flow freely and rapidly as dream imagery mingles with our imagination. The writer will find that a dream image quickly morphs into something else – a memory, a face, a moving scene – and as s/he describes this new image, s/he slips into writing fiction. Since lucid dream images are often particularly radiant and

**'I have found in dreams that I can change the setting by simply looking down at my feet then looking up again'**  
Amy Tan

intense, they are ideal as material to work with in the writer's trance, but any vivid dream image can be used. Anything can happen in the writer's trance, so it's wise to have someone you trust on hand in case painful memories emerge. As with any dreamwork, it's vital to retain a sense that

you are in control of your material, and know when to stop.

My development of lucid dream imagery in the writer's trance resulted in some weird and wonderful characters. An initial image of a scarecrow-like figure sinking into a field developed into a silver disc-headed man. An elephant emerging from a tree trunk became a winged elephant with diamond blue eyes. These creations found roles in the novel as my protagonists' personalised archetypes.

### Plot development

Sigmund Freud likened lucid dreamers to playwrights when he spoke of people who 'possess the faculty of consciously directing their dreams'; he noted that such dreamers can replay the action, 'just as a popular dramatist may under pressure give his play a happier ending' (*The Interpretation of Dreams*, translated by J Strachey, Avon Books, 1965). Indeed, screenwriter Paul Schrader develops his plots in the lucid dream state through creating and recreating film-like narratives: 'I'll critique the "dream story" as it occurs. I'll think, "This is not a good scene", "I should drop this character", or "I need some action" – back up and "re-dream" the scene' (reported in *The Committee of Sleep* by D Barrett, Crown Publishers, 2001).

Non-lucid dreams can be chaotic and random, but researcher Ed Kellogg notes (in a paper presented to the conference of the Society for Phenomenology and the Human Sciences) that, 'Intentionality in the dream state seems almost akin to creation', so that in a lucid dream the expectation of a coherent sequence of events is likely to prompt just that, thus providing a useful platform for experimentation with plot development. The lucid dreamer could conjure a dream theatre and watch her own fictional characters act out the next chapter of a novel-in-progress, or throw a question about plot into the dream environment and observe the response she gets.

Plot development can also take place after the dream, in the writer's trance. Following a disturbing conversation with a friend who

### HOW TO ENTER A WRITER'S TRANCE

- With pen and paper to hand, close your eyes and focus on your breathing. Take a few moments to relax your body and empty your mind
- Bring a chosen dream image into your mind's eye. Allow it to grow in clarity, and feel the core emotion it generates
- Open your eyes just enough to see the paper. Once you begin writing, keep going as fast as you can for a minimum of five minutes
- If you hit a blank wall, return to your chosen image for inspiration and record the new thoughts or images which appear. Be open to any transformation of the dream image that takes place as you write

has a sleep disorder, and who admitted to dragging his girlfriend around the bedroom by her hair while he was asleep, I had several lucid dreams about sleep violence. Using these as my starting point in a subsequent writer's trance, the scene opened up with startling intensity and morphed into a fictional world so compelling that I realised I wanted to write a story about the effects of a sleep disorder on a loving family. This became the premise for my second novel, *Dreamrunner*.

Anyone can have lucid dreams and, with practice, learn to work with them in ways which support the writing process. If you've ever had that sinking feeling that there aren't enough hours in the week for your writing, consider the fact that we sleep for a third of our lives, and every night there are dozens of possibilities to become conscious while dreaming. Why not maximise and enrich your writing life by taking up lucid dreaming and continuing the creative writing process in your sleep? As magical realism author Jorge Luis Borges said: 'Writing is nothing more than a guided dream.' ■

### HOW TO LUCID DREAM

- First, start improving your recall of your dreams. Ask yourself on waking, What was I doing just now? Even if all you can remember is a colour, that's a start. Write down everything you remember. You will quickly improve
- Try to become aware of incongruent elements in your dreams: a frozen pizza melting like a Dali clock in your hand; finding yourself flying, Superman-style, over your old school. Aha, you think, I must be dreaming...
- Cultivate a clear intention to become lucid in your dreams. Repeat to yourself throughout the day, and directly before bedtime, 'Tonight I will realise that I am dreaming'
- For more tips on becoming proficient at lucid dreaming, read *Exploring the World of Lucid Dreaming*, by S LaBerge and H Rheingold (Ballantine Books, 1990)

### THE PITCH for this feature

Clare Jay has subscribed to *Mslexia* since 2002, but this is the first time she has pitched a feature to us. It started when her publicist emailed me in the run-up to the publication of *Dreamrunner*. We are often contacted like this, with a précis of a book and a suggestion the author write for us. These pitches tend to be too human-interest for a writing magazine, but in this case I hesitated before pressing 'delete' – because the ideas intrigued me. Clare then wrote to me directly, proposing a series of workshops in which she would illustrate how to transform readers' dreams into fiction or poetry. Now I was interested: not in the workshops at this stage, but in a feature on how dreaming can inspire creative writing. But I was worried the topic might be too airy-fairy for discerning *Mslexia*s, so I checked Clare's bio and discovered she had a PhD on the subject. At this point I telephoned her to discuss a more scholarly piece. When people pitch me directly, it's often like this. The idea's not quite right, but the writer and subject matter are, so we negotiate a new commission. And in case you're thinking we only commission published authors, Clare's novel was irrelevant to my decision. What made the difference was her authoritative knowledge of the issue. Debbie Taylor

**CLARE JAY** has led 'Dreaming into Writing' workshops internationally. Her stories and poetry have won prizes. Her first novel, *Breathing in Colour*, was critically acclaimed; her second, *Dreamrunner* (both Platkus) is out now. Visit Clare at [www.clarejay.com](http://www.clarejay.com)

