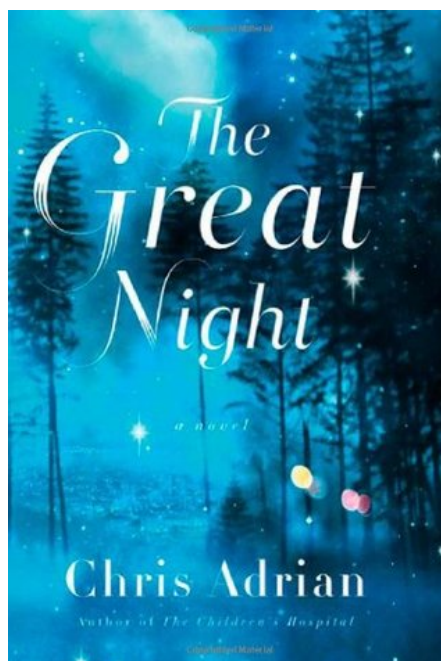




The Great Night

Chris Adrian

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A brilliant and mesmerizing retelling of Shakespeare's "A Midsummer Night's Dream."

On Midsummer Eve 2008, three people, each on the run from a failed relationship, become trapped in San Francisco's Buena Vista Park, the secret home of Titania, Oberon, and their court. On this night, something awful is happening in the faerie kingdom: in a fit of sadness over the end of her marriage, which broke up in the wake of the death of her adopted son, Titania has set loose an ancient menace, and the chaos that ensues will threaten the lives of immortals and mortals alike.

Selected by *The New Yorker* as one the best young writers in America, Adrian has created a singularly playful, heartbreaking, and humorous novel—a story that charts the borders between reality and dreams, love and magic, and mortality and immortality.

The Great Night Details

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Author : Chris Adrian

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From Reader Review The Great Night for online ebook

Caleb says

The Great Night is a wonderfully strange trip of a novel. Though it is drenched in magic and the fantastic it is often pulled down into the mundane world where it becomes another enthralling but ultimately useless curiosity and distraction.

Frequently startling and dark in equal measure it draws the reader into its world for one night through offering a glimpse into the range of characters who are grounded and familiar but still somewhat surreal. While the fantastic and magic are the elements that really drive the narrative it is the heavy human reality of characters that make it a compelling and satisfying read.

EditorialEyes says

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For this review and others, visit the EditorialEyes Blog.

~*~

4 out of 5

Something is gloriously, tragically amiss in San Francisco's Buena Vista Park. In fact, to mix my Shakespeare quotes, something wicked this way comes. It's also something strange and chaotic and deeply human.

In Chris Adrian's *The Great Night*, the faerie court of Titania and Oberon are celebrating another Midsummer Night, many moons after the events of Shakespeare's play—though “celebrating” is not exactly the right word. After the cancer death of their changeling son, Titania has spurned Oberon, who has subsequently disappeared, and her unchecked grief rules the night. Unable to manage or even comprehend her sadness fully, Titania does the unthinkable: she removes the magic that binds the trickster Puck to the royal will, unleashing him upon the court, the park, and eventually the city. Into this world wander three heartbroken humans whose own histories are rife with the kind of tragedy Titania is languishing in, as well as the requisite rude mechanicals (in this case five homeless people who want to put on a musical version of *Soylent Green* to bring to light a Swiftian cannibalistic conspiracy they believe the mayor is perpetrating).

All of which is to say, a lot is going on here. This book is billed as a reimagining of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which isn't quite right. This is far closer to a sequel or at least a jumping-off point. Unlike the merry mayhem of Shakespeare's beloved comedy, *The Great Night* is, above all else, a tragedy. The book uses the well-known faerie characters to spin tales of heartbreak, tracing the pasts of each of the five main actors (Will, Molly, and Henry the humans, Titania, and to a lesser extent the rude mechanicals), showing us their origins, their intersections, and, ultimately, their fates. Much remains mysterious at first, which makes this a real page-turner. You want to know what's happened to these lovely, broken people, and what will happen to them if Puck wins the night.

As it turns out, Puck is not that, well, puckish creature you remember from outdoor summer stagings of the play. He is an ancient menace, deeply powerful—perhaps unstoppable. Kept in check for millennia by Oberon's magic, he is out for vengeance, for reasons both straightforward and mysterious until the end.

Adrian delivers him as a palpably dangerous villain and the terror he inspires in the faerie court creates jittery suspense for the present-day part of the narrative. His promise to Titania, “I will eat you last,” gave me shivers.

