

BOOK REVIEW

The Dream Interpretation Dictionary: Symbols, Signs, and Meanings by J. M. DeBord. Visible Ink Press, 2017. 464 pp. \$21.95. ISBN 978-1-57859-637-9.

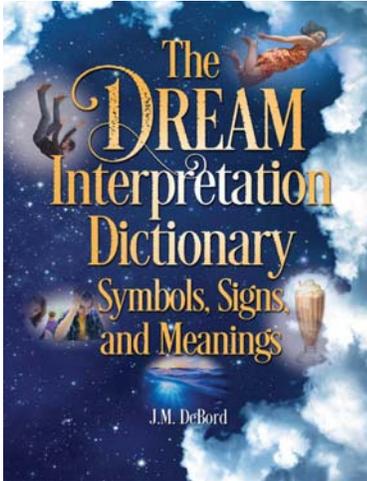
There are many popular books on dreams, and people are naturally curious about what their dreams mean. Dream images, often, leave us stymied as to why they appear and how they relate to our waking concerns and experiences. Dreams can be elusive and mysterious, and it is probably for this reason that people often turn to books on dreams to try to uncover something about themselves.

There are a number of books that guide the individual on how to work with dreams (for example, Delaney 1996, 1998, Faraday 1974, Garfield & Stewart-Garfield 1998, Krippner & Dillard 1988, Moss 1996, 2011, Taylor 1983, 1992, Ullman 2006). These books, and others, offer techniques for working with dreams, individually, one-on-one, or in groups.

Bosnak (1996) has advised that working with one's dreams individually, with no input from another individual, can have discouraging or deleterious effects. This is due to the fact that it is easy for the individual to have blindspots about dream symbolism or psychological resistances to realizing the dream's meaning. Participating in a dream group, such as an Ullman dream group, working one-on-one with a peer technique, such as Delaney's Interview Method, or with a counselor or psychotherapist, can help overcome this handicap.

Research confirms the benefits of working on dreams with others. One study showed that 88% of the participants preferred to work with another person, rather than on their own when working on dreams (Heaton, Hill, Petersen, Rochlen, & Zack 1998).

People who keep dream journals write down any feelings associated with the dream, paying special attention to both the feelings in the dream and feelings upon awakening. Dream journalers also try to relate their dreams to occurrences and concerns in waking life, including any feelings, thoughts, and experiences (e.g., reflecting back on what one was thinking about upon retiring the night before). Journalers try to make connections between the feeling tone in the dream and a waking experience that generated the same or a similar feeling. This can often lead the dreamer to the dream's meaning. By reflecting on related issues in waking life that are mirrored by



the emotions in the dream, individuals can gain insight about themselves.

Journalers also try to make associations to the symbols in the dream. Any images that appear in a dream are personalized for the particular dreamer (Delaney 1998, Faraday 1974, Garfield & Stewart-Garfield 1998, Krippner & Dillard 1988, Ullman 2006). For example, one person may associate France with being free and carefree, as in 1920s Paris. Another may associate France with a terrible vacation.

The Dream Interpretation Dictionary: Symbols, Signs, and Meanings can serve as an entertaining

starting point to try to uncover a meaning of a dream symbol. However, the suggestions offered should be taken lightly and not be viewed as actual knowledge about an individual or her dream. For example, under the listing of “Animal,” the author states, “Dreams . . . use animals to tell stories about you and your life. For example, a dream about a fish dying in a fishbowl symbolically warns of an oncoming urinary-tract infection” (p. 18). Shortly after this passage he states, “What an animal in your dream means to you matters more than pat definitions like the kind found in typical dream dictionaries”! Although I would wholeheartedly agree, one has to wonder whether individuals who read dream dictionaries are searching for what a particular dream symbol *means* and view these books as a source for understanding their dreams. This would be a mistake.

A similar example is included in the section on “Cat,” where the author states that Cat is a symbol commonly associated with femininity. Delaney states,

... We can never assume a common meaning for any group of images. . . . I have discovered that sometimes cats remind dreamers of their mothers or sisters or sleek, agile, confident aspects of themselves. I have also found that sometimes cats remind the dreamer of her image of men in general (“independent, don’t need much affection, come and go when they please”), or of a particular “black cat” (boyfriend) in a woman’s life and bedroom, and of a sneaky, sly, gray cat (man) trying to seduce the dreamer. (Delaney 1996:59).

Few of these personal, individual associations to “cat” would appear in a dream dictionary.

There is also a tendency for the author to protect himself from criticism. When he offers interpretations of a particular symbol, he first states several meanings and then states as in the case of “Cat”:

The common associations with cats can be used as symbolism, but your personal associations matter most. (p. 59).

Since this is indeed the case, it raises the question of how much value dream dictionaries offer.

This book begins with a short biography of the author who lists himself as a “dream interpreter.” This term raises an issue of discomfort for most dreamworkers. A dreamworker will help the dreamer to uncover the dream’s meaning for himself, through extensive exploration and using tried-and-true techniques, because it is recognized that only the dreamer can know the dream’s meaning. Montague Ullman, a psychoanalyst who developed a group method for working with dreams, strongly discouraged the term *interpretation*, which, he believed, brings up associations of an outside authority on the dream’s meaning. “Dream interpreter” can indicate to many people that the individual has a special gift of understanding about dreams that the average person does not have. According to The International Association for the Study of Dreams (IASD) in their Ethics and Confidentiality statement,

Systems of dreamwork that assign authority or knowledge of the dream’s meanings to someone other than the dreamer can be misleading, incorrect, and harmful. (Warner 1997)

As a general rule, dream dictionaries, this book included, can serve as light entertainment or as possible suggestions for dream symbol meaning, providing the individual does not take the definition at face value and continues to explore possible meanings of the image by making personal associations. However, the best way to work with and understand one’s dreams is to work with another individual or in a group. In lieu of the ability to do this, making personal associations to dream feelings and images can often help to uncover dream meaning.

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