



LOGGEE

An Interview with Gina Nutt

(WRITER)

by Jeannie Vanasco April 20th, 2021



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After reaching the last page of Gina Nutt's debut essay collection, *Night Rooms*, I immediately returned to the first. This time I studied the ways that each essay coheres around fragments to create a hallucinatory experience that doesn't obscure but instead deepens the subjects that Nutt explores. When she writes about ballet, beauty contests, and themed college parties, she shows their bleakness through self-aware examinations of depression, anxiety, and body image. She breaks apart almost every essay with horror film references or allusions, which, as Amy Berkowitz points out, "describe feelings and experiences that can't be expressed in words."

I recently assigned *Night Rooms* in my undergraduate nonfiction workshop because every semester students tell me they want to write about confusing or traumatic experiences but don't know how without revealing more than they feel comfortable revealing. When Nutt writes about her father-in-law, uncle, and great uncle who died from suicide, she avoids oversimplifying or speculating on their reasons. When she writes about sexual assault, she avoids showing the assault in any conventional way—instead, she describes it with questions:

“ Was there anything atop the dressers? Was the floor carpeted or bare wood? What was the finish? How high was the pile? Was the room clean or dirty? A child's room or an adult's room? How big was the bed? Was it a trick question if the answer is two stacked twin mattresses on a bunk frame? Could anyone hear? Who was in the other rooms? Would they say I let this happen and what would they call this? Were there curtains in the windows? Were they opened or closed? Were there streetlights outside? How many lit versus how many burnt out?

The other reason I assigned *Night Rooms*: the lyricism is astounding. Her sentences, as Chelsea Hodson describes them, are "chainsaw-sharp." It's no surprise that Nutt is also a poet. Her phenomenal full-length collection, *Wilderness Champion*, which came out in 2014 from Gold Wake Press, balances humor with heartbreak, with lines such as, "Determined to know something definite about disaster, I gave up charting constellations and hoped to become a dinosaur" and "I take a memory and bury it like the dead thing it is. I kiss the dirt and say, 'There there, dead thing. I do not miss you nearly as much as I miss everything I have not yet buried.'" Nutt graduated from Syracuse University's MFA program in Creative Writing, where she was the Lou Reed/Delmore Schwartz Scholar and served as poetry editor and editor-in-chief of *Salt Hill Journal*. She is now an associate editor for *Black Lawrence Press*.

I wanted to hear Nutt describe the influence of poetry and horror movies on her creative process for *Night Rooms*. We talked over Zoom—her in Ithaca, and me in Baltimore—shortly before *Night Rooms*'s release. What follows is a condensed version of that conversation.

—Jeannie Vanasco

THE BELIEVER: I've been rereading *Night Rooms* so much that it's spilling into my dreams.

GINA NUTT: Oh my gosh.

BLVR: You mention a dream app in the book, which allows you to read strangers' dreams. We don't really know one another, and so going on about the dream could be a mistake.

GN: I love hearing other people's dreams. What better way to know someone—what they care about, or love, or fear.

BLVR: The dream was weird. A taxidermed cat was on my couch. I was on the other side of the room, and each time I glanced at it, it moved a little. I thought, *The cat is still alive*. So I went over, thinking I might help it, but when I looked into its eyes, I realized it was a demon inhabiting a cat's body. I immediately worried that it was going to attack my cats, so I quickly picked it up and carried it to the back door and tossed it outside. When I woke up, I saw your essay collection on my nightstand and thought, *Of course*. You write about Victorian taxidermy tableaux featuring cats and you also write about horror.

GN: It's funny you shared that because we call one of our cats "the demon." [Laughs] She's a tortoiseshell cat, and torties have very distinct personalities, some attitude. It's cool to hear the book is permeating your dreams. Or maybe not if they're upsetting. Your dream reminds me of a James Tate poem, or several of them spliced together, something about wanting to help the demon-cat and also wanting to protect your cats.

BLVR: [Laughs] I love that it's permeating my dreams. *Night Rooms* holds dreams and so many other fragmentary images and memories and pieces of information. One of the main thematic through-lines involves horror films. When did you know that those were going to become a big part of *Night Rooms*?

