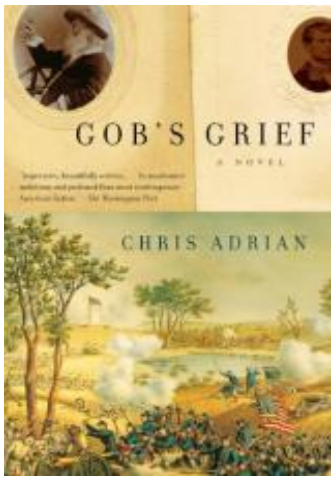
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Gob's Grief

by Chris Adrian



About the Book

In the summer of 1863, Gob and Tomo Woodhull, eleven-year-old twin sons of Victoria Woodhull, agree to together forsake their home and family in Licking County, Ohio, for the glories of the Union Army. But on the night of their departure for the war, Gob suffers a change of heart, and Tomo is forced to leave his brother behind. Tomo falls in as a bugler with the Ninth Ohio Volunteers and briefly revels in camp life; but when he is shot clean through the eye in his very first battle, Gob is left to endure the guilt and grief that will later come to fuel his obsession with building a vast machine that will bring Tomo?indeed, all the Civil War dead?back to life.

Epic in scope yet emotionally intimate, GOB'S GRIEF creates a world both fantastic and familiar and populates it with characters who breath on the page, capturing the spirit of a fevered nation populated with lost brothers and lost souls.

Discussion Guide

1. From each of the main characters to Alanis Bell in the woods of Homer, Ohio [p. 115], **Gob's Grief** can be read as an elegy to lost brothers everywhere. How does the concept of brotherhood convey the personal yet universal nature of loss and death? What is the larger symbolism of the rending apart of twin brothers?

2. What does Gob's machine symbolize? Gob asks, "Is it useful to [the dead] that we mourn? Life might spend all its days grieving for lost life. You'd think something could be done with it." And Walt responds, "All the precious blood. A great work ought to be coming, oughtn't it?" [p. 69] Is Walt's vision of "a great work" the same as Gob's? Does Gob's machine work? Is his project a success? Why does Maci's father build his machine, and what does the existence of another machine like Gob's suggest about post-Civil War society? Why does Maci's father call his machine "the Infant" [p. 268]?

3. What is the nature of the grief and suffering in the novel? Is it for the living or the dead? According to the Urfeist,

"Every last creature is sad. . . . Not that they mourn their beloveds. They mourn themselves. They are sad because they know that they are going to die" [p. 253]. Does the Urfeist's assertion, echoed by Walt's fear of death [p. 108] and Gob's fear of death [p. 117], encapsulate the theme of **Gob's Grief**? Or does Maci's sentiment, "It is memory that keeps us all ever from being happy" [p. 381] more accurately summarize the theme of the novel?

4. Other than the angel's warning to Will that Gob's machine is an "abomination" [p. 182] and Gob's strangely rational acknowledgement, "Oh yes. The angels--they're very much against us" [p. 202], **Gob's Grief** seems strangely devoid of religion. Does this lack of religion reflect a postwar nihilism? Or, conversely, can the entire novel be read as a religious allegory? If so, what do each of the characters in the novel represent?

5. Even as Maci watched Walt in Gob's machine, she "thought it was folly, just an enormous monument to **Gob's Grief** that was beautiful and complex, but no more likely to raise the dead than an ordinary lever." But at the same time, "Maci believed and believed and believed. . . . She considered how it was wonderful that a machine could manufacture faith and put it in you, how it could abolish doubt, and that this was perhaps more miraculous than the abolition of death" [pp. 372-3]. Is Maci's faith, in fact, the driving force behind Gob's machine? Why is the abolition of this vague concept of "doubt" so significant?

6. Will recalls his brother Sam: "When they were small, Sam had tried to teach him how to wake within sleep, to know he was dreaming while he was dreaming. 'Then you are the master of your whole world,' Sam confided" [p. 158]. What do the characters' dreams reveal about them? How does the retelling of dreams advance the plot? [See, for example, Tomo's dreams on pp. 7, 23, 211 and Walt's dreams on pp. 47, 31, 52, 100, 102.]

7. What are the roles of Walt's Hank, Will's Jolly, and Maci's brother Rob? Are they actually spirits, or are they the characters' consciences? Why might these characters be able to "hear" or "see" the spirits, while Gob, whose "fondest wish" [p. 114] is to see a spirit, is unable to?