Just as splendid is Adrian’s Titania as the weeping queen, the bewildered mother, and the battle-hardened commander marching to war. Her tragedy is at once immediate and distant. She finds herself mired in the horrors of the contemporary world: a child lost to leukemia whom modern medicine could not save, a husband who has left her, possibly for good. Both concepts—disease/death and loss of love—are foreign to her, and one of the best parts of the story (in fact, what started out as its own standalone story, “The Tiny Feast,”) show Titania and Oberon fretting over their adopted boy as he slowly fades away from them. At one point, as the chemo begins to work, Oberon praises the doctors by saying “you have poisoned him well!” The modern world is as strange and mystical to the faeries as their world is to us, and each side’s inability to deal with the other’s mystery makes for excellent reading.

The human aspects of the story are as important as the chaotic faerie framework. Each of the three singular characters comes from a very different background, but each intersects with the others in wonderful and unexpected ways. Their stories and their heartbreaks twin with the faerie tragedy unfolding incomprehensibly around them, and their reactions to the magic and to each other are wonderful: Molly with the suicide of her boyfriend and her almost cultlike upbringing; Will and his destructive relationship with a strange woman in a strange house; and Henry, whose boyfriend has left him, who cannot remember his childhood because he was abducted for several years, and whose mother is possibly more damaging to him than the abduction was.

The group of homeless fares less well: they feel dropped into the story because there must be rude mechanicals, and their lunatic quest and conspiracy theory don’t hold up as well. They are less well developed than the rest of the characters, and while they, too, have suffered sadness, it feels sketched out and at times more of a caricature. A nodding glance toward the Bottom-the-ass part of the play, in which Titania is temporarily enchanted to fall in love the homeless’ leader, Huff, and make his musical better, feels rushed through.

Indeed, at times it feels like Adrian is trying to do too much, which is perhaps not surprising, given the number of characters and plots and intrigues going on here. And until the very end, no one sub-plot or character is given precedence over the other, which means the story is at times hard to pinpoint. A weakness, but also part of the point: the faerie court is chaos incarnate, and the book reflects this precarious, Pisa-style layering of stories tilting dangerously against each other. The visual descriptions, however, are stunning, and work to anchor us within the surreal world of the park. Adrian also does some subtle work with coincidences, echoing the uncanniness of the faerie court: a character named Peaches followed by a scene where Titania demands a peach; repetition of first names here and there; and genuine intersections where characters have met one another, or almost met them, outside of this night.

This phantasmagorical, often sad, often funny, very scary tale is a mind-full. While it stumbles at times in pacing and characterization, its heaps of tragic, magical, surreal narrative are definitely worth spending a great night (or three) with.

Nathan says

Did not enjoy, alas. Interesting idea: Titania and Oberon are separated, and bored Titania frees Puck while at a feast under a tree in a SF public park. Four interesting SF residents are caught up in the subsequent action. However, the novel isn't about the action or resolving the situation, the situation is a premise by which to

explore the messed-up humans and their backstory. The story is told in long three-or-four part sentences, which have a rhythm and excitement of their own, but between this style and the fact that it hinges on some screwed-up people, the book just didn't hook me. I want to have a story or more precise grumbles to set down about this book, but the short fact is that nothing really stood up and grabbed me to say "Read Me!". I did, but didn't enjoy it and won't pursue others by Adrian.

amanda eve says

I give the fuck up. I strongly disliked the book as a whole, but the whole cougar/teenage boy salad tossing/queefing scene made me want to throw my Kindle across the room.

This book is dreary and tedious as fuck. The scenes with Titania and her court were by far the most interesting parts; I even liked Demon Puck! The humans are just horrible and their stories were so dull and repetitive.

I get the sense that Adrian, in an attempt to make this a truly unique spin on Shakespeare, confused "spin" with "subversion". What you get is not really subversive -- it's more a weak attempt at what Adrian thinks might be inflammatory. Molly "rebellious" against her wacko "Christian" family by falsely accusing her black foster brother of rape is not so much creatively subversive as it is out-and-out offensive. The aforementioned queefing scene and the descriptions of marshmallow genitalia were just stupid. Molly, Henry, and Will reminiscing about their lost loves were sweet and a refreshing change from the overall bleakness of the story.

Ultimately, I honestly don't think Adrian is as creative or as enchanting a writer as he thinks he is. I want my \$9.99 back.

