



Wishing for Snow

By Minrose Gwin
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Introduction

For novelist Minrose Gwin, growing up was a time of chaos and uncertainty, the result of? being raised by a parent with a serious mental illness. Life with poet Erin Taylor was unpredictable at best and painful at the worst times, as she spiraled ever deeper into psychosis until her eventual death from cancer. But reading her mother's childhood diary as an adult, Minrose encountered a very different Erin Taylor Clayton Pitner. Her late mother's words, written in the 1930s, revealed a cheerful, perceptive young girl growing up in rural Mississippi who wished for snow that "usually didn't come" a girl with a bright view of the future as she progressed from college student to young mother to published poet, only to have an unbearable darkness close in around her, cruelly suffocating her hopes and dreams.

In her poignant and extraordinary memoir *Wishing for Snow*, Minrose Gwin sets out to rediscover her mother in the poems, letters, newspaper clippings, and quixotic lists that Erin left behind after her death. The result is an unforgettable true story of a Southern family and the tragic figure at its center and a loving daughter's determination to find the mother she never knew.

Questions for Discussion

1. 'I sure do hope it will snow tonight.' Every other chapter in Minrose Gwin's memoir about her brilliant but mentally tormented mother is an excerpt from her mother's diary when she was a chipper nine year old growing up in Mississippi yet always *Wishing for Snow*. What is the purpose of these alternating chapters in young Erin Taylor's child's voice, a voice so at odds with the adult that she became?
2. Throughout *Wishing for Snow* Gwin questions her own story of Erin Taylor Pitner's life and Gwin's rocky relationship with her mother, saying 'It's hard to tell the truth. The memory plays tricks. We can dream things that never happen. Things happen that cannot be dreamed.' Does the author's uncertainty about the truth of the past and her mother's life make us trust her story more or less?
3. *Wishing for Snow* is littered with debris from the past: a lab report on her mother's ovarian cancer, a recipe for egg-and-olive spread, a police report, to-do lists, newspaper clippings, sofa pillows, letters, and the like. The author, we are told, can't work with these dusty relics unless she is outside in the fresh air of New Mexico, where she can breathe freely. She spreads all these things out on her card table, another remnant from her relationship with her mother, and quotes freely from them in telling her story. What do they add to the memoir?
4. 'I am the daughter of the woman who wrote this poem.' What is the effect of Gwin's inclusion of Erin Taylor's poetry throughout the book?
5. Why does Gwin write so extensively about her mother's southern family, going several generations back?
6. *Wishing for Snow* hops, skips, and jumps through time, the past and present always held in tension with each other. Why would Gwin choose this nonlinear way of telling her story?
7. There are funny stories sprinkled throughout the memoir, from Erin Taylor's pride in her homemade bedroom shoes with bells on the toes to her snitching the flowers from the church altar. How would you describe Gwin's brand of humor and how does humor work in the story?
8. Toward the end of *Wishing for Snow*, Gwin writes: 'My life takes its shape because of my mother's absence from it. But that shape is not anything I can see. It is instead a gesture, the way my dog cocked his head when I said his name a moment ago or the birds now settling at the feeder, scratching and snuffling.' What is the difference between a shape and a gesture? Why does Gwin use those terms to describe her life?
9. The theme of hunger occurs throughout the book. At various points, Minrose's grandmother eats too much, her mother eats only green beans, and the author herself becomes temporarily fixated on baked potatoes. Even stories themselves, as noted in the next question, become 'hungry to be told again.' What is this hunger about?
10. In sum, Gwin says: 'Some stories are never satisfied. They fly away only to return, predictably, in their own good time, hungry to be told again.' Do we leave *Wishing for Snow* feeling that the author has resolved her powerful but troubled relationship to her mother?

About the Author

Minrose Gwin has been a writer all of her working life, starting out as a newspaper and wire service reporter and working in Mobile, Atlanta, Nashville, and Knoxville. She was a finalist for the 2010 Julia Peterkin Award, and *The Queen of Palmyra*, her first novel, was selected as a finalist for the 2010 John Gardner Fiction Book Award. *The Queen of Palmyra* was a Barnes & Noble 'Discover Great New Writers' pick and an *IndieBound* Notable book. The Women's National Book Association selected it as one of 13 'Great Group Reads' for 2010. It was hailed by Lee Smith as 'the most powerful and also the most lyrical novel about race, racism, and denial in the American South since *To Kill a Mockingbird*,' and Jill McCorkle calls it 'a brilliant and compelling novel'. The beauty of the prose, the strength of

voice and the sheer force of circumstance will hold the reader spellbound from beginning to end.'

Wishing for Snow, Minrose's memoir about the convergence of poetry and psychosis in her mother's life has been praised by Booklist as 'eloquent' and 'lyrical'"a real life story we all need to hear.' Published in 2004, it is being reissued as a Harper Perennial paperback. As a literary critic, she has written three scholarly books (one a CHOICE book of the year) and is a coeditor of *The Literature of the American South*, published by W.W. Norton, and the *Southern Literary Journal*.

Minrose teaches literature and creative writing at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and fiction and creative nonfiction workshops at the University of New Mexico Taos Writers Conference.