

An outbreak story — just a little too soon

'The Dreamers' by Karen Thompson Walker

By Lisa Britton

Go! Magazine

I belong to a book club in Baker City, and sometimes when we brainstorm our next book we are overwhelmed with all the countless choices. New releases? Classics? Fiction? Nonfiction?

For February, I suggested we choose an Oregon author in honor of Oregon's birthday on Feb. 14 (my kids think celebrating this birthday is more fun than Valentine's Day).

For inspiration, I did a search on Google and found a post titled "10 books by Oregon authors that should be on your reading list" (find the post here: www.hasson.com/blog/2020/04/oregon-authors-that-should-be-on-your-reading-list/).

It has older books, such as "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest" by Ken Kesey (which I haven't read) and newer offerings like "Strange the Dreamer" by Laini Taylor (I zipped through this young adult novel, and its sequel, several years ago).

One that really caught my eye, though, was "The Dreamers" by Karen Thompson Walker. The premise is this: In a small California college town, a student goes to sleep and doesn't wake

up. Soon others fall into the same deep sleep — alive, but their brain waves registering extraordinary activity.

This line in the post caught my eye: "Written in luminous prose, 'The Dreamers' is a story about how life goes on, even in the midst of a crisis."

The book club didn't choose it for the month, but I added it to my "to read" list.

Then April brought winter back with a vengeance, and what better way to spend a snowy weekend than reading?

I picked up "The Dreamers" and entered the world of Santa Lora, California.

I had to take a break several times.

Don't get me wrong — the prose is wonderful, and the story is good. But it's eerie — "The Dreamers" was published in 2019, but it felt like I was reading about the pandemic we just lived through.

Perhaps the author simply captured how humans react to a crisis — something I'd never seen on a global scale until 2020. But I could feel my pulse start to race as I read about quarantines and masks and panic in the grocery stores.

If I had read "The Dreamers" in 2019, I would have found it an interesting story about human nature — like how I felt when I read "Station Eleven" by Emily St. John Mandel (in that 2014 book, a virus causes total destruction of the world as we know it, and the few survivors live

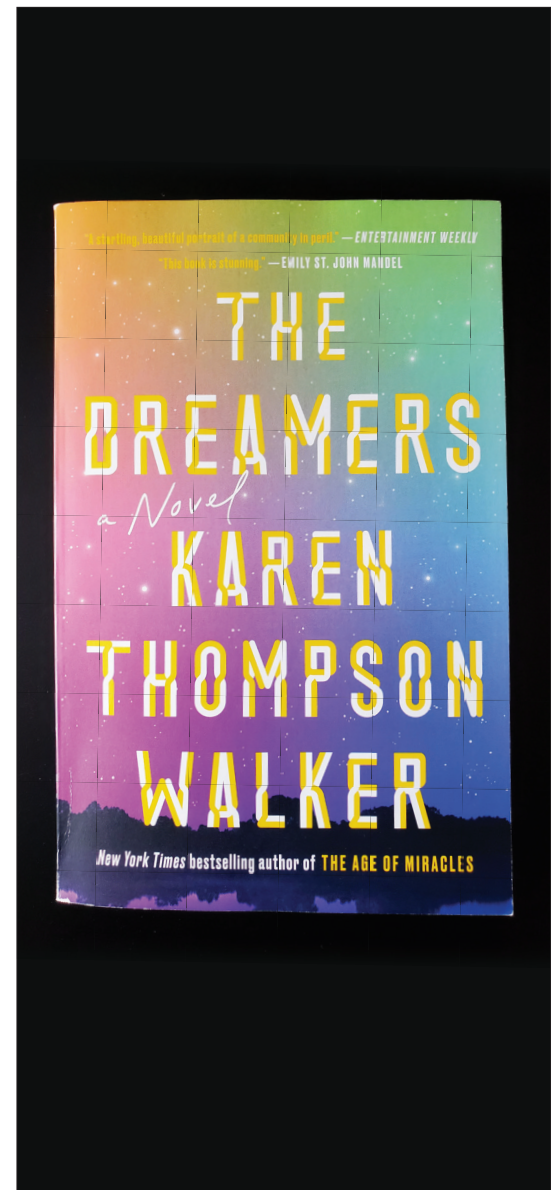
in small settlements. It is very much a survival tale).

It is so fascinating to me how we react to books. Sometimes, we pick up a book and it's just the story we need at that point in our life. Other times, a book just doesn't quite fit — yet if we pick it up years later, it reads just fine.

I feel like it wasn't quite fair that I read "The Dreamers" in 2022. I wish, instead, that I'd read it in 2019 and then, as the pandemic unfolded in 2020, I would have thought back to that story and marveled at how fiction reflects real life.

Instead I read this novel with the knowledge of how humans react to a crisis — how fear can cause strange reactions that aren't always rational. Now that I think about it, the author did an amazing job of capturing the human reaction — how some people hide in fear while others go about life as normal, and how the health care workers work tirelessly to care for patients with an unknown affliction — so overwhelmed by the sheer volume of sick people that they barely have time to think, let alone figure out a treatment or cure.

I'm always wary of giving book recommendations because everyone's tastes are so different. But I am glad I read "The Dreamers" because it introduced me to a new author and I've put her first novel, "The Age of Miracles," on my reading list.



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