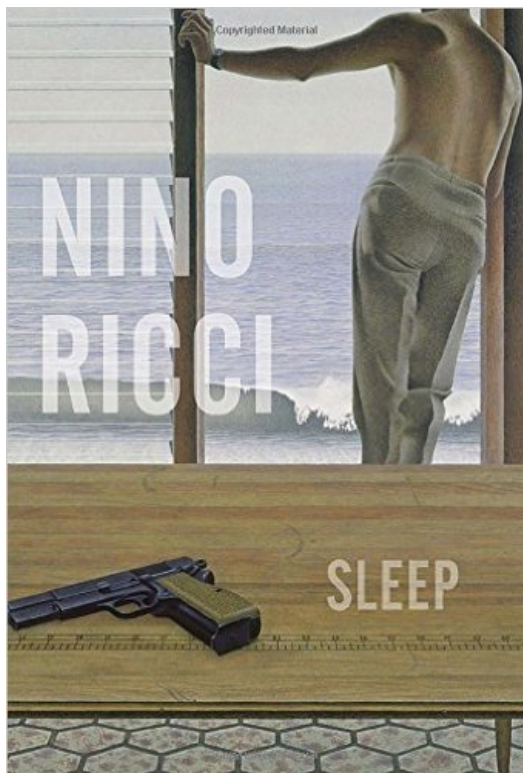


## Killer Drugs: Sleep through your Waking Life

Written by Eric Walberg, Эрик Вальберг/ Уолберг □□□□□ □□□□  
Tuesday, 21 June 2016 15:02

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A review of Nino Ricci *Sleep* (2015) and Richard Linklater *Waking Life* (2001)

Ricci's latest novel, [Sleep](#), inspired by [his own sleep disorder](#), is really more a fun text book on the latest brain research and the blind use of powerful drugs to alter--and possibly restructure (who knows?)--the brain. It's like a 'don't smoke' ad that's actually informative and hilarious, with a classic 'death of a salesman' plot moving it along.

The complexity of the brain and the perilousness of the chemical warfare we casually inflict on it is far greater than, say, sending a man around the moon or deploying star wars 'defense' systems. Imagine your brain: a ball the size of a large fist, crammed with *billions* of neurons, brain cells, a tiny Mission Control module, with dozens of centres, some highly specialized, some working in tandem with others, a fantastic electrical grid.

The more scientists reveal about the workings of the brain, the more questions arise. Enter profit-hungry pharmaceutical companies, developing ever new drugs, testing them as quickly as the lax laws allow, where concern for long term effects (there could be many, far reaching, varying among various brains) is cavalierly ignored.

Killer candy floss

Ricci portrays cocky university prof David, living off the fame of his first publication, *Masculine History*, merrily bedding his infatuated students and faculty lovelies, bored with his career and his increasingly shrewish wife, until his life falls apart. He suffers from what seems a combination of narcolepsy (falling asleep at inappropriate times) and insomnia, his doctor Becker happy to ply him with "every sort of psychotropic, pushing his dosages to the upper limits with each new cocktail as if he were an expendable specimen in a rat trial. Time-released drugs with delivery

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systems as sophisticated as an ICBM's."

\*Provigil, a so-called smart drug (stumbled on by chance, mechanism unknown, but already in wide use among pilots and soldiers) promising 72 hours of wakefulness at a stretch;

\*Ritalin To pacify bright, unruly children (i.e., David). "He'd spend hours redrafting a single paragraph over and over, then be unable to choose among the dozen different versions. Maybe it was just that he was too hooked on the Ritalin by then, though who knew anymore what was him and what was the drugs taking him over."

\*Prozac To anti-depress. "In the hope of quelling the shudder he keeps feeling in this brain stem that presages one of his collapses. The drug needs days or weeks to rewire his circuits before it kicks in, tough in the usual way of these crossover brain drugs. No one seems sure why it works at all." But at the expense of his sex drive, which depresses, requiring more Prozac or ...

\*Sodium oxybate The truly magic potion that both boosts the sex drive and slow-wave sleep (the best kind), "though there is some question whether what it induces is actual sleep or only an eerie synthetic version of it, something that reads as sleep in the monitors, but may be a new state of consciousness unknown in nature" – like americium or californium on the periodic table. Also known as the "date rape" drug.

### The brain

Ricci cuts to the quick, sketching for the layman startling recent discoveries about our inner universe. Operations on epileptics severing their left and right brain hemispheres show the brain houses within them "actual warring consciousnesses, each distinct from the other, down to level of political affiliations, food preferences, religious beliefs."