Maria says

I really wanted to like this book. I loved the premise, and the first half of the book was really promising. I was especially interested in the story line of Titania and Oberon and their experience of mortal loss in the death of their "adopted" changeling child.

But overall I was quite disappointed with this book. It just failed to tie the stories together in a meaningful way, and the final twists were more frustrating than surprising or exciting. I didn't care much for any of the characters...which was probably just as well since none of them seemed to be given any closure. Not that is the be all and end all, I understand that, but there was nothing to hold on to...it just was lacking in some way I have difficulty expressing.

What can I say. I wanted to like this book. But in the end...I just didn't. :(

Cheryl Gatling says

This was one weird book. It is advertised as a re-telling of Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream* in contemporary San Francisco. There are some elements that are the same: young people wandering confused in the woods, poor people practicing a play, and faeries (always spelled that way in the book) being faeries.

But this book is a good deal darker, and has details that are so bizarre it makes you wonder what the author was smoking when he wrote it. It's funny, too, though. The Great Night is Midsummer's Night, the faeries' high holiday, when they have a feast, and do even more singing and dancing than usual. On this particular Great Night, however, the faeries don't feel much like celebrating. Titania and Oberon's changeling child has died of leukemia (in a hospital!) and the couple has broken up. Titania, in her grief, has set Puck free. This Puck is no mischievous sprite, but a flesh-eating monster who had been kept chained by magic. Now he is on the rampage. Faeries scatter, howling that they are all going to die. The humans who have had the bad luck to get caught in the middle of this muddle also run, as much in bewilderment as fear. Detailed flashbacks tell the backstories of these humans, each one suffering a profound grief. As events in the park tie the fates of these humans together, we learn that their pasts are tied together, too. All three have been touched by dazzling, seductively-beautiful, yet life-destroying faerie magic. How will it work out? Can it work out? Until it does, if it does, it sure is a wild ride.

Larry H says

Sometimes a book has a beautiful story at its core, but the thread tends to get lost in overcomplication. That's the way I felt about Chris Adrian's *The Great Night*, a well-written book that meshes the emotional, relationship-driven crises of three San Franciscans with characters from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, with mixed results.

It's Midsummer Eve in 2008. Three strangers, each dealing with the wreckage of a relationship, enter Balboa Park, headed to the same party. But unbeknownst to them, Titania, Oberon, and their court call the park their home as well. That night, deep in the throes of sadness over the end of her marriage, which dissolved following the death of her adopted son, Titania releases an ancient menace, which threatens the lives of the immortals, and the mortals alike. The three strangers, along with a group of homeless people rehearsing a musical version of *Soylent Green*, are sealed in the park—and forced to confront their emotionally turbulent pasts, with bizarre results.

I loved when Adrian spun the stories of the three strangers: Henry, a neurotic, gay oncologist dealing with the breakup of his most long-term relationship, and memories of being kidnapped as a child; Molly, suffering from the sudden suicide of her boyfriend; and Will, an arborist in love with one woman yet compulsively drawn to affairs with others. But sadly, he spent far too much time on the strange world of Titania and her minions, and the kaleidoscopic adventures that ensue were far more jarring than fulfilling. I'd love it if I could learn what actually happened to the characters in this story, because that would be a book truly well worth reading.

Maria Headley says

Basically, Chris Adrian ranks in my personal pantheon of author rockstars. I love people who write this way - both beautifully, on a sentence by sentence level, and with elements of the unreal incorporated in the text. I had about ten years of reading books set exclusively in naturalistic universes, and honestly, I've come to the conclusion that the universe, even the one we know and see and accept as unmagical, IS rich and strange and unlikely. I appreciate Adrian's work, because he seems to feel this way too. Amazing things open up out of the ordinary in his books. *Great Night* is a riff on *Midsummer Night's Dream*, set in San Francisco. It's not a direct riff - as in, it's not a contemporized version of Shakespeare's story - but it has character overlap. Puck, Titania, Oberon. And some lovers, parallel-ish to the lovers in the original. I read a chapter of this book (as a freestanding short story) in the *New Yorker* a few years ago, and was totally blown away. That chapter

involves Titania and Oberon, and their changeling boy, who gets sick. They spend the chapter in a children's ward of a hospital, dragged into the broken universe of children with cancer, their parents, and their caretakers. It's an amazing story. Different from - very different, as it also involves fairies and magic - but on par with Lorrie Moore's incredible story *People Like That Are The Only People Here*, published in *Birds of America*.

