



A Pillow Book

Suzanne Buffam (Editor)

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Not a narrative. Not an essay. Not a shopping list. Not a song. Not a diary. Not an etiquette manual. Not a confession. Not a prayer. Not a secret letter sent through the silent Palace hallways before dawn. Making a daybook of oblivion, *A Pillow Book* leads the reader on a darkly comic tour through the dim-lit valley of fitful sleep. The miscellaneous memoranda, minutiae, dreamscapes, and lists that comprise this book-length poem disclose a prismatic meditation on the price of privilege; the petty grievances of marriage, motherhood, art, and office politics; the indignities of age; and the putative properties of dreams, among other themes, set in the dead of winter in a Midwestern townhouse on the eve of the end of geohistory. Feather-light in its touch, quixotic in its turns, and resolutely deadpan in its delivery, *A Pillow Book* offers a twenty-first-century response to a thousand-year-old Japanese genre which resists, while slyly absorbing, all attempts to define it.

A Pillow Book Details

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Author : Suzanne Buffam (Editor)

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The says

"Not a narrative. Not an essay. Not a shopping list. Not a song. Not a diary. Not an etiquette manual. Not a confession. Not a prayer. Not a secret letter sent through the silent Palace hallways before dawn."

A Pillow Book, Suzanne Buffam's 2016 book of poetry, is a great companion for anyone struggling with sleep. During the darkest hours of night and through the early hours of morning, at dusk or dawn, the poems in A Pillow Book possesses the hypnotizing ability to lull readers into a restful trance.

"Recent studies link sleep, or rather the lack of it, to all manner of psycho-physiological disrepair, from high blood pressure to metabolic dysfunction, schizophrenia, and Alzheimer's, not to mention anxiety, depression, irritability, and despair. [...] Those who sleep fewer, on average, than six hours every night, live, on average, twenty percent shorter lives. Without dreams, we die quicker." (18-19).

Insomnia is actually a very common condition, with more than 3 million cases reported every year in the United States alone. Associated with a difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep, those who suffer from insomnia can feel dissatisfied with their sleep and usually experience one or more of the following symptoms: fatigue, low energy, difficulty concentrating, mood disturbances, and decreased performance in work or at school, according to the Sleep Foundation. Most cases of insomnia are related to poor sleep habits, depression, anxiety, lack of exercise, chronic illness, or certain medications. The most effective treatments for insomnia consist of improving sleep habits, behavior therapy, and identifying and treating underlying causes. Sleeping pills may also be used, but should be monitored for side effects.

"There are two kinds of insomniacs: those who fall asleep easily, only to wake up hours later to toss on their pillows until dawn; and those who toss on their pillows from the start, only to drift off just long enough to be roused at dawn by the crows. A little game I like to play, when I crawl into bed at the end of a long day of anything, these days, is to guess which kind, tonight, I will be." (2).

A Pillow Book captures the spirit of insomnia, highlighting the issues associated with the common but overlooked issue that many suffer from. Employing techniques that encourage sleep, Buffam's poetry acts as a guide on how-to fall asleep, functioning as an example for others on what approaches and techniques to employ when trying to fall asleep. Whether reading the poems in hopes of falling into a lulled trance of sleep, or using them as start points for creating your own pillow book of sleep lists, the book itself is a blessing to those experiencing insomnia.

The poems often address feelings that could be associated with or caused by a lack of sleep (such as anger, irritability, fatigue or depression). By expressing contradicting emotions through the poems (such as gratitude, love, or relief) Buffam creates an interesting juxtaposition between the subject and the cure (ie. poems written to relieve anger speak about love, or poems written to empty the mind list a codex of facts). Some poems assert fiction as fact, in a way that sounds scrambled, as if partial facts have been dressed up by a near-dream state of consciousness. The paradoxical nature of the poems confuses and complicates them, leaving readers strangely healed by the exact opposite of what afflicts them. In other words, sleep is found in making one's mind busier.

"Thomas Edison invented the light bulb so he could read after dark." (2).

Some poems are written as lists, themed and alphabetized; some poems are written as letters, apologies, or pleas; some poems are simply observations, research, or useless facts ... all poems are reminiscent of the flurry of thoughts held in ones head before bed; useless thoughts keeping one awake, the anticipation of

events to come, chores to do, anything keeping the mind active. Buffam suggests that By writing the thoughts down rather than letting them roam, clears the mind and prepares it for sleep, allowing expression to come to fruition and get it out so to speak.

“Melatonin. Lunesta, Nyquil. Zzzquil. Ativan. Ambien. Lorazepam. Trazadone. Warm milk. Hot baths.

