



Nothing: A Portrait of Insomnia

Blake Butler

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“If there’s a more thoroughly brilliant and exciting new writer than Blake Butler . . . well, there just isn’t.”
—Dennis Cooper

From Blake Butler, one of the most challenging young writers of our time and the acclaimed author of the novel *There Is No Year*, comes a thrillingly wide-ranging and provocative book about insomnia—from its role in history, art, and science through its unexpected consequences on Butler’s personal imagination, creative process, and perspective on reality. Fans of David Foster Wallace, David Shields, and Dennis Cooper will be captivated by Blake Butler’s darkly evocative prose and his daring exploration of the challenges of consciousness.

Nothing: A Portrait of Insomnia Details

Date : Published October 11th 2011 by Harper Perennial (first published 2011)

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Author : Blake Butler

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From Reader Review **Nothing: A Portrait of Insomnia** for online ebook

JudithAnn says

Blake Butler suffers from insomnia and in this book, he highlights every aspect of the affliction. He discusses a lot about his youth, about insomnia when he was young, but also many other topics from his youth.

There is some reference to research on insomnia, and on all the external and internal stimuli that keep him from sleeping. He also talks about the time he was awake for 129 hours consecutively.

He discusses internet obsession, the use of sleeping pills, the thoughts he may have when in bed trying to sleep, and other topics relating to (his) insomnia.

The book is written in a rather inaccessible prose, for me at least. There is rambling, there is stream of consciousness and there are philosophical bits that I understood and liked, followed by passages where I had no idea what Butler was talking about.

Some of what he mentions is recognisable: how your mind wanders when you try to sleep, which particular factors might keep you from sleeping.

I had hoped for some more reference to sleep research, whereas this book was more of a personal account of insomnia.

This book is a perfect example of literary non-fiction, if you were doubtful it existed. It's not for me, but if you're a lover of good, serious, literary, "deep" writing, then this is your book!

Luna Miguel says

Enorme.

Crystal says

Quite literally waxed poetic about nothing (maybe that was the whole point of the book?) 4 stars only cos book cover glows in the dark

Michael Labone says

I think this is the most interesting of Butler's works that I have read so far. His novels are poetic but this just reads through like an extended prose poem. The imagery he conjures is both beautiful and disturbing and he really seems to be able to express sleeplessness better than I have seen elsewhere.

Brittany says

I had to force myself to finish this. I absolutely hated the run-on, stream-of-consciousness narrative style. It works for some books, or excerpts of books, but it just made the entirety of the book seem delusional and unhinged, and devalued the parts of the book I did enjoy, namely some of the timelines of historical discoveries and inventions, especially regarding the development of insomnia and the associated treatments/pharmaceuticals.

Bobby Dixon says

I have always been kind of averse to writing anything about Blake Butler's writing because [a] his sentences are mean like an older smart kid who listened to metal before you and seems beyond and [b] although I have always enjoyed reading his books, I cannot remember a fucking thing I have read after I have finished the book, even though weird corners and ditches of my memory wave dark hands when I remember these books, and I like it. About all that I can remember are textures like mud and blood [Scorched Atlas] or hair and teeth [Ever] or houses that have hidden doors, too small rooms or rooms that were right but by being in them you fuck them up and maybe there's an Other/mirror family hidden in the other walls and the only difference is that they have mold for teeth [There is No Year]. It is the closest to actually being haunted by a book I have ever felt [think about being haunted by the texture of too much light in your eyes or the moist fuzzy irritant of mold]

I also read something by him that he did w/ Publishing Genius, it was fucking really good. It had a dog in it.

Nothing is non-fiction. The cover is white w/ black script for the title. There are embossed [z] all over the front that glow in the dark. There are bracketed glow in the dark z's on the cover of a "memoir" about insomnia. It feels cruel.

I was worried about reading this book. I read on HTMLGiant that this person read and couldn't sleep for days. I already have problems falling asleep. I have night terrors. I twist into my head at night. I get pathologically compulsive about bed time rituals; blankets just so, fan on or ac on, etc. No matter how I try and describe the texture of a sleepless night, BB portrays it so much better. It was almost comforting how familiar it seemed. The quality of sleep was better this week.

[I HAVE POST ITS W/ MORE REVIEW NOTE STUFF, TOO TIRED TO GO ON FOR NOW. WILL EDIT MORE LATER.]

Jeremy Ward says

A beautifully written book that goes nowhere. I enjoyed the researched parts about the history of sleep, a few anecdotes from Butler's personal life, and accounts of the worsening dementia of his father, but throughout reading this book I just couldn't wait for it to be over.

