

Dreamers

by Kim Newman, 1959–

Published: 1985



Elvis Kurtz was dreaming. He dreamed he was John F. Kennedy, former president (1960–Lee Harvey Oswald) of the former United States of America. The dream was a riot of pornography; involving enormous wealth, extreme power, intermittent ultra-violence, and sex with Marilyn Monroe. It was a pre-sold success. An inevitable Iridium Tape. An inescapable quinquemillion-seller.

Kurtz was *dybbukking*, a passenger in the mind. Kurtz was aware of what John Yeovil thought it felt like to John Fitzgerald Kennedy in August 1961. He had access to a neatly arranged file of memories, plus a few precog glimpses carried over from waking life. He would have to pull out before Dallas. The JFK similie was not aware of Kurtz. Actually the JFK similie hardly seemed to be aware of anything.

Yeovil had had JFK plump his mistress' bottom on the edge of the presidential desk and penetrate the former Norma Jean Baker (1926–next year) standing up. A pile of authenticated contemporary documents were scrunched up beneath their spectacular copulation.

Kurtz trusted Yeovil had got the externals right. Through the JFK similie he was perceiving the Oval Office precisely as it had been. Marilyn's squeals were done in her actual voice, distilled from over three hundred hours of flatty sound-tracks and disc aurals. Yeovil would have had a computer assist handle that. Sometimes Kurtz envied the man's resources.

Marilyn and the president were sexing like well-oiled flesh robots. The dreamership liked their sexing pristine, with all the mess and pain taken out. Kurtz seared his overlay onto the dreamtape, burning a semi-apocalyptic series of multiple climaxes.

This was standard wet-dream stuff. The sort of thing Kurtz could do in his sleep. Kurtz's dybbuk overmind left the internals to his experienced subconscious and skimmed through the similie's memory. He ignored the story-so-far synopsis and picked a few random sensations.

The Pacific, WWII: the smell of burning oil and salt water, all-over Sun heat, repressed fear, an aural loop of *Sentimental Journey*. His father throwing a tantrum: the usual mix of shame, terror and embarrassment. Prawns at Hyannis Port. The inauguration; January chill, tension, incipient megalomania: '...ask not what your country can do for you...'

Kurtz wondered who had written that speech. Yeovil did not know; all the question got out of the similie was a momentary white-out. Damn, an extraneous thought. It would bleed onto the tape. Yeovil would have to do a post-erase. With the scene getting near the finish, Kurtz took ego control again.

Yeovil had taken the trouble to insert a 1961 image: Kennedy ejaculated like an ICBM silo; a thermonuclear chain reaction inside Marilyn took her out.

Yawn. Kurtz was an orgasm specialist. He topped the metaphor (too literary, but what did he expect) with a jumble of cross-sensory experiences. He translated the aural stimuli of the Saint Matthew Passion into a mass of tactiles. The dream shadow could take it, although a real body would have been blown away.

Marilyn lay face down, exhausted, her hair fanned on the pile carpet. JFK traced her backbone with the presidential seal. Yeovil had Catholic guilt flit through JFK's mind.

'Jack,' breathed Marilyn, 'did you know there's a theory that the whole universe got started with a Big Bang?'

Kennedy parted Marilyn's hair and kissed the nape of her neck. Kurtz felt a witty reply coming. Something hard at the base of the president's skull. A white hot needle in his head. A brief skin-and-bone agony, then nothing.

Damn Yeovil. Oswald was early.

Like most of the *haut ton* that year John Yeovil was devoted to Victoriana. The tridvid sages said the craze was a reaction to the acrid smogs that had taken to settling on London. Usually Yeovil affected to despise fashions, but this one suited him. Frock coats and stiff collars became his Holmesian figure, a beard usefully concealed his slash mouth, and the habitual precision of his gestures was ideal for consulting a half-hunter, taking a pinch of snuff, or casually slitting a footpad's nose with an iridium-assist swordstick.

At thirty-nine Yeovil was rich enough to indulge himself with opium-scented handkerchiefs, long case clocks and wax wreaths under glass. Three of his dreams

were in the current q-seller listings. The JFK advance had accounted for the complete redecoration of his Luxborough Street residence.

