



CORMORANT BOOKS

DCB

***The Pain Tree* by Olive Senior Teacher's Guide**

Created by Martha Brack Martin with support from Olive Senior and the Cormorant Team



Olive Senior's collection of short stories in *The Pain Tree* are each little gems. The stories deal with universal themes and characters but in the context of Jamaican culture and history. Olive Senior is the Poet Laureate of Jamaica and writes not only fiction and poetry, but also drama and non-fiction. This diversity in her chosen genres makes her a great author for students of English, creative writing, or post-colonial history to study. Her work is funny, sad, inspiring, shocking, and above all, thought-provoking.

Themes

Some key themes and “big ideas” in this book include:

- Home
- Belonging
- Loss
- Family
- Resilience
- Betrayal
- Absent parents
- Motherhood

The Plot

The Pain Tree tells stories that speak to all aspects of Jamaican life. Among the characters we hear from are: poor folk making the best of past hardships (“Coal”); rich folk plotting future selfishness (“The Goodness of My Heart”); an old man, familiar with darkness, who discovers in foreign capitalism a force even he cannot control (“Boxed-In”); a young girl, uprooted to a new country, forced to shoulder her mother’s unspoken burdens in addition to her own (“Lollipop”). Bookending these are two powerful stories about the inextricability of home and history: in “The Pain Tree,” the protagonist comes to realize the love she has abandoned and the pain she has left behind; in “Flying,” the lead character, searching for that which has been missing most of his life, comes home for good.

The Setting

The stories are set in Jamaica and Canada, in both the present and the past.

What Kind of Reader Will Love This Book? One who...

- Loves incredibly well-written short stories
- Wants to understand more about Jamaican culture
- Is fascinated by the universal lived experiences of women
- Appreciates well-crafted “voice” in their reading choices

Pre-Teaching Prep

Trigger Warning: This book has scenes of gun violence, grooming, and implied sexual assault. Consider the life experiences of your students. Some resources are provided below to improve your awareness and support your students.

Awareness of Triggers:

<https://ssaic.ca/learning-resources/triggers-what-are-they/>

<http://www.openingthecircle.ca/defining-abuse/dealing-with-triggers>

Trauma and Gun Violence:

<https://everytownsupportfund.org/everytown-survivor-network/resources-for-victims-and-survivors-of-gun-violence/trauma-and-gun-violence/>

Individual Story Questions (for Independent Work or Class Discussion)

The Pain Tree

1. The story begins with the narrator having a vision of Larissa with a gift in her hands. She adds her vision is absurd, however, because “Larissa was a poor woman with nothing to give” (p. 7). Is this a true statement? What does Larissa give the narrator? Explain.
2. The narrator’s mother is described as “well-preserved” and “carefully layered” (p. 8). Those terms are not often applied to humans. What other things in the story are

carefully layered and well-preserved – or not so well-preserved? What might the author be trying to say?

3. There are several references in this story to the passage of time and the changes it brings. The narrator's perspective has changed now that she has grown up and studied abroad. What are some examples from the text that show her changed perspective?
4. In your opinion, why does the narrator destroy the walls of Larissa's room? Use evidence from the text and your own ideas to support your reasoning.
5. When Larissa tells the narrator, "Maybe people like you don't need the pain tree" (p. 17), the narrator says, "It was the only time I ever felt uncomfortable with her." Why do you think she felt uncomfortable? Explain.
6. What is the significance of the nail going straight into the pain tree in the last line of the story?

Moonlight (CW: Implied Sexual Assault)

1. In this story, the main character is brave for her age – until she discovers a family secret that causes her world to be shaken. Have you ever made a discovery or experienced an event that caused your personality to change, even for a brief time? What advice would you give the main character? Why?
2. Since the mother of the narrator clearly knew what was going on with her husband, why do you suppose she didn't address it prior to the last morning in the story?
3. Are you surprised by the reactions of both the mother and father at the end of the story? Why or why not? Explain.