Ashley Crawford says

I am looking forward to the upcoming collaboration between Blake Butler and David Lynch. They're made for each other, after all - both are masters at concocting strange rooms illuminated with stranger light. Both are masters at stalking the somnambulistic side of life and reporting back with terrifying accuracy.

OK, the collaboration is a fantasy, at least thus far. But it most certainly doesn't seem inconceivable. There is something cinematic about Butler's ability to describe his bizarre mis en scenes. His three previous books - *Ever*, *Scorch Atlas* and *There is No Year* - were works of powerfully visceral fiction, hallucinatory and troubling and claustrophobic. And now we know why.

Nothing - A Portrait of Insomnia is in fact a portrait of a hyper-sensitive zombie (a contradiction, no doubt, but it feels about right). When he works in an analytical, almost scientific mode, he gives David Foster Wallace a run for his money when DFW was in journalistic mode. But as the hours tick past and exhaustion gives way to hallucination, Butler travels to very strange places indeed.

At times this is a somewhat tragic family portrait, at others a meditation on houses and homes and at yet others a pharmacologists wet dream. It veers into the realm of experimental fiction and as a stylist Butler is up there with Ben Marcus who, indeed, he references in this text.

There are numerous cultural references scattered throughout, from Aleister Crowley to Antonin Artaud to David Lynch and *Inland Empire*. One that I felt was missing was that of Michael Gira and his band *The Swans*. In an interview I once did with Butler he commented that: "I've probably listened to the song 'Blood Promise' more than any other song. One year for about a month all I did was lay on the floor and let it repeat."

This in fact says a great deal about Butler's clearly obsessive state of mind. Gira's haunting lyrics to that song echo the tonality and thematic of Butler's own writing: "When silence falls/And light remains/And time is born/Beneath the sun/I'll hide your name/ Inside a word/And paint your eyes/With false perception..." (The album that song appears on, *The Great Annihilator*, makes for a great soundtrack to Butler's books).

But there are, no doubt, innumerable other influences and touchstones that Butler could have included in the mix and, as it stands, he balances a delicate cocktail of reality and the fantastical.

Butler's first book, *Ever*, was only published in 2009 by the small but vibrant Calamari Press. Both *There is No Year* and *Nothing - A Portrait of Insomnia* have appeared in 2011 via Harper Perennial. Sleeplessness, it would seem in Butler's case, has one clear benefit - extra time to write.

Philip Bardach says

Broke my winning streak of reading fucking awesome shit by cracking open this migraine of a book. Maybe it's a tumour. I couldn't go on so I didn't.

Matt Briggs says

This is a great memoir that provides one of the pleasures of a really, to my taste, well done memoir. It is conversational and I feel as if the Butler has no axes to grind and is mostly interested in somehow capturing and preserving his mind in action around a subject. In this case he is trying to capture the world and his brain while not sleeping or being unable to sleep. Thinking about it now while typing this I can't really think of a many memoirs (a kind of inaccurate term of this book since Butler isn't concerned with the events of his life so much as his thought as a kind of event or the process of his thought as a kind of way of being) that capture this sense of a person thinking honestly about himself. There is the more standard Janet Frame Autobiography and maybe some diaries like Ann Franks. Maybe Nicholson Baker's U and I?

Juveria says

Honestly speaking I have to give this book a 0.5 rating if such a thing would exist on GR.

I could not stand the book. I've been trying to read it all day. But I just can't go beyond page 34. I tried. I tried really hard. But every time I went to read it, I couldn't understand what he was harping on about. His thought process is all over the place. Sometimes he uses words that don't make sense to me, and are repetitive. Though its a nice style of writing, I just hoped that he would at least make sense. His paragraph would start nicely then somewhere in the middle of his story he would lose me, or I would lose his train of thought. So I had to put down the book. Though I would not have liked to, but for his sake I just had to say "Good Bye" to it.

My thoughts when I first picked up this book was that I would read something interesting from an insomniacs' perspective. But I found it hard to follow him. I have to admit I'm an insomniac of sorts. I don't have waking terrors, but I have nightmares all the time. I fear these nightmares that I can't even think about going to sleep. So what I usually do is analyze my day, think of what I'm reading, create lists of things I have to do when "I get up", that I hardly sleep beyond 3 hours. I make myself so exhausted during the week that I end sleeping for 12-14 hours straight at least a month or every two months, the most. Its not healthy, I know. So yes, this was my reason for wanting to read this biography. I hoped he would help me gain some insight as to what insomniac people should do.

May be some day I will come back to it, and read it properly this time around.

