

Oh, for the arms of Morpheus

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Alan Judd reviews *Counting Sheep* by Paul Martin

"We are the great unslept", is the conclusion of this fascinating account of what happens during the dark third of our lives, the time with which we are so familiar but about which we know so little.

The point about sleep, the Cambridge don Paul Martin argues, is that it is not waking time wasted but a positive activity essential to our physical, psychic and emotional well-being, and we are worse at everything if we lack it. It can also be enjoyed for itself, as he demonstrates.

Most men and women in the West get less sleep than they should. There are many reasons--the electric light, noise, the 24/7 work culture, parenting, commuting, television, the internet, clubbing, alcohol, caffeine and just sheer busy-ness.

Most of us actually need the traditional eight hours (Einstein needed 10, even 11 ahead of a busy thinking day) and the consequences of an accumulated deficit include driving reaction times comparable with those at the drink-drive limit, increased heart disease, declining memory and libido and proneness to conditions ranging from irritable bowel syndrome to (in children) attention deficit disorder. "We might live longer and happier lives", Martin says, "if we took our beds as seriously as our running shoes."

In fact, most of us don't have just one sleep a night but four or five of about 90 minutes each. We often surface between them but don't remember. Each sleep comprises two stages of light sleep, then two of deep ("slow-wave") sleep, then another brief light sleep and finally REM (rapid eye movement) sleep, which is when we dream.

During this latter we are in a state of almost total muscular paralysis, apart from those muscles controlling the vital organs, breathing and the eyes. We sleep mostly on our right side, least on our front, and generally move 30-40 times without noticing.

We dream for about two hours a night and those who, like me, claim to dream infrequently are merely forgetful (curiously, people judged to have "higher verbal creativity" have shorter dreams). Babies dream for 7-8 hours a night and foetuses, it is thought, do little else. About two thirds of REM dreams--that is, proper dreams as opposed to the brief, confusing mental videos we often get during

the onset of sleep, which are known as hypnagogic dreams--are unpleasant.

Some people, however, have "lucid" dreams, which are the ones in which you know you are dreaming. These tend to be more pleasant and there is evidence that, to a modest extent, we might be able to direct them. Martin is understandably intrigued by this theory and, though treating it with proper scientific caution, he reports his own experience that simply learning that "lucid" dreams are possible makes it more likely that you will have them.

As for the function of dreams, he is refreshingly anti-Freudian: dreams often relate to waking experiences but not in the sense of standing for or symbolising anything else; also, given the hundreds of millions of dreams dreamt nightly in this country alone, it is unsurprising that some should feature things that happen the next day. We don't really know why we dream but it is clearly important: our mental state deteriorates more rapidly if we are woken when we start to dream. It seems to have something to do with the ordering of memory.

Snoring, however, has no such beneficial effects and sleep apnoea--temporary cessation of breathing, followed by compulsive gasps--is positively unhealthy for the sleeper. You're less prone to either if you're female (you have 30 per cent less muscle and soft tissue in your neck), don't sleep on your back and are neither drunk, over-weight nor left-handed.

Nocturnal erections and female arousals occur several times a night; you sleep worse and dream less as you get older and smoking is bad for sleep--though it helps if you want to stay up all night.

With solid science behind him, Martin makes an engaging appeal for us to change our attitudes to sleep. There are few better ways to spend time and he is gratifyingly indignant at the "anti-napping" culture we inflict upon ourselves. He also has helpful suggestions for insomniacs--but the practice of counting sheep is, apparently, no use at all. Nor does he recommend Groucho Marx's suggestion--subtracting sheep.

Alan Judd's novel *Legacy* is published by HarperCollins.