

***Sleeping Around: The Bed from Antiquity to Now.* Annie Carlano and Bobbie Sumberg. Seattle: University of Washington Press (co-published with Museum of International Folk Art), 2006. 200 pp.<sup>1</sup>**

Reviewed by Greg Stevenson

It may seem like a strange thing for an academic to admit, but I often sigh when I get asked to review a book, as so many academic books can be a chore to read. Not so with this history of beds edited by Annie Carlano and Bobbie Sumberg, which sits as comfortably on the university library shelf as it does on the suburban coffee table. Well-illustrated, well-designed, and written in a clear and concise voice, I almost began to question if this was an *academic* book at all.

The good news is that you do not need to be an academic to enjoy this book or to find it engaging and useful. *Sleeping Around* has been sitting around my own house for a few weeks now on the kitchen table, and most visitors have been picking it up for a flick though. We do, after all, spend a third of our lives in bed, so a book on beds should be at least of some interest to everyone. I suspect, however, that most were tempted by its titillating title. Annie Carlano asks in the preface if the book could have been called *Sleeping Around* in the pre-*Sex and the City* world. I would answer that it probably would not, and should not, have been called that, then or now either. A cheeky title was not required to make this work effective, and it is not about sex at all. But if we can forgive it its tabloid title then this collection of chapters on beds and their meanings was a worthwhile exercise.

*Sleeping Around* is funded by grants from the International Folk Foundation, though the material covered inside crosses over between anthropology and design history. Flick through and you will see a good selection of contemporary designer and mass-produced beds from the last decade. In fact, if it has a fault then, the book is guilty of being too ambitious with its remit. You can not really cover “The Bed from Antiquity to Now” well in 164 pages, despite the quarto format. And do not come here expecting to find many academic references for further reading, because they are not here.

In my opinion this book would have been better off dumping the brief tour of early beds that was too wide-ranging and light, and concentrating instead on, say folk bed traditions of the period 1700 to 1900. The lack of depth is mostly felt in the second chapter, which quickly skips from century to century and from continent to continent in an attempt to provide an overview of bed development. The reader does gain a few interesting tidbits of information from this—I did not know for example that French medieval beds could be as large as 13 feet long and 11 feet wide (4 x 3.5 meters). Apparently such large areas required long sticks (*batons de lit*) to smooth out the sheets and bedcovers. But the overall impression is that a closer inspection of a particular theme would have been more rewarding for the reader. Fortunately this is what the rest of the book does, and is where the text comes into its own.

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Chapter Three, on “box” and cupboard beds is a successful case study of the practice of sleeping in enclosed spaces. Again it skips through the different countries where such box beds are used, though with little mention of Welsh, Scottish, or Irish box beds. This omission, however, is levelled by the inclusion of some great illustrations of box beds from Brittany, Sweden, and the Netherlands. It might have served better to have considered more the *meaning* of sleeping in a box bed, but the chapter was nonetheless informative and well-constructed. The chapter ends by asking if anywhere in the world people continue to sleep in box beds, and is doubtful if they do. As reviewer I can add to the subject here, as I have one that is regularly used in my West Wales cottage, the experience of which is not as claustrophobic as the author infers.

The chapter entitled “Sleeping on the Move” is, like the chapter on box beds, the kind of subject that the reader reads out of general interest and inquiry rather than necessarily from academic interest. It is a fascinating subject. From the simple wool mats of Mongolian yurts to the fancy detailing of Romany wagons or *vardos*, the chapter even brings us into the modern Western world with a look at the converted “hippie” pick-up trucks of the 1960s and 1970s.

The subject of sleeping on the road is developed properly in the following chapter that covers train berths, cruise ship cabins, airships, airplanes, and trains. Again, fascinating images combine with a text that lightly skips from subject to subject. Nothing is covered in detail, but the reader has little time to get bored before moving on to the next subject. The text is littered with interesting snippets such as that Charles Dickens felt ‘*like a giraffe being persuaded into a flowerpot*’ in his cabin crossing the Atlantic in 1842.

“Sleeping in the Modern World” was the subject of a further chapter, and frankly this could have been a book in itself, especially as it starts its discussion back in the 1860s. When I saw the image of the restored William Morris bedroom at Kelmscott Manor, I imagined that what would follow would be a discussion on the revival of romantic notions of historical bedrooms in the late 20th century (by designers such as Laura Ashley, for example.). This was not the case, and the illustration was used to discuss the Arts and Crafts original by Morris. The chapter, though interesting, would have worked better as a survey of contemporary beds and what they mean—and even that would be a subject worthy of a book in itself. That does not mean that the discussion on Yoko Ono and John Lennon’s “bed-in” at a Montreal hotel in 1969 was not interesting (it deserved to be repeated in a book like this), it’s just that as in many of the chapters, I felt that the authors had given themselves too wide a brief, and had left little room for a meaty discussion.

Beds for babies and infants gets a short chapter all to itself, and is interesting enough. A final chapter, “Sleeping Forever...and Ever” considers beds and sleeping imagery in historical graves, and felt a little out of context in this volume. However it is an engaging subject, and the illustrations maintained my interest to the end. I did not even know that the root of the word “cemetery” is the Greek for “sleeping room.”

As the authors remind us, most of us are both born in and die in bed. Some of our most pleasurable and most painful moments are experienced in bed. Beds are undoubtedly worthy of our interest, and *Sleeping Around* makes for a well-illustrated and engaging introduction to the subject.

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