Dreamer Short Guide

Dreamer by Jack Butler

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Contents

Characters

More than any of his three previous novels, in DreamerJack Butler serves up a mixture of "old" characters from his earlier novels, plus characters who make their first appearances here. Foremost among the familiar characters is John Shade, the centuries-old "vampire" protagonist of Nightshade (1989; see separate entry) who appears here as an undercover government agent posing as an author of popular spy fiction, and who has been assigned to track Dr. Jody Nightwood's work in dream research for a shadowy government agency. Jody, a "new" character, is a Little Rock native; she and her college roommate, Toni Archuleta, are partners in a sleep clinic in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Jody, herself, is one of several subjects who are observed while they sleep and who keep dream diaries.

Jody, who has been seriously involved with only two men in her life, and who feels estranged from the possibility of romance, falls lustfully in love with Shade, who is uncannily handsome and powerful. When one of the employees at the clinic leaves suddenly, Shade volunteers to monitor the subjects participating in Jody's dream research, which gives him intimate knowledge of Jody's own emotions expressed through dreams and her diary. She is plagued by dreams that are caused by the murder of her mother, possibly by her father, when she was a teenager.

Another character from Nightshade is Benjamin George, the extremely aged owner of the "artificial intelligence" Mandrake in the earlier novel. In Dreamer, Benjamin is the government official who secretly sponsor's Dr. Nightwood's research, which he believes will be helpful in his quest to develop artificial intelligence. Mandrake is present here as well, but in a prototype model as yet incapable of certain higher functions of intelligence and consciousness—most notably, dreaming. The "Prologue" chapter features a dialogue between Benjamin and Mandrake in which the latter's accents, familiar from his (or her) role as " narrator" in Nightshade, are unmistakable. It is a measure of his primitive state, however, that he is unable to make puns on purpose, a practice in which he greatly delights in his later condition.

Other Butlerian characters who appear or at least are mentioned in Dreamer include Loren Wingo, familiar from Nightshade as the obscure twentieth-century mathematician who founded the religion called Butlerianism (so called from the fact that Jack Butler, an obscure twentieth-century poet, wrote the "Preface" to Wingo's volume The Works; it will be recalled that the epigraph to Nightshade, "Nothing in nature explains nature," is attributed to "Loren Wingo," as is the epigraph to part one of Dreamer, the epigraph to part two purports to be quoted from Wingo's Works). The epigraph to part four of Dreamer is attributed to "the Holy Ghost," the nominal narrator of "Living in Little Rock with Miss Little Rock (1993; see separate entry). Marcus Gandy, the self-identified narrator of Jujitsufor Christ (1986; see separate entry) and possible "author" of Nightshade, is cited in Dreamer by Shade as the pen name under which he writes his spy novels. The degree of "reality," or degree of "presence" Marcus may or may not possess in this novel is problematical. A thus far minor Butler character—-J. D. Rider, a

friend of Charles and Lianne Morrison in "Living in "Little Rock with Miss "Little Rock—is mentioned in Dreamer as a popular author of detective fiction.

Victorio V. Vigil, a Santa Fe police officer by day and a Native American shaman named Dead Men Walking by night, is another character original to this novel. Vigil eventually marries Toni and, in the second half, is revealed as a shaman. In his role as detective, Vigil investigates mysterious occurrences in Jody's life, including the theft of her computer files and a break-in at the sleep clinic; in his shaman's role, he serves as Jody's mentor in her personal forays into the world of dreams.