Nate D says

So Blake Butler wrote a Memoir. A Non-Fiction. Whether it is either of those things, reading it as such may lead to frustration. Reading it as A Blake Butler Book may lead to delight. That is not to say that this strange personal account of insomnia, writing, the mysteries and treacheries of home and self, things half seen under near-sealed lids, things dreamed while awake and staring down the dissolution of those you've loved -- that is not to say that this is not filled with information, both of the Personal Life History sort (I do not think Butler is *making up* anything here, really, just channeling experience into strange expressions) and of the Compiled Facts and Statistics variety. Soon after a decidedly eerie personal section, a recounting of his recurring dreams of a boulder slowly descending through his bedroom ceiling over the long and restless course of every night until a certain age, we're launched into another chapter, equally fascinating and poetic, mapping a detailed history of sleep research against the dubious advances of modern life: sleep disorder centers and

fluorescent-lit Walmart in twin proliferation across America, the digital clock appears, the first case of canine narcolepsy is documented.

Everything intertwines: personal, historical-scientific, hallucinatory attempts at capturing the feeling of sleep-deprived overthought and twilight half-life. As Butler's only supposed Non-fiction so far, it has an encyclopedic quality towards all of his experience and preoccupations. At some point, awake and staring when he should be close-eyed drifting, his eyes follow a labyrinthine path through sleep and philosophic notes on Borges and Daumal, Nightwood and Cronopios and Famas, tracing along book spines, from cube to cube and across facing pages to the opposite side of shelving, his storage apparently much the same as that from which some of my books watch my prone sleeping body overnight, much less prone to overnight unsleeping than Butler's, unless, of late, I must drift instead on hardwood floor, guarding a folding screen against our impertinently interloping cat, who will find her way through all openings, unless I watch and wait and ward her off with water, our cat who if successful will wake M, who, conversely, is no stranger to such insomnia, and once woken may not return so easily as I to sleep (I nodding off, even, on my side on the floor at many points, only to wake in the early-morning, cat at last crept off to rest, I creeping back to bed at last, and trying not now to wake M with my motions, who if woken may yet lie awake), M turning and overthinking perhaps, sleepless, unless I rise to stalk the pre-dawn streets, moving now myself like sleepwalker or glassy-eyed unsleep-walker moving in aimless wakedness, to find an open store from which to acquire the milk which, warmed, may warm M back at last to sleep.

but the problem is, you've already turned so old. Every day is faster than the last and you're still all pen to paper and all in small rooms hiding from the light. What do you think sleep is? One third of any life. And still the bodies who talk about books don't want to hear what happened to you in there, call it ugly. Like every word you've ever said. Like every inch you've ever holed. This is the smallest car I've ever drove.

Driven, I start to say to him, correction--and my mouth is so full of my spit, I can't snort or say no, pull over, who are you, there's no seat belts, where are we going, why does the radio not have dials, why does the seat belt feel like burning, what is that banging in the trunk.

It could be argued that this runs overboard at points, and though it may in doing so overrun my senses, I never actually seem to mind so much. Immoderation has its place and recreating chronic sleeplessness may be it. And I rather love the format of the ending, this collapse into an archaic digital form that apparently Butler recalls as well as I

You are standing outside of a white house, white as typing paper.

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Carmen says

I checked this book out because it looked amazing. Unfortunately, it is a bunch of crap. He teaches you nothing and keeps waxing poetic. Example: "And therefore, Light: in each phase of those nightly nighted

hours, there looms the premonition that the sun will not come back – that, in its burning, it will burn up at last, those last hours therein unknown for how the light still travels across such time – and thereafter leave the breadths and widths of our sunk cities therein forever under, wadded, stunned.”

Then, in about Chapter 3, he starts making A TON of footnotes that are COMPLETELY pointless, like “14: Words bouncing other words out of them in a silence, refracted by association, filling out the flesh around the flesh inside the head with what.” Garbage.

Katie says

I actually didn't read more than 52 pages of this book....wasn't what I expected at all. The writing style was too poetic and stream of consciousness for me. If you like that kind of writing, you may love this book. If it drives you a little crazy to read (as it does me), skip this one.

Benoit Lelièvre says

Parts of that book were locked in a room away from my grasp and I've wrestled with the idea of giving it a four stars ranking because of that, but who am I kidding here? Where the fuck am I going find literature even remotely similar to this anywhere else in my lifetime? Blake Butler is a wildly unique and savagely talented author and I'm ready to follow him in his utmost bizarre and poetic quirks as a writer.

NOTHING is part journal, part narrative and a third class on the history of what people learn at night when they don't sleep. Butler's fascination for his house is a recurring theme in his books, but it perhaps never had been so eerie. It wavers between reality and inner fantasy. Between embodiment and disembodiment. Think of it as a Radiohead song meets the creepiest episode of the X-Files. It's tough to follow at times. It doesn't give itself to the reader, but I've never read anything like this. It felt intimate and alive in ways most works of art aren't. That ultimately won me over.
