

# **The Book of Night by Bernd Brunner**

Non-fiction / Cultural History



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*Our entire history is merely the history of those who were awake;  
no one has ever considered the history of the sleeping.*  
Georg Christoph Lichtenberg

## Nightfall

At first there's a moment of uncertainty, but then we realize what's happening: night is falling. Colors fade. The light dims and softens and the shadows grow longer. The evening gradually darkens—the *crepusculum*, as the Romans called this phase, is upon us. In the mountains, the blackness first gathers in the valleys and canyons, but soon the upper slopes begin to darken as well. Only the peaks directly before the setting sun continue to bask in a golden glow.

Soon the sun's disk touches the horizon. Red, yellow, and orange tones emerge as the light meets different layers of the atmosphere. Because atmospheric gases aren't completely transparent at higher altitudes, they reflect and refract some of the sunlight. A position with a broad view to the west over an open landscape or the sea is the best spot to appreciate a sunset's full scope and drama.

If the weather is clear, the temperature will fall and the relative humidity will rise. Crows make their way to back to their roost. Here and there a star is visible—and the blinking lights of passing planes. In the cities, lights begin to come on. And now we enter the darker stage of dusk, the “blue hour,” as the soft light dyes the sky a deep indigo. It's a time of day beloved by photographers, but others find it inspiring, too. Jacques Guerlain, the legendary French perfumer, created a fragrance in its honor. He claimed that the idea came to him as he took a walk at dusk. Nature was bathed in blue and the feeling overcame him that in these moments of stillness humans were “in harmony with the world of things” and the light itself. During the blue hour, Guerlain explained, the sky “has not yet gained the stars.” His appropriately named *L'heure bleue* perfume is an oriental-floral mix with a touch of vanilla.

It's time to go home, but first we take one last glimpse toward the heavens: was that a late swallow flapping between the buildings, systematically searching the air for insects—or was it a bat? The question remains unanswered, but soon bats on their erratic flights are the only creatures visible in the sky.

*The sun descending in the west,  
The evening star does shine;  
The birds are silent in their nest,  
And I must seek for mine.  
The moon, like a flower,  
In heaven's high bower,  
With silent delight  
Sits and smiles on the night.*

William Blake,  
*Songs of Innocence and Experience*

## Defining the night

Night exists when the sun is absent—specifically, when the earth has turned so far in its daily rotation that we find ourselves on the planet’s dark side. The “terminator,” as the border between day and night is called, sweeps over the earth in from east to west, moving more than 1,000 miles per hour near the equator. Thomas Hardy describes this motion in his novel *Far from the Madding Crowd*:

*“To persons standing alone on a hill during a clear midnight such as this, the roll of the world eastward is almost a palpable movement. The sensation may be caused by the panoramic glide of the stars past earthly objects, which is perceptible in a few minutes of stillness, or by the better outlook upon space that a hill affords, or by the wind, or by the solitude; but whatever be its origin the impression of riding along is vivid and abiding.”*

So many things are possible at night! If you stay awake, the darkness upends the coordinates that usually organize our perception. The shackles of control and authority loosen and our imaginations run freer. Smells and tastes seem more intense and sounds that are drowned out during the day become especially audible. Our feeling for time and space changes, too—at night it’s easier to sense that we’re just tiny parts of the universe.

It’s a paradox: the darkness that descends when night falls opens our eyes to the vastness of infinite space. If conditions are right, about six thousand stars are visible in a clear night sky—and their light originated long before our own solar system existed.

Although the proliferation of artificial light has blurred the stark opposition of night and day that our premodern ancestors knew, the dark hours retain some of their special mystery. And it’s a mystery full of contradictions. Nighttime is often perceived as dangerous and threatening, but it also offers opportunities for freedom that the day denies. Forbidden meetings and encounters that could expose their participants to punishment or persecution take place under the cover of darkness. Night is also the time for lovers, for assuming new identities, for experimenting with social roles, for taking chances. How many people wait longingly for night to come—opening possibilities and enabling them to fulfill their hidden daytime desires? At night, fear and fascination go hand in hand.

The French writer Charles Péguy once sought to describe the relationship of day and night. He found an evocative answer:

*“It’s the days that are discontinuous. It’s the days that pierce, that break the night  
And not at all the nights that interrupt the day.  
It’s the day that makes noise for the night.  
Otherwise it would be sleeping.  
And the solitude, and the silence of the night is so beautiful and so great  
That it envelops, that it surrounds, that it enshrouds the days themselves ...  
Night is what is continuous, night is the fabric  
Of time, the reservoir of being. ...  
It’s the day that fractures and the days are like islands in the sea.  
Like broken islands that break the sea.”*

## **Night before the dawn of humankind**

When the earth formed four and a half billion years ago, there was no such thing as night. And there was no day as we commonly understand it, either. Vast amounts of dust had to settle before the sunlight could penetrate to the earth's surface and create a distinction between night and day in the first place. The young earth also rotated much faster than it does now, so the nights were far shorter. When the moon emerged, its gravitation acted as a brake on the earth's spin. The moon started out quite close to the earth and has been gradually moving away ever since, so it originally appeared much larger and more clearly visible in the sky.

