



Who's Been Sleeping in Your Head?: The Secret World of Sexual Fantasy

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Based on the largest-ever survey of sexual fantasies, and drawing on the author's twenty-five years of clinical practice, this "anatomy of secret desire" does for sexual fantasy what Kinsey did for sexual behavior. However, unlike Kinsey's books, which were almost unreadably dense and data-driven, *Who's Been Sleeping in Your Head?* features narrative accounts of sexual fantasies and the author's own insightful interpretations of how those fantasies affect our lives. Kahr reveals the astonishing truth behind secrecy, shame and taboo, and demonstrates how sex fantasies exert a more powerful influence on our emotions, behavior, and relationships than we ever imagined. Kahr's insights are liberating. He tells us the story of Margaret, who, in mining early sexual abuse for arousing and satisfying sexual fantasies: "succeeded brilliantly in turning a childhood trauma into an adult triumph." He explains how he helped a young man who couldn't get turned on by his beautiful girlfriend but only by dominatrix-themed porn, and how numerous men and women used fantasy to become more intimate with their partners-or to be unfaithful or even cruel to them instead. Ultimately, by unmasking the myths and destroying the guilt and ignorance surrounding sexual fantasy, Kahr offers readers a chance to lead richer and less conflicted lives.

Who's Been Sleeping in Your Head?: The Secret World of Sexual Fantasy Details

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From Reader Review Who's Been Sleeping in Your Head?: The Secret World of Sexual Fantasy for online ebook

John Scott says

Very technical at times, but fascinating and eye opening throughout.

Erin says

Perhaps the worst book ever written by a seriously repressed Freudian. How this is called non-fiction, I have no idea. This book was not set aside lightly. It was thrown with great force.

Rachel says

Very well researched and educational, but not a great one to read on the bus before work.

Joris De Brucker says

Er mocht best wat meer analyse aan te pas komen, maar de talrijke voorbeelden van wat mensen zoal opwindt maken veel goed.

Erika says

My review that ran on March 8, 2008 in the Los Angeles Times:

There's something about reading almost five hundred pages of sexual fantasy that throws the doors of perception a little off their hinges. Just knowing that 90% of humanity is out there screening some kind of porn film in their heads, makes, say, the lunch crowd at Fudrucker's more interesting to observe. Does that waitress serving chili fries dream of being wrapped in cellophane and spanked? Does the bus boy want to be licked by Keanu Reeves? Does that businessman chipmunking on his Blackberry dream of being cavity searched by terrorists?

At least, that's how it seems after reading Brett Kahr's "Who's Been Sleeping in Your Head: The Secret World of Sexual Fantasies." Kahr, a Freudian psychotherapist with over twenty years in the field, sensed there was therapeutic gold in the undulating hills of our erotic imaginings. Kahr's interest was far from prurient, he suspected fantasies don't exist for purely recreational purposes, that they are in fact "psychological fingerprints" that can help us unravel the mystery of our deepest, darkest selves. "Our sexual fantasies remain, by and large, an unprocessed, unsynthesized area of the mind, crying out for explanation." P. 61

"Inspired by the psychological insights of Sigmund Freud, the large-scale methodological rigor of Alfred Kinsey, and by the brave public dissemination of Nancy Friday, I decided that I would attempt my own research, a "Kinsey of the mind," so that I could begin to answer some basic questions," Kahr asserts. Chief among those questions was, "Do our fantasies represent just a bit of private fun, or do they have more

profound implications for how we lead our lives?"

Thus he began The British Sexual Fantasy Research Project, culling statistical data from a combined group of 20,153 British and American adults p. 67 and conducting exhaustive, five hour interviews with several hundred subjects.

This monumental undertaking offers for the first time, an anecdotal adjunct to the bigger game of sexual activity itself. Kahr makes it clear that to ignore sexual fantasy is to miss a large piece of the puzzle in human psychology. The discrete, methodical and clearly sensitive Kahr approached his interviews less like a Sherlock Holmes and more of a Dr. Watson, asking questions, listening with his "third ear" (the one that hears not only what the subject is saying, but what he isn't saying) and being careful not to jump to conclusions. The book provides a nice insight into the point of view of the therapist. "We must approach each fantasy rather like a giant jigsaw puzzle or mystery story. At the end of the analysis, every piece must fit in order that we may gain a clear picture of the contents of the mind of the fantasist." P. 338 Sure enough, Kahr discovers that sexual fantasies "have developed as both a means of gratifying wishes and of conquering intrusive memories of early traumatic experiences." In other words, we use fantasy to turn that which haunts us into something we have psychic mastery over, or as Kahr calls it, "equilibration of the self."

