

A Room Made of Windows Short Guide

A Room Made of Windows by Eleanor Cameron

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Overview

A Room Made of Windows plunges into the chaotic life of Julia Carolyn Redfern.

Her life simmers with consistent intensity, whether she is searching for her lost cats, rescuing a trapped rabbit, slamming her brother's bike into a telephone pole, flirting with a boy visiting in her neighborhood, or rebelling at her mother's remarriage. Preoccupied with writing, she records her observations in her Book of Strangenesses. She aspires to become a professional writer, considering it the only worthwhile career for her, and she is critical of peers who view marriage and raising children as suitable life goals. As she becomes more tolerant and open-minded, Julia moves closer toward maturity.

About the Author

Eleanor Cameron was born on March 23, 1912, in Canada, to Henry and Florence Butler. Cameron attended the University of California and the Art Center School in Los Angeles, and worked in the Los Angeles Public Library and with several advertising agencies before launching a writing career. She married Jan Stuart Cameron in 1934. Their son David inspired her to write the science fiction novel *The Wonderful Flight to the Mushroom Planet* and its sequels. Her time fantasy, *The Court of the Stone Children*, won the National Book Award in 1974, and *A Room Made of Windows* garnered the Boston Globe-Horn Book Award in 1971. Several of the Julia Redfern novels have been recognized as American Library Association Notable Books. Cameron's *The Green and Burning Tree: On the Writing and Enjoyment of Children's Books* (1962) is considered a major critical work in its field.

Cameron lives in Pebble Beach, California.

Setting

Julia lives in Berkeley, California, during the 1920s in a neighborhood of stately older clapboard homes. The house in which twelve-year-old Julia lives with her mother and brother has been divided into three apartments. The apartment that Mr. and Mrs. de Rizzio, the landlords, live in has an aviary. Mrs. de Rizzio's father, whom Julia affectionately calls Daddy Chandler, lives in the small attic apartment, where he writes about his mother and her friend, a famous dancer in mid-nineteenth-century San Francisco. Julia loves her own small "room made of windows" because it is her first private space since her father's death in World War I. Although the room is quite small and really meant to function as a sewing room off her mother's bedroom, Julia basks in the atmosphere created by the windows on two sides, a glass door leading to a small balcony on the other side, and a skylight above her bed. The room is large enough to hold the desk her father made for her, and her memory of him is intensified in this space.

The neighborhood becomes important, too, since Julia explores the yards, homes, and lives of its occupants. On one side, in an elegant but neglected home, lives an older woman, Mrs. Rhiannon Moore, who becomes a special friend to Julia. Mrs. Moore's veranda, her eucalyptus trees, and the old windmill on the back property line offer alternative retreats for Julia and her imagination. Near Julia's home live Addie Kellerman and her troubled family in a stark and brooding structure that Julia avoids as much as possible. Other settings in *A Room Made of Windows* give Julia more aesthetic and cultural depth, and they add to the authenticity of the portrait of the early twentieth-century Berkeley-San Francisco area, but the neighborhood provides a sense of stability and permanence.



Social Sensitivity

Although *A Room Made of Windows* is set in the 1920s, it effectively portrays a common conflict of today—the tension between child and parent on the issue of remarriage. Cameron juxtaposes failed marriages among other characters with Mrs. Redfern's struggle to gain her daughter's approval to marry Phil Stanhope. Julia is forced to think about Mrs. Moore, their neighbor and Julia's friend, who has been separated for years from her husband because she was preoccupied with her career as a pianist. Another neighborhood couple, the Kellermans, fail in their marriage because Mr. Kellerman drinks to excess and abuses his children and wife. Julia is also aware of the tension that exists between her Uncle Hugh and Aunt Alex; Alex dominates the marriage through her purse strings because Hugh works for her firm. These marriages—filled with abuse and neglect, career preoccupation and failure—help Julia to understand that she cannot let her selfishness and resistance to change interfere with her mother's chance for a happy marriage.

Literary Qualities

The character of Julia reflects Cameron's memories of herself as an aspiring young writer. In the foreword to *The Green and Burning Tree*, Cameron states that she has been "preoccupied with the craft of writing since the age of eleven," and she has alluded to the books in the Julia Redfern series as "autobiographical in spirit." At the core of Julia's intense character is her love of words, exemplified in her *Book of Strangenesses*. She records lists of words she detests or considers beautiful. She bases her opinion on how the words sound. "Okra," "mucus," and "intestines" sound repulsive to Julia, while "undulating," "melifluous," and "Mediterranean" sound graceful.

