

BOOK REVIEWS

Book Review of *Wild Nights*

Wild Nights: How Taming Sleep Created Our Restless World by Benjamin Reiss; Basic Books; 1st ed; 2017; 320 pages; ISBN-13: 978-0465061952

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*Wild Nights*¹ by Benjamin Reiss is an exceptional book that takes us on a historical and literary tour of sleep, starting from the early modern period (1500-1700) all the way to our current hyper plugged-in world of instant communication. This compelling tour (“which recovers some of sleep’s hidden history”) reveals the amazingly strong, pervasive, and at times devastating, influence of social structures and pressures on human sleep patterns, with forebodings about the future of sleep in our rapidly evolving Human Age.² There is legitimate concern that healthful, restorative sleep is becoming a “casualty” due to the relentless assaults from the world we have created—what Reiss refers to as “global weirding.” *Wild Nights* provides a carefully researched and documented background for how we should understand sleep and its contexts from the broadest possible perspective. This knowledge should have a positive impact on our practice of sleep medicine, such as with patients coming from different cultures and varying customs related to sleep. The book also attempts “to answer the riddle of why... sleep has become such a battleground.”

The subtitle of *Wild Nights* establishes a central theme: “How Taming Sleep Created Our Restless World.” There are four parts to the book (with selected sections included herein): Part I (The Invention of Normal Sleep: Before Sleep Was Normal); Part II (Taming Sleep: Sleeping Slaves, Waking Masters); Part III (Rocking the Cradle: Wild Things; Utopian Sleepers); Part IV (Global Weirding: Beyond Normal). Reiss further explains that “the book has a braided rather than a strictly sequential or chronological organization.” This approach works very well, as Reiss, an English professor at Emory University, has written a highly readable, engaging, informative, and provocative book that should be of interest to professionals in the sleep medicine field, and beyond. *Wild Nights*, a poem written by Emily Dickinson around 1861, was chosen as the title of the book for the purpose of offering positive and alluring expectations of the night and sleep, to counterbalance the frequent battering of sleep in our current times.

Sleep throughout most of history was a shared social activity, with the current emphasis on private sleep being a late development. Furthermore, sleep across a wide range of nationalities and social classes in early modern Europe and North America was typically segmented into first and second

sleep periods of equal duration, with an interval of wakefulness lasting about an hour, during which time social interactions of various types (including visiting with neighbors) could take place.³ Reiss goes on to emphasize that “virtually *nothing* about our standard model of sleep existed as we know it two centuries ago.” The Industrial Age, which was accompanied by the spread of electricity and artificial lighting, had a profound and permanent effect on sleep, extending the hours of wakefulness later into the night that ultimately resulted in one continuous episode of overnight sleep. However, with the advent of shift work and “punishing hours” of factory work, sleep deprivation became a serious and persistent problem. This “electrical taming of sleep” promoted the unlinking—and the frequent conflict—of human daily rhythms from natural rhythms, which was a major focus of Henry David Thoreau’s classic book *Walden* (1854), the main subject of Chapter 2 (with Thoreau identified as the “guiding spirit and lead witness” of *Wild Nights*). This conflict of rhythms is now being played out with “engineered sleep” that is excessively subjected to the dictates of work,⁴ travel, communication, gadgets of all sorts (that we often sleep with), and all the other rapidly emerging features of the digital age, all of which can wreak havoc on people’s sleep.⁵ Intrusions of work life into personal time are increasingly becoming an employer-driven reality. For example, at a preeminent business, “emails arrive past midnight, followed by text messages asking why they were not answered.”⁴ The forces of capitalism are colliding with basic sleep health needs: “there is no going back from non-stop connectivity, because that state is too profitable.”⁵

Chapter 2 also discusses how the introduction of coffee into the Western world had pronounced effects on personal and social life that were both beneficial and pernicious. The stimulant effect of caffeine gave rise to journalism, the writing of long novels, and even to special musical compositions, such as “The Coffee Cantata” by Johann Sebastian Bach. By the year 1700, London had 3,000 coffeehouses that became hubs of intellectual life. The intrusion of caffeine into the lifeblood of society was also associated with the devaluation of sleep, and the excessive use of caffeine was found to cause many physical and mental ailments. The long history of medicinal sleep remedies is discussed in Chapter 3, including the prevalent use of opium

that spurred a far-flung drug trade in the 18th century of sleep concoctions derived from the poppy plant. Somnambulism was the first identified medical sleep problem, and was considered worthy of treatment by Benjamin Rush, the father of American psychiatry, in the late 18th century. Chapter 4 exposes the exploitation of sleep in slave plantations in the Antebellum South, where the black slaves were consistently overworked and hence sleep deprived by the white plantation owners, and yet they were punished for their failure to maintain proper alertness and the expected high level of productivity that were the direct, negative consequences of their long work hours and sleep deprivation. Because of their owner-imposed sleep deprivation, the slaves were cruelly labeled as being “lazy.” Racial disparities in sleep are discussed in other contexts. For example, insomnia was considered to be an ailment of “civilized whites,” whose ceaseless mental activity could force their brains to stay awake while the body was beginning to wear down. In contrast, daytime sleepiness and sleep disturbances were considered signs of devil attacks by the clergy in late 17th century New England. Chapter 5 (“Wild Things”) covers the history of children’s sleep and the various types of advice given over the centuries for sleep problems in children. Chapter 6 (“Utopian Sleepers”) discusses the wide array of alternative sleeping arrangements sought by people and groups who wanted to escape the dictates imposed by social structures. Finally, given all the evidence provided in *Wild Nights* on how social structures and sleep have always been strongly interlinked, and given the impediments for obtaining good sleep in our current world, a major unstated thrust of this book is to further promote the field of the sociology of sleep.

CITATION

Schenck CH. Book review of *Wild Nights*. *J Clin Sleep Med*. 2017;13(6):855–856.

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DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

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