This is all very interesting and highly worthwhile, but for the, er, layperson, the best parts of this book are the dirty parts. Kahr has done a great job of culling and organizing his respondents' fantasies, and they are repeated verbatim, often to unintentional comedic effect. Grouped into categories like "Bisexual Fantasies," or "Fantasies of Celebrities" the narratives flow with blunt, artless logic. Some fantasies are related in coy shorthand, and others are elaborate, describing antics in language that would make Susie Bright blush. Kahr warns us, "On first reading, many people become either sexually aroused by the private fantasies of others or embarrassed by them." Indeed, the erotic reveries are arousing, embarrassing, shocking, boring and most surprisingly, hilarious. There's the woman who wants to be squeezed between Serena Williams' thighs, and the guy who fantasizes about watching an episode of *Lost* with a girl, then duct taping her to a counter so he can "change her views forever about how many orgasms are acceptable in an evening's encounter." Senior citizen, "Isadora" has been fantasizing about Gregory Peck for decades: "Gregory is the mainstay of my fantasy. Yummy. I think he is dead now." p.146 Then there's "Berger" who thinks Seth Green and Topher Grace "would be one hot man-on-man action. "Sancho" fantasizes about a week in Vegas with a harem of chorus girls; "All of the showgirls are tall and beautiful and their job is to be nice to me all week – laugh at my jokes, tell me what a great guy I am, massage my neck, dance with me at nightclubs, etc. — and of course, have sex with me and with each other like crazed weasels in every possible position in the Kama Sutra."

Many of the choicest fantasies are so laden with coprolalia ("dirty talk"), they cannot be reprinted here, but they amply illustrate the full, quirky spectrum of human sexuality, which appears also to include a large subset of people who are turned on by Margaret Thatcher.

Of course, there's a dark side to all this. The book has many accounts of people who are so damaged that their fantasy lives drip either with cruel sadism, or heart-wrenching masochism. Most of these erotic reveries are what Kahr calls "the ordinary sadism of everyday life," and for the most part these people are harmless. But Kahr encountered enough disturbing material to ask himself "should these individuals be tolerated, or should they be treated?" He admits, honestly, to not having a clear answer, though he is sure that his interviews were not the appropriate context for real therapeutic intervention.

But for most of us, sexual fantasy is a pretty healthy indulgence, allowing us to find an outlet for desire, and turn past trauma into a source of pleasure, rather than pain.

There is a prescriptive element to "Who's Been Sleeping in Your Head?" Fantasy research can be used in a diagnostic-predictive manner, to protect society from dangerous sexual predators. Another practical application Kahr suggests is using fantasy data to match up potential partners through dating services. As Kahr points out, "Such factors may prove to be much more pertinent to compatibility than whether one enjoys films, eating out, and country walks." Now there's something to fantasize about.

Diane says

The writing style was too academic, with too many examples of fantasies. Reading so many fantasies got boring. I skimmed a lot to try to find the analysis I was hoping for, but his basic premise that fantasies are a way to cope with trauma kept repeating itself. I got the point and put the book down. Freudian analysis really is getting dated, maybe if this survey was examined through a different lense it could be more insightful.

Autumn says

3.5 stars really. I don't know if I'm really sold on Kahr's arguments and analysis, but he did make me look at this subject from a different perspective, which is a nice challenge sometimes. He doesn't particularly go into a huge variety of fantasies and their causes or hidden meanings, even though he laundry lists pages and pages of them from his research. (I could have done without that. Most were so commonplace that they really didn't need to be repeated ad nauseum throughout the book.) I think he would have been more successful if he had addressed a wider variety of fantasies in more detail instead of just listing survey participants' answers verbatim and commenting on one or two of them specifically per chapter. Though of course his research was the foundation for the book, some historical perspectives would have been interesting too.

Kahr is a strong proponent of the theory that masochism and rape fantasies generally are a result of past (usually repressed) sexual abuse - a theory that I hear Dr. Drew spouting off on his radio show regularly. I find that a relatively dangerous assumption to make, as well, Kahr's views on S&M being really, the only true perversion I thought was a bit antiquated and questionable. His Freudian background was VERY apparent, and again, a bit outdated, but I can see the reasoning behind some of the parallels he observes.