Today many locations on the earth's dark side are lit up brightly enough to be seen from space. But darkness' hold on the part of the planet facing away from the sun has never been complete. Here and there, volcanic eruptions cast a glow. Liquid magma flowing from the earth's interior bathed the surroundings in a red haze. Lighting is as old as the atmosphere itself, but fire was only possible later, once oxygen-producing plants evolved. Now, of course, lightning strikes can cause forest fires.

The Northern lights have woven their fascinating veil over the Arctic since primeval times. And throughout the world, the moon has cast its light on the earth's surface as it followed its course through the night sky, growing brighter or fainter as its phases and the weather changed.

But it was people who first had the idea to intentionally light up the night with fire.

And in the modern age it became possible for us to use artificial light to turn night into day.

[...]

### **The luxury of reading late**

Those of us who like to stay up late are generally also receptive to the lure of reading in the evening or even far into the night. Forgetting the world around you and sinking completely into a book is easier during the night's quiet hours. If you read in bed, the familiar coziness combines with the dark to create a very special atmosphere.

Bedtime stories are no longer just for children. But which type of tale makes the best late-night reading—a thrilling mystery, a whimsical romance, or even a nonfiction book (like this one)—depends entirely on the readers. Choosing which thoughts will accompany us into sleep is a very individual decision.

The writer Alberto Manguel has described how the books in his library develop “voices” at night that relate a great deal about the world, the place of books in it, and the people who have loved, demonized, banned, or even burned them. “In the light, we read the inventions of others;” he asserts, “in the darkness, we invent our own stories.” And he writes: “If the library in the morning suggests an echo of the severe and reasonably wishful order of the world, the library at night seems to rejoice in the world's essential, joyful muddle.” It's a pleasure to imagine Manguel enjoying “reading in the thick silence, when the triangles of light from the reading lamps split [his] library shelves in two.” His gaze occasionally wanders to follow the motes of dust dancing in the lamplight.

Libraries that are open around the clock encourage nocturnal reading habits. But while they are common at American universities, such late-night libraries have been slow to catch on in Europe. Still, they have proven popular at universities in Dortmund, Freiburg, Konstanz, and Karlsruhe. Although more and more sources are available online, many students seem to appreciate reading and studying while surrounded by other people who are doing something similar.

Countless people in earlier times surely fell asleep while reading books by candlelight—and could count themselves fortunate if their bed didn't go up in flames. Modern modes of reading have their own less dramatic dangers, such as insomnia: reading with electronic devices late at night suppresses the hormone melatonin, which helps us fall asleep. In this context, printed books have an advantage over e-readers or smartphones because less light is required to read them. Perhaps one day someone will come up with a way to print books with glow-in-the-dark ink. Then we wouldn't even have to turn the lamp on.

Another writer who shared strong views about late-night literary indulgence was Marguerite Duras. In an interview she once said, “You can't read by two lights at once—the light of day and the light of the book. You should read by electric light, with the room in darkness and the page alone illuminated.” Often night reading takes place in secret, and the fascination of the forbidden adds to its appeal.

It's no surprise that literary characters are sometimes susceptible to the lure of late reading. In *The Book of the Duchess*, Geoffrey Chaucer's protagonist relates that reading is her preferred distraction when insomnia strikes:

*“So whan I saw I might not slepe,*

*Til now late, this other night,  
Upon my bedde I sat upright  
And bad oon reche me a book,  
A romaunce, and he hit me took  
To rede and dryve the night away;  
For me thoghte it better play  
Then playen either at ches or tables.”*

Famed diarist Samuel Pepys also recorded a bout of late-night reading for posterity. After a festive evening of wine and song with friends, he retired to his room with a book: *L'école des filles*, published in English as *The School of Venus*. In his diary, Pepys fully admits that this tome is “a mighty lewd book”—indeed, that was certainly the reason it attracted him. Still, Pepys first tries to convince himself that his conscience is clear because he was merely interested in it “for information sake.” But as he continues reading and the book’s physical effect on him grows impossible to ignore, this attempt at self-deception becomes increasingly laughable. Filled with shame and contrition, he decides to burn the book—although, notably, only after it has served its purpose. Of course, Pepys did document the incident, preserving it for posterity. That’s quite a difference from most readers of pornography, who disappear under the covers with a flashlight to peruse these works and never tell a soul about it.



*“One must see the night  
before one can realize the day.”*  
Anne Sexton

*“At night every cat is a leopard.”*  
Italian proverb

*“Each night, when I go to sleep, I die. And the next morning, when I wake up, I am  
reborn.”* Mahatma Gandhi

*“Only in the darkness can you see the stars.”*  
Martin Luther King, Jr.