Awaiting his guest, Yeovil adjusted the pearl pin in his grey cravat. Exactly right. Exact rectitude was all Yeovil asked of life. That and wealth and fame, of course. He sighted his one-sided smile in the mirror. The smile which, flashed during a tridvid interview or frozen on a dustjack, could cost him one million pounds *per annum* in lost sales alone. A definitive figure would have to take personal appearances, merchandising, and graft into consideration.

The smile was Yeovil's little secret. The mark of the submarine part of his mind he rigidly excluded from his dreams. John Yeovil had come to terms with his character. He lived with himself in relative comfort, despite the fact that he was easily the most hateful person he knew.

He had the dreaming talent, but so did hundreds of others. He had the patience to research and the skill to concept, but any raw Dreamer with funding could buy access to the D-9000 for those. Success in the dream industry was down to depth of feeling. Any feeling.

Great Dreamers were all prodigies of emotion. Susan Bishopric: empathy; Orin Tredway: imbecile love; Alexis St Clare: paranoia. And John Yeovil had hate. It did not come through as such in the dreams, but he knew that it was his great reservoir of hate that gave weight to conjuring of excitement, joy, pain and the rest.

The doorbell sounded. Yeovil had sent an in to Elvis Kurtz. The Household admitted him. A few tendrils of smog trailed the guest. The Household dispelled them.

'Mr Kurtz?'

'Uh. Yes.' Kurtz was muffled by his outdoor helmet. He pulled out of it. His eyes were watering profusely. Yeovil was familiar with the yellowish stream of tears. 'Sorry about this. I have a slight smog.'

'My sympathies,' said Yeovil. 'You can leave your things with the Household.'

'Thanks.' Kurtz ungauntleted and de-flakjacked. Underneath he wore a GP smock. Yeovil led his guest through the hall. The Household offed the hallway lamps, and upped the gas jets and open fire in the drawing-room.

'You were difficult to find, Mr Kurtz.'

'I'm supposed to be.' He had a trace of accent. Possibly Lichtenstein. 'I've been out.'

'Of course.' Yeovil decanted two preconstituted brandy snifters. 'Piracy or pornography?'

'A little of both.' Kurtz accepted the drink, smeared his tears, and sagged into a heavy armchair. He was not at ease. As well he might be. Yeovil decided to hit him now, and cover later.

'Mr Kurtz, prior to your incarceration you produced bootleg editions of my dreams which made a sizeable dent in my income. I can now offer you the opportunity to repay me.'

'Your pardon?' Kurtz was trying not to look startled. Like most Dreamers he was rotten at that sort of thing. Most, Yeovil reminded himself, not all.

'Don't worry. I'm not going to tap you for money. I'll even pay you.'

'For what?'

'The use of your talent.'

'I don't think you understand...'

'I'm well aware of your limitations, Mr Kurtz. Like myself you are a Dreamer. In many ways you are more powerful than I. You are capable of taping sensations far more intensely than I can. Yet I am successful and well-regarded,' (by most at least) 'and you are reduced to aping my dreams. Or producing work like this.'

Yeovil indicated a stack of tapes. Inelegant under-the-counter dreams with clinical titles: *Six Women With Mammary Abnormalities*, *The Ten-Minute Orgasm*. They were badly packaged, with lurid artists-imps on the dustjacks. There was no Dreamer by-line, but Kurtz recognised his own stuff.

'I'm too strong, Yeovil. I can't control my dreams the way you can. My mind doesn't just create, it amplifies and distorts. I wind up with so many resonances and contradictions that the dream falls apart. That's an advantage with one-reel wet dreams, but...'

'I don't require of you that you justify yourself, Mr Kurtz. I am an artist. I have no capacity for moral outrage. We have that much in common. Our position is at odds with those of the judiciary, the critical establishment, and the British Board of Dream Censors. Come with me.'

The dreaming room was different. Most of the house was a convincing, dark, stuffy and uncomfortable recreation of the 1890s. The dreaming room was what people in 1963 had expected the future to look like. All the surfaces were a glossy, featureless white.

Kurtz was impressed. He touched his fingertips, then his naked palm, to the glasspex wall. He started away, and a condensation handprint faded.

'It's warm. Is that eternity lighting?'

'Partly. I have the dreaming room kept at womb temperature.'

'You dream here?'

'Of course. The surroundings have been calculated exactly. Psychologically attuned to be beneficial to the dreaming talent. The recording equipment is substantially what you are familiar with.'

'You have computer assist?'