Minor characters who have an important bearing on the plot include Colonel Wilbur Goodloe Hall, an aging and wealthy Santa Fe real estate entrepreneur but also a high-ranking operative in the CIA subsection that opposes Benjamin George's subsection in the novel's covert spy-action plot. Characterized as a "cultured sociopath," Hall directs the activities of two bumbling agents, the British Nigel Toynbee Tarkington and the younger American Leonard Michaels, as they spy on, burglarize, and ultimately try to assassinate Jody. "Toy" and "Lenny," a homosexual couple, function in this novel in a role closely analogous to that of the petty criminals Ferrin Dwell and Rubert Bokamper, who spy on and eventually do manage to assassinate Lianne in "Living in "Little Rock with Miss Little Rock. While this near-replication of a plot element that at first glance might seem merely a clumsy attempt to reuse a successful gimmick, its true meaning is subtler than that. It is in fact an instance of the mathematically recursive or fractal quality (in which an entire complex structure may consist of larger and smaller replications or "iterations" of a particular pattern) that Butler deliberately weaves into the larger tapestry of his fiction as a whole. In a fitting closure to Toy and Lenny's activities, Shade rips out their throats and drinks their blood. Another minor character significantly involved in the plot is Bruno Sandoval, who is befriended by Jody and who will help save her life. Others include the lesbian couple Vida and Allegra Archuleta, Toni's parents, who are delightful people and effectively balance Toy and Lenny.

One other important minor character is a figment of Jody's dream state. During her own dreams, which are presented in frequent interludes throughout the novel, Jody develops a relationship with a dream character who asks that she "Call me Ish." Ish becomes the companion and lover of her dream life, and when her interest in her own dreams takes a Native American-spiritualistic turn under the mentorship of Vic as "Dead Men Walking," Ish becomes a spiritual dream healer-figure for her, her "internal selfhealer."

Social Concerns

Set in New Mexico, Dreamer explores the exploitation of Native American culture for commercial purposes, as reflected, for example, in the sociopathic entrepreneur/CIA agent Wilbur Goodloe Hall's real estate development "Anasazi Heights." The development is billed as "A Respectful Re-creation of the Original," and it is an ironic measure of the depth of the compromise involved that Vic Vigil (the novel's most authentically Native American character) and his bride Toni move into one of these "respectful recreations." As a social issue, this crass and superficial commercialization of Native American culture represents an ironic culmination of more than two centuries' devaluation of not only Native Americans but the cultures of other minority groups in American society as well.

Another social concern has to do with the increasing impact of computer technology on human life. Specifically, the nascent development of "artificial intelligence" (which accounts for Benjamin George's interest in dream research; he thinks dreaming is the key to human and perhaps all mammalian intelligence) "foreshadows" the full development of such intelligence and other technology in Nightshade. As represented in that earlier novel, technology proves at best a very mixed blessing. Science, mathematical theory, and the technological developments they support figure prominently in both Living in Little Rock with Miss Little Rock and in Dreamer. In Nightshade, with its futuristic setting, they appear vexed to nightmare proportions, with already alarming trends in the late-twentieth century society drawn out to their logical, if horrific, conclusions.

Technological development is, of course, inevitable; the genie cannot be returned to the bottle. On the positive side, at least apparently, Butler's vision of the future includes the development of artificial intelligence of a high order, in some respects superhuman. Ironically, however, Butler seems to regard artificial intelligence—with its promise of physical immortality—as an evolutionary dead end. Mandrake in Nightshade represents the best promise of artificial intelligence, and it is finally insufficient because it means an end of change. It is significant that Shade refuses to allow Mandrake to "copy" him, thus rejecting that kind of immortality, in contrast to the vampire's immortality, so that Mandrake ends up alone, lonely, and yearning for the return of vanished humanity, his creators. In Nightshade, the ultimate evolutionary destiny of humanity is a "ghostly" or spiritual condition beyond Mandrake's mere physical immortality.

Accompanying technological advancement there appears to be a general deterioration in other areas of society. Repeated references to widespread criminal activity both in Santa Fe and in a visit to Little Rock by Jody and Shade, where they are accosted by gang members, create an undercurrent of social degeneration. Jody's father, a mom-and-pop storekeeper, had been murdered by a "gang banger."