One side dominates, so "everyone carries within them a shadow self that dogs the dominant one like a stalker, always seeking an outlet, awaiting its chance under cover of dark." The left hemisphere is more or less the 'conscious' mind, the right hemisphere – the 'unconscious', though the reality is far more subtle.

The iconic ['shovel, claw' experiment](#) on such patients exposes the usually hidden self-censor within, usually in the dominant right hemisphere.

The waking mind is a place of merest invention, winnowing the billions of points of data the universe emits every second down to the handful of isolate bits it needs to create the dream it calls the world. All the excess that the brain has no use for, the colours it doesn't register, the smells and sounds, the inconceivable worldviews and extra dimensions, are like the universe's dark matter, invisible, unknown, though the very pith and meaning of things might reside in it and every accepted truth be overthrown.

### Sleep

Sleep is more or less understood now. It is characterized by the inhibition of nearly all voluntary

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muscles, alternating between two highly distinct modes known as non-REM and REM sleep. REM stands for "rapid eye movement" but involves many other aspects including virtual paralysis of the body, and is associated with dreaming. The point of sleep is regeneration, strengthening the immune system. Consciousness is sharply reduced but not absent.

### Dreams

From the sleep literature, he had gathered that "Freud was utterly mistaken or slightly so," that dreams are merely the brain's desperate attempts to make sense of its own chemical twitches during sleep, or a kind of spawning ground for consciousness itself. That they have something to do with firming up memories though in a way that subtly changes them, adding neural links that shift their associative streams according to a logic beyond the conscious mind's reach.

The bizarre and inconsistent nature of dreams means there must be many mechanisms in the brain inducing them, and many causes, both physical (indigestion, pains, sounds 'out there') and psychological (stresses, fears, joys, memories 'in there'). It is generally agreed that they come from the (unconscious) right hemisphere, liberated at night from the left hemisphere interpreter/ censor, which is always at work and makes the best story it can from the various prompts it gets 'from the other side'.

As his state worsens, David enters "a hallucinatory purgatory in which his dreams had so much of the nagging insistence of the waking world that he arose exhausted from them." He found himself sleepwalking and got to the state where he wasn't sure if he was awake or asleep, a kind of "lucid dreaming" where consciousness invades the (unconscious) dream state. He worries he might murder his wife Julia or son Marcus or jump to his death in his sleep, and erects physical barriers before going to sleep to wake him up.

### Lucid dreaming

"Lucid dreaming" – being awake in your dreams, directing them – is an ability which only a tiny fraction of people [claim to be able to do](#) . Some eastern cultures have long known about this dream-awareness, but only as a shamanic, mystical ability. It inspired Richard Linklater's film *Waking Life*

(2001), the title a reference to the philosopher George Santayana's maxim: Sanity is a madness put to good uses; waking life is a dream controlled (i.e., we're living in a 'lucid dream world' even while 'awake').

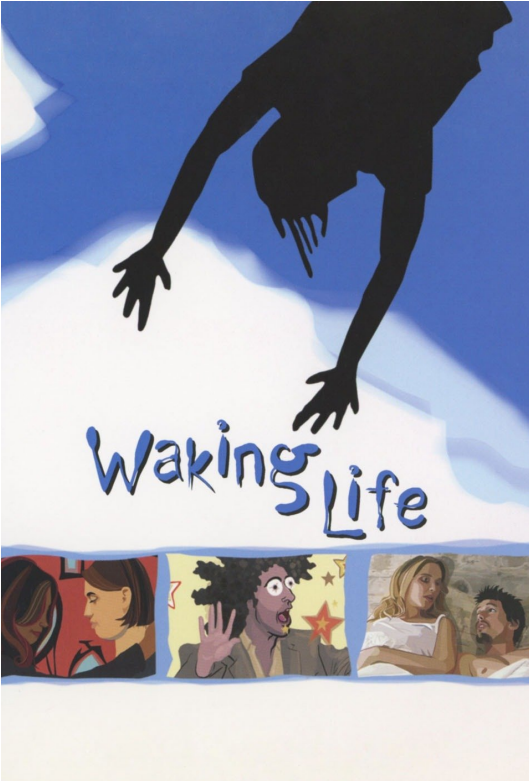
Ricci's David was lucid dreaming, but in such a confused state that he was never sure if he was awake or asleep and had constantly to do the lucid dream checks (clocks are

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[http://www.wakinglife.com/](#)