Counting sheep. Counting backwards from a thousand in French. Still I toss and turn through the night with a pillow on my head and another clutched like a mule between my knees.” (4).

There are certain lines of wisdom, moments when small epiphanies shine through the text and hit home with the reader, proving that stepping away from a situation can bring a fresh outlook and understanding.

“We are what we repeatedly do, was Aristotle’s view of virtue.” (15).

Instilling within us the understanding that both mind and body work in conjunction, this collection of poems balances on a precipice between the unconscious and the consciousness mind. Suzanne Buffam’s poetry truly captures the spirit of insomnia and implores readers to manage their problems with poetry. Embodying the unmanageable and uncontrollable feelings of hopelessness despair that can be brought on by sleeplessness, the poetry transcends insomnia and brings all insomniacs a direct cure: the hypnosis of reading.

AUTHOR BIO Suzanne Buffam’s first collection of poetry, *Past Imperfect*, won the Gerald Lampert Memorial Award for Poetry and was named a Book of the Year by theGlobe and Mail. Her second collection of poetry, *THE IRRATIONALIST*, was a finalist for the Griffin Poetry Prize. Most recently, she is the author of *A PILLOW BOOK* (Canarium Books, 2016). Her work has appeared in international anthologies and publications, including *Poetry*, *jubilat*, *Denver Quarterly*, *Colorado Review*, *Books in Canada*, and *Breathing Fire: Canada’s New Poets*; her poetry has been translated into French, German, Spanish, and Slovenian. She lives in Chicago.

If you or someone you know suffers from insomnia, you are not alone. Please visit <http://www.mayoclinic.org/> or <https://www.helpguide.org/>.

Mabel H. says

What a lovely book of poems, notes, and lists that captures the essence of insomnia--it's endlessness, and the anxiety, apathy, desires, and contemplation it induces. These idle musings on everything from lists of famous insomniacs to reflections on privilege are written with refreshing brevity and levity. It's a philosophical tribute to the famous Sei Shonagon's *The Pillow Book*, so the form of this book is unique. But with such sly humor and compelling feeling, I found a friend in this book--and eventually, sleep.

nikki says

super different and entertaining, and a subject i can get behind. this made me think in one breath and then laugh out loud in the next - i really enjoyed it.

Waverly Fitzgerald says

Second on my list of favorite books read this year.

Lauren says

Buffam is an unpretentious poet. I love her listy poems and her wit. I love how this book blurs the line between dream and awake. I love all the pillow trivia. I love how smart and intimate this work is. What a delightful genre-bending book.

Matt says

This is a curious little book-- modeled on Sei Shonagan's book, this is also, ostensibly, the record of insomnia, a collection of thoughts recorded when one can't sleep. But I think in that conception there's also the notion that this is the cure, that like Shonagan's book, one can keep this close to your bedside and read a section or two to slow your brain and let you fall asleep.

I never quite made it to that stage of reading it before bed, but I think it would be good for that, given the short and relatively untaxing nature of most of the short pieces collected here. You have brief historical notes (true?) about pillows through history- what's the oldest? what are they traditionally made of? etc; brief autobio fragments, often about her daughter (here called Her Megesty); reflections on Shonagan's life in the Japanese court; lists like Shonagan would write (Rare Things, Jobs from Hell) which are sometimes also abecedarians, etc. It's fun and diverting stuff and it goes down easy. There weren't excerpts here that brought me up short, like some of those in Shonagan's book do, but, well, I enjoyed the little time I spent with this book just fine.

Khashayar Mohammadi says

quite enjoyable

Alana Chantry says

Made me think and made me laugh. Loved it.

Mel Spady says

Do you like lists? Do you like dreams? Do you like sleep? If so, you will like this book. So much of my time with A Pillow Book was spent feeling like I was wandering around in my own head, which I feel is a sign of a good read. This book struck a chord with me. A deep and bass-y chord, one that will reverberate long past my closing the book. Quirky, quippy, and witty, Buffam's work is both pointed and relieving at the same time. Read at night, or in the winter, or early mornings in the summer. Read it on the bus or in a waiting room or curled up in a chair. Read it anywhere and anytime you want to be transported to a strange and ethereal place that feels like looking at home through a foggy window.

Anna Wakefield says

Absolutely an amazing book! I loved reading what seemed to be someone's nightly thoughts, some funny, some existential, and some with historical tidbits! I also had the amazing opportunity to Skype with Suzanne Buffam, as we read this in my college literature class, and she is a fantastic woman! I can't wait to read what else she puts out!

L.A. says

Shonagon with the wind.

