

Lucid dreaming, Synaesthesia, and Sleep Disorders: Dreaming into Fiction

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I'm a novelist and lucid dream researcher, and in this paper I hope to show how dreaming into a subject can elicit powerful breakthroughs in the creative process. As a writer, I'll be focusing on my experiences with fiction, but lucid dream induction, spontaneous dreaming around a subject, or accessing trance states to connect with the creativity of the unconscious mind, can be employed across the arts to enhance paintings, musical composition, sculpture and more.

My PhD focused on the connection between lucid dreaming and the creative writing process. I quickly discovered that there's more than just a casual link between the two: lucid dreaming informed my writing at every stage of the novel, from idea creation to plot development. The main novel character in my first book, *Breathing in Colour*, has synaesthesia, a neurological condition in which musical notes might be experienced as colours, or textures tasted on the tongue. The protagonist in my second novel, *Dreamrunner*, has REM Sleep Behaviour Disorder, known as RBD, where he physically enacts violent nightmares, endangering his family.

I don't have either of these conditions. How does an author approach a condition she has never experienced? Sighted authors write from the perspective of characters with congenital blindness, as in Linda Gillard's novel 'Star Gazing', or they depict bi-polar disorder despite not suffering from it themselves, as in Patrick Gale's 'Notes from an Exhibition.' Each author or artist must find their own way into a subject. My way is through dreams, and particularly lucid dreams.

One of the most astounding realisations for me while writing my first novel was the discovery that lucid dreaming could open a door not only into rich worlds of imagery and new experiences such as flying, but that it could also act as an experiential gateway into a neurological condition that I do not personally have. The story goes like this: I was at a loss as to how to find the distinctive narrative voice of the teenaged girl, Mia, who disappears while backpacking in India. I knew there was something special about Mia, I just didn't know what it was. After several weeks of frustration and false starts, I had a lucid dream in which I was lying on a beach and I experienced a fistful of sand as having

an orange texture and taste: on a strong sensory level, the sand was orange before I'd even looked at it. In the same dream, there were coloured lights exploding across the sky, and for each colour of the spectrum, I heard a different sound. Some of the colours were musical tones, while others buzzed or crackled.

When I woke up, I looked on the internet for information about this kind of mingled sense perception. I found the term 'synaesthesia' and this led me to Dr. Cytowic's articles on the subject. Reading these was a Eureka moment for me as I knew immediately that Mia was a synaesthete and that this enhanced, mingled perception was the key to her character and voice. In subsequent dreams, on becoming lucid, I carried out experiments in the dream to invoke synaesthetic perceptions.

The following dream shows my best success with this, and I also had several lucid dreams afterwards in which tastes, scents and sounds were spontaneously triggered by various stimuli, and experienced in the criss-cross way typical of synaesthesia, with tastes provoking sounds, or scents provoking sensations on the skin:

'I'm lucid,' I say. I briefly consider synaesthesia and my research and novel, and suddenly I am standing in front of a wall of textured strips which I decide to touch to see whether any synaesthetic associations occur. I stroke my hand across the first one, which is hard and grainy, laid out in corduroy stripes. Stroking it is strange; it feels so real. It looks and feels brown and I ask myself what I taste when I rub it but nothing comes up and I reflect that taste sensations are fairly rare in dreams. I move onto the next texture. This one is soft and slightly furry, sort of like velour. 'It tastes of porridge!' I realise. I love the feel of it under my fingertips, as it reminds me of childhood. I get so involved in stroking and tasting this texture-memory that lucidity starts to slip.

A question that could be asked here is: Did these dreamed sensory experiences give me an *actual* experience of synaesthesia, or did they show me my dreaming mind's *interpretation* of what I had absorbed through research and through engaging my imagination with the phenomenon known as synaesthesia? Some investigators believe all infants might have synaesthesia at birth (Baron-Cohen 1996, Maurer 1993) as the senses haven't yet separated out into their individual functions. This separation is estimated to happen at around four months of age for most people, and not at all for those who end up with lifelong synaesthesia. If this is the case, it means we may all have a primitive

memory of synaesthetic perceptions, and certain altered states of consciousness, such as trauma-or-drug-induced hallucinations, or the dream state, can provoke these perceptions.