*“What are days for? To wake us up. To put between the endless nights.  
What are nights for? To fall through time, into another world.”*  
Laurie Anderson

*“Does not everything that inspires us wear the color of the night?”*  
Novalis

*“I curse the Night, yet doth from Day mee hide.”*  
William Drummond

*“The night has a thousand eyes, And the day but one.”*  
Francis William Bourdillon

*“What hath night to do with sleep?”*  
John Milton

*“Every day has its troubles, and the night its joys.”*  
Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

*“The darker the night, the brighter the stars,  
the deeper the grief, the closer is God!”*  
Fjodor Dostojewski

## Night wanderings

“One should take heed not to journey out in the evening, but rather to remain where one is; for the night is a friend to no one.” This advice comes from the pen of Master Johann Dietz, a military surgeon in the service of Frederick Wilhelm, the Great Elector of Brandenburg. Dietz recorded these tips in his autobiography as the seventeenth century was giving way to the eighteenth. For those with no choice but to travel at night, he recommends selecting a time when the moon is full: hazards in the road are easier to recognize then, and your chances of spotting robbers in advance are better. Whenever possible, travelers joined forces so they wouldn’t be as vulnerable. Some also put their trust in amulets, rosaries, and lamps as protection against evil spirits and criminals—or carried weapons so they could defend themselves in an emergency.

Everything changed in the nineteenth century with an innovation that revolutionized night travel. Georges Nagelmackers, a Belgian engineer who spent the 1860s in America, brought the idea of the Pullman train car to Europe. Soon a variety of countries had their own versions of these luxurious sleeping and salon cars. As the founder of the Compagnie Internationale des Wagons-Lits, Nagelmackers also played an important role in the development of the legendary Orient Express. The line’s high-end trains often featured wood-paneled interiors, dining and salon cars, and specially equipped sleeping cars with up to ten compartments that could be converted into seating for the daytime. Originally only strangers of the same sex could book a trip in a single compartment.

Although night trains represented a leap in safety, not everyone was a fan of this new mode of travel. “It’s a strange feeling to lie in bed and be whisked through the night,” wrote Alfred Polgar. “What’s more, the earth is rotating and revolving around the sun. It’s hard to not get nervous in a situation like that.”

Any number of things could make a train passenger on a night journey uneasy: suspicious strangers who smoke a last cigarette in the aisle and stare portentously out into the darkness, although the only thing they can see in the window is their own reflection. Abrupt movements and the irritating squeaking of the train on the tracks. Fellow passengers who loudly complain or argue, are drunk, and probably smell—and who hopefully disappear into a different compartment. Errant beams of light from stations in unknown places that always manage to pierce through your drowsiness. The half-naked bodies of strangers that you’d rather not see. Irritable conductors who slide the door open just as you’re finally getting some rest. Agatha Christie, a passionate world traveler, drew on the vagaries of the night train experience to construct one of the most compelling mystery novels of all time. In *Murder on the Orient Express*, a killing takes place on a three-day journey from Constantinople to Calais—and is duly solved before the train reaches its destination.

Once the trains were established, it didn’t take long for books to appear that examined the phenomenon of night journeys and provided advice for travelers. One example, published around 1921, was *On the Technique of Travel* by the apparently rather fussy Austrian geographer and engineer Robert Haardt:

*“Especially on night journeys, paying attention to the compartment’s ventilation is essential in order to allow the stale air and ... overheated atmosphere to escape continuously without generating unhealthy drafts by opening the windows to an excessive degree, allowing too much morning coolness to stream in and give everyone a*

*cold... Leaving the windows open at night may also give thieves an opportunity to reach in. This is more likely to happen to train passengers in the tropics than in Europe if, before going to sleep, they neglect to close the shutter-like wooden windows that let in the air."*

In Thomas Mann's novel *The Confessions of Felix Krull, Confidence Man*, the Marquis de Venosta is fortunate enough to have his compartment to himself. But although his first-class berth is of "excellent construction," he still has trouble falling asleep, despite his "inborn love and talent for slumber" and "the ease with which (he is) otherwise wont to enter the sweet, restorative homeland of the unconscious."

There's a simple explanation for his restlessness:

*"Why, before going to sleep—looking ahead toward the first night I would spend in a train that raced, swayed, and bumped, now stopping, now starting up again with a jolt—did I have to drink so much coffee? This was tantamount to intentionally robbing myself of the sleep that even my unfamiliar shaking bed alone would not have stolen from me."*

Inns are also places where complete strangers meet and must then somehow come to terms with one another during the nighttime. Even the grand hotels that began emerging at the end of the nineteenth century were no exceptions. People had to learn to tactfully stay out of one another's way while all spending the night under the same roof. Unless, of course, they were looking to make contact, because not all the socializing that happened was by chance. Hotels have always been the sites of amorous adventures, illegitimate affairs, and questionable transactions. Women traveling alone could sometimes find it very difficult to gain admittance at all. In March 1891, for example, the management of New York's Fifth Avenue Hotel simply refused to accommodate a woman who arrived late at night in search of a room, although they faced a public outcry as a result.