I wouldn't say *Great Night* is easy. The plot leaps around, and it's quite surreal in many places. There were sections I had to reread to understand what was going on. But reading it was absolutely worth it. It's got elements of *Peter Pan*, and of the classic under-the-hill narratives about fairyland, as well as a lot about what it means to experience absolute pleasure, and then come out the other side of it. Some of the characters in *Great Night* have been to fairyland and then were cast out. This is a useful metaphor for all kinds of things, and very germane to SF and its history - the characters span all class strata - though in this book it is literal. It's a pleasure to read it. Lots of reviewers have focused on the sex in the book - hello, *Midsummer Night's Dream* is ALL ABOUT SEX - and yes, there's lots. It's hot, too, another feat, in my opinion. It's hard to write hot sex in a surreal book. The only quibble I have, and in truth, I forgive it, because what comes before is so stunning, is that the end becomes a bit frantic. I felt this way when reading Adrian's similarly wonderful *The Children's Hospital*, as well. I was with him. I could have had an extra fifty pages inserted in the last section, if it might have made things a bit more clear. There's a problem of bounty here, many characters, many storylines, and as a result the last 50 pages or so feel frenetic and tangled, and not particularly cogent. Still, though, there's plenty of glory there, and the book is quite gorgeous and strange. Recommended - and one more thing. Fantasy readers? You should read this. It wasn't marketed as an urban fantasy novel, but it absolutely is - in the Jonathan Carroll vein. It has monsters and fairies and fairyland. Literally. Not as metaphors. This is a book in which the people under the hill exist. This is a book in which Puck is a beast. You're gonna dig it.

Marc Kozak says

I really can't resist a mostly realist book with supernatural elements. After finishing a book like this, I walk around for days wishing it was real. I have a long history of secretly desiring magical explanations for the most mundane of things. Don't you want to live in a world where, instead of casually explaining to people that the reason you are humming "Call Me Maybe" is because you must have heard it in the background somewhere, the real reason is because the Bird Prince of the Hills needed to reclaim his usurped throne, and used the songs of Carly Rae Jespen (which is an anagram of Pearl Jay Censer) to transmit a spell through the airwaves in order to use the combined aural might of millions of people singing the same song in unison, thereby filling his bird spirit with enough power to fight off the Dark Cardinal Prince, the resulting victory of which is celebrated by all of bird-kind, which we perceive as birds singing? This is my big dumb wish before I go to bed every night.

I'm not sure why I do this - it's not like real life doesn't have enough surrealism in it. I guess I just think it would be so exciting to go through what the characters in Chris Adrian's fantastic second novel go through. Three humans walk into a park one night and are suddenly brought into a war between magical beings. Described as a retelling of William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the story tells of the *Great Night* where Puck is about to destroy the faerie kingdom, only opposed by a diminished faerie queen and a few dumb humans who spend the entire time stammering like morons (because they aren't used to seeing seven foot tall talking trees and half boy/half bunnies). This may seem silly, but it is actually told in a refreshingly non-smirking, and at times terrifying manner, while never losing sight of the human theme of overcoming sadness.

What makes this really work is Adrian's outstanding imagination and impeccable prose. He writes a lot like

Jonathan Franzen - sharp dialogue, beautiful turns of phrase, and relevant portrayals of modern suffering. The story weaves in and out of the three human's lives, covering their troubled pasts and sad presents out of order, until they all weave together spectacularly. At times you can't see where any of it is going, but by the end it all comes together extremely well. I can't remember being satisfied by an ending as much as this one in a long time.

And of course, the magic! If you've read anything by Adrian, you know he is one warped dude. You don't even need to be versed in Shakespeare to enjoy this - the connections are more tangential than anything. Adrian populates his faerie world in a very similar vibe to Neil Gaiman's Sandman series - everything is dark and sinister, and mortals clearly have no place in the world they find themselves in.

Which also got me thinking - how come every story like this ends in complete tragedy for the humans? Why are we always playthings for these otherworldly beings, and when they tire with us, our memories are wiped and we're doomed to roam the world in a depressive haze until we unceremoniously die by getting ironically murdered by a child molester. Just once I want to see a story where the mortal is completely unfazed by all of the magic, and totally bitch slaps the faerie queen.