GN: A few persona poems in my poetry collection *Wilderness Champion* riff off the "final girl"—that trope of the woman alive at the end of a horror movie—and so this book, in a way, felt like a fuller exploration of that. But also, my husband and I watch a lot of movies. For whatever reason, after his dad passed, watching movies in the middle of a weekend day was a way we could be with each other, without talking or trying to move through the world in put-together ways. For his birthday that year, we hosted a movie night and a few friends came over and watched *Phantom of the Paradise*. After drafting the *It Follows* essay, I was thinking about other movies that resonated on that bone-deep memory level, my tendency to watch and rewatch, so I think that's when I committed to horror movies on a longer timeline, when I couldn't stop thinking or writing about them.

BLVR: Carl Jung said that horror movies "tapped into primordial archetypes buried deep in our collective subconscious." Does that sound right?

VN: I think that quote is so true. Horror movies do tap into archetypes. They also tap into our deepest fears and our insecurities, and if not our own specific fears and insecurities, those that someone else might experience. While working on the book, a few friends shared they couldn't watch horror movies because the world is so hard, and the volume on human cruelty was exponentially louder during the last administration. Horror movies remark on the world we live in, sometimes an amplified, more horrifying and gruesome version of the world, but also one that wants to know the "primordial archetypes"—instead of refusing to acknowledge and understand them.

BLVR: I realized recently that I can watch horror movies straight through if women are not the ones primarily being tortured. I never had to look away from *Midsommar* because men were the ones mostly being tortured. What was that scene where the guy's organs were out of his body in some contraption?

GN: The blood eagle! Yeah, the lungs pulled out the back.

BLVR: I thought that was a beautiful shot. It was so stylized. How do you watch horror movies? I mean, do you watch them the entire time? Or do you often look away?

GN: Sometimes watching them in a theater isn't easy. I startle easily, so really loud sounds are hard. But now I would give anything to be in a movie theater, watching a movie with strangers, even with the crunching of snacks. The first time I saw *It Follows* in theaters, I was wiling in my seat. So while you're like this [covers eyes], I'm like this [covers ears] covering my ears. The jump scares really startle me.

In terms of really violent movies, there are some movies that I won't watch, and movies I'll watch but look away from, or I'll go in the kitchen while super-intense scenes are playing. I like slashers, the kitschy and overall timeless feel of them. But sometimes I prefer older, moodier films, like *Eyes Without a Face* or *Carnival of Souls*. It all depends on my mood and headspace.

BLVR: In *Night Rooms*, you write about a movie that shows a sexual assault. I'm forgetting the title.

GN: *The Last House on the Left*.

BLVR: Your boyfriend at the time argued that showing the sexual assault scene in *The Last House on the Left* was necessary to understanding the parents' violent revenge. Your book perfectly demonstrates that someone can write about sexual assault without dramatizing it in scene. Can you talk about that decision? Because I think there's this expectation that women who've survived sexual assault are supposed to put everything out there. It connects to your interrogation of the final girl trope: *One assumption about a final girl being the person who lives to tell the story is that her survival is attached to telling; she is expected to say it, to tell, again and again; she can't live without a saying so revealing she is bare before the audience, the moment is bare*.

GN: Maybe it's an impossible approach, to talk about this in "craft" terms, but part of my choice hinged on ideas about story, the arcs we're used to and the expectations those stories create. Can you write about something, but not show it? Of course, you just find a good way to go about it. Easier said than done. I wrote this essay so many ways before it arrived at this place. Early drafts had less description, the next drafts had more, which didn't sit with me, especially since the essay begins with the boyfriend insisting we have to see a dramatization.

The paragraph you mention unlocked things for me. After stumbling through so many drafts and feeling unsettled with letting that much be in the world, I asked, *Why do I have to show this?* Once I got there, I revised the essay toward that question, cutting away a lot, knowing some readers expect those details, those modes of story, but also that expectations are part of what I'm writing about. That's a whole essay in and of itself, how much to give or not. I also leave out detailed suicide descriptions and, it's something, I knew early on I wouldn't share those details. I wanted to honor a sense of privacy I feel is often not given to people who choose suicide. I think writing about one taught me how I could write about the other.