Indeed, the plot of Dreamer bristles with murders. Government agents on both Benjamin George's side (which includes Shade) and the opposing CIA subsection are responsible for numerous killings, some of which are attributed to "the gangs" who, of

course, do their own killing. Colonel Hall is a sociopathic killer, as are his agents Toy and Lenny, and Bruno Sandoval kills Hall and Shade during the effort to save Jody. (Shade's vampire status, of course, prevents his death.)

Amid so much casual death, one might ask what, if any, distinctions Butler makes among the killings. It is a given that Shade must kill in order to live, but he does not relish the necessity, and his actions are neither random nor conscienceless. He usually manages to kill people who deserve to be killed for one reason or another. The gang killings are a symptom of social decay. As for the "government" killings, their moral dimension depends to some extent upon which side they are on. Jody and Shade discuss the question of "right" and "wrong" sides as Shade carries her to safety after her shooting. Shade's stated position is that there are just sides—no right or wrong, merely forces in conflict. Jody disagrees, arguing that the wrong side "misuses things," and the right side is the only one "that makes sense," that allows things to be as they are and to "fulfill themselves."

Although the matter retains some ambiguity, it appears that, under the circumstances, the moral balance tips in favor of Shade's (and Benjamin's) side.

Early in the novel Jody meets Bruno Sandoval when he confesses to her at the clinic that he cannot sleep because a friend of his (who he later admits is himself) has gunned down two motorcyclists traveling at high speed. He assumes he has murdered the biker, and Jody's advice is for Bruno to confess to a priest and talk to the police. Through the acts of confession and contrition, Bruno forgives himself and is forgiven, so that his murderous act leads to his rejuvenation and redemption. Like the archetypal Fisher King, his sexuality is restored, and he regains life. His crime, insofar as Bruno is repentant, serves the ultimate good of himself and paves the way for his potentially self-sacrificial attempt to defend Jody against her assassins.

The key murders, of her parents, are the ones that Jody does not understand, and which dominate her dreams. After much analysis and agony, she finally identifies the symbols in her dreams that represent her father's murder and her mother's death, but she is at a loss to explain them. All the other murders in the novel are reality based; that is, there is some reason why the murder was committed, even if it was nothing more than a senseless act of violence. Jody's father was murdered for pocket change, and the sociological reasons for this type of murder are a fact of modern psychosis, which she well understands. But to Jody, his murder is so incomprehensible, as is the mysterious death of her mother, that they become the psychological equivalent of chaos theory. They have been implanted in her mind as vanishing points of relativity that make it impossible for her to accept any reality. They are symbols of modern madness and the deepest of insecurities that are finally resolved only in Jody's "healing dream" in Chapter 23.

Techniques

In Butler's three previous novels the primary focus of interest in matters of narrative technique has been on voice— the individual voices of the characters, to be sure, but most importantly on the narrator's voice and the identity of that narrator. Thus in Jujitsu for Christ the narrator is surprisingly revealed at the end of the novel to be Marcus Gandy; in Nightshade the narrator turns out, again at the end, to have been the artificial intelligence Mandrake; and in Living in Little Rock with Miss Little Rock the narrator identifies Him/Her/Itself in the book's opening line as the Holy Ghost.

It comes as a surprise, then, to a reader familiar with Butler's tricks, that the narrator of Dreamer appears to be a more or less standard, third-person narrator with a limited-omniscient point of view. The principal "viewpoint character" throughout is Jody Nightwood, whose thoughts and feelings are rendered in full detail; several other characters' thoughts are revealed occasionally, but for the most part the other characters are rendered only dramatically, through their words and actions. This limitation is applied most strikingly to the character of John Shade (the virtually immortal "vampire" introduced in Nightshade), whose importance in this novel is secondary only to that of Jody. To increase the complexity, Shade in Dreamer is an author of spythriller fiction that features an immortal "vampire" secret agent character; thus Shade's fiction mirrors, recursively, his role in "real" life as a covert government operative. Piling on more complexity, Shade writes under the name "Marcus Gandy," the Black poet and novelist who passed for white in Jujitsu for Christ and whom Shade knew 25 years earlier in Fayetteville, Arkansas.