'My Household has a library tap for research. I don't use it much, though. I actually read books. I'm not one of the D-9000's troop of hacks. I don't think we should be the glorified amanuenses of a heuristic pulp mill.'

'I don't like the machines either. They hurt.' Kurtz was irritated. Good, that should keep him off balance. 'What is all this about?'

'Would you be surprised to learn that I am an admirer of your work?'

Kurtz cleared an unconvincing laugh from his throat. 'Would you be prepared to say that on the dustjack of *Sixth Form Girls in Chains*?'

Yeovil tapped his ID into the console. The Household extruded a couch from the floor. It looked sculpted. Out of vanilla ice cream.

'Besides yours my talent is lukewarm. I want to make use of your capacities to underline certain aspects of my work in progress.'

'Uh huh.'

'I am dreaming a historical piece, focusing on the character of John Kennedy, martyred president of the United States of America. Kennedy was known to be a

man with a highly passionate nature. I think it not inapt that your touch with erotica be applied.'

Kurtz sat on the couch, trying to find the loophole. 'What about the certification?'

'I plan on sidestepping the BBDC. They have no real authority, and I am supported by my publishers and the vast public interest in my work. The Board owes its precarious existence to its claim that it represents the desire of the majority. Once that is disproved, they will fall. JFK has been conceived as a radical dream.'

'How is this going to work?'

'I've dreamed a guideline. The sequence you'll work on is fully scripted. The externals are complete. However the first person is blank.'

'Kennedy?'

'Yes. He is emerging as a very strong figure in the dreaming. But in this scene he's empty. I want you to amend the internals as he sexes with his mistress.'

'Same old wet dream stuff?'

'Essentially. But in this case the explicit material is crucial to the concept. The character of Kennedy is seminal to an understanding to the twentieth century. All of his drives must be exposed. The underlying...'

'Yeah. Right. Let's talk about the money.'

Yeovil balanced the newly-discharged needle gun on his fingertips as he walked across the room, and dropped the weapon into the Household Disperse. Kurtz lay face down on the dreaming couch with a three-inch dart in his brain. The tape was still running, although the Kurtz input was zero. Yeovil sucked his burned fingers. He would smear them better when he was finished with Kurtz.

He had never killed anyone before. He sadly discovered that dream was better than actual. Like sex. He stored the minor rush of emotions for future use.

The tape clicked through. The Household offered the recorder. Yeovil picked the subcutaneous terminals out of Kurtz's head and dropped them into their glass of purple. The whirlpool rinse sucked particles of Kurtz out of its system.

Yeovil went through Kurtz's smockpocks. A few credit cards and a bunch of ins. A couple of five-pound bits. They all went into the Disperse, along with Kurtz's outdoor gear, porno tapes, and finger-printed brandy glass. Do it, then clear up afterwards—the secret of criminal success.

The Household presented Yeovil with his outdoor kit: a visored hat, and a padded Inverness. The tailors boasted that their garments were proof against a fragmentation charge. That was true: in the event of such an unlikely weapon being turned on the cape, it would be unmarked. Anyone inside it, however, would find his torso turned to jelly by the impact. Most footpads used needle guns, anyway.

Yeovil hauled Kurtz out to his armoured Ford. On the street he fitted an outmoded breather. It kept the smog out of his lungs as well as a more stylish domino, and disguised him.

Yeovil pressed his car in, and tapped his ID into the automatic. The smog lights upped. The streets were deserted.

Yeovil drove around central London for fifteen minutes before chancing upon a suitable dump. He slung the body over several twist-tie rubbish bags in the forecourt of a condemned high-rise. It would look like an ordinary waylaying. There were probably five similar corpses within walking distance. If the Black Economists got to Kurtz before the Metropolitan's, the body would be stripped of any usable organs. The incident would not rate a mention on the local.

Back at Luxborough Street Yeovil reprogrammed his Household to forget Kurtz's visit. He fed in a plausible dull evening at home, and wrote off the energy expenditure to various gadgets.

Then he slept. The next stage was complicated, and he did not want to deal with it late at night after his first murder. He felt a twinge of insomniac excitement, which he countered by back-grounding a subliminal lullaby.

The Household woke him early with a call. It was Tony, Yeovil's chief editor at Futura. Tony looked harassed.