BLVR: Your essay collection—the style and the tone of it, the way that you make these associative leaps and work with fragmentation—is very poetic. You went to grad school for poetry. Did any of the essays start as poems?

GN: None of these essays started as poems, but prose poetry was the form I leaned into most during grad school, and in a lot of ways it guided the book. I thought a lot about compression and distilling, crystalizing paragraphs, sentences, and images. It took time for me to understand these components could move the book.

Shortly after my father-in-law passed away I had a hard time writing. So I just wrote about death. The memory of bringing my mom a dead mouse opened into *It Follows*, the sense of suicide following me, anxiety and depression in my own life. The urgency was there, but the shape was a mess. I was moving material around, getting needlessly experimental. As the book grew, I tried to excise my poetic tendencies and sound more academic or critical. That wasn't me though. So I told myself I was just writing one prose poem after another.

Several drafts in, I worked with the writer Chelsea Hodson, who was really tuned in to the book's poetic pull. She led me toward balancing dreamy states with clarifying moments. Books like Clarice Lispector's *Água Viva* and Heidi Julavits' *The Folded Clock* also helped because the writing in both asks a reader to give herself over to the book's meditative logic, the speaker's world, in the same way a poem makes this ask.

BLVR: After rereading your book, I noticed a lot of subtle repetition, and I wondered whether you had done a lot of rearranging. In the first essay, for example, you mention an element of the creature-feature genre—*life emerged from lake or sea*—and then in the last essay you address one origin of the word *soul*: *coming from or belonging to the sea*. Also, early on in the book, you mention that fences were put around bridges in Ithaca to prevent suicides, but some residents didn't want fences because they obstructed the view. The community came to a compromise, putting nets underneath. And then, to ward the very end of the book, you write, *Some bridges have nets beneath them*. The sentence there operates more metaphorically as part of a larger, lyrical passage: *Some bridges have nets beneath them. Some mottos make me wish I lived some place else. Some years I was a cat. I was not the knife. I have felt the future closing in instead of expanding. I have imagined days and nights tilting forward without me. Overwhelmed by blankness. Like a street during a snowstorm*. The repetitions, spread-out like that, give the overall book a sense of closure without framing it too neatly. What does your drafting process look like?

GN: Once a project outlines journaling and transcribing, I'll have an ongoing Word doc. I'll just keep going, making a new draft when I feel like, for whatever reason, there should be a new draft. I liked printing this manuscript, cutting it up, and taping the pieces on my office wall. I do this with poems as well. It makes it easier to see what's where and move pieces around, consider other logics. In later drafts, I color-coded notecards for different threads: "movies," "language/wander/fugue," "death," "childhood," "now." Blue was for movies. It helped to see everything stuck on the wall with painter's tape. I was able to say, *Oh, well, this is a bunch of movies. You need to move some of these movies elsewhere*. Or, *I could read here*. So, I did a lot of rearranging across drafts. This was also a way new threads or ideas emerged, and others fell away—they didn't quite fit or I lost interest.

BLVR: How do you feel now that the book is done?

GN: I feel like I'm living all the lives I lived while writing it in time-lapse. I'm remembering people I'm missing people. Mostly, I'm grateful I got to write the book I wanted to write, work with my dream press, and share it. The pandemic has me, like lots of folks, reassessing the bar for what in this life would make me happy, asking what it takes. Being able to write a book and have it go into the world is so unique. I'm trying to take it all in.

CONTRIBUTOR



Jeannie Vanasco is the author of two memoirs, *Things We Didn't Talk About* and *When I Was a Girl and The Glass Eye*. *Things We Didn't Talk About* When I Was a Girl—a *New York Times* Editor's Choice, a *Kirkus* Best Book of the Year, and a *TIME* magazine Must-Read Book of the Year—was published by Tin House Books in 2019 and comes out in paperback this fall. *The Glass Eye*—honored as an Indie Next selection and an Indies Introduce selection by the American Booksellers Association—was published by Tin House Books in 2017. She lives in Baltimore and is an assistant professor of English at Towson University.

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