The person who could most accurately assess the guests' secrets was the night porter, since this position provided an overview of who came in when and when they left again—or didn't. In a poem dedicated to his "twelve hundredth hotel room," Klaus Mann—the son of Thomas Mann, mentioned above—indicates the kind of complications that could result:

*"What kind of person is the night porter?  
Will he allow me to take my visitor up to my room, politely looking aside when I stroll  
past his desk as though it were the most natural thing in the world?  
Or does he take a strict tone—'Please step into the writing room, there is something we  
need to discuss.'"*

In addition to regular travelers and guests, hotels have attracted their share of notorious vagabonds, more-or-less-questionable characters, and even outright criminals. And of course there have always been complaints about guests who refused to comply with the social rules of this temporary community. Probably no one has so meticulously documented the full gamut of sounds to be heard in a hotel room—both day and night—than Hermann Hesse did in his description of a stay in the city of Baden:

*"With what suffering and surrender we stare up at the whitewashed ceiling, which  
never fails to grin with silent emptiness when we first view the room, only to thunder*

*morning and evening with the footsteps of the resident above us—ah, and not only with footsteps; they are familiar and not the worst foe! No, in the fateful hour unforeseen sounds and vibrations roll above this harmless white expanse—and through the thin doors and walls: boots flung aside, walking sticks dropped to the floor, powerful rhythmic shaking (signaling health-promoting exercises), upended chairs, a book or glass tumbling from the nightstand, suitcases and furniture being pushed back and forth. And the voices: people talking to one another, talking to themselves, coughing, laughing, snoring! What's more, worse than all of these are the unknown, inexplicable sounds, the strange, ghostly noises that we can't interpret, the spirits that knock and rustle, all the clicking, tapping, whispering, whistling, sucking, whirring, sighing, creaking, pecking, bubbling—God only knows what kind of vast invisible orchestra can be hidden in the few square meters of a hotel room!”*

In comparison, Thomas Mann's diary entry recording marking a stay in the Waldhotel National in Arosa, Switzerland, was positively restrained: “Objectionable racket at night due to loud guests.”

But human sounds aren't behind every hellish hotel night. For British composer Edward Elgar, a 1905 stay in Istanbul's legendary Pera Palace Hotel was marred by a disturbance of another kind: “In the night the most fearful noise by the dogs—a sound I never dreamt possible—like 40,000 dogs—they were just under the window.”

Perhaps, despite the disturbances and disruptions hotel stays may involve, the possibility of random encounters lends them certain frisson. Mario Wirz described this longing in *Embraces at the End of the Night*: “I leave the door wide open. Maybe a hotel guest will lose his way and come in. A slightly drunken traveling salesman who doesn't care where he ends up. Someone ready to warm a stranger tonight. We can't save each other, but we can give each other comfort.”

## How we sleep

In the time before artificial light pushed the day later and later into the night, when did people go to bed? Groundbreaking research by the American historian Roger Ekirch suggests that into the eighteenth century, Europeans did not generally sleep through the night. Instead, phases of sleep alternated with at least one longer period of activity. The following excerpt from Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Quijote* supports this view:

*“It was a somewhat dark night, although the moon was in the sky, but not where it could be seen. At times señora Diana travels to the far ends of the earth and makes the hills black and valleys dark. Don Quixote fulfilled his obligations to nature, and he slept his first sleep, without giving any room for his second, quite the opposite of Sancho, who never had a second one because the first one lasted from the night to the morning, which served to show his sturdy constitution and few cares.”*

We might expect that this sleep pattern originated in the early Christian period, when monks had to get up for night prayers, but Ekirch shows that it stretches back to late antiquity. People filled the time spent awake in the middle of the night with any number of activities: smoking, visiting neighbors, tending the fire, praying, physical intimacy, and perhaps thinking over the dreams they had just had. Ekirch explains:

*“Often, persons emerged from their first sleep to ponder a kaleidoscope of partially crystallized images, slightly blurred but otherwise vivid tableaux born of their dreams... As in previous eras, dreams played a profound role in early modern life, every bit as revealing, according to popular sentiment, of prospects ahead as of times past.... The general public valued not only the oracular quality of dreams but also the deeper understanding they permitted of one's body and soul.”*

Criminals used these late-waking hours to plunder empty shops, steal firewood, or pluck forbidden fruit from neighboring orchards. Others, like Henry Best of Elmswell, a seventeenth-century farmer, took the opportunity to drive roving animals from their fields.

As sources of artificial light became more widespread, these nocturnal phases changed, especially in cities. Ekirch locates this shift in the eighteenth century. But while increased illumination enabled all kinds of evening entertainments, city nights retained their sinister side. For Charles Dickens, that masterful chronicler of urban life, cities remained places of “guilt and darkness.”