'You've overreached another deadline, John. I wanted the JFK master back yesterday. We're committed to a production start. And we have marketing to consider. It's a q-seller on advance sales, and you haven't delivered yet.'

'Sorry.' Yeovil stretched his mind around the problem. 'I've still got a few more amendments.'

'You're a trekkiehead, John. Leave it alone. I told you it was finished last week. I'm satisfied as is. And I'm supposed to be a bastard tyrannical editor. We're all expletive deleted here. The copiers are primed.'

'You have my word as a gentleman that a definitive master will be on your desk tomorrow morning.'

'Tomorrow morning? I get into the office Kubricking early, John.' Tony looked dubious. 'Okay, you've got it, but no more extensions. No matter how many errors slip through the finetooth. You can have Oswald miss, and re-elect the randy bugger for all I care. The next John Yeovil hits the stands Friday. Does that scan?'

'Of course. I apologise for the delay. I'm sure you understand...'

'If that means: Will I forgive you for being an iridium-plated prick, no way. However, my slice of your sales buys you a lot of tolerance. Ciao.'

Tony over-and-outed. He was getting near termination. There were other publishers. Offers tapped up in Yeovil's slab every morning.

The Kurtz-assist master was still slotted. Yeovil pulled it, primed the duplicator, and cloned a copy. The master tape was too recognisable as such for his purpose. Too many slices and scribbles. Plus he would need it later. His plan did not include writing off the work done on *JFK*. The dream would be worth a lot of money. Yeovil doled himself out a shiver of self-delight.

He printed on the clone's spine: *JFK* by John Yeovil. And under that he scrawled: review copy.

Review copy. Yeovil backgrounded an aural of Richard Horton's review of his last dream. Just to remind himself what this was about.

'Yeovil is lucky that his publishers have the clout to buy off his heroine's heirs, 'cause *The Private Life of Margaret Thatcher* is quite as unnecessary and unsavoury as his previous efforts. Yeovil is genned up on period externals, and has an insidious knack for concepting his dreams so you zip through without being too annoyed. But once the headset is off, you know you've had a zilch

experience. A few critics praise the man for his high-minded moral tone, but even they will find the lip-smacking prurience of *Margaret Thatcher* difficult to get their heads around. Yet again Yeovil bombards the captive mind with an endless round of sensuality—enormous state banquets, thrilling battles, ichor-drenched ‘tasteful’ sexing—and finally condemns all the excesses he has dragged us through with such gloating relish. He is at his worst when his heroine submits to what he has her anachronistically think of as ‘a fate worse than death’ under the well-remembered, much-maligned Idi Amin in order to save a planeload of hostages. One sympathises with the feminist group who have petitioned for Yeovil’s judicial castration under the anti-sexism laws. Finally, the man’s dreams are a far less interesting phenomenon than his publicity machine. If you’re out there taking a rest from adding up the profits, John, pack it in and join the Rural Reclamation Corps. With relief we turn to a new dream from Miss Susan Bishopric, who has made such an...’

Richard Horton was as smug a little shit as ever there was. Listening to his middle-aged parody of the adjectival overkill of a comput-assessor made Yeovil’s fingers twist his watch chain into flesh-pinching knots.

Yeovil could not decide which made him hate Richard Horton more. The Carol business, or his tridvid defamations. Carol Horton had been Yeovil’s mistress for three months. Before he had elected to sever the bond, Carol had taken it upon herself to return to her husband. Moreover she had instituted a civil lawsuit against Yeovil, alleging that he had drawn upon copyrighted facets of her personality for *Pristine*, the protagonist of his *The Sweetheart of Tau Ceti*. When he thought about her Yeovil still disliked Carol, but only to prove a point. Deep down it was Horton’s insulting reviews that lifted Yeovil’s loathing into the superhate bracket.

Before leaving the house Yeovil vindictively erased all his Horton tapes.

Richard Horton was dreaming. He dreamed that he was John F. Kennedy. Or, rather, he dreamed that he was John Yeovil jacking off while dreaming that he was John F. Kennedy. If Kennedy had been like the simlie no one would now be around to review the dream. The Ivans would have nuked the world in desperation.

So far it had been the typical John Yeovil craptrap. The man never missed a chance to be cheap and obvious.

In the Oval Office JFK was sexing Marilyn Monroe. Why was it always Marilyn Monroe? Every dream set in the mid-twentieth century found it obligatory to have the hero sex Marilyn Monroe. The girl must have had a crowded schedule. The semiologically inclined comput-assessors called her an icon of liberated sensuality. Richard Horton called her a thundering cliché.