An interesting read, not particularly shocking or innovative, but fascinating all the same.

Grayson says

I was hoping for more psychology and fewer descriptions of people's fantasies. It reads more like "porn by way of science" than "why people have the fantasies they do and how the subconscious processes desires." I mean, there's some of that in the beginning, but then it's just fantasy descriptions.

Also, Kahr is a Freudian, and I am not into Freud at all. The guy's been thoroughly debunked, except for a couple of ideas. And seeing someone in modern times who actually falls for all the old ideas annoys the hell out of me. Oh well, another one for the discard pile...

Simone says

This book was not what I was expecting. I wanted / thought it would be a book more like *The Other Side of Desire: Four Journeys into the Far Realms of Lust and Longing* (which by the way, is awesome) but this book was really far from that one in almost every respect. Although ostensibly this book is about understanding sexual fantasy, I'm not sure the author accomplished that goal. Two main issues:

First, I didn't realize that the author is such a hardcore Freudian. John and I were recently chatting about

Freudian psychotherapy and we joked that we should write a book / propose a conference panel called, "Psychotherapy - Why Are We Still At It." To be fair, I haven't studied much Freud, but I feel it was an interesting model when proposed but that it's sort of outlived its usefulness. The people who truly believe everything can be understood with regard to Freud? You scare me, and I want nothing to do with you.

Second, most of the chapters just seemed to consist of long descriptions of people's fantasies. These were supposed to be people's deepest darkest desires (many of which by the way, were relatively tame and boring) and while interesting from a research perspective - they are sort of tiring to read though in long lists. He would usually pick one or two to talk about more at length, and then group them into broader categories. If I turned in a paper written like this my professor would accuse me of trying to pad my text to meet a page requirement, and the professor would probably be correct. Also, all he seems to prove is that people have fantasies and occasionally they are a little odd. This should be a fairly obvious conclusion to anyone with a computer and an internet connection, as there are porn and fetish sites for literally everything. And they wouldn't be making it if someone wasn't buying it.

Additionally I found most of the analysis not that interesting and occasionally offensive. (See Issue One) But every time it turns out a hand picked fantasy can be traced to some innocuous (or not innocuous) childhood memory, I was shouting, "We get it." I also don't think it's true, it might be true for some people, but I've read/listened to enough Dan Savage to realize people are into a variety of things and sometimes it's linked to experiences (the common one referenced is being spanked as a kid versus not being spanked) and there's no causation. To the author of this book I wish to remind him, correlation does not equal causation.

And then there were things like this: people with any thoughts even vaguely S&M are "perverse" and people having fantasies about sex with more than one person "may be an attempt to repair ones narcissistic injuries by possessing more than more love simultaneously." Sure, that's one explanation, but I can think of several others.

/Shrug. Not for me. Go read "The Other Side of Desire."

Peter Neiger says

As is often the case on road trips and long flights I was able to get some good reading and writing done... maybe I need to find a way to do this more. Anyway, I finished reading "Who's Been Sleeping in Your Head?" by Brett Kahr. This 400-page book is the culmination of a multi-year study conducted primarily in the UK (though there are some US participants) about people's sexual fantasies. These fantasies are what goes through a person's head during masturbation and sex with a partner. The research was conducted through online surveys completed by over 23,000 people and 122 intensive face-to-face interviews with volunteers. It appears to be the most comprehensive attempt to catalog and interpret human sexual fantasies that anyone has ever done.

While I found the intentions of the study and premise of the book fascinating my feelings towards the book are bitter-sweet. As a Freudian psychotherapist Kahr spent much of his time focusing, analyzing, and, in my opinion, unjustifiably fishing or hoping for childhood trauma to explain sexual fantasies that people had. He mentions alternative approaches like evolutionary psychology only twice and only in passing. I understand that he is a Freudian but if his attempt was to objectively or comprehensively attempt to look into sexual fantasies and their foundation (if one exists) he should have brought in some alternative view points. To him humans seem to be born as a blank slate with no genetic predispositions or tendencies in place from evolution.

Kahr often at times come off as a bit judgemental and sex-negative, and even a bit LGBTphobic. He focuses several times on homosexuality possibly being linked to childhood trauma and child rearing but little acknowledgement of a biological aspect. He also seems to see all cross-dressers as “transvestites”. It also seemed like a negative judgement when he penned the term “intra-marital affair” to describe thinking about someone other than your spouse, as if thinking of another is a form of cheating. Some may agree that fantasies are cheating (but if they really are based in trauma or evolution it is cheating we have little to no control over) not everyone does and I think it weakens the betrayal of true affairs if we attach that phrase to a passing thought during masturbation.

