

Michael Greaney. “Observed, Measured, Contained’: Contemporary Fiction and the Science of Sleep.” *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 56, no. 1, Spring 2015, pp. 56-80.

Enriching recent discussions in a currently emerging field called “critical sleep studies,” Michael Greaney’s article examines a literary subgenre that Greaney calls “sleep-science fiction.” The article identifies a wide range of contemporary novels and short stories which share a specific setting: the sleep laboratory. According to Greaney’s analysis, sleep-science fiction is populated by villainous scientists who try to observe, measure and contain the narcoleptic or insomniac heroes’ sleep(lessness) with the help of seemingly futuristic machines; an enterprise typically destined to fail.

Greaney focuses on J.G. Ballard’s “Manhole 69” (the prototypical sleep-science text), Jonathan Coe’s *The House of Sleep* and Alison MacLeod’s *The Wave Theory of Angels*. His aim is to examine recent interest in contemporary sleep science, and to explore why the engagement with sleep research has moved beyond the sleep laboratory, generating a certain fascination with sleep among novelists as well as researchers in the humanities. To do this, Greaney formulates two suggestions: the first focuses on the “ongoing territorial dispute between art and science over the nature of sleep” (57). This debate revolves around questions such as how to study sleep from the perspectives of different disciplines, for example, which language to use to talk about sleep – poetic, technocratic, machinic? Greaney’s overview of sleep science history shows that, whereas literature’s preoccupation with sleep is certainly not new, the humanities have been slow to respond to it. Medical sleep research over the past sixty years has measured our sleep and sleeping habits in an attempt to decipher “the nature of sleep.” However, the inherent paradox of sleep science, as Greaney demonstrates, is that sleep scientists try to treat and cure sleep disorders, while seemingly working towards “eliminating sleep altogether” (65). Thus, not only does the ever-represented “sleep gone wrong” in the form of insomnia, sleepwalking or narcolepsy gain the status of an “unhealthy disorder,” but also sleep itself becomes an undesirable human activity.

Secondly, regarding the generic emergence of sleep-science fiction, Greaney addresses the interconnections between sleep and science in a larger socio-cultural context. For him, contemporary fictional representations of the sleep laboratory are “microcosmic representations of a contemporary world that is frequently understood to be in the grip of … a ‘sleep crisis’” (58). Sleep-science fiction, via representations of sleep laboratories, uncovers society’s ambiguous relationship with sleep because “only a society that profoundly values sleep would have developed these labs, but only a society that routinely distorts and degrades the sleep of its citizens would need them” (58).

The article clarifies sleep-science fiction’s fascination with “observing the sleep observers,” discussing the role of the sleep scientist in terms of voyeurism. However, while the act of watching the sleep of others has a long (literary) history, as Greaney asserts, most “watching” is now done by machines. Scientists no longer observe sleepers, but instead focus their gaze on the polysomnograph. No longer is the sleeper at the centre of attention, but “sleep itself” as “an object that belongs more intimately to the scientific instruments that perceive it than to the person who produces or inhabits it” (68). Moving from watching the sleeper to monitoring sleep creates a distance between sleep and the sleeper, offering new possibilities as shown in *The Wave Theory*

of Angels. In producing an unreadable nonsense language, which scientists are unqualified to decipher, “technology [forges] an unlikely alliance *with* the sleeper against the masterful rationality of the sleep scientist” (77).

Greaney further discusses the gendered dimensions of sleep. While his analysis of (masculine) insomnia and (feminine) narcolepsy as well as his reading of MacLeod’s novel via Cixous are quite conclusive, he might have drawn a parallel between critical sleep studies and gender/queer theories. If the literary texts show that “our relationship with sleep is never purely biological, never simply a private matter between us and our bodies,” but rather that “sleep is shaped by, and reflects, its social and cultural contexts” (73), then “sleep” in the early twenty-first century generates similar questions and discussions as did “sex” and “gender” in the late twentieth century.

Greaney’s broad expertise in literary analysis, critical sleep studies and cultural theory result in readings of contemporary literature that are highly complex and interwoven with interdisciplinary insights from the past decade of research on sleep. Greaney identifies a hitherto unrecognized literary subgenre that has emerged at the intersections of (clinical) sleep research and the arts, while he also convincingly shows that one of the key future challenges for critical sleep studies will be to take seriously the interface between sleep and technology. The article will be a key text in contemporary discussions on sleep, science and literature, not only seminal for researchers in critical sleep studies, but also for sleep researchers, cultural theorists, literary scholars and those in the medical humanities.

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