

# Book review: Dreams, Vietnam and Other Dreams, by Marc Levy

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*Summary.* The former infantry medic Marc Levy published his dream reports, which he was recording regularly for one year, 45 years after he returned from Vietnam War. After the war, he was suffering from severe nightmares related to war experiences. Those dreams are also published in another book. In his newer dreams, war themes are less frequently occurring. They mostly represent daily concerns, and severe threatening dream themes are occurring rarely, but war themes are still reported. In some dreams, severe conflicts are escalating between the dream-self and other dream characters, where the dream-self is also physically violent. This books offer future research a possibility to compare dream contents of idiopathic and posttraumatic nightmare dreamers over a long time period.

*Keywords:* Dreams; nightmares; PTSD; offender-nightmares, content analysis

## 1. Introduction

Since his participation in the American Vietnam War as an infantry medic in 1970, Marc Levy is suffering from PTSD. As a common comorbid disorder, he is also experiencing regular severe nightmares, related to war contents (WHO, 1992). These nightmares were recorded over a thirty year period and published in the book "Dreams, Vietnam". This book is probably the first in which a large number of dream reports of a Vietnam veteran who is suffering from PTSD is available for everyone (Levy, 2016).

The foreword in "Dreams, Vietnam" was written by William G. Domhoff. Domhoff points out the importance and uniqueness of this dream report collection, which is in his opinion even more valuable than dream reports collected of many different people during a few weeks in a classroom or a sleep laboratory. It is interesting for everybody who is engaged in dream research. "Dreams give us a portrait of how we view the important people and activities in our waking life (Domhoff, in Levy, 2016, p. 5)". Even decades after the war, Marc Levy was sleeping regularly with a gun under his pillow, and also he is not able to sleep while the bedroom door is open, or in direction to his back (Levy, 2016).

The frequencies of Marc Levys recorded dreams per year are different. In 1970, he was experiencing his first war-related nightmare, which has left a deep impression to him. In his dream, he shot a soldier sleeping next to him. Since this dream experience, he was suffering from up to five war nightmares per year for the next three years. In the book is mentioned that there were no further entries until 1977 (Levy, 2016). There, Marc Levy spent two months at the "Klinik am Zürichberg" in Switzerland, which was due to severe anxiety which was related to war stress. During treatment, he noticed that writing down his war nightmares is improving his treatment success, so he decided to record his dreams more regularly (Levy, 2018). Further, the night-

mare frequency increased in year 1980 and 1981, then there were no nightmares recorded over two decades. From 1998 to 2002, Marc Levy documented more nightmares per year than before (Levy, 2016).

At this point it should be kept in mind that the documented dreams may not be representative for Marc's common dream contents. In this book, he was solely publishing his dreams which were related to war and had an emotional charge, so there is no evidence for how frequently he was dreaming about positive emotional or daily-life contents. Keeping in mind that frequent nightmare dreamers usually have an excellent dream recall ability, there can be assumed that Marc's other dreams may be more positive than these recorded dreams.

Concerning the dream contents from "Dreams, Vietnam", the dream reports seem to be frequently realistic. For an external reader, most of the dream reports could also be usual war memories from waking life that could also happen in reality. Previous research found out that this effect occurs in dreams, that bizarreness-ratings of external readers are lower than of the dreamers themselves (Schredl & Erlacher, 2003). Also, some others are including elements from Marc's childhood, e.g. former classmates are also engaged in the Vietnam War as soldiers. In many dreams, Marc Levy is at a combat where he is attacked by unnamed war enemies. And quite frequently, Marc has to defend himself and his company, where he has to kill the enemies and the dream turns into an offender-nightmare. As well, guilt seems to play an important role in his dreams, where he often feels guilty for his company, when he could rescue his own life, but not those from other soldiers. On the other hand, he is glad that he was able to defend himself, so the emotions in his dreams are often described contrary.

Overall, in nearly a fifth of all  $N = 87$  nightmares, the dream-self's life was not directly threatened. And in those nightmares where the dream-self was attacked by an enemy or was aware of possibly being injured, the outcomes of the dreams were varying in a broad range. The most frequent option was that the dream-self was not able to solve the problem, where it probably died or was injured. In further dreams, problem could either be solved by external sources (e.g. interruption of sequence, help from other characters) or personally by the dream-self (e.g. by killing the aggressor), which was nearly equally distributed (Table 1). Out of these dreams, where the dream-self was able to solve the prob-

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lem while killing the aggressor, in more than half of these dreams, it felt guilty or the act resulted in another problem situation. And least, in a fifth of all dreams the dream-self awakens while be the offender (Table 1).