Silent (CW: Gun Violence)

1. It is clear from Joel's reflections that his life in his community has not been easy. What are some of the clues that Joel is not new to violence?
2. The author contrasts brief descriptions of tiny everyday things like the chenille bedspread, the small rug, and Joel's mother's slippers with the violent actions experienced by the family. How does this affect the reader? Do you think it is common for people in violent situations to focus on everyday things, as Joel seems to do?
3. Why do you suppose the family is being moved so far from home by Miss Simms? Explain your ideas.
4. The author begins the story by describing the "sudden silence" (p. 23) Joel notices after hearing a barrage of gunshots and ends the story on page 29 with a description of stars that are "pulsing like gunshots – but far, far away. And silent." Why does the author repeat these images (though with subtle differences)?

A Father Like That

1. Reema's birth father is named Mr. Canaan. What symbolism is attached to the word "Canaan" in history and in the Bible?
2. How does the author use Reema's "voice" to make her personality come alive? Are there any words or phrases that are unfamiliar to you? Research these and share your research with the class.

3. In what time period would you say this story is set? Use evidence from the text and your own ideas to justify your answer.
4. Why do you think Aunt is “behaving real strange” (p. 43)? Are you surprised? Explain.

Coal (CW: Trauma)

1. How would you describe the relationship between Doll and Sarah? Explain using evidence from the text and your own ideas.
2. Vincent is known as “Boy” for most of his life. His grandfather is known as Coal. Discuss the importance of names in this story and what they mean to their owners and the people around them.
3. Vincent experienced tremendous trauma at a young age. How did it affect him? How was he able to overcome it?
4. The author intentionally describes the process of making coal from found, broken wood in the story. Why do you suppose she includes this? What else might she be suggesting beyond the creation of the material itself? Explain.

The Goodness of My Heart

1. Mrs. Bailiff takes great pride in her social standing and reputation in the community. How does the author use this to provide humour in the story?
2. How did you feel when you heard Mr. Bailiff had ten children, and one was Tidie’s son Griff? Explain.
3. Are there any characters in this story you would describe as actually having a “good heart”? Use details from the story to explain your answer.
4. Does Mrs. Bailiff deserve what happens in her life in your opinion? Why or why not?

Lollipop (CW: Grooming)

1. The author carefully juxtaposes Katie’s life with her grandmother in Jamaica with Katie’s life in Canada with her mother. What do you think the author is trying to say in this story? Explain using specific examples from the text as proof of your opinion.
2. “Katie notices that the lollipop her mother has placed on the counter is identical to the ones in the jar” (p. 100). What is the significance of the lollipops being the same?
3. Katie wants to tell her mother about the man, but “no words come” (p. 100). What do you think holds her silent? Explain.

Boxed-In

1. Despite Mr. Everett’s apparent fine standing in the community, his neighbours do not want his ghosts following them to their new homes. To stop this, they practice some traditional spiritual rites. What do they do?
2. Near the beginning of the story, the author says of Mr. Everett’s decline, “It was as if he had allowed Death to come and claim him long before breath left his body” (p. 104). Why is this a particularly appropriate observation in hindsight?
3. On pages 123 and 124, Mr. Everett concludes:

In rushing to bring the black boxes into their homes, the mountain people were selling themselves back into a kind of bondage worse in one way than that of their ancestors – for once captured by the box, there would be no hope ever of emancipation. They would become forever enthralled.

Mr. Everett sees his community becoming enslaved to “the black box.” Do you believe people today have become enslaved by technology? Explain your opinion.

4. How is Mr. Everett himself the embodiment of the classic literary theme of “appearance versus reality”? Discuss.
5. At its most simple, this is a story of prosperity coming to a rural community and changing the lives of the villagers. How does the author turn it into so much more? Explain using evidence from the text and your own ideas.