Some light, at least, is shed on this maze of self-similarity by Butler's unpublished remarks about the overall "plan" of his fictional works—those completed, those in progress, and those projected.

Although Butler's plan for his complete works is subject to the unpredictability inherent in "chaos theory" (one of Butler's principal thematic interests), the general outline calls for one group of novels "supposedly written by Jack Butler," another group written by "J. D. Rider" (who "writes only mysteries"), and a group written by "Marcus Gandy," who writes both serious and popular fiction.

John Shade, incidentally (who bears a striking physical resemblance to Marcus), is identified by Butler as Marcus's "symbol for his own alienation both as a writer in a materialistic culture and as a person who is at home in neither white society nor black society." In the present state of Butler's body of work, several puzzles and apparent contradictions exist, but because Butler's canon is far from complete, we can only assume that he will work them out in future novels.

One such problem involves the identity of the narrator in Dreamer, one of the novels Butler's outline assigns to the authorship of Marcus Gandy. Butler has also suggested that "on the metafictional level at least," Marcus is the "author" of Nightshade, though, of course, the narrator of that novel is Mandrake. And although the narrator of Dreamer,

uniquely in Butler's published novels to this point, does not explicitly identify himself or itself, there are definite clues in the novel that the narrator is someone—that is, a "real" personality rather than merely a generic third-person narrative voice. For example, the narrator at one point says, "Let's be fair to Jody. It is possible that she wasn't fully aware, . . ." which clearly indicates personality. The identity of that personality is very nearly confirmed when in Chapter 27 Shade and Jody, on their way to Toni and Vic's wedding, encounter a road sign that reads "Iron Gate."

The name and the impending wedding inspire Shade to quote the final six lines of Andrew Marvell's poem "To His Coy Mistress," including the couplet "And tear our pleasures with rough strife / Thorough the iron gates of life." Describing the scene, the narrator says that "because of the sign apparently Shade said the lines of what was evidently a poem," and then quotes Shade quoting the lines. Any human or supernatural narrator—be it Jack Butler, Marcus Gandy, J. D. Rider, or the Holy Ghost Itself—would assuredly know not only that it was a poem, but which poem it was and by whom. Among Buder's stable of narrative voices thus far, only one is capable of this uncertainty, and capable of it only in a relatively early stage of his (or her or its) "evolution": Mandrake, the artificial intelligence being developed by Benjamin George whose voice, at least, appears in this novel in dialogue with Benjamin. On one of the various and bewildering levels of "reality"—fictive, metafictional, or otherwise—represented in this novel, Mandrake is the narrator.

Themes

In this novel as in its predecessors, Butler's themes include the nature and function of religion, the concept of love as an elemental, essential force in the universe, and the nature of reality and human intelligence.

Dreamer supplies the origin of the religion known as Buderianism in Nightshade.

In the earlier novel (but set a couple of centuries into the future, on Mars), the founder of the religion and author of its scripture The Works was unknown, and the religion took its name from the twentieth-century poet (Jack Butler) who wrote its "Preface." In Dreamer we learn that the founder was the mathematician Loren Wingo, who had a life-changing amnesiac experience and fled from Fayetteville, Arkansas, to New Mexico.

There, he became a hermit and devoted his life to creating his Theoretical Model of Heaven, evidently the volume that would later be known as The Works.

In Chapter 17, "A Meeting of the Minds," Wingo expounds upon religion in general and his new religion in particular, explaining it to Jody and Shade. According to Wingo, religions serve a metaphysical or "explanatory" or theological function as well as a moral function. The explanatory function typically provides the metaphysical and cosmological framework of existence, and the moral function provides the guidelines for the moral code for living one's life. Religions of the past become obsolete when their theologies harden into dogma that is upheld in the face of inevitably contradictory evidence. The main difference between old religion and Wingo's is the theoretical or hypothetical quality of his, as contrasted with the dogmatic qualities of the former.