Over the course of history, people have come up with all kinds of ideas about sleep—including some that push the envelope. Some hardy souls are convinced that they can store up sleep in advance for when they need it later, like camels filling up on water before crossing the desert. The saying “Six hours of sleep for a man, seven for a woman, eight for a fool” is often attributed to Napoleon Bonaparte, who could even supposedly get by on just four hours a night when demands on him were high. Leonardo da Vinci was indeed enormously productive, but there is no proof to the legend that he slept in twenty-minute spurts every four hours, for a total of two hours spread over six sessions per day. This polyphasic cycle is known as the Ubermann sleep schedule (and I am most certainly not recommending you try it yourself). In fact, sleep researchers tell us that while a range of individual differences exist, longer periods of recovery are essential for anyone who has had to make do with very short periods of sleep for an extended period.

All kinds of things are presumed to cause sleeplessness, and the list of cures is probably at least as long. And there have always been people who can't sleep, for whatever reason. Fear, noise, cold, hunger, and war are all among them. Artificial light and even bright moonlight that finds its way into the window can disrupt our slumber. And of course there are all the troubled thoughts that plague insomniacs who just want to escape into dreamland. Conscious attempts to grow drowsy—like counting sheep, imagining the sounds of a babbling mountain brook, or convincing ourselves that we feel heavy—can have precisely the opposite effect than intended. Paradoxically, the best way to nod off is often to tell ourselves that staying awake is essential. For the first-person narrator of Anna Seghers's novel *Transit*, a story of exile during the Second World War, the struggle to sleep brings the sense of being in an entirely different place:

*“Even as I fell asleep I had the feeling of being on a ship, not because I heard so much about them or wanted to travel on one, but because I felt dizzy and miserable in the surging waves of impressions and sensations, without the strength to explain myself. And from all sides noise bombarded me, as if I were sleeping on a slippery plank in the middle of a drunken crew. I heard luggage rolling and crashing as if it had been carelessly loaded into the hold of a ship tossed by the sea. I heard French curses and Spanish farewells, and finally—but more intensely than all the rest—I heard a simple little song that I had last heard in my homeland back when none of us knew who Hitler was, not even Hitler himself. I told myself that I was surely just dreaming. And then I really did fall asleep.”*

Every insomniac has their own story. Anton Chekhov, who was a physician as well as a writer, memorialized one such remarkable account in his story “A Case History.” Koryolov, the assistant to a doctor in Moscow, travels to the country to visit Liza, a young woman plagued by sleeplessness whose father owns a textile factory. “She had been ill for some time and had been treated by various doctors; during the previous night, from evening until morning, she had such violent palpitations of the heart that no one in the house had slept; they were afraid that she might die.” On the way to her, Koryolov notices ailing workers, marked by alcohol. “I feel such a weight on my heart nearly every night,” Liza says. It soon becomes clear that the young woman's insomnia is the outgrowth of her guilty conscience about the workers' exploitation. As Koryolov learns, the factory's five buildings belong to her. “As the owner of this factory owner and a wealthy heiress, you feel dissatisfied,” he tells her. “You aren't convinced of your right to it and that's why you can't sleep. Of course, that's better than if you were satisfied, slept well, and thought everything was fine. Your sleeplessness does you credit; in any case, it's a good sign.”

Emily and Charlotte Brontë, who both suffered from insomnia, supposedly walked around their dining table in the evening before bed until they were tired enough to sleep. After Emily died, Charlotte's sleeplessness intensified and she apparently extended these walks until dawn, wandering through the neighborhood and to the cemetery. The inability to sleep also plagued Emil Cioran, a Romanian writer with a tendency to nihilism. Cioran lived for decades in a run-down attic apartment in Paris, and it seems he rarely enjoyed a good night's sleep there. “What is that one crucifixion compared to the daily kind any insomniac endures?” he once asked.

Marcel Proust is considered one of history's most famous insomniacs and he indeed wrote through the night with extreme concentration. At the same time, he enjoyed the luxury of

being able to sleep during the day, and we know that he was less prone to his allergy-induced bouts of asthma at night. Could it be that he simply reversed the normal rhythm of sleeping and waking because he could think more freely at night? Proust's habits clearly show how much social status determines the implications of being awake at night and the constraints on how people organize their daytime and nighttime activities. Someone who goes to work early every day will never have the chance to experience the night in all its facets or draw on it as a source of inspiration.

The dream of eliminating the need to sleep without suffering ill effects continues to fire imaginations, and some researchers are looking to the animal kingdom for answers. One remarkable subject of their study is the white-crowned sparrow. Scientists have learned that these small American songbirds can stay awake for up to two weeks, an ability that enables them to fly from Alaska to northern Mexico without stopping.