For me as a writer, one thing was indisputable: these lucid dreams had effectively dissolved any blocks or hang-ups I had about depicting a condition I didn't have myself, and they had given me a deeper insight into how it might feel to experience such perceptions on a daily basis. I was away – the scenes involving Mia became the most fun parts of the book to write and I felt inspired to go fearlessly into my interpretation of synaesthesia. The result was writing different from any I'd done before, loaded with sense perceptions and surprising associations. Here's a quick look at a scene where Mia recalls walking into the sea for the first time at the age of three:

I waded in up to my waist holding my father's hand, and I gasped and gasped at the cold salt pushing into and around me, the gelatinous seaweed sliming up through my toes, the sunlight splashing so brightly on the tips of the waves that I heard musical notes as I watched. My father asked if I was enjoying myself and I couldn't respond. The velveteen foam, the thorny cries of the gulls, the cold potato grasp of his hand: these things took up all the spaces of my mind. Entering the sea was all-round sensory submersion and it turned me into a walking jelly.



Weekends are Taller than Weekdays, by Marcia Smilack

In my opinion, research is never ‘enough’ to write convincingly about a condition or illness that one doesn’t have. What is needed is an imaginative engagement with the subject; authors must find their own way of inhabiting their characters’ worlds, of tasting the salt of their tears and breathing the air they breathe. For me, the magic key to this empathetic world is dreaming.

While writing my first novel, I developed a method for entering the inspired creative state of the ‘writer’s trance’ through focusing on vivid dream images and allowing them to move and transform into imagined scenes, like a waking version of lucid dreaming. I experimented with lucidity as a dream-route not only into the psyche of my characters but as a way to literally get inside their skin, as demonstrated with the synaesthesia dreams.

Now, with my second novel, *Dreamrunner*, which I’m currently writing, I am learning to inhabit the mind of a man who suffers from violent, recurrent nightmares which he can’t remember upon waking but which cause him to leap, shouting, from his bed and run onto the streets of Lisbon, fighting his dream characters. We all experience a natural paralysis while we’re asleep, which affects every muscle in our body apart from the respiratory apparatus (for obvious reasons!) and the eyelids, which can be seen to move in REM sleep.

In REM sleep behaviour disorder sufferers, this natural paralysis is lifted and dreamers physically enact often violent scenarios. The dreamer has no idea that he is dreaming, yet his body is performing the most unbelievable range of physical actions – jumping from the bed, running, smashing into furniture, all while fast asleep.

People wake up covered in blood and don’t know why. They wake up with broken toes from kicking frantically against hard objects in the room. They wake up to learn that they have hurt members of their family without knowing they were doing it. It can be most traumatic for them and for family members, not to mention dangerous.



Sleepwalker, by Maggi Hambling

In severe cases, people have badly hurt or even killed their bed partner, mistaking them for a dream enemy, or they've damaged themselves by jumping through windows or crashing into objects that they simply don't see, as all their attention is on their inner dreamscape. RBD is a good example of automatism: an unconsciously performed act. In legal cases, defendants have been found innocent due to an automatism defence such as homicide while sleepwalking. I've been researching this condition in conventional ways, reading up on Dr. Carlos Schenk's extensive and ground-breaking work into the disorder, and surfing the internet for stories from sufferers. I've also opened myself up to dreaming into this difficult subject.

I've had an increase in violent dreams since I started working on RBD. I had them only very rarely before, but because I'm writing vivid, violent scenes, and imagining myself into the character's mind-set, this has affected my dreams and it's only to be expected. I am able draw on any violent scenes in my dreams to inform my written scenes. In one semi-lucid dream, I dreamed I was asleep in bed with a man who went straight into a violent RBD scenario, smashing into wardrobes, yelling and screaming. In the dream, I was shocked and distressed, but part of me knew (in a vague, not particularly lucid way) that I was dreaming this and that I was witnessing the effects of RBD on a bed

partner. This dream helped me to write a chapter in which the protagonist has his first violent RBD incident, narrated through the eyes of his wife of eight years. Here's a short extract:

It's as if an electric shock runs through Carlos' body in an intense spasm. I judder awake, and in the half-light, I see him leap from the bed with astonishing speed and height, as if he has the power of flight. He's yelling something incoherent at full volume, and the desperation in his voice cuts straight to my heart. I sit up, groping for the lamp switch with one hand, the other stretched out towards Carlos as if this will calm him.

