

Sleeping Presidents

John Ransom Phillips

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Sleeping Presidents is a surreal collection that pairs presidential dreams with moving pieces of art.

John Ransom Phillips combines art and creative writing in his ambitious book *Sleeping Presidents*.

The US president is a fascinating figure. The job is held in high esteem, and the person elected to it assumes responsibility for the safety and well-being of millions, as well as the international perception of their country. But what does the president dream about? Phillips seeks to answer this question in an inventive way. Entering the dreams of those who have been president, living and not, Phillips paints one or more pieces about each, looking for the core humanity of the people who helped to shape the American dream.

The book's art and story work together in dreamy concert. More than being focused on the presidents' dreams, the essays are glimpses into the perceived psychological states of the men they cover. Arranged in reverse chronological order, the book starts with Donald Trump and ends with George Washington. The essays evoke each man's speech patterns and thought processes: for example, John Quincy Adams's dreams of words as a comfort, and of journaling as a way to quiet and empty the mind, lead into a meandering, tangential essay that has to be wrestled into coherence. Conversely, Zachary Taylor's essay is told from the perspective of his horse, skipping over the more negative aspects of his life and military service.

But a darker quality permeates the book, too. George W. Bush also dreams of words, but not in a comforting way: for him, language is an enemy that can perhaps be conquered and used to manipulate others. And Donald Trump's essay follows him through his childhood, when he first learns competition from his father, who is positioned almost as a sexual rival. Such sinister elements cast long shadows through their individual essays without impacting other pieces.

Phillips's bold, multicolor pieces combine with quieter, more monochrome ones. George Bush Sr.'s essay posits that, in a half-dreaming state, the president journals with one gloved hand; the accompanying piece is more amorous, infused with innuendo from its title to its composition. The arm and "paper" are rendered in layered creams and nudes to contrast with the blue medical glove. And *Washington I Dream in My Dream All the Dreams of the Other American Presidents* is full of color and life and movement. Shaped like the bas-relief carving of the quarter, the painting's focus is the center image of a man, hanging down the side of Washington's face, opening a window into his dream of America. It is a striking image.

A conversation-starting coffee table book that works best as an intermittent read, *Sleeping Presidents* is a surreal collection that pairs presidential dreams with moving pieces of art.

DONTANÁ MCPHERSON-JOSEPH (June 15, 2021)

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