The speaker of this clever set of poems has pretty bad insomnia, so she keeps a pillow book. Modeled after the classic Japanese work by Sei Shonagon, Buffam's pillow book talks a lot about literal pillows and their use in various cultures. She also makes random lists, chronicles her dreams and nightmares, fusses over her child (lovingly dubbed "Her Majesty"), and worries about her strained marriage and less-than-stellar academic career (at least, compared to her husband's). Much as the Lady Shonagon was trapped by court ritual and manners, Buffam's speaker is hemmed in on all sides by the strictures of middle-class academe, right down to treating the nanny and maid like shit, even though she knows better and it makes her cringe. As she plumbs the depths and shadows of her speaker's life, Buffman shows how even women who have come a long way still have a long way to go before truly breaking the more subtle patterns. Recommended for all poetry collections.

Kell says

Portrait of the artist as a white middle-class insomniac mother who is obsessed with pillows, pillow books, Sei Shonagan, and lists.

Buffam is witty and smart, her writing carries an elegance and some parts have a sharp edge of brilliance. I enjoyed reading this book, though it attended so much to normalcies in life of the speaker, and the most poetic and meaningful of its parts were not found in this everyday. The growth or trajectory of *A Pillow Book* was guarded and hazy, in pockets rather than building together (I have trouble finding the right way to describe this).

That makes some sense given the multiple ideas Buffam works with. Pillows as a starting point relate to:

- history, archeology, and cultures
- sleep and dreams
- pop culture (often as nighttime distraction)
- sleep theories or cures from various medical and mystical sources
- Sei Shonagan, Japanese court, pillow books and courtesan lifestyle
- the writer's and speaker's context, including her young daughter, husband, and social sphere - her own journal-type pillow book

Still, I found myself growing bored during some parts, because I had trouble finding purpose in them for me. Likely the best audience for this book would be young white female academics, mothers, artists, readers (intersecting, of course). There are many lists throughout that tap into Buffam's charm and humour, but are overdone, too aware of themselves. It's also in these sections that I became most aware of the parameters and ignorances of her life, whiteness and American middle-classness always central. Any commentary on them comes from within them, rather than looking critically at their spaces and meanings.

I picked this book up at a bookstore in Toronto called Type (I'd recommend visiting!). A favourite book of mine works off the concept of a pillow book, and I've been interested in reading the genre and Shonagan (the most well-known remaining example). Buffam's writing contains both good, fascinating information and a modern example of a pillow book, so I learned from and am glad to have read Buffam's treatment of these ideas; but likely, what I'm really looking for and need to read is Shonagan's original writing.

Margaryta says

If I could give Suzanne Buffam a hug right now, I'd probably sandwich her from all the emotion I feel. I'd also pull up a chair and two cups of tea, and just ask her to keep talking, because I didn't want "A Pillow Book" to end. It reminded me a bit of "Sequence" by A. F. Moritz which I read a few months earlier, although Buffam's work has a voice and style all of its own. This book is both a diary and isn't, is fiction and non-fiction, poetry and not poetry. It is and isn't so many things, all of which worked so harmoniously together in a way I never would've thought. The pieces in this collection can be divided into "list poems" that are similar to the ones in Sei Shonagon's "The Pillow Book" which Buffam frequently mentions, and more personal diary-like pieces that look into the personal life of the speaker, her (I presume) daughter, referred to as Her Majesty, her husband, and her dreams, as well as way in which the latter shapes her waking life and relationships. "A Pillow Book" is poignant and elegant in the way it strings words together. It has some of the aspects that make the "Tumblr poetry" genre so popular today yet it makes them infinitely and incomparably better, which is why if you're looking for something with a personal voice, simpler in wording but nonetheless filled with allusions and references, pick this one up instead of some of the overrated contemporary poets. I will remember this collection for a long time. Buffam is a genius.

Vincent Scarpa says

(Really 3.5)

Mostly enjoyable, though the premise does feel stretched rather thin by the end. Still, some great passages, like this one:

“If you wish to rise early, ask your pillow to wake you. Tell it exactly what time you wish to wake up and repeat your request politely three times. Go directly to sleep, taking care not to utter another word before your head touches down. In the morning you will wake well-rested, at precisely the hour you desire. Pillow, I say, shutting off the light and turning to address my steadfast headrest with respect, please wake me at six a.m.. I repeat my request politely three time, and pull the blanket up under my chin. Pillow, says my husband, the lark, please wake me at five forty-five.”

Erin Panjer says

Suzanne takes historical excerpts, imaginative sentiments and lists and blends it into a charming readable text. She uses elements of improv, and engages the reader to imagine more than is on the page. Light, fun, warm, silly and informative.