It was the regulation wet-dream stuff, a little harder than Yeovil’s usual hypocritical lyricism. At least there were no butterflies and gentle breezes here. Just heavy-duty sexing. Another depiction of woman as a hunk of meat. Kubrick knows what Carol ever saw in Yeovil.

Horton’s attention strayed around the scene. Perhaps he should feed the dream through the British Museum Library’s researcher. It might catch Yeovil out on an external. It was probably not worth it. Yeovil was the kind of Dreamer who got

every wallpaper tone and calendar date right and then hit you with a concept that would make a computer puke.

Yeovil had peppered the sexing with memories. The lanky git was pathetically pleased with himself. Look how much research I did, screamed a mass of largely irrelevant facts. WWII, Holy Joe Kennedy, Hyannis Port.

Who wrote Kennedy's inaugural address? That was out of character. Horton's *dybbuk* flinched from the white-out. There was another mind crowding in, superimposed on the Kennedy similie. It was not Yeovil, he was working overtime on having JFK remember who was topping the bill at the Newport, Rhode Island jazz festival in 1960. There was someone else. A strong mind Horton could not place. It was a contributory Dreamer. Was Yeovil trying to pirate again? Eclipsing a collaborator on the credits was not beneath him.

Horton felt himself getting lost in the dream. The fiction was broken, and he was disconcerted. For an instant he thought he actually was sexing Marilyn Monroe. The woman was screaming in his ear. After all these years, the real thing.

Then it was cartoon time. The JFK similie body stretched impossibly. The return of Plastic Man. There was a playback fault. That was it. Whoever had last dreamed through this copy had left an accidental over-layer. Horton fished around for a name, but was dropped into a maelstrom of explosion imagery.

Was Yeovil experimenting with hard core? At least that would make a change.

Then the dream came together again, and Horton was locked in. Wedged between the minds of Yeovil, Kennedy and the mysterious Mr X.

Marilyn lay face down, exhausted, her hair fanned on the pile carpet. JFK traced her backbone with the presidential seal. Horton was disgusted to feel Catholic guilt flit through JFK's mind. Yeovil was piling cant upon cliché as per usual.

'Jack,' breathed Marilyn, 'did you know there's a theory that the whole universe got started with a Big Bang?'

Yeovil's dialogue was always the pits.

Kennedy parted Marilyn's hair and kissed the nape of her neck. Horton felt a trekkiehead reply coming. Something hard at the base of the president's skull. A white hot needle in his head. A brief skin and bone agony (what was that about Oswald?) then nothing.

Horton was not Horton any more. Horton was not anybody any more. His mind had been wiped. Completely, as an erase blanks a tape. Yeovil watched as the former Horton rolled on his side, retracting his arms and legs, wrapping himself into an egg.

The dreamtape was still running. Yeovil offed the machine, and pulled the clone tape. Elvis Kurtz had been unknowingly generous. He had shared his death.

Yeovil freed Horton from his headset, and gently popped his contact lenses. They had been making him cry. No point in keeping up enmities from a previous incarnation.

Yeovil wondered how Carol would take to motherhood. She always had shown an inclination to sentiment over gurgling infants. Now she had a chance to be closely acquainted with one. Horton had a lot of growing up to do.

Yeovil dropped the tape into Horton's Disperse, and used the critic's in to gain access to his Household. He wiped the whole day. As an extra flourish, he wiped the entire Household memory. A little pointless mystification to obscure his involvement.

Now all he had to do was get back to Luxborough Street, wipe Kurtz off the master tape, give that to Tony, and wait for the returns. Do it, then clear up afterwards.

Tony had messaged in the Household tridvid.

I had a merry hell of a time overriding your Household, you bastard. But we didn't lend you company programs for nothing. So you were spending the day putting a few final touches to the masterpiece were you? If so, you must be doing it in another dimension because the master is here and you aren't. Where the Jacqueline Susann are you? Actually, don't bother to tell me. I don't give a damn. I now have the *JFK* master, and that fulfils your contract. You can start looking for a new publisher. By the time you play this back we'll have a million copies in distribution, with an expected second impression on Monday. Don't worry though. You won't have to sue us to get what's coming to you. Ciao.'

