

# Book review: "The dreamkeepers: An Invictus mystery thriller". by Antonio Zadra

Michael Schredl

Central Institute of Mental Health, Medical Faculty Mannheim/Heidelberg University, Germany

**Summary.** The book, by Antonio Zadra, includes recurrent dreams, lucid dreaming, nightmares, violence, evil creatures, and the dreamkeepers' task is to ensure that the dreamworld is free of oppression and terror. Several oneironauts, like James Dillan, Vincente Santilli (in the footsteps of his mother) and Michael Kohler, are trying to outwit the dark forces that try to take over the dreamworld and rule mankind. Overall, the book is well-written and is gripping from beginning to end.

**Keywords:** Lucid dreaming, recurrent dreams, nightmares, sleepwalking, fiction

Many well-known writers in different epochs like William Shakespeare, Novalis, E. T. A. Hoffmann, Edgar Allan Poe, James Joyce, Franz Kafka used dreams within their novels, stories etc. (Rupprecht, 2012) (Bulkeley, 2016; Engel, 2018; Phelan, 2002; Welt, 2019). On the other hand, the number of dream scientists writing fiction is rather small. An interesting exception is the book by Michel Jouvét, a famous French sleep and dream scientist, called "Le château des songes (The castle of dreams)" (Jouvét, 1992). The author tells a story of finding a heavy wooden chest with transcripts of 5000 dreams, letters and journals of a dream scientist, Hugues la Scève, recorded from 1765 to 1788. He starts with dream content analyses of time references in the dreams and observations of sleeping animals to more bizarre experiments like weighing dreams (!). It's based on his own scientific career (some 200 years later) (see: Jouvét, 1999) but includes a lot of fiction. And this playing with ideas of what kinds of research can be done fascinated me.

So, I was very interested when a colleague of mine, Antonio Zadra, a well-known dream and nightmare researcher, told me about his fiction writing. The title of the mystery thriller is "The dreamkeepers"; the ebook and paperback will be published in May 2020. After Tony sent me the advanced review copy on March 21st, it was so captivating that I finished reading it 24 hours later. The book, consisting of 54 chapters, is like a puzzle with many parts, fitting more and more together when the story goes along. At the end, there are still some loose ends which makes sense as it is the first book of a series (Invictus mystery thrillers). In the story, three worlds are intertwined: waking reality, the ordinary dream world, and a dream world beneath/beyond called *anumia*. Whereas dark forces try to gain control over these

dream worlds in order to dominate mankind via their dreams (mostly nightmares), the dreamkeepers' job is to protect the freedom of dreaming and keep the dark creatures of *anumia* called *taurines* at bay. The boundaries between these three worlds are fluid, so a recurrent dream character can show up in waking life, or injuries experienced in the dream state can persist into the waking world. Within this overall theme of good vs. evil an illustrious cast of characters who relate to dreams in one way or another was created by the author.

The main character is James Dillan who runs a sleep lab in Montreal and is specialized in forensic sleep medicine, i.e., he investigates cases in which he has to determine whether the persons were truly sleepwalkers or were just pretending when they committed their crimes. The major problem with such cases is that during the act no electrodes are attached to the scalp in order to record EEGs (see Cartwright [2010] for more information). We also learn something about insomnia, e.g., the more you think about sleep the more difficult it is to fall asleep, and the very rare disease called fatal familial insomnia starting with severe insomnia and ending lethal; it's related to the Creutzfeldt–Jakob disease. This character shows some similarities with the author who has done research in sleepwalking (Zadra, Desautels, Petit, & Montplaisir, 2013), and nightmares (Robert & Zadra, 2014), and the following recurrent dream of James Dillan, is based on personal experiences of the author.

*"Dream: The elevator began to rise. The entire contraction—walls, door, ceiling, and floor—was made of clear glass. Dillan strained his neck, looking upward, but couldn't make out the top of the skyscraper. The elevator was on the outside wall of the soaring edifice, allowing a view not only of the sky, but also of the receding pedestrians, cars, and buildings below. Dillan steadied himself as the carriage accelerated upward. Within seconds he was being propelled at horrific speeds. The floors of the skyscraper flickered by, a vertical blur. He glanced downward. The ground was thousands of feet below; the view made him sick to his stomach. He was trapped. His chest pounded, each thumping heartbeat resonating inside his head. He tried to scream, but no sound came. The glass walls boomed and shook as the elevator continued its ter-*

Corresponding address:

Michael Schredl, Sleep laboratory, Central Institute of Mental Health, PO Box 12 21 20, 68072 Mannheim, Germany.  
Email: Michael.Schredl@zi-mannheim.de

Submitted for publication: March 2020  
Accepted for publication: March 2020

rifying launch. His legs buckled. Any second, the whole thing was going to break apart and send him plummeting to his death. He braced himself."

Within the book, James Dillan relived the glass elevator dream once more and was able to change it, landing safely at ground level but, this time, an evil creature attacked the elevator and the dreamer, a lucid nightmare, i.e., being lucid is not always helpful (Stumbrys, 2018). So he received the advice to believe in his powers, an important ingredient for successful lucid dreaming. The author studied lucid dreaming as a coping strategy for nightmares (Zadra, 2019). And – not wishing to disclose too much – James Dillan succeeded the next time.

Elizabeth Parks is a software engineer in Dillan's lab, her computer hacking skills come in handy; the romance between James Dillan and her which is starting in the first book might get to a deeper level in the sequels.

Another main character is Giancarla Santilli, unfortunately dying in the first chapter, very likely one of the dreamkeepers. She taught her son, Vincente, 12 years old, about lucid dreaming and about doing reality checks like looking at the back of his hand where his mother placed an *s* for *sogno* (dream) as a reminder. He learned to dream lucidly; his favorite activity was to follow butterflies. He also used spinning as a technique to prolong lucid dreams. This character might also represent some personal experiences of the author who dedicated this book to his mother: "For Mom, who taught me the importance of dreams."

Another oneironaut (an explorer of dreams) is Michael Kohler, an old friend of James Dillan, who kept a detailed record of all the dreams he could remember. He was so eager to explore *anumia*, having once fought against a *taurine* – a fight that left a scar on his breast – that he worked with the dark side in order to get hold of a specific drug that was developed and tested in a lucid dream lab just outside Heidelberg to enter *anumia*. Interestingly, a lucid dream lab existed in Heidelberg, founded by Daniel Erlacher (e.g., Erlacher, 2012). Since Daniel is the lost younger brother of James Dillan, one might speculate about the truth of the disclaimer "This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental." I should add that I (Michael) am a long-term dream journalist myself.

The bad guys, The Priorate (a nasty figure), Iris (a high-heels wearing descendent of the Medici), and Ivan Mihailovitch, with their henchmen, are chasing after a long lost vase created by Benvenuto Cellini – quite a bad guy himself – believing that it hides something with enormous powers useful in *anumia*. The book is set in the Dolomites of Italy (the author is of Italian origin) and it includes some legends about the origin of the edelweiss. The story goes that the moon princess brought them with her after marrying an earlthling prince.

Helping James Dillan and Vincente Santilli is an Italian policeman, Riccardo Tramonte and his father who was an experienced mountaineer in the Dolomites. So, these are the main characters, including Victor, a recurrent dream character of Dillan's dreams, who has a life on his own and can also visit other people's dreams.

To summarize, the book is very well written and gripping, especially for those who are interested in dreams. As there is a lot of violence and nasty stuff, e.g., ripping of fingernails,

going on, I would not recommend it for young and sensitive minds. I myself look forward to the sequel and am keeping the advice for successful lucid dreaming "Believe in your powers" in mind.

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