

Man And Machine: Haunted Survivors Turn To Science For Postwar Redemption

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Review

MAN AND MACHINE

Haunted survivors turn to science for postwar redemption

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Adrian, Chris *Gob's Grief*. Broadway Books, 2001-01-01. ISBN 767902815

Chris Adrian's debut novel **Gob's Grief** is not so much a book about the Civil War as it is about how people cope with the terrible loss and grief caused by the war. It is a book not of battles and generals, but of spirit voices, regret, and madness.

A postwar America riven by social upheaval, reevaluation of accepted values, and radical politics provides the setting for the suffragists, spiritualists, and walking wounded who populate the book. Walt Whitman is at the spiritual center of their audacious effort to undo the war's devastation. He establishes the tone of wistful sadness that propels the first chapters, in which he works to comfort wounded soldiers at the army hospitals in Washington City. During a visit to New York City in 1868 he befriends a brilliant young doctor, George Washington "Gob" Woodhull, who is consumed with grief over the death of his brother in the war.

Gob, in turn, befriends Will Fie while the two are studying medicine at New York's Bellevue Hospital. The men belong to a "not very exclusive club of surviving brothers"-Will also has lost a brother to the war and suffers the same survivor's guilt that drives Gob to madness. While a soldier in the Union army, Will takes up with a French photographer who follows the army like a vulture, making photographs of the battle carnage. After the Frenchman is killed, Will inherits a grisly collection of photos that so sensitize him to the world's ills that he begins to see ghosts all around him. Will thus is a natural recruit to Gob's project: a machine that will resurrect all the dead from all wars.

What Gob manufactures is a "great nonsensical conglomeration of mechanical parts that sat under an enormous telescopic gaselier...glass tubes and

iron gears, steel ribs, yards and yards of twisting, wrist-thick bundles of copper wire, here and there a bone." One part looks "like the gate to Greenwood Cemetery, complete with a gatehouse, and the whole thing sheltered under a pair of wings" made from the photographic negative plates that contain Will's horrifying images of the war.

Maci Trufant is the last active ingredient added to this volatile mix. She is a suffragist who works for Gob's mother, the radical feminist Victoria Woodhull. For Gob, however, science rather than politics is his religion and his way of dealing with loss. He has become a doctor because he is obsessed with death. While initially repelled by Gob's work, Maci eventually is drawn into the resurrection effort (she, too, lost a brother to the fighting) yet remains the practical one among the three-Maci recognizes that the crazy endeavor is mostly about keeping the dead from being forgotten. She ultimately makes sense out of Gob's struggle against death and offers hope for the future as well as a way to reconcile the living with the dead.

Adrian is a medical student whose work has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Paris Review*, and *Story* magazine. His writing in **Gob's Grief** can be beautiful and evocative at times, with compelling characters and strong attention to historical detail. Adrian's talent for breathing life into odd characters as well as his skill at painting a compelling portrait of the time make him a writer to watch. However, each character's story is told in fragments and vignettes that diffuse any dramatic tension. The parallel histories of the characters not only tend to confuse, but Adrian settles for an ending that is too enigmatic to be satisfying, thereby weakening what is otherwise a strong first effort.

Don Evans is a newspaper editor and the author of Locust Alley: A Novel of the Civil War (2000).