The Country Cousin

1. Why do you think Mr. F gave Rose the opportunity to eat the hot pepper at dinner, yet the women in his family were not supposed to do so?
2. Compare the narrative voice the author uses in this story. How is it different from others in the book? Consider how topics are introduced and then picked up again, especially in the beginning of the story. How does her writing style here mimic the character of Mrs. F?
3. Authors show the personalities of their characters by what the characters do, what they say, and by what others say about them. Using these three categories, explain what the author is saying about the character of Mrs. F.
4. Freddie is asked to recommend a book for Mrs. F’s book club. He suggests *Pride and Prejudice*, “raising his hand to make the pronouncement, grinning widely for he considered the title apropos” (p. 35). Why does Freddie think the title is “apropos”? Explain.

Flying

1. There are quite a few ambiguous parts in this story which require the reader to infer the deeper meaning behind the words.
 - a. What do you think Jonathan’s illness is?
 - b. What do you believe happened to Jonathan when his mother sent him to the priest? Explain.
 - c. What do you think YaYa and her friends are doing with all these strange concoctions and actions, as Jonathan becomes more ill? On what do you base your theories?
2. What is the point of Jonathan being able to understand the bird at the end of the story?
3. Why is it significant that the story ends with the bird saying, “Hurry up. Rain is coming. Let’s go” (p. 196)?

Discussion or Essay Questions (All Stories)

- a) Choose the theme of “mothers and children.” Discuss how this theme is used in at least three of the stories, citing specific examples from the text to discuss the author’s purpose.
- b) Consider the number of “absent parents” in these stories. Why is this such a common plot element? How do you feel about this?
- c) As you were reading, did you have any personal connections to one or more of the stories in this book? Explain your connections and the parts in the stories that prompted them. How does making connections affect your understanding and enjoyment of the stories you read?
- d) Choose two of the stories in this book and compare them in terms of writing style, characters, and mood.
- e) If you could ask Olive Senior about the stories in *The Pain Tree*, what would you ask her? Create a list of questions and share them with the group.

Culminating Activities

Give students the opportunity to make connections to the world and themselves, as well as to other texts, and to choose their own way of demonstrating them. Here are some other activities to consider at the end of the novel:

Two Peas in a Pod

Read at least one short story anthology or collection of your choice. Do any of the stories in your chosen anthology “speak to you” with the same themes as the stories in *The Pain Tree*? Do any of them feel like they are trying to tell the “same story” but in a different way?

Compare one of the stories in your chosen anthology with one of the stories in *The Pain Tree*. Discuss how the two different authors approach the same theme(s) in different ways, and why you felt the two stories could be “two peas in a pod.”

Exploring the Same Themes in Different Texts

After reading *The Pain Tree*, consider reading *Finding Edward* by Sheila Murray (9781770866263) or the picture book *Malaika’s Costume* by Natalie Hohn (9781554987542). How are some of the same themes repeated in these stories? How are they handled differently?

Create a presentation comparing the themes or share your ideas orally in a class discussion or with a friend.

Olive Senior, the Poet

Olive Senior is Poet Laureate of Jamaica, and her poems are just as powerful as her stories. You can find them in numerous collections, including *Hurricane Watch: New and Collected Poems* (Carcanet, 2022). Read at least five poems of your choice. Think about how they compare to the stories in *The Pain Tree*, structurally, thematically, and emotionally.

Select one of her poems you particularly appreciate and share how and why it speaks to you. Explain what you noticed about its themes, structure, and message.

Interview with the Author



Martha: Hi Olive! I am so excited to chat with you. I am a HUGE fan!

Olive: I love people who love my work. So thank you Martha.

Martha: This book is a collection of stories which you wrote over a series of years – and for different publications. How did the collection come together in this current form?

Olive: The usual way. Once I had enough stories, I submitted them to the publisher, Cormorant, and together with my editor, Marc Côté, decided on which stories would fit together thematically and which would not. These latter ones I am saving for another collection.

Martha: What is your writing process like? How do you get started?

Olive: Because I write in different genres, my process is always different.

For non-fiction, the subject matter and other factors determine how I proceed in that genre.