For the last word on the subject, let's turn to the protagonist of Ulrike Kolb's aptly named novel *The Sleepless*:

*“Why is there no treatment to cure us of sleep, this God-ordained waste of time? What was that the therapist said recently? It's not that you can't sleep—but that you don't want to! And the way he said it! As if he had discovered that my life contained a hidden crime. Here comes another one of those gurus who want to sell us a bill of goods. As if sleep were really the cradle of life, the source of energy, the darkness we have to thank for the light, and other such trivialities... when really nothing is more powerful than the synapse choir of all those awake in the night.”*

## What keeps us up at night

*It is night: now all the gushing fountains raise their voices. Any my soul is a gushing fountain, too. It is night: now all the lovers' songs awaken. And my soul is a lover's song, too.*  
Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Night Song," *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*

Darkness intensifies our moods and susceptibility to stimuli. Some people prefer to do creative work at night because the lack of noise and other distractions makes it easier for them to concentrate. The fact that they can only glimpse the world around them vaguely—or can't see it at all—enables flights of imagination that are nearly impossible during the day.

Authors in particular have a tendency to retreat during the night to burn their midnight oil. For the Cuban writer José Martí, night was "the encouraging friend of poetry." Honoré de Balzac had the habit of going to bed for six or seven hours immediately after dinner—"like the chickens," in his words. At one o'clock in the morning he got up and worked for seven hours. Then he enjoyed a nap from eight o'clock to nine-thirty before he received his guests, took a bath, and left the house. Balzac supposedly drank fifty cups of coffee each day. While there's no proof this rumor is true, all that caffeine might have helped him to maintain this unusual daily rhythm. In Balzac's age, this pattern of waking and sleeping was known as *dorveille*—a combination of *dormir* (to sleep) and *veiller* (to stay awake).

It's not surprising that horror author H. P. Lovecraft found inspiration in the dark, late hours. "At night, when the objective world has slunk back into its cavern and left dreamers to their own, there come inspirations and capabilities impossible at any less magical and quiet hour," he wrote. "No one knows whether or not he is a writer unless he has tried writing at night." For others, the transitional period of the early morning provides the necessary creative kick. Novelist Toni Morrison, winner of a Nobel prize in literature, once described how she gets into the writing mindset: "I always get up and make a cup of coffee while it is still dark—it must be dark—and then I drink the coffee and watch the light come." Playwright and author Dmitré Dinev wrote exclusively at night for many years, but later switched his working hours to the morning between four and seven o'clock. He offered a remarkable anthropological explanation for his productivity at this very early time: his body, claimed, "has stored in tis genes the ancient rhythm of countless lines of farmers who rose with their livestock for centuries."

But waking up in the night or during the early morning is not always a surefire way to unlock creativity and mentally conquer new fields of inquiry. In fact, troubling thoughts we manage to suppress during the day can reassert themselves. German author Bettina von Arnim was familiar with this feeling: "All alone in the night's darkness, the depths of what we desire become quite clear!"

Some of us know all too well that night alone is no guarantee of sleep. When our thoughts begin to circle incessantly, it's hard to resist the urge to subdue the demons of insomnia with sleeping pills. Memories come—perhaps with regret over decisions that seemed right at the time but turned out to be wrong. At night feelings of loneliness, separation, or grief over lost loved ones can be especially intense. "What keeps me awake are women, losses and failures, imagined and real fears and dangers, pretensions and insults that I committed or suffered," wrote Ivo Andrić, a Yugoslavian author and Nobel laureate plagued by sleeplessness. But he did see a ray of hope in the fact that the power of these subjects over him faded as he grew older and his concerns sank "in the sea of forgetting and unconsciousness."



If concerns and regrets fuel insomnia, can the right behavior help prevent it? The patriarch of Thomas Mann's novel *Buddenbrooks* seems to think so. As he turns over the reins of the family business to his son, he admonishes him to "be zealous in your business dealing by day, but only engage in those that will let you sleep peacefully at night."

Children presumably have fewer memories and regrets to torment them. But they are much more likely than adults to suffer from *pavor nocturnus*, or night terrors, that cause them to start up from deep sleep with wide-open eyes, frightened and disoriented. Physical pain can also be especially intense at night. Gout, for example, flares up during sleep until it becomes excruciating enough to wake the unfortunate sufferer.

An even more mysterious nocturnal phenomenon is somnambulism, or sleepwalking. It seems to be triggered by stress or certain medications, but some people are apparently genetically disposed to it as well. The haunting image of a sleepwalker gliding at dizzy heights along the rooftops with outstretched arms and closed eyes is firmly anchored in our collective imagination, but such a thing is very unlikely to actually happen. In Vincenzo Bellini's 1831 opera *La sonnambula*, the title character performs feats that are likewise improbable: by the light of a full moon, this nightgown-clad sleepwalker balances on a treacherous wooden ledge by a splashing waterwheel. Today scientists believe that somnambulists' "sleep" is purely physical and their consciousness—with all its drives, emotions, and instincts—is wide awake. Amazingly, sleepwalkers have been known to drive, cook, and eat. In rare cases, aided by the fact that the mind's self-control mechanisms are deactivated, a sleepwalker has even killed someone. In short, "sleepwalkers" are asleep and awake at the same time.