He's standing at the foot of the bed in his boxer shorts, and as the light clicks on I see his eyes, wide and fearful, unseeing. Sweat shines off his bare torso and he is hyperventilating, his breath hoarse and panicky.

'Oh, God, what's wrong?' I cry, struggling from the bed, my nightie tangling in the sheets, my hair half blinding me. There must be some disaster, I think. Is it our son Leo, a snake in the bed, an earthquake?

Carlos doesn't register my voice or even seem to notice the sudden light. His muscles are bunched as if he's about to fight, and before I can say another word, he runs from the room with a prolonged groan, crashing heavily into the corner of the wardrobe as he goes but not reacting to the pain, those staring green eyes focusing on nothing.

He's asleep, I realise, and the eeriness of it makes a shiver run through me because he seems like a stranger. I rush after him, calling for him to stop.

Another interesting way in which my dreams have helped me to deepen and expand my understanding of RBD has been with a series of *literal* examples of how it feels to wake up moving due to some action that's been taking place in your dream. For a short period covering a month or so, when I first started the novel, I had several incidents where I would wake up in a half-sitting position, my hand outstretched, or I'd kick out in my sleep and awaken laughing that I'd done it again (I don't think my husband found it quite so amusing!). On some of these occasions, which only ever involved mild movements, I'd experience all the disorientation of someone struggling from a dream into waking reality, and it would take me a while to remember what I'd been dreaming about.

These were all very helpful feelings in terms of understanding what my character must be going through. They enabled me to internalise the experience of RBD and

glimpse how easily dream enactment disorders might happen to anyone. At times this was a frightening thought – I wondered whether the very fact of focusing intently on the disorder and being so open to learning more about it in my dreams might actually trigger it. As you can see, this did appear to happen in a very minor way, with those few incidents of dream movement. The disturbing idea that I could potentially trigger a sleep disorder in myself charged my writing with emotion. It's all grist to the mill. Still, I admit to being faintly relieved when the helpful examples of dream enactment stopped happening; I get the feeling that they would have stopped seeming quite so funny and intriguing if they had continued!

When I was a child, I went through periods of sleepwalking, and my memory of these moving dream states remains extraordinarily clear, as with lucid dreams or vivid non-lucid dreams. I can see again what I saw through my dreaming eyes, and can recall being gently led back to my bed by my mother. Many RBD sufferers don't recall what they were dreaming about unless they are asked immediately after waking up from the dream, and it is left to their family members to piece together the action of the dream through clues such as their physical actions and spoken words while in that state. Witnessing an RBD attack must be like having a window into someone else's dream life; a window that is only partially opened and gives a rather confused picture.

I believe that lucid dreaming could provide a cure for some RBD sufferers – after all, if they manage to recognise that they're dreaming, they could then remind themselves that there's no need to run and fight. Theoretically, sufferers could wake themselves up, or calm the dream right down, change it into something positive, and continue to sleep peacefully. The triggering dream in RBD sufferers is often different each time – a single sufferer reported RBD episodes triggered by these different dreams: a wicked witch laughing at the window, a missile flying across the street, a toilet about to explode, the police chasing her (Schenk 2005, p.229). Lucid dreaming has been shown to be useful in eliminating nightmares (Arnold-Forster 1921, LaBerge & Rheingold 1990), and perhaps if a familiarity with lucid dreaming is cultivated in RBD sufferers, they'll be more likely to become lucid during any violent dreams, so giving themselves the opportunity to avoid or cut short another dream enactment episode. In *Dreamrunner*, I'll be elaborating this theory as well as looking at the root trauma behind violent, moving nightmares.

The dreaming mind is gifted at providing experiential solutions to problems. Hopefully the examples I've given here of experiencing synaesthesia and dream

enactment as part of my research into novel writing will serve to demonstrate the flexibility of dreaming and its enormous scope in helping creative artists in very practical ways. Actively engaging with the dreaming imagination can help those involved in any creative project to make headway, often with startlingly original results.

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