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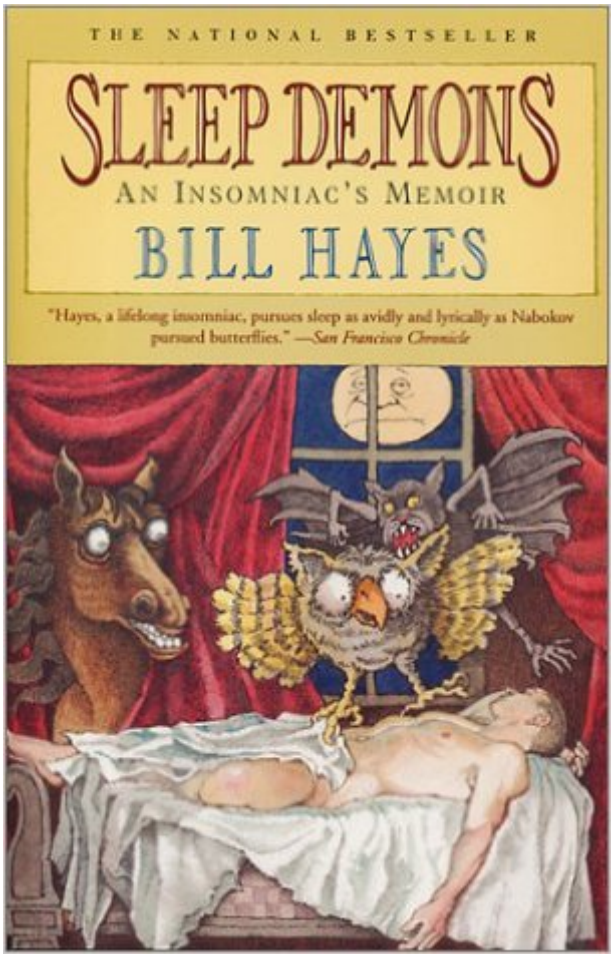
Sleep Demons: An Insomniac's Memoir



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Synopsis

Bill Hayes grew up in a family in which the question "How'd you sleep?" was as much a staple at the breakfast table as orange juice or coffee, a question that encouraged genuine reflection and a legacy of life-shaping implications. If there's such a thing as an insomnia gene, he tells us at the outset of this beautifully written memoir, my father passed it on to me, along with his green eyes and Irish melancholy. Hayes' narrative affords an intimate look at one man's singular journey through contemporary life -- from his over-caffeinated, sleep-disturbed childhood as the son of a Coca-Cola bottler to the height of his insomnia, when his partner struggles with AIDS and Hayes must face an increasingly troubling and debilitating sleep disorder. Armed with an infectious curiosity and an obsession with the mysteries of his personal demons, he leads readers on a fascinating exploration of sleep disorders and contends with all manner of theories and experimentation, from the conceptions of sleep in ancient mythology to today's state-of-the-art sleeping aids and clinics.

Book Information

Paperback: 368 pages

Publisher: Washington Square Press; Reprint edition (January 29, 2002)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0671028154

ISBN-13: 978-0671028152

Product Dimensions: 5.4 x 0.9 x 8.3 inches

Shipping Weight: 12.8 ounces

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Customer Reviews

As a sleep researcher myself, I appreciated how the author connected his personal sleep problems with ancient, historical, and current studies about sleep. Quoting a variety of sources from books, interviews and articles, the book presents the information in a very candid yet engaging manner. I wish the author a good night's rest, finally.

Though I've never had trouble sleeping, I found this book fascinating. I couldn't put it down, reading

late and awaking early to enjoy its beautifully written passages. Hayes expertly weaves the scientific and historic aspects of sleep (and sleep disorders) with his own extremely personal revelations. The very specifity of his details triggered my own reflections on my relationship with sleep and with the world. Don’t miss this remarkable debut from a wonderful wordsmith.

Sleep Demons is part memoir, part discussion of sleep and sleep disorders by Bill Hayes, a self-described agnostic gay insomniac. I found both the memoir and the sleep information intermittently interesting: Some of the scientific sections came off as dry and tedious to me, and I wasn’t expecting to read so much about Hayes’s active sexual life. Of particular interest to me were his childhood and family life, and then later years living in San Francisco with his partner, Steve, who was HIV-positive and later developed AIDS. The first-person narrative of their life at this time was intriguing and touching, and was what ultimately made me glad to have read Sleep Demons. I’d like to have given it 3 1/2 stars, but felt 4 was too high for my thoughts on the book. So 3 stars it is.

This is a book that cannot decide what wants to be. The parts that try to be a memoir deserve from two to five stars as the book proceeds. I don’t really care to read about generic suburban childhoods - please stop including them in memoirs - but it is in his first-person accounts of life as a young gay man during the AIDS epidemic in the latter parts of the book where the author finds his voice. On the other hand, the parts that try to be a popular account of the history of sleep research are at best mildly interesting and deserve only two stars. Splitting the difference, it pains me to give it only three stars, because I really like the author and would like to see more of his work. (A recent essay of his in the New York Times, "A Year in Trees", had me in tears.) There is much that is mysterious, exciting, and illuminating about the modern science of sleep, but this book is not the place to read about it. In my opinion, the book would have worked better as a real memoir, with the theme of insomnia and sleep science perhaps limited to short epigraphs at the start of each chapter.

Sleep Demons is a beautiful, poetic book that masterfully weaves science with storytelling. Hayes is one of the most peotic writers of recent memory. He weaves the story of his life with the development and findings of sleep science. He is a lifetime insomniac and documents his struggle and ultimate understanding of the meaning of sleep and insomnia in his life. He grew up in Spokane and ultimately moves to San Francisco during the height of the AIDS epidemic. His experiences and description of San Francisco at that time is one of the most beautiful, true representations of that era. He brilliantly captures the emotional and very personal toll the AIDS epidemic has on an

individual and a couple. The book is also a love story, describing the relationship he has with his longtime partner, Steve who has AIDS. Their relationship is inspirational. The book is many things all at once -- a primer on sleep, a memoir, a love story. And the book is at times, gut wrenchingly funny. Hayes has a great sense of humor and his keen, smart observations of the everyday are right-on and very funny. I laughed and cried reading this book. He has the rare ability to be simply descriptive and write moving, poetic prose at the same time. I can't remember a book that so succesfully combines genres so beautifully and succesfully. I couldn't put the book down and was sorry to see it end.

This fascinating memoir weaves in facts about sleep disorders (including insomnia and somnambulism) and the study of sleep all in with the story of Hayes's life. Each chapter uses aspects of his life as a springboard for a discussion of things related to sleep. Sometimes the details almost became monotonous or tedious, but Hayes's style kept me interested in the intriguing details and little known information. I learned so much in this book, as well as thoroughly enjoyed the various reminiscences of Hayes's life, like his apparently inherited insomnia, his partner Steve's battles with HIV, and his search for a "cure" for his insomnia. He ultimately doesn't find an absolute cure, but rather he must come to grips with his unique sleeping patterns. This is an amazing memoir sure to fascinate even those who enjoy a good night's sleep.

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