Clearly, I have some problems with Kahr’s approach, but I want to give him some benefit of the doubt, it is possible that there is a generational gap and cultural one between he and I. He is British and a bit older than I, while Americans and our friends across the pond are similar in many ways I can’t help but wonder if the stereotypes about prudish non-sexual Brits might have some truth to it. It has also been almost a decade since this project started and a lot has changed in sexual research and views on fantasies in the last 10 years, particularly with the exponential growth of internet access and the pornography that comes with it.

There were also some wonderful things within the book though, and I actually very highly recommend it. Kahr’s analysis later in the book provides a lot of great information and provides some support to his hypothesis in some of the cases. There clearly can be a trauma at the foundation of sexual fantasies, and many of these trauma fantasies are causing great distress and harm to the individuals. In cases where people can’t live the lives they want or have the relationships they desire it is a problem, such as the case of “Julius” who has only been able to masturbate to mental images of a girl who tormented him in his adolescence and he has not had a long-term relationship in nearly 50 years.

I would have loved to see more research and questions about the ramifications of opening up about your fantasies to your significant others. Kahr mentions a few in one chapter but for the most part glosses over any potential benefits and instead focuses on trauma and harm. In my experience being open and honest with your partner about desires and what goes on in your head can have a bonding effect and open the door for new real life experiences. If we decide to enter into a partnership something as intimate and important as sex should not be a taboo subject. Much of the negative aspects seem to come from our social stigmas against sexuality as much as childhood events. As a culture if we can admit that sex is a healthy and enjoyable part of the human experience we can reduce the pain, suffering, and shame that seems to accompany so many fantasies.

Kahr does admit that this is just a beginning, and like a good scientist he hopes others will dive into the data, conduct their own studies, and come up with alternative hypothesis. I would love to see a larger sample size of humans from more diverse backgrounds. What is true for Brits (and in this case a few Americans) may not be true for Australians, Italians, Russians, Kenyans, Colombians, Thai, Egyptians, etc. The more information the better and it looks like this is a field ripe for research and exploration.

I definitely recommend this book for many different people. If you just have an interest in sexuality there is a lot to love about this book, as well if you are interested in seeing how a Freudian interprets things, though I would recommend skipping or skimming Section II if you get bored with it. You can only read poorly written erotica for pages and pages for so long before it becomes a blur. It is also a good resource for people who have anxiety about what goes on in their own heads. It will become quickly clear that “normal” fantasies don’t exist, and because of that there is really nothing that is “weird” or “abnormal”. Some people don’t fantasize at all, some think only about their spouse, some focus more on feelings while others have elaborate situations they play in their head, some people think of college professors, siblings, strangers, movie stars, and inanimate objects. Some people like to be raped, piss on people while they are shitting, or change genders. Some like to be whipped while others like to be bought a nice romantic dinner followed by a massage and some cunnilingus. The limits to human sexual fantasies are only restricted by the combined imagination of billions of people.

Jafar says

Kahar starts the book by repeating over and over again that we have sexual fantasies of the sorts that we're often ashamed/afraid to share with others — as if this were some new discovery. Reading other people's sexual fantasies gets boring very quickly. And what Kahr offers in terms of analysis is not just shallow but often wrongheaded. I should have known, given that Kahr is a psychoanalyst. Everything is the results of repressed childhood memories and other usual psychoanalytical concoctions. (My personal favorite is *castration anxiety*.)

MrsEnginerd says

If you are looking for a good exploration of sexual fantasies and their possible interpretations, this case study book is for you. The author takes a thorough look at his research to enlighten us about the subject matter. I got this copy from my local library's book sale and it was worth the 400 pages. Keep an open mind when reading it and you can find some benefit without needing to talk to a professional.

Darsied says

To be fair, I read about 20 pages and then decided to find something else on sexual fantasy. His style of writing and overall voice/tone made me feel like I was reading something from the 1840s, not the 21st century.

Terence says

I've marked this as containing "spoilers" largely because this is an "open" site and the subject matter may offend some.

Who's Been Sleeping in Your Head is a bit of a departure for me. Most of my nonfiction reading tends toward the historical or the "hard" sciences (astronomy, evolutionary biology, etc.) but one of my GoodReads friends marked this as a "to-read," I read the publisher's blurb and a few of the reviews, and it looked intriguing. Fortunately, one of my libraries possessed a copy and the inevitable ensued: I obtained and read it.

