



The Curing Room

Michael Winn

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Michael Winn's *The Curing Room* is a swift psychological thriller that delves into themes of mental illness, revenge, and healing.

Ava is a demure adjunct professor at a small New England college. Unlucky in love and passed over for the promotion she craves, she uses her ancient house's curing room to heal from her growing resentment. Ava's path crosses with that of a charming student, Jared, when they witness the tragic death of an incoming freshman. They are thrown into a complex web of secrets and crimes that takes them from allies to deadly enemies.

Beginning slow and then heating up, the story alternates between Ava's and Jared's viewpoints. Ava is a bland lead at first, but she becomes more layered over the course of the story. Her driving purpose is her resentment—toward colleagues and former boyfriends especially. Much of the story takes place in her memory, giving it her own twist from the beginning. Jared is a foggier character; he is purposeful in hiding his past from everyone, including himself. Secondary characters, including Ava's humorous but blunt colleague Professor Quinn, are well developed even if they appear only briefly.

Language is direct and visceral. Opening chapters dwell on sharp observations of an average, even dreamy, day: the leaves on trees, what characters are wearing, normal interactions. The dreaminess ends in a sudden way, and the juxtaposition of violence with the ordinary is strong. The freshman's accident is described in unflinching detail, with the same clarity as descriptions of summer leaves.

The text captures images in quick snaps, echoing a stream of erratic thought. Occasionally the pace grows frantic and hard to follow, but this also echoes the plot's plunge into the theme of mental illness. The story grows more and more raw and violent, and some moments are uncomfortable.

The story rides on misdirection, hiding key plot points until abrupt reveals. Characters lie and change their stories from chapter to chapter. Hooks are constant and attention is secured; intriguing cliffhangers are frequent. The facts aren't clear until a late and surprising twist.

Characters who at first seem unimportant later prove to be vital. Others who first seem villainous prove to be heroes. Dialogue is blunt and hard-hitting, revealing layers in characters who seemed less dimensional before. The novel's culminating question is not "What is the curing room?" but rather "What needs to be cured?"

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SAVANNAH DANTONA (November 19, 2018)

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