

Bedtime reading; 'Dreamland' gently explains the science of all that keeps us up at night

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Body

DREAMLAND: Adventures in the Strange Science of Sleep, by David K. Randall. W.W. Norton & Co., 290 pp., \$25.95.

It's no wonder sleep is a problem for millions of Americans. We're overweight, lead sedentary lives, spend evenings bathed in artificial light and share beds with other people, all of which impede shuteye. The massive baby-boomer generation is aging, and humans probably evolved to sleep more lightly as we get older. Such are the reasons an astonishing one in four U.S. adults has prescription sleeping pills in the medicine chest, even though studies show that "drugs like Ambien and Lunesta offer no significant improvement" in the quality or quantity of sleep.

We learn all this from David K. Randall's "Dreamland," a modest yet informative work of nonfiction in which a sleepwalker walks us through the subject of sleep. Randall has done a lot of good reporting, writes clearly and makes even the scientific aspects of his subject easily accessible. And he knows what makes lively reading, such as the legal conundrum of people who kill while sleepwalking.

Regrettably, he also seems to feel that every aspect of the topic needs to be embodied in somebody's story. Much of the chapter on snoring, for example, is spent discussing the progenitors of a device for countering sleep apnea. The science of sleep is covered painlessly but a little sparingly. Nor does the author dwell much on sleep in literature and mythology. The result is an enjoyable, edifying book that goes down easy, even if it leaves you wishing that it were a tad more ambitious.

The one thing "Dreamland" will not do - sorry, insomniacs - is put you to sleep. The topic and the treatment are both too interesting. Take dreams, for instance. Randall reports that Freud was all wrong; science shows that rather than brimming with hidden meanings and sexual longings, dreams are straightforward, even pedestrian, if usually unpleasant - rehearsals, perhaps, for bad things we might face while awake. We also learn that, in the Middle Ages and early Renaissance, people spent more time in

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bed, but sleep was segmented into "first sleep" and "second sleep," with perhaps an hour of relaxed wakefulness in between - an hour considered convenient for lovemaking.

Randall says that humans evolved for an environment quite different from the one we live in today. The advent of electric lighting means that people aren't exposed to enough daylight, throwing off their circadian rhythms. Or they drink alcohol at night, which leads to wakefulness in the wee hours. And sleep deprivation can blight your waking hours, making you sadder, dumber and less healthy.

While not a self-help book, "Dreamland" provides good advice on improving sleep. Get ample natural light by day, and some exercise. Avoid bright lights at night (including the glow of computers and iPads), establish a consistent bedtime, use the bedroom only for sleep or sex, and keep the place cool - between 60 and 66 degrees if you wear pajamas. A tepid shower beats a hot bath before bed and, sadly, sleeping on the same mattress as someone else doesn't help. "Getting a good night's sleep takes work," reports the author. By the end of the book he has a better handle on his somnambulism, as well as the credibility to add: "And that work is worth it."

Graphic

Getty Images photo - Photos of a girl sleeping

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