The occurrence of war nightmares may be explained by the Continuity hypothesis (Hall & Nordby, 1972). Nevertheless, there is no continuity to waking life concerning the fact that Marc has not been engaged in a combat for more than 45 years. But from another point of view, it is plausible that such a crucial experience as the Vietnam War is frequently on Marc's mind in waking life, which may explain the occurring dream themes. Another kind of explanation offers the Mastery hypothesis, which states that the function of dreaming is to create and simulate solutions for waking life fears and problems (Wright & Koulack, 1987). Keeping in mind that these reported dreams are nightmares, the dream-self often fails in finding a sufficient solution in the dream scenarios, which may be due to the high negative appraisal of the dream contents during the dreams (Mathes et al., 2018).

Considering this possible explanation, I personally found one dream interesting, where the dream-self served in war and shoot one enemy. Feelings of the dream-self were contrary; it was not sure if the act was right or wrong. Instead of being awaked by the dramatic happening, the sequence was changing into another one: The dream-self was swimming in the sea, while being chased by the enemy, which was presented as a demon in the dream. Suddenly, American troops arrived and fought the demon, which led to positive dream emotions and the other dream characters acted suddenly friendly (Levy, 2016). Perhaps, the contrary emotional appraisal led to a change of sequence and therefore to a good ending, instead of an escalating conflict which turns the dream into an offender-nightmare.

In 2016, Marc Levy was interested to see what impact the Vietnam War had on his sleep after nearly 50 years. So he recorded all his dreams every day he could remember from September 2016 to September 2017, and published them in his book "Other Dreams". Overall, there were 288 dreams. In most dreams, there are many positive interactions with other dream characters. They do not leave the impression that the dream was a nightmare, but obviously the reader can not exactly know what the dream-self was feeling during the dream, which is due to the bizarreness of dreams. There also were dreams which contained violent acts which could be a nightmare, and also some offender-nightmares.

After more than 40 years returning from Vietnam, 31

Table 1. Frequencies of different outcomes in dream reports (N = 87).

	Frequency	Percent
No problem	17	19.54 %
Dream-self gets killed or injured; no solution	26	29.89 %
Dream-self solves problem by itself	15	17,24 %
Problem is solved by external sources	13	14.94 %
Awakening during problem	16	18.40 %

dream reports (10.8 %) containing war contents were identified. However, they are usually different than those from "Dreams, Vietnam" and are more bizarre. Frequently, the dreams represent daily contents and there are dream characters from daily life included, which may be relatively important to the dream-self, e.g. the mother (identified in 20 dreams, 6.9 %) and the brother (in n = 33 dreams, 11.5 %). Interestingly, Marc Levy had no contact to his brother for about ten years, but despite this, he occurs quite frequently in the dream reports. In three quarters of all dreams (n = 216 dreams), strangers were identified.

Irrespectively of usual dreams, the dream-self seemed to have a hostile attitude against other dream characters. In several cases, it was acting aggressive and felt provoked relatively quickly, which was manifested in both verbal and physical violence, for example: "I have a room in a college dorm. A long-haired man, handsome, tall and powerful, shows up at the door. I know this man. Has he stolen something from me? He says, no. He's here to explain. I don't care. I stand up to him. I argue"(Levy, 2018, p. 239). Not unfrequently, there were no feelings of guilt after offending reported, which was on the other hand reported indeed in "Dreams, Vietnam".

On average, there were  $4.31 \pm 2.73$  dream characters coded in a dream report (range: 0-14 characters). Mean and standard deviation of explicitly identified male characters was higher ( $2.15 \pm 1.79$ ; range 0-9) than mean and standard deviation for female dream characters ( $1.21 \pm 1.35$ ; range 0-8). Mainly, female dream characters were occurring in dreams with sexual content (which is generally frequently recorded in the dreams), the mother and a former relationship (Levy, 2018).

To summarize, Marc Levy's books are indeed "a rare gift" (Collins, in: Levy, 2016). It may help future studies to compare nightmare or dream contents of a PTSD-patient with dreams of idiopathic nightmare dreamers or persons with other psychic disorders. As well, future studies should investigate offender-nightmare frequency of idiopathic nightmare dreamers and of PTBS-patients who were engaged in war. Probably, there is a difference in nightmare frequency, nightmare contents and nightmare emotions, which may then be explained by a real experienced physical violent situation, whereas persons who merely have experienced that by watching in the media or imagining may have less violent nightmare content or severe emotions.

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