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, somnambulism was often associated with the idea of "animal magnetism" postulated by Frank Anton Mesmer. Doctors who applied Mesmer's methods laid their hands on their patients' bodies or made movements over them to create "healing currents." As a result, the patients entered a trance-like state in which they could (allegedly) report which treatment—usually a special diet or certain baths—would help to cure them. In some cases, sleepwalkers were believed to have psychic abilities. For example, an 1817 volume of the German journal *Archive of Animal Magnetism* relates that a number of somnambulists in Stuttgart correctly foretold the death of "a person of high rank." In general, interest in parapsychological phenomena was strong during the nineteenth century. Spiritualist gatherings like seances were popular—and of course they generally took place at night.

*"For as darkness makes us timid and apt to see terrifying shapes everywhere, there is something similar in the effect of indistinct thought; and uncertainty always brings with it a sense of danger. Hence, towards evening, when our powers of thought and judgment are relaxed,—at the hour, as it were, of subjective darkness,—the intellect becomes tired, easily confused, and unable to get at the bottom of things; and if, in that state, we meditate on matters of personal interest to ourselves, they soon assume a dangerous and terrifying aspect. This is mostly the case at night, when we are in bed; for then the mind is fully relaxed, and the power of judgment quite unequal to its duties; but imagination is still awake. Night gives a black look to everything, whatever it may be."*

Arthur Schopenhauer, *Counsels and Maxims*

## Wildest dreams

Do miraculous things really come to pass at night while we sleep? Or, with a bit less hyperbole: Does sleep have an especially beneficial effect on creativity? We don't have the final answer to this question yet. But one point is certainly clear: a whole series of inventions and discoveries have ties to the nighttime, to sleep and dreams. John Steinbeck once noted, "It is a common experience that a problem difficult at night is resolved in the morning after the committee of sleep has worked on it."

One of the most famous examples of dream creativity involves the chemist August Kekulé, who had long investigated the complicated molecular structure of organic bonds. Specifically, he was interested in benzene, which consists of six carbon and six hydrogen atoms. But how were they arranged to form a benzene molecule? Kekulé dreamed of a snake biting its own tail—and in a sudden flash he realized that the atoms must form a ring. This discovery, in turn, enabled the synthesis of an entire series of artificial dyes in the second half of the nineteenth century. But this account of dream inspiration is not unique among chemists: the idea for the periodic system supposedly came to Kekulé's colleague Dmitri Mendeleev in a dream as well.

Then there's the case of Elias Howe, an American mechanical engineer. Around 1844, Howe dreamed that he was captured by cannibals carrying spears with holes bored through the tips. This image not only provided him with the idea for a sewing machine needle but led to one of the first reliable sewing machines at all. A dream that inspired the Italian-Slovenian composer Giuseppe Tartini had a very different character: in it, he made a pact with the devil and handed over his violin to the fiend. A contemporary account provides his reaction: "How very amazed I was upon hearing him play—so skillfully—such a marvelous, beautiful sonata. It surpassed anything I could dare to imagine. I was entranced, beside myself; my breath failed me and I woke up." Tartini immediately began to record as much of the dream music as he could recall. He considered the resulting composition to be his best work, and gave it the name "Devil's Trill Sonata" – but admitted that it did not approach the brilliance of the piece that he heard the devil play in his dream.

Tartini makes an appearance in an essay by the Argentinian author Jorge Luis Borges, but the real focus is on a famous dream of the English poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge. After an "indisposition" prompted Coleridge to ingest a sleep aid containing opium, he dreamed a series of verses about Kublai Khan. Shortly before nodding off, the poet had read a text by Samuel Purchas that described how the Mongol emperor "commanded a palace to be built"—a palace that had previously appeared to Kublai in a dream. Coleridge claimed to have dreamed three hundred lines of verse. Unfortunately, he had written down just fifty when an unexpected visitor interrupted him and drove the rest from his mind. Borges was fascinated not only by the exquisite poem to emerge from Coleridge's dream but also by the idea that a legendary thirteenth-century ruler dreamed of a palace and had it built, and that this same palace entered—or perhaps even caused—Coleridge's dream five hundred years later.

Is it all just a strange coincidence? "Hypotheses that transcend the rational are more appealing," Borges writes. "For example, one could imagine that after the palace was destroyed, the emperor's soul penetrated that of Coleridge so that the poet could rebuild it in words, a more lasting material than marble and metal." Or could some superhuman entity be

behind it all? In the end, Borges comes to believe that the palace represents an archetype “not yet revealed to humankind, an eternal object . . . making its way into our world” and persistently progressing to its manifestation.

Dreams were long valued as divine messages that could be interpreted in different ways. But Aristotle argued against this view in this essay “On Divination in Sleep”: dreams, he asserts, are not sent by the gods but rather draw their content from the day’s events. In his other writing on sleep, he insisted that sleeping and waking are not complete opposites and compares dreams to reflections on water.