Brett Kahr is a Freudian psychoanalyst who's realized that there is a dearth of studies of what constitutes sexual fantasies - what's "normal" (if that can be measured) and what's "perverse" (also a slippery concept) - and how those fantasies might affect people in their lives.

Being a Freudian, Kahr believes that most, if not all, of our fantasies arise from childhood traumas. "Trauma" here does not necessarily mean something horrible like being raped by your father when you're 10 years old or having a group of boys sodomize you in the public restroom when you're 13. It can mean relatively unfortunate events or circumstances in an otherwise good childhood. Circumstances like an emotionally distant father or an overbearing mother or (as in the case of one woman) the loss of an older

brother in a car accident. Kahr argues that "trauma functions as a key ingredient in the genesis of adult sexual fantasies" (p. 393) and that these fantasies help master "trauma through eroticization, rendering the terrifying and unprocessable into something sexy and manageable." (p. 383)

A "perverse" fantasy is one that eroticizes hatred (p. 418) and that "requires sustained perpetration of sadism toward oneself or one's 'love object'" and "becomes so all engrossing it prevents one from forging intimate relationships." (p. 420)

There are a number of conclusions he arrives at (if some are only tentative):

1. What is a sexual fantasy? An image, thought, drama, usually thought about during sex (coital or masturbatory) and that results in orgasm. (This makes it a different phenomenon than the sexual dream.)
2. What is a "normal" fantasy? There is no normative fantasy. People who appear quite "normal" might have some of the most sadistic, misogynistic, bestial fantasies but as long as they avoid the two criteria for "perversion" I mention above, they're no more abnormal than fantasizing about making love to one's partner that never departs from the missionary position.
3. Why fantasize? Kahr doesn't really know. From an evolutionary point of view it may help arousal and, hence, propagation. In terms of human psychology, it eroticizes and makes harmless traumas in our lives.
4. Does everyone have fantasies? Despite some negative responses in Kahr's survey, he feels that everyone has a fantasy of some sort even if they don't recognize it as such.
5. Should we share fantasies/act them out with our partners? Maybe. He recounts cases where exposing and/or acting out a fantasy did wonders for a relationship; alas, sometimes they torpedoed a relationship.
6. Are fantasies dangerous? Sometimes. See above about what a "perverse" fantasy is. Actually, in relation to this subject, Kahr gets into some potentially scary "Big Brother" stuff where he envisions mental-health experts "tagging" potential rapists, pedophiles, etc. based on their sexual fantasies - sort of a "Minority Report" world without the ESP.
7. If we don't fantasize about our partner is that a "bad sign"? Maybe; maybe not. Since a fantasy is a defense mechanism from past trauma, the absence of one's current partner is not unusual.
8. If we fantasize about something illegal (i.e., rape, pedophilia, incest, murder, etc.) will we eventually act it out? Probably not. Most - the overwhelming majority - even if their fantasies involve raping the cheerleading squad or murdering their partner don't go through with it. As Kahr wants to emphasize, even the most vile fantasy is a defense mechanism against some childhood trauma. Now, fantasizing about gang rapes or murder probably indicates a fairly serious trauma and the person should seek some form of therapy and it may make a person's intimate relationships ultimately unsatisfying but it doesn't mean we have a future "Ted Bundy" on our hands.
9. Can we control our fantasies? Always a good Freudian, Kahr doesn't believe so. At least not to any great extent.

One of the best aspects of this work is that Kahr doesn't try to create an all-encompassing theory of sexual fantasy. He tries to identify some broad generalizations but doesn't apply them to explain fantasy.

Though I don't have the background to assess just how valid psychoanalysis is or what competing theories may be out there, I found this book fascinating and interesting.

Kira Fisher says

I didn't love his conclusions about sexual fantasies, specifically that they stem from serious emotional trauma in our childhoods. I can accept that some do, and I accept that our sexualities are obviously shaped by a wide array of events during our young lives. I totally accept that creating difficult fantasies can be used to help the mind cope with serious trauma. But the way he problematizes it, and makes it seem like having fantasies always hints at mental troubles...I don't know. I just wish he was a bit more loosey-goosey. He makes it seem like having fantasies of being dominated is extreme, and I wish he would take a more liberal stance on things. Sexuality is already such a fraught topic. The last thing we need is a doctor giving us more reasons to be concerned about our own.
