

Book Review

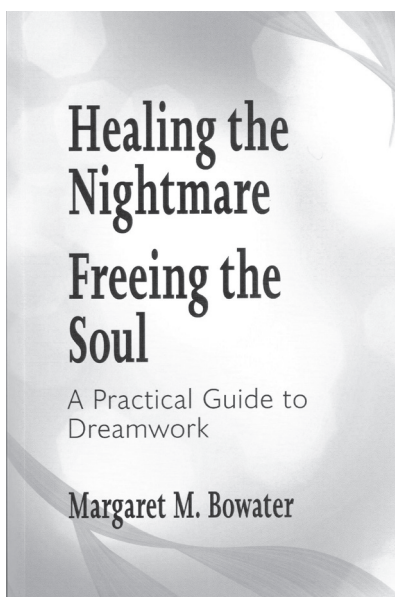
Healing the Nightmare, Freeing the Soul. A Practical Guide to Dreamwork.

By Margaret Bowater. (2016). Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand: Calico.

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This is Margaret Bowater's second book, published nearly 20 years after her first which had the overlapping topic area of dreams and visions. This time, Margaret focuses specifically on nightmares, on dreams that she characterises as leaving the awakening dreamer with feelings of helplessness and powerlessness, fear and terror, or guilt and shame — certainly not in a state of happy mastery of life. Reading about nightmares is potentially a heavy topic, especially when dreams are narrated from that end of the dream spectrum where nightmares are prevalent and recurrent as consequences of unresolved trauma and abuse. Maybe this is the reason why Margaret does not include in her target group dreamers of nightmares, and she does not advocate the book as a self-help book à la “the 101 of how to deal with my nightmares”. Instead, she aims her writing at health care professionals, clergy and caregivers/parents.

Psychotherapists are not specifically mentioned.

The book roughly comprises three sections, each subdivided into several chapters.

In part one the author lays out the foundations of understanding nightmares. She classifies dreams into six categories (such as shadow-self or post-trauma dreams) and she gives a very brief and maybe superficial introduction to brain processes while sleeping. She then proceeds to give an overview of how to make meaning and work with dreams in a step by step process. One of these steps is to draw the dream on a whiteboard or on paper. I have used this technique on several occasions with clients and my own dreams and have been surprised by its effectiveness in amplifying dream meanings and in accessing otherwise

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overlooked messages from the unconscious. I now see “Margaret’s drawing technique” as an, on occasion, highly valuable additional technique for dream work.

Part two of the book covers trauma related dreams. This section addresses the clinical spectrum of nightmares where dreams are repetitive and terrifyingly immediate with strong physical responses and initially often with an extremely limited scope of responses of the dreaming victim to the endured trauma. Margaret gives the example of one woman’s dream in which she died but her spirit survived. The section includes children’s dreams (such as post-hospitalisation) and may therefore be especially helpful for parents to assist their children’s processing. Even in this heavier section including nightmares post-sexual abuse Margaret stays true to her underpinning philosophy so aptly captured in the book’s title of the healing power of nightmares, and, in this, the potential for positive transformation via the nightmares and the work with nightmares through developing alternate, more empowered endings.

The topic of part three is spiritual and transpersonal dreams and nightmares. The section is strongly aligned with the author’s world view of Spirit and a spiritual world transcending and underpinning our human and physical world. As in the other sections, Margaret gives many dream examples. She lets clients voice the meanings they attach to their dreams. For example, one dreamer is reported in understanding his dream, at hindsight, as pre-cognitive and prophetic of his wife’s later leaving him. Other dreams are seen as warning dreams about future events. The meaning of specific symbols is also addressed, such as the “readily” (p. 179) meaning of a grey owl that had appeared as a dream symbol as a seer in the dark.

The book contains more than 80 dream reports, many of them highlighting the progression of healing as this is paralleled and fostered through the soul’s processing via dreaming and the potential subsequent conscious work with the dream. These dream reports very much enlivened the reading for me. I never once felt overloaded by the presented material nor did I feel vicariously traumatised. I believe this is because Margaret takes such good care of the reader to provide a counterbalance to the nightmare topic: the book cover is kept in swirls of different shades of calm orange to very light yellow. This gives the reader a visually uplifting experience through choice of colour and overall art design. Throughout the book there are fitting, uplifting cartoons interspersed that depict dream elements. Most importantly, however, Margaret has maintained her positive humanistic and spiritual stance in holding her reader in a place of trust in the potential for healing and transformation — even when this process entails the unpleasant experience of facing one’s nightmares.

I have appreciated reading this very accessible book. Margaret is able to combine a flowing, narrative writing style with clarity of thought, fitting inclusion of other dream specialists’ writing, and succinct summaries of some relevant research. Throughout her writing, Margaret’s sensitive care of, and consistent compassion for, her clients is very apparent and appealing for me as the reader. They point to Margaret’s solid fostering of helpful therapeutic relationships with her clients and workshop participants as necessary underpinnings for working with distressing dreams.

I see this book as potentially supportive reading for psychotherapists who wish to develop their expertise in working with dreams. Margaret’s book can foster this, primarily

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through a process of “absorption by immersion” of Margaret’s positive, active stance of working with dreams and her two core techniques of drawing the dream and creating alternate, empowering endings to the dream. I may recommend the book to some of my clients as a beneficial resource while undergoing psychotherapy and thus having a strongly holding, supportive relationship. *Healing the Nightmare, Freeing the Soul* can assist clients in opening up to their nightmares and dreams with an attitude of hope and trust in the potential of their dream life to assist in their healing and transformation.

The book can be ordered from calicopublishing.co.nz or direct from Margaret Bowater, mandebowater@gmail.com .



Brigitte Puls is a part-time senior lecturer in the Discipline of Psychotherapy at AUT. In her private practice, Brigitte provides (usually long-term) psychotherapy for adults, adolescents and children as well as supervision to colleagues. Her professional background spans clinical psychology, psychotherapy and dance-movement therapy. Her approach to psychotherapy is best described by her relational, embodied, experience-near stance. Contact details: brigitte.puls@aut.ac.nz .