By the seventeenth century, the idea that dreams were not particularly worthy of attention had become commonplace. In fact, most philosophers refused to see anything productive about sleeping at all—except, of course, for the fact that we can’t do without it. Arthur Schopenhauer at least acknowledged that sleep was more than just a necessary evil: “It is especially important to provide the brain the full amount of sleep it requires for reflection; sleep is to the full person what winding up is to a clock.” In another passage he echoes the capitalistic language of his time, describing sleep as “the interest we must pay on the capital which is due at death; the higher the rate of interest and the more regular our payments, the more the date of redemption is postponed.”

With the theories of Sigmund Freud, dream interpretation returned to the spotlight as an area of serious study. In addition to his theory that dreams are a form of wish fulfillment, Freud developed the concept of “day residue,” positing that dreams link to our recent experiences and even control our sleep. He further noted that certain patterns of wishes from early childhood can be activated by this process. While his views bear some resemblance to Aristotle’s, this last point represents a clear difference, as Aristotle never connected dreams to mental development on childhood or the unconscious.

But the idea that dreams could provide premonitions or even predict the future persisted, too. One account that appeared in 1833 in a sensationalist German penny magazine relates:

*“A parson who lived in a village not far from Edinburgh came to the city and went to an inn to spend the night. He dreamed of a fire with one of his children in its midst. Frightened awake, he immediately left Edinburgh and returned home. When he had traveled far enough homeward to see his house, he saw that it was really on fire. He rushed on and arrived just in time to save one of his children, who in the fear and confusion had been forgotten in a dangerous spot.”*

The cheap mass-market magazines of the day were full of stories like these. But were they all just fabrications? Or are prophetic dreams due to precise powers of subconscious observation? Do the events of dreams, which often seem to follow a bizarre logic, stem from a different level of consciousness? Some people take this line of questioning a step further and ask if it’s possible to become conscious that we are dreaming and control what happens in our dreams. Adherents of this theory claim that the trick is to regularly ask yourself if you’re awake: when the answer is “no,” the moment of “lucidity” has arrived. At California’s Lucidity Institute, researchers are investigating precisely these topics.

The warning dream of the Scottish pastor bears a resemblance to those found in tales such as *The Arabian Nights*, with their simple, easy-to-interpret symbolism. In *The Arabian Nights: A Companion*, Robert Irwin explains that “the dream in medieval Arab fiction was a

storyteller's device, used to foreshadow what was going to happen—and, as such, a special form of literary adumbration or prolepsis.” Irwin illustrates this point by recounting an episode from “The History of Gharib and his Brother Ajib”: Gharib dreams that he and his companion are carried away by a bird of prey. The next day, at least in the fictional world of the story, that is exactly what happens. As Irwin notes, “Most of the dreams in the *Nights* turn out to be self-fulfilling prophecies.”

Initially, the Italian writer Alberto Savinio put little stock in his dreams and even seems to have found them contemptible; in his book *Nuova Enciclopedia* he compares them to places “where unclean animals and dark dangers hide.” Over the years, however, Savinio reached a remarkable realization:

*Dreams achieve what my thoughts as someone awake cannot ... now I am beginning to understand why the dreams are making themselves felt with increasing urgency. It is so I can get used to them. So that can relocate into them. As preparation for my 'total' relocation there ... and if real life were not so scattered, so eventful, and above all so short, then perhaps with a little training we would be able to go over into dreams, voluntarily and freely, as if we were going on a kind of summer holiday, a break, and spend some of our time there 'socially,' meeting one another as friends who live in different countries, distant from one another, and coming together in the warmth of the dreams, the 'immortality' of the dreams, the way people gather in a pleasant, lighted, heated room while it's freezing outside and the wolves' steaming fangs and fiery eyes stalk us in the night.”*

Savinio shows how we can make peace with dreams, take a more playful approach to them, face them with serenity. Perhaps he was familiar with and appreciated the ancient Greek satirist Lucian of Samosata's thoughts about dreams:

*“...As for the dreams, no two are alike in either character or appearance. Some are tall, with good figures and good looks, others short and ugly; some are golden (that was my impression, at least), others plain and cheap. There were dreams with wings, freakish dreams, and dreams that, dressed up like kings, queens, gods, and the like, looked as if they were going to a carnival. Many we recognized because we had seen them long ago. These actually came up and greeted us like old friends, then invited us to their homes and, putting us to sleep, extended us the warmest and most generous hospitality, including lavish entertainment of every sort plus a promise to make us kings and princes. Some of them even led us to our homelands, gave us a look at our families, and brought us back, all the same day.”*

But no matter how familiar or fantastical they may be, most dreams dissipate quickly and are forgotten in the morning. Our chances of remembering them are better if we wake up while they are happening or shortly afterward.

[...]