At any rate, I'm off to start writing a novel based on that last sentence. What you need to know is that Chris Adrian is one of the most intelligent and imaginative writers there is today (and he's under 40!). His last book, *The Children's Hospital*, was 5-star madness, and this one is almost just as good.

Tasha Robinson says

A startlingly strange, rich novel that has repeatedly been described as a retelling of "A Midsummer Night's Dream," but is something more interesting — an original story that borrows some of the characters and a couple of plot twists. This is top-flight literary fantasy, a Neil Gaiman-esque story about myths and magic and how they intersect with the real world. The prose is lyrical and beautiful, and the scenarios Adrian comes up with to background his mortal characters — a woman whose family formed a Christian rock band and expected complete ideological obedience from the kids, a pediatric oncologist with severe OCD and a missing past, a tree doctor trying to save something magical he's never seen before — are compelling and detailed and heartbreaking. My only quibble with the book is that I felt like I got to know these characters extremely well, and then the story largely disposes of them. Their present isn't as well-realized as their past, and in the end, the ending seems rushed and full of loose threads. It's no insult to say my major problem with the book was that I wanted more of it by the end.

Kerfe says

A pure delight. I did have trouble keeping the characters straight, yet somehow at the same time the storylines of each were easy to follow and understand.

There are so many ways the world can damage us, promise more than it can deliver. There are so many ways to fall short of what is asked of us, to fail to follow through on the emotions hidden deep inside.

We run and run, but in the end lies the same fate. The demons are real. But even so, and still, "...there is always room to enjoy yourself, and always something to appreciate, even when you've lost your mind and lost all hope and have clawed your way down not just into the slough of despond but beyond it into the subsequent sloughs of despair and please-kill-me-now. She hadn't meant to enjoy that unexpected feast,

but she had, and it made her feel big in her soul..."

We can put up walls, or we can stay open. We can turn into ourselves, or we can reach out a helping hand to others who also feel the sorrows that living brings. We can wallow in what is missing, or try to fill it with something that also has value--never a replacement, but a different way of seeing what is and can be.

The characters in "The Great Night" come to the park with different baggage and travel the dream-night in ways that reflect what they brought. They walk out changed but not resolved.

The journey continues.

Sam Ruddock says

The Great Night is one of those rare books that I'm impossibly grateful to have found. A modern reworking of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, it is conceptually daring, stylistically exciting and presents a view of humanity that is stark and powerful and unlike anything I've read before.

It is Midsummer's Eve in San Francisco's Buena Vista Park, where Oberon, Titania and their faerie kingdom have set up court. But the Great Night celebrations do not go quite as planned. Unable to deal with the all-too human feelings of grief and loss that have assailed her on the death of their adopted son and subsequent failing of her marriage, Titania sets free an ancient menace that threatens to bring an end mortal and immortal life alike.

It is on this night, just after dark, that Henry, Molly, and Will separately walk into that same park and find themselves utterly lost. Like Titania, they are each struggling (and failing) to overcome romantic losses. Henry, kidnapped as a child and now paralytically obsessive-compulsive has driven away Bobby, the one person he's ever loved. Molly is rebelling against her extreme upbringing but unable to escape the suicide of her boyfriend nearly two years earlier. And Will, a tree-surgeon, is desperate to patch up his relationship with Carolina, who discovered his infidelity and left him. All three have encountered magic before, but nothing like the faerie magic they are about to be caught up in tonight.

Such an introduction inevitably sounds bleaker than the book is. The Great Night is often laugh-out-loud funny and utterly absurd. Puck is given a new, ominous role, and the Mechanicals make an appearance in the guise of a group of homeless people who believe they can bring down the mayor and stop his evil plot by staging a musical production of *Soylent Green*.

Simultaneously, The Great Night is existentially mundane and magically extravagant. It charts the luminal space between dreams and reality. Through magic, Adrian presents the profound realities of mortal life, through humour, the unrelenting sadness of loss. It is a book of opposites, "at the same time one of the strangest and most ordinary things" I've ever read.

Chris Adrian, named in the *New Yorker* as one of the 20 best writers under 40 years old, certainly lives up to that billing. A graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop, and now a fellow in paediatric haematology-oncology, he marries literary craft with a visceral understanding of the human body to create one of the most explicitly embodied books I've read. The Great Night is psychologically explicit, mortally explicit, sexually explicit. His prose is unassuming and easy-to-read, a coherent medium through which to convey his unique view of the world.