Julia begins to appreciate the meanings of words, in addition to their sounds, when she wants the name of a medical doctor to be "Mendenheal" as in "mend-and-heal" instead of his actual name, Mendenhall. Cameron as a writer shows a similar awareness in naming the children's page editor Mrs. Penhallow, a name that symbolically indicates the character's importance to Julia as a developing writer; Mrs. Penhallow teaches Julia that writing is a serious and sacred activity. Julia is most impressed with the advice Mrs. Penhallow gives about "the gift of seeing" that writers need: "You must always see clearly the objects you're describing and find exactly the right words to explain what you feel about the object, and how it looks."

Cameron follows this advice throughout *A Room Made of Windows*, especially in creating a sense of place and atmosphere. In the basement of the music store where her mother works, Julia finds a blend of solace and tension by playing an abandoned pump organ that "looks like a wedding cake." She listens to the "scutterings" of the rats in the darkness as she sweeps dust and the sprinkles of rat pellets off the organ keys. Striking the chords, she makes "a mournful tune creep out, a tune like the voice of some mad Ophelia, for she could no more play the organ than she could play the piano...."

The place Cameron evokes most lovingly is Julia's special room, a room that could "glow like the inside of a shell" as late afternoon, "honey-colored" sunlight filters through the skylight and windows. Julia can lie on her army cot, and view through her skylight directly above "clouds bowling along in stormy seasons, the tops of trees bending, and birds being swept about in the air," or at night she can "watch the cold, patterned stars in warm comfort."

Cameron also uses symbolism to emphasize themes and characterization.

Kenny, for example, is compared to a frightened rabbit; Greg describes Kenny as acting "like that rabbit up in the hill that was caught by the legs and then screamed when we all closed in on it."

And Julia's short story, "The Mask," comes to represent her coming to terms with her father's legacy as a writer; after discussing the meaning of her story with Mrs. Moore, Julia writes, "...maybe the mask was not only [her father's] desire to write but his whole difficult complex self that he's handed on to me..."



Themes and Characters

The central theme in *A Room Made of Windows* concerns recognizing and accepting change as an inevitable part of life. Julia resists change, especially her mother's plans for remarrying, because the marriage would displace Julia as the priority in the life of her mother, Celia Redfern; it would also displace her from her beloved room made of windows.

Julia wants to be a writer and considers her room and the desk her father made for her essential in achieving this goal.

Her father's dream was to be a published writer, and she has adopted his life goal. She holds an intense affection for his memory as a perfect man. His photograph as a handsome, robust man sits on her desk, reinforcing this view of him.

Her mother's fiance, Phil Stanhope, seems pale and weak compared to the photograph and memory of her father.

Julia criticizes Phil Stanhope's hesitancy and indecisiveness when Mrs. Redfern reminds Julia that her father was a difficult man to live with and that she was frequently unhappy, especially when moodiness and volatility would overtake him.

Recognizing and understanding the fallibility of her father is crucial to Julia's emotional maturation. No longer can she use her father, "the perfect man," as an objection to her mother's future plans. Julia must confront her own stubbornness, selfishness, and possessiveness in her relationship with her mother. Being willing to share her mother by giving her approval to the marriage indicates Julia's recognition of her own imperfections. Despite her tantrums, Julia is an intense, fascinating character—a likable girl on the verge of becoming a caring young adult who understands the needs of those she loves.

Julia's maturation is reflected in the development of relationships with several significant characters in the novel. She gains a new appreciation of her brother, Greg, a fourteen-year-old intellectual devoted to the study of Egyptology. Greg's insight and sensitivity help Julia to understand and accept change.

Julia's friendship with Mrs. Rhiannon Moore, a seventy-year-old reclusive pianist, inspires her interest in poetry and contributes to her growing awareness of serious adult concerns—such as loneliness and aging. Mrs. Moore, whose husband left her years ago because she placed her music career before him, encourages Julia's writing aspirations but advises her to become more considerate of others' feelings and needs.

Daddy Chandler, the eighty-four-year-old father of Julia's landlady, Mrs. de Rizzio, provides Julia with a source of grandfatherly love and artistic support.



Daddy diligently works on his novel every day, and Julia loves to visit him in the attic where the two share peppermint candies, jokes, and conversation about writing.

Julia's best friend, Addie Kellerman, lives with her stubborn grandmother, her brother Kenny, and her abusive, alcoholic father. Despite her tense domestic life, good-natured Addie remains a loyal friend to Julia. Addie's brother, however, annoys, offends, and sometimes frightens Julia. The frequent victim of his father's drunken beatings, Kenny is a nervous, manipulative, angry boy. Addie and Kenny's cousin Paul, whom Julia comes to admire romantically, effectively tries to control Kenny's aggressiveness.

Julia also finds a new friend in Leslie Vaughan Carlson, a fourteen-year-old who publishes her poems in St. Nicholas magazine. Julia admires Leslie's talent and dedication, and Leslie encourages Julia to pursue her writing. Leslie also shows a romantic interest in Greg, which Greg seems to reciprocate.