Wingo's religion will accommodate itself to the known or theoretical facts of existence and experience. Wingo's system is much more complex than this bare sketch would suggest, and he acknowledges that little of it is original. He does claim originality, however, for its particular combination of elements.

The notion that love, thought of as a primordial force in the universe—"a kelson of the creation," as Walt Whitman says—is somehow the source and motive power for all we are and do is a very old idea. It finds literary expression in the second choral ode of Sophocles' Antigone, and in many other ancient works. One senses that this idea imbues all of Butler's fiction, although the idea is inculcated dramatically, in the actions of the characters, far more than it is presented in words. Perhaps the closest it comes to explicit articulation in Dreamer is the insight Jody delivers in her comatose dream after she has been shot: "The only real work is health and peace and creativity and understanding."

In the work of all authors who may be called "philosophical novelists"—and Butler certainly is one of these—the nature of reality is a common thematic concern. In Living in Little Rock with Miss Little Rock the Holy Ghost (the supposed narrator) observes that "reality itself fades off into mystery at the edges" and implies that it is part of the

novelist's job to supply those mysterious edges for his fictional reality to fade off into. This occurs in Dreamer in a variety of ways, but the most obvious is to be found in the strange interpenetrations of the dream world of Jody's research and the fictional "reality" of the waking world in which she and the other characters primarily move. This relationship is further complicated when Jody accepts the mentorship of Dead Men Walking and enters the dream world not as a scientist but as a shaman or "healer" in training. While the New-Age interests in lucid dreaming and shamanism obviously cater to elements in popular culture, they nevertheless have a direct bearing on this novel's philosophical concern with the nature of reality. As Jody becomes convinced scientifically that the dream world possesses an architecture and a topological dimensionality—what she dubs "I-space,"with the "I" signifying "imaginary," "inward," or "ego"—it gradually becomes clear to Jody that the waking world is only one "model" of reality, and an incomplete one at that.

Indeed, the insistence on the "making of models" as being bound up with the essential nature and function of human intelligence is a thematic constant in Butler's fiction. One of Jody's insights is that "Our brains were modelmaking devices.

That was the main thing brains did, create models. All brains." The present difference between human brains and computers, she understands, is that computers process data in order to create simulations, whereas the human brain creates simulations "without regard to 'reality' or data. . . . And then they try the already existing simulations against the incoming data, and some of them match up." The brain puts the matching data into a structure, makes rules about it, and calls it "reality." This makes the basic function of human intelligence a "feedback system" and Jody's attempt to "map" the process in effect "a model of the modelmaker." "No wonder the shape was so complex, so recursive," Jody thinks. This insight in part accounts for the thematic importance of "chaos theory" and fractal recursion in this novel and in Butler's fiction generally.

Key Questions

For readers familiar with Butler's other novels, fascinating discussion might center on the characters from other novels who appear or are mentioned in Dreamer.

The possible significance of such reappearances and the various kinds or degrees of "reality," fictional or otherwise, that these characters possess offer possible topics.

Other fruitful areas for discussion might include the Santa Fe setting of the novel and the "New Age" interests and practices—the interest in "lucid dreaming," for example, or Native American shamanism—reflected in the book. Indeed, the entire subject of dream theory and dream lore represents a large field for discussion. Ideas about the nature and function of religion constitute another such area, as does Loren Wingo's concept of the spiritual realm or "afterlife."

As was the case with Living in Little Rock with Miss Little Rock, the plot of Dreamer includes many situations that fit Butler's definition of "modeling." It could be interesting to identify such instances, as well as situations that seem to be "recursive" images of other situations, both within the novel and outside it.

Although the matter of fictional voice or "identity of the narrator" is far less obvious than in previous novels, it is still a matter of great importance. Particularly in light of what we know of Butler's overall "plan," the identity of this narrator and his/its relationship with other narrators should prove a topic for intense discussion.