I read The Great Night on the back of two stunning reviews in The Independent and The Guardian. It is a

beautiful book to hold and to read and the praise on the jacket fizzles and pops with effervescent exuberance*. Yet just as there are those who think that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is about as comic as experimental pile surgery, *The Great Night* is likely to divide opinion. From such a brilliant premise, the plot sometimes gets indulgently lost and the back stories of Henry, Molly and Will can feel a little forced at times. For some, it will feel a little too like a male sex fantasy in faerie land.

But for all who hate *The Great Night* there will be those who love it. I'll certainly be exploring Chris Adrian's back catalogue further and looking forward to future books from him. This is an intriguing work from a writer who, in a world where too many books feel like they were written from a 'how to write fiction' guide, offers a fresh view of the world. He's a storyteller with an almost unbounded imagination, and he routes his story in the very human lives of his characters. This is exactly what modern fiction can and should be.

Kaycie Hall says

This book is one of the best I've read this year. The ending is a little hazy and confusing, but overall I loved it. The third chapter was published in the *New Yorker* a year or so ago, and I still think that it can stand alone as a beautiful story. It's about Titania and Oberon and the changeling boy they've come to love as their own and his struggle with cancer. Really the scenes with Titania and Oberon and their struggles with death and mortality and human sadness are the most moving parts of the book, in my opinion.

I also love how Adrian wove all of the characters together in the end. I didn't see it coming (though the recent *NYTimes* book review gave it away, so if you haven't read that yet, don't).

Definitely a book I'll read again at some point.

Beverly says

The Great Night is another *Midsummer Night's Dream* with Titania playing the greater role along with three mortals who get trapped in the garden with her and a bunch of fairies just after she's released Puck from being bound. Each of the mortals brings his/her own issues. One was taken in as a boy and thrown out again without memory of it. It's an interesting retelling, one that was hard for me to track for a good bit of it because the story switches from one or other of the main characters to another to bring us up to date with their lives. And yet the story is compelling with an ending that isn't awful but not happy either.

Tim says

I admit I was a little worried that "*The Great Night*" wouldn't be in the same league with Chris Adrian's other two novels, "*Gob's Grief*" (nearly great) and "*The Children's Hospital*" (stone-cold great). Tepid ratings on Goodreads, for instance, coupled with what seemed to me to be a plot description fraught with potential peril gave me pause. Here's the pitch: a modern-day re-imagining of Shakespeare's "*A Midsummer Night's Dream*," set in San Francisco, featuring faeries from the play, faerie queen Titania having unleashed an ancient menace; and three mortals trapped in Buena Vista Park by Titania's actions along with a group of homeless actors putting on a production of "*Soylent Green*."

I needn't have fretted. "The Great Night" is excellent; no "Children's Hospital," to be sure, but enjoyable even to those who aren't that into Shakespeare. I count myself as not being all that knowledgeable or especially nuts about the Bard (dodging your slings and arrows now), but I plunked down \$2 at my favorite local used bookseller for a "Midsummer Night's" Cliff's Notes (horrors!) and, with a quick read of the synopsis, did just fine. It's likely to resonate more with Shakespeare freaks than with those who are not.

"The Great Night" isn't as different from Adrian's other works as I had supposed. Adrian, a pediatric oncologist, continues to soak his books with the magical and the medical. In "Gob's Grief," a man, with the help of Walt Whitman, tries to construct a machine that will bring back his dead brother along with all the Civil War dead; the sprawling "Children's Hospital" includes a modern retelling of Noah's ark, set in the structure of the title, and is replete with angels and children and medicine and the impossible. In this latest novel, the death of Titania and Oberon's changeling child starts the story's fantastical chain of events. The faerie queen and king, now residing in a hill in a San Francisco park along with all manner of faeries, often had stolen mortal children, unbeknownst to their glamoured parents. But Boy sickened and died in a San Francisco hospital while the two faeries watched. Boy's death planted a wedge between Titania and Oberon, who disappeared, and in a fit of grief, Titania frees the fool Puck from his restraints. Puck, who has a grudge against Titania, is set on using his considerable powers for vengeance.