Finally, Mrs. Kathryn Penhallow, the editor of the Young Writer's Page in the local newspaper, takes time from her busy schedule to invite Julia to her home for tea. Like Leslie, Daddy Chandler, and Mrs. Moore, Mrs. Penhallow serves as a literary mentor for Julia.

Julia develops renewed enthusiasm and self-confidence as a result of her visit with Mrs. Penhallow.



Topics for Discussion

1. Describe Julia's friendships with Addie and Leslie. Does Julia nurture one relationship at the expense of the other?
2. Is Mrs. Moore influential in Julia's life? Does her advice about being responsive to the needs of others make an impression on Julia?
3. Describe Julia's relationship with Daddy Chandler. Why does she feel guilty at his death?
4. Is Mr. Kellerman a threatening character? Describe how others help Julia understand more about his shame and unhappiness.
5. What does Julia discover about herself, her father, and their respective careers as writers when she composes the short story "The Mask"?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. List the points of advice about writing that Julia receives from various characters. Then write a short story of your own, attempting to incorporate the advice that Julia receives.
2. Trace the steps of Julia's gradual acceptance of her mother's marriage to Phil Stanhope. What events in Julia's life help her to accept Uncle Phil? How does her mother help? How does Uncle Phil help?
3. Read Ivan Southall's *Josh*, a novel about an adolescent boy who wants to become a writer. Compare Josh's and Julia's reasons for wanting to write, how they work to improve their writing, and how their experiences affect their writing.
4. Julia's friend Leslie publishes her poetry in *St. Nicholas*, an influential magazine of writing for and by young people in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Research and report on the history and significance of *St. Nicholas*. Discuss some of the famous writers who published their early work in this magazine.
5. Julia holds an idealized view of her deceased father in the beginning of the novel and only gradually comes to terms with the reality that he was an imperfect man. In Cynthia Voigt's *Solitary Blue*, Jeff clings to a similarly idealized view of his living, but absent mother. Read Voigt's book and compare how Jeff and Julia learn to accept that the parents they have idolized are flawed human beings. How does idealizing an absent parent affect each character's relationship with his or her other parent?
6. Read the sequel to *A Room Made of Windows* entitled *The Private Worlds of Julia Redfern*. Explore how Julia is beginning to understand more about adult relationships, and how failed or compromised marriages are significant in these last two books in the Julia Redfern series.

For Further Reference

Block, Ann, and Carolyn Riley, eds.

Children's Literature Review. Vol. 1.

Detroit: Gale, 1976. Contains a collection of excerpts from reviews of Cameron's books published before 1976.

Cameron, Eleanor. *The Green and Burning Tree: On the Writing and Enjoyment of Children's Books*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1962. A collection of articles that originally appeared in *Horn Book* magazine. Cameron establishes challenging literary standards and praises writers such as Wanda Gag, Lucy Boston, and Rumer Godden for their contributions to the field. She also reflects at length on the composition of the *Mushroom Planet* series.

Commire, Anne, ed. *Something about the Author*. Vol. 1. Detroit: Gale, 1971.

Contains a longer biographical entry on Cameron with emphasis on her son as an inspiration for her creation of the *Mushroom Planet* series.

Ethridge, James, and Barbara Kipala, eds. *Contemporary Authors*. Vols. 1-4.

Detroit: Gale, 1962. Includes a brief biographical entry with emphasis on *The Wonderful Flight of the Mushroom Planet* Weiss, Jaqueline Shachter. *Prizewinning Books for Children*. Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath, 1983. Contains a brief thematic reference to *The Court of the Stone Children* and *A Room Made of Windows*.

Related Titles

A Room Made of Windows is the earliest published novel in a series of five about Julia Redfern. Julia and the Hand of God, That Julia Redfern, and Julia's Magic explore her character at a younger age, while The Private Worlds of Julia Redfern portrays her at age fifteen.

Julia is a preschooler in Julia's Magic, and her father is still living. Less mature and constantly in trouble, she suffers the effects of poison oak after she undertakes a forbidden adventure to a canyon, and she also breaks a perfume bottle in her Aunt Alex's boudoir. Her father's strong sense of honesty encourages Julia to admit her unintentional act of destruction. Although Julia is slightly older in That Julia Redfern, she continues to be mischievous, taking her brother's bike and nearly running down her haughty, generously-proportioned Aunt Alex and gorging herself on berries, that make her sick. Julia's misadventures as an eleven-year-old are the focus of Julia and the Hand of God.

In these prequels, Julia learns about adult relationships, especially concerning the marriage between Uncle Hugh and Aunt Alex. This marriage dissolves in The Private Worlds of Julia Redfern when Julia unintentionally discovers Uncle Hugh's involvement with a woman he loved before his marriage to Alex. Julia grows to accept people as they are and to recognize that others have private lives just as she has a private, complex existence.



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