1. Compare the character Mandrake who engages in dialogue with Benjamin in this novel with the Mandrake who claims to be the narrator of Nightshade. Are they the same, or different? If they are different, how and why? Could Mandrake be the narrator of Dreamer? If not, who is?

2. Compare the character John Shade in Dreamer with the John Shade who is the protagonist of Nightshade. What is the relationship between these two manifestations of the Shade character?

3. What is the relationship between Shade and Marcus Gandy? Are they, in some sense, the same person, or not?

Explain.

4. Consider the religious system described by Loren Wingo in Chapter 17.

How is it similar to traditional religious systems? How different? What advantages or disadvantages do you see in Wingo's system as compared with traditional religion?

5. What is "lucid dreaming" and how does it fit into Dead Men Walking's shamanistic practice? How does it fit into Jody's scientific dream research? Discuss Jody's "dream

theory" from a rational, scientific perspective and from the perspective of New Age spiritualism. Do the two perspectives remain separate and different, or do they merge?

6. "Jack Butler" is mentioned in Nightshade as the author of the "Preface" to The Works, the scripture of the religion known in that novel as Butlerianism, and "Jack Butler" appears as a minor character in one scene in Living in Little Rock with Miss Little Rock,. Is there any appearance in Dreamerby a "Jack Butler" character, or any reference to one, or is Butler completely absent from this novel?

7. What do you make of Loren Wingo's speculations on "the afterlife." What do his ideas suggest about the nature of existence? How are his ideas similar to or different from traditional Christian notions or beliefs?

8. In her dreams Jody meets a recurrent character named Ish, with whom she develops and carries on a complex relationship. What does or may this character represent? Where may he come from— that is, what are possible sources or explanations for the existence of this character? In the plot of the novel, what "level" of reality or existence does he possess?

9. The major subdivisions of Dreamer are designated "iterations" ("first iteration," "second iteration," etc.) rather than "books" or "parts." What is the meaning of this term, and in what sense do you suppose Butler uses it here? How may his use of this term relate to any other themes of his fiction? (Compare a similar use of the term "iteration" in Michael Crichton's novel Jurassic Park.)

Literary Precedents

Butler's ambitious if not grandiose intention to create a fictional "world" (see Techniques above) within such wide boundaries invites comparison most obviously with the similarly coherent but diverse world of William Faulkner's fiction, and indeed Butler acknowledges the comparison at the same time he disavows any attempt to "imitate" Faulkner. Plans similar in scope, but perhaps less complex than Butler's, that their creators simply did not live long enough to complete include Chaucer's plan for The Canterbury Tales and Edmund Spenser's plan for The FaerieQueene. Butler also acknowledges such influences as the type of "future history" represented in the science fiction of Robert A. Heinlein, Frank Herbert, and Isaac Asimov. Familiar examples of a slightly different sort include J. R. R. Tolkien's sagas of Middle Earth and Robert Jordan's current Wheel of Time series. Thus Butler's plan points to a large, various, and complex fictional realm that is both part of a literary tradition and a major ramification of that tradition's parameters. The appearance of characters from one novel to another, and the use of writer as narrator, is a trademark of Vladimir Nabokov, who, in Pale Fire (1962; see separate entry) created a writer character named John Shade.

Related Titles

Butler's works to date are all related to one another, in spite of their extreme superficial differences. The recurring characters, themes, and other intertextual relationships among Butler's novels become somewhat clearer with the publication of Dreamer, especially in light of Butler's remarks about the overall plan of his fiction. It is clear now, for example, that with each new title Butler is "filling in" a piece of a very large tapestry that stretches in temporal terms from John Shade's origins in the eighteenth century until the setting of Nightshade on Mars three and a half centuries later, or perhaps until Mandrake's ultimate perspective as narrator of Nightshade some 300,000 years in the future, long after the human species has evolved into spirit.

By filling in a piece of the larger puzzle, the publication of Dreamer and the remarks about Butler's overall plan in his fiction clarify the relationship among his works greatly.

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