Three grief-stricken and broken people become trapped in Buena Vista Park by Titania's magics, and are caught up in the swirl as faerie creatures of every description, from a treelike being to a boy with the bottom half of a bunny, flee from the Beast (Puck). These mortals are Molly, a woman with a troubled family past and a dark guilt, whose boyfriend killed himself; Will, an arborist who once had a relationship with Carolina, the sister of Molly's dead boyfriend; and Henry, a gay man who works at a hospital and who recently broke up with his boyfriend, and who had a haunted, lost youth scarred by an abduction he doesn't remember. Then there are the five determined to put on their own version of the movie "Soylent Green" (people as food) as a warning, convinced that the mayor of San Francisco has hatched an evil plot (a song goes: "People. People who eat people are the loneliest people in the world.").

Adrian weaves in flashbacks from the pasts of Molly, Will and Henry with their experiences in the faerie world encountering strange creatures and fleeing the Beast, who appears to each person as he or she whom they most fear or are most haunted by. We're very much in Alice in Wonderland territory during these scenes, and I wonder whether a labeling of this book as a fantasy (though it doesn't really deserve it) would lead to a more-prepared reading public and higher ratings here. I guess I'd call the book a mixture of "Alice," Shakespeare and, for its occasional oddness and sexuality, John Irving. I might add that my knowledge limited to a little perusal of Cliff's Notes would make me assess "The Great Night" as less of a modern retelling of "Midsummer Night's" than a novel that takes its jumping-off point from some of the characters in it, though the "Soylent Green" players are obvious echoes of the "mechanicals" of the play.

Adrian's flashbacks often bleed into each other; it can be tough at times to see where one time period ends and another begins, though the book as a whole is not difficult. The first half of the book is not as strong as its conclusion, and it takes time to build up momentum as Adrian hops from the story of the faerie king and queen to the mortals trapped in the park and their backstories.

"The Great Night" is filled with wonders, depravity, humor, weirdness, warmth and sadness, blending delightful hijinks among the faeries with stories of heartbreak. Adrian's earlier books had been populated by people wanting to beat/overcome death; there is not as much of a weight of mortality, here, though it includes the death of people and the death of dreams, as well as dreams of happiness. Adrian's story doesn't always flow seamlessly, but his way with words is, as expected, thrilling. I won't spoil the story by telling the point at which everything comes together and the novel turns from merely quite good to astonishing, but it encompasses the book's final third. Adrian brings everything home with a brilliance that at times is staggering. If we get there in sometimes choppy steps, the destination is well worth it. Adrian, one of The New Yorker's "20 under 40," which spotlights our best young writers, continues to prove that he is, in fact,

one of our most talented storytellers. His humanity, his unusual (odd, if you will) scenarios and approaches, his startlingly beautiful observations and turns of phrase, make him, three novels in, one of my very favorites.

Alissa says

This book is literally a clusterfuck; as in, people and faeries are clustered together. Fucking. They are also masturbating, having sex with trees, spying on people masturbating, and spying on people masturbating on trees.

Well, I see that you're kerflummoxed as to why I gave this book a lowly three stars. Truthfully, I was thinking two until the tree sex scene.

So anyway, what is going on in this beautiful disaster of a mind f-ing? A bunch of heartbroken, lonely ass people stumble into Buena Vista Park in San Francisco...some of them are doing a homeless person remake of Soylent Green, others are getting drunk off faerie wine, and others are...running around having more sex with Titania who's mourning the loss of...crap, who cares.

I'm going to go see if anyone in the bum park outside my apartment is remaking Soylent Green or having sex with a tree. I suggest you do something similar instead of reading this book.

Oriana says

Jesus, this took me *forever*. I have my reasons, but the upshot is that it was really hard for me to keep this all together, because it's a crazy sprawl. I'm not sure how much of it was my general distractedness, but honestly I think he was trying to do way way way too much here, with too many characters and too much backstory, especially since it was all scrimmed over with fantastical and evil faeries and a retooling of *Midsummer Night's Dream*.

I didn't dislike it, but I definitely got lost a lot with who was sleeping with whom and whose brother died and who had a silver-barked tree and who was in which orgy. Like you do, I guess.

switterbug (Betsey) says

In this phantasmagorical tale, Chris Adrian reshaped "A Midsummer Night's Dream," into a mammoth, messy, tilted, erotic, meandering reimagining of Shakespeare's comedy into an elaborate feast of faeries and monsters, Lilliputians and giants, demons and derelicts, heart-broken humans and a group of outspoken homeless people who are staging a musical reenactment of SOYLENT GREEN. And that is just a segment of the odd and atavistic population of characters that you will meet in this multiple narrative tale of loss, love and exile. As you enter San Francisco's Buena Vista Park during this millennial summer solstice, the moon shines eerie and luminous over creatures large and small, and a thick wall of fog sluggishly spreads its fingers during the celebration known to the faerie kingdom as the "Great Night."