Poetry is usually sparked by language – with a word that then sparks ideas and themes which set me off on extensive research and a process of discovery.

Several of my poetry books work thematically – *Gardening in the Tropics* uses gardening as the theme to interrogate Caribbean history; *Over the Roofs of the World* uses ‘birds’ and ‘thread’ to interrogate New World mythological themes; and *Shell* employs all the permutations of the word “shell” to interrogate the legacies of the slave trade in Britain and the Caribbean.

My fiction usually arises from a character that forces me to engage with them and get to know everything about them. The character always determines the trajectory of the story.

Since I am engaged with history and culture, I find that my thinking and research filters into all my work, regardless of genre.

Martha: You are the Poet Laureate of Jamaica, and your poetry has won awards all around the world. How does writing poetry contribute to your ability to write short stories? Or vice versa?

Olive: I would say that some of my poems are actually short stories as I am strongly into narrative. My knowledge of fiction enables me to employ characters within scene, setting, etc.

and to give them voice in poetry. Good examples of this in my poetry would be “Embroidery,” “White,” or “Penny Reel.”

“Story” for me is the heart of the connection I want to make with the reader so I try to translate even complex issues into that kind of format where the human element is always to the fore – in poetry or prose (and I might add also in my non-fiction books such as *Dying to Better Themselves: West Indians and the Building of the Panama Canal*.) Poetry forces me to condense and get quickly to the heart of the matter and that influences my approach to fiction as well. I think my early journalism training (at Carleton University) also forced me to “write tight” and that injunction has served me well in all my writing.

Martha: Do you prefer one genre over another?

Olive: No. I write whatever comes to me. Though in recent years I find myself concentrating more on the shorter forms – poetry, essays, and writing for children.

Martha: Well, back to your short stories in this collection ... I had a smile on my face the whole time I was reading “The Country Cousin.” Mrs. F is such a universal character – we all know someone just like her (I know I certainly do). Do you often start with an idea for a character based on someone you know? Is that easier or harder to do, in your opinion?

Olive: I guess all characters are based on people we encounter in real life even when we are not conscious of it. We take bits and pieces of various characters to create our own. I have to admit that while Mrs. F is not based on a specific person, she is very much a “type” I know and one that is ripe for satire. So I had fun writing her though I hope the reader’s sympathy also extends to Mrs. F, as mine did. In all my stories, I like to give a sense of how the character is shaped by his or her background and early childhood in order to elicit empathy.

Martha: Your stories in this book are all so different; different times, different perspectives, different moods. I think that’s what I find so amazing about your writing. Is that a result of them being written across the years and for different purposes, or is that something you intentionally tried to do in this book?

Olive: I think all my stories are different because once I fully get into the character and story (usually in my head before I even start to write), everything then becomes focused on the story so each one will reflect different times, moods, etc. In other words, these elements are all dictated by the story itself. I don’t consciously determine them. However, because of my interest in the past and how it shapes us, the stories in my various books tend to cover a wide span of time, as these do.

Martha: How intentional was the order of the stories in the collection? I felt their position in the book was far from accidental.

Olive: To be honest, I don't remember how this came about but it was probably at the suggestion of my editor, which is usually the case. This is where good editors are really useful in enabling authors to see the bigger picture.

Martha: You mentioned earlier your non-fiction writing. Your *Encyclopedia of Jamaican Heritage* is a huge work – I can't imagine how long that took you to create! I'm assuming it was a labour of love. How did that come to be?

Olive: Yes, it was a labour of love. I wanted to share so much of traditional Jamaican culture that I saw swiftly passing as that culture had shaped my childhood in rural Jamaica. I also wanted to validate the oral or "folk" or African-centred culture that under colonialism had been denigrated in favour of the elevated European culture. So I did the research that enabled me to combine the two. Since then, I have learnt to call these two ways of learning "book truth" – what is presented to us as gospel in our history and school books – and "ground truth," which is what is learnt from the oral culture and experientially. The *Encyclopedia* evolved over many years. I first published a shorter book called *A-Z of Jamaican Heritage* that was very successful. I had no funding so I researched and wrote these books entirely on my own, but I had a lot of support in the later stages of the *Encyclopedia* from the experts who freely read and commented on the entries. Above all, I had the fullest support of my editor and publisher who shared my vision, a husband and wife team whose small press – Twin Guinep – was totally committed to the project. Without them I would never have pulled it off.

