

Insomnia

J. R. Johansson

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Supernatural young adult thriller creates a real sense of tension, anticipation, and dread.

Parker Chipp hasn't slept in four years. Every night, he's an involuntary witness to the dreams of the last person whose eyes he looked into before going to sleep. Sometimes this means a night full of talking ponies or whimsical adventures; other times, he's tormented by nightmares of endless domestic brutality or the guilt-wracked memories of wrongdoers who escaped all justice except that delivered by their own conscience.

Either way, he doesn't get to sleep properly, and the stress is taking its toll, perhaps even killing him. Beside this, the more mundane problems of a typical high school junior—trying out for athletic teams, navigating conflicted friendships and budding romantic attractions, and dealing with the absence of his father and the consequences of a stressed-out mother—seem tame and manageable.

When Parker inadvertently glances into the eyes of a new arrival in town, he's startled to find that, for some reason, he's able to sleep peacefully in her dreams. Why? And can he enjoy the peace of her dreams without making her think that he's a deranged stalker?

J. R. Johansson's debut novel has an intriguing, original premise and an engaging first-person narrator/protagonist. It's refreshing to read a supernatural young adult thriller that, for once, does not involve zombies, werewolves, vampires, or some other familiar trope. Parker's curse (or gift), the rules that govern it, and the effects it might have on him and the people around him are mysterious and unknown, creating a real sense of tension, anticipation, and dread as the reader, along with Parker, tentatively explores his ability's parameters without knowing what he will find or what the consequences will be.

The plot inevitably expands outward from Parker's own problems to those of the people around him. High school social drama gives way to more visceral dangers, both real and imagined, as Parker finds reasons to question his own motivations and even his own sanity. Mysterious links to Parker's father suggest that there's more to his peculiarity than he knows, and his untutored explorations suggest that it may be much darker and more powerful than he dares contemplate.

Some of the plot threads of *Insomnia* are tied up a bit too neatly and suddenly, but Johansson's first book lays the groundwork for an intriguing series based on an original premise.

BRADLEY A. SCOTT (Summer 2013)

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