Adrian's visionary epic expands on his short story, "A Tiny Feast," centering on King Oberon and the ruthless Queen Titania and their changeling son, Boy, who suffered from leukemia. At the start of this novel,

Titania is inconsolable after the death of Boy and the subsequent departure of Oberon. She unleashes a malevolent force of magic by removing the controlling constraints of Puck, thereby allowing his demonic urges to run rampant through the park.

Meanwhile, three heartbroken people with doleful memories of forsaken loved ones are lost and trapped in the park on their way to a summer solstice party. The tangled backstories unleash the bitter coils of pain and loss, and the mortals and immortals eventually interlock with loose springs. Molly grew up in a pious, gospel-singing family, fuel for unresolved trauma that preys on her like a ghost, and she remains stuck and heartsick over the suicide of her lover, Ryan. Will is a tree surgeon who was dumped by Carolina, the only woman he has ever loved. Henry has a black past with memory holes; he was abducted as a child and has forgotten the terror of those years. Meanwhile, his obsessive cleaning and hand washing, which serves him well as a physician, has cost him a relationship with pediatrician Bobby, the man of his dreams and now ex-boyfriend.

Adrian flashes backward into the lives of the mortal three and alternates that with the captivity at the park and the faerie kingdom tale. There were shades of John Crowley's *LITTLE, BIG*, as both books use some similar unrealistic elements and fantasy to enhance the realistic elements and emotional heft. However, Crowley's faeries are more subtle and subconscious, and don't violate the moral codes of humanity as wickedly as Adrian's. Crowley also combines a Carrollian and Dickensian wit and artistry that would have been welcome in Adrian's story.

The essential problem I had with this book is that the fantastic elements were crowded with too much symbolism, and I had difficulty getting a purchase on the concepts. The visual surrealism, rather than taking me seamlessly to a deeper consciousness and serving as a metaphor or counterpoint, began to pile up and distract me. I was often bewildered with the action and commotion of the faeries. Rather than surrendering to the story, I had a more cerebral and exhausting experience. I lost control of the narrative—or did Adrian?

I was taken with his scuttling energy and the peering furtive faces; I felt the oppressive weight of the shadowed victims. But I was also dizzy, blindfolded and drugged by too much screwball humor adjacent to tragedy, and the clarity I was seeking was etherized. Adrian's prose is rich and layered with raucous, ribald wit and multiple motifs. It was eventually difficult to identify the core of the story. The fate of Molly, Will, and Henry was subverted by an anticlimactic ending amid black humor and zany twists of immortal madcap magic and erotic mayhem.

However, the story resonated with me at many turns. There is a bizarre and churlish glee to the prose and a willingness to take the reader to unknown zones of scary emotional wilderness. Despite the novel's flabby focus, I shall inevitably look for more of this esteemed "20 under 40" writer's works in the future. He captured me with his perversely baroque and insane merriment.

Danny says

This book is a sort of retelling of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by that perennial favorite Billy Shakespeare. But whereas the play, as far as memory serves, focuses mainly on the relationships between the confused lovers lost in the wood, this one spends just as much time, if not more, talking about things from the Faeries' point of view, which I totally dig. (Have you read *Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell*? If not, GET ON IT. Amazing.) I mean, there are lots of things about changelings and magic and how dealing with Faeries leaves

you broken for life in terms of interpersonal relationships. It's got THEMES is what I'm saying.

So this time around Titania and Oberon have set up camp in a park in San Francisco, except that Oberon has skipped town and Titania's depressed and decides she should just release Puck from his bondage and let him wreak vengeance on the world. While this is happening three people on their way to a party get lost in the park along with some homeless folks putting on a musical based on the movie *Soylent Green*.

There's a lot of sex in here, of all stripes, so don't pick up the book if that's going to bother you.

Miriam says

This book takes place here:

My parents used to take me to this park as a kid -- not often, it was farther away than the Panhandle. As a little urban child I thought it was like the real forest.

And it is the real forest, in *The Great Night*, the forest that is endless, and dangerous, and beautiful, the forest where you lose your way and find yourself -- or a horde of crazy fairies, or some bums putting on a play of *Soylent Green*, or some other heartbroken souls lost on their ways to a party none of you wanted to go to.