Martha: Have you seen an appreciation for your work growing in recent days, with the focus on diversity in literature and especially with the call amongst publishers for works by and about racialized people?

Olive: I don't know about recently. My first books were published in England in the 1980s and were hailed then as multicultural literature when that conversation was just beginning. They've served that purpose internationally since then. And my children's picture books serve the same purpose with widespread interest in the last two (*Anna Carries Water* and *Boonoonoonous Hair*). I write my children's books intentionally, to celebrate diversity, and also expect the illustrations to reflect that. My other work is not intentional in the same way. I just want to be true to the characters and subject matter. It's up to the reader to take what they want from it. Nowadays I find there is a great deal of interest in my poems for their environmental themes.

Martha: You spoke to graduates of York University in June 2022 about the importance of curiosity. How can we inspire young people to be more curious?

Olive: I think we need to find ways to open their eyes to the world around them, that is, the environment, and find ways of bringing old and young together so we can keep alive an interest in stories and storytelling. And, of course, encouraging reading. We can't turn back the focus on technology and the virtual world, but we should not lose contact with the real. Giving primacy to play and the arts in schools are proven ways of enabling curiosity.

Martha: How do you want your readers to feel after they finish *The Pain Tree*? With what message would you like to leave them?

Olive: I don't believe in a "message" as such, but I would first of all like readers to feel satisfied after reading my work. That would signify that I have done a good job of storytelling and held their interest. Then I hope they would ponder the stories and characters that linger in their minds. I like to think of my work as featuring a world and setting that might be new to readers but presenting characters and situations with which they can identify because they are universal.

Martha: Well, I, for one, can say you accomplished all three of those aims for this reader. I look forward to exploring your other books and appreciate so much you sharing your gift of "story" and chatting with me today.

About Olive Senior

Olive Senior is the current Poet Laureate of Jamaica. Her literary work includes books, articles, and lectures that span multiple genres, including poetry, fiction, non-fiction, and children's picture books. Her twentieth book, *Hurricane Watch: New and Collected Poems*, has just been published by Carcanet in the UK. It follows *Pandemic Poems: First Wave* (2021) a work consisting of alphabet poems derived from the language of the Covid-19 pandemic.

In April 2022 her first book, *Summer Lightning* (winner of the Commonwealth Writers Prize) was named one of the 70 outstanding books from the Commonwealth chosen to celebrate the Queen's Jubilee. (bbc.co.uk/arts/BigJubileeRead)

Her popularity as one of the Caribbean's foremost writers was cemented when four of her books were included in the first compilation in 2021 of "The 100 Caribbean Books that Made Us" organized by the Bocas Literary Festival.

Awards and Recognition for *The Pain Tree* and other works

Winner, 2019 Canada's Writers Trust Matt Cohen Award for Lifetime Achievement

Shortlisted, 2017 Association of Caribbean Writers Grand Literary Prize

Winner, 2016 OCM Bocas Prize for Caribbean Literature

Shortlisted, 2012 Amazon.ca First Novel Award for *Dancing Lessons*

Shortlisted, 2012 Commonwealth Writers Prize for *Dancing Lessons*

Related Weblinks and Resources for Further Learning

<https://hotpepperlatte.com/index.php/2017/02/22/the-pain-tree/>

<https://yfile.news.yorku.ca/2022/06/21/honorary-doctorate-recipient-olive-senior-wishes-grads-a-happy-adventuring/>

<https://poetryarchive.org/poet/olive-senior/>

<https://www.torontomu.ca/olivesenior/author.html>

<https://www.cormorantbooks.com/dancing-lessons>