8. Do the characters in **Gob's Grief** live by any conventional codes of morality? Do traditional concepts of right and wrong have a place in either the novel or in post-Civil War America?

9. How is the construction of Gob's machine implicitly compared to the construction of the Brooklyn Bridge [p. 197]? How are each of these parallel constructs a particular manifestation of the post-Civil War mentality--one a grotesque distortion of the other?

10. What image of doctors emerges from **Gob's Grief**? What attitude toward death and life should a doctor have? On the one hand, "It seemed to Will that Gob was becoming a doctor for the wrong reason, not because he loved life, but because he was obsessed with death" [p. 167]. On the other hand, for Will himself, "Medical school was the last place he should be, in his condition, because the sad natural histories of disease became personal to him" [p. 156]. What does it take to be a good doctor? Are the expectations for physicians different today than they were at the end of the nineteenth century? In the novel, how are doctors likened to soldiers and medicine to war?

11. Who is the Urfeist? Is he a doctor? What does he teach Gob? How does Gob feel about him? How do these feelings compare to his feelings for his father? His mother? How does the role he plays in Gob's development compare to the role Frenchy plays in Will's development, or the role Victoria Woodhull plays in Maci's life?

12. According to The American Heritage Dictionary, "Kosmos" is the Greek word for "order, universe" and has evolved into the English word "cosmos," which is defined as "the universe regarded as an orderly, harmonious whole." In his 1958 critical essay on Leaves of Grass, John Kinnaird describes the multiple components of Walt Whitman's persona utilized in his poems, the third being the "kosmos": "[The kosmos] is the most functionally mythical aspect of the persona--the furthest from worldly ego and the closest to his dream life--the fantastic, serio-comic mask of godhead whereby Whitman resolved in imagination the contradictions of his conscious identity into a divinely free and conventionally lawless unity of opposites" [source: Roy Harvey Pearce, ed., Whitman: A Collection of Critical Essays, "Leaves of Grass and the American Paradox," p. 30]. In light of these definitions, why might Gob have chosen Walt Whitman to power his machine?

13. In her recent biography of Victoria Woodhull, Barbara Goldsmith states, "The rise of Spiritualism . . . expanded at a time when devastating war had imposed the unbearable loss of husbands, sons, and lovers" [source: Other Powers: The Age of Suffrage, Spiritualism, and the Scandalous Victoria Woodhull, p. xiv]. Does this provide a clue as to why Adrian chose Victoria Woodhull as the other unique historical character upon which to anchor his story? Is Woodhull's Spiritualism another expression of **Gob's Grief**? Maci gets "so tired that she confused their projects, so she thought that Gob was building a machine to expose and destroy hypocrisy, and that Mrs. Woodhull was writing an article that argued so powerfully against death that nature, shamefaced after reading it, would revoke mortality" [p. 363]. Is the reader intended to recognize in Maci's confusion a bizarre resemblance between Gob's efforts and his mother's?

14. What did Will learn from his glass house? Does Maci learn the same lessons from Rob's sketched body of Pvt. Vanderbilt? What might the sketches have meant for Rob [p. 278]?

15. Is Maci insane, as she suspects [pp. 295-6]? Is Gob insane? How are the concepts of sanity and insanity defined in the novel?

16. What role does sexuality play in the novel? How do the relationships between Will and Gob; Walt and Gob; Walt and Hank; and Gob and the Urfeist simultaneously expand and scar the notion of brotherhood? Why does the novel close with an act of sexual intercourse between the aging Tomo and his wife?

17. Why does Will Fie dislike Walt so much [p. 234]? What is the significance of the character Oliver Barley [pp. 42, 51], and how does his role in the novel compare to Will's?

18. Will thinks, "This was the transformation their engine had effected, to make the ridiculous sensible and the sensible ridiculous" [p. 219]. Does Will's disorientation convey a thematic effect of confusion to the reader? Does Adrian's decision to relate his story out of chronological order emphasize this theme?

19. Can **Gob's Grief** be read as an embodiment of Walt Whitman through the dramatization of the different components of his poetry, his philosophy, and what his life came to represent to America? If you are not familiar with Walt Whitman's life or his epic collection of poetry, Leaves of Grass, some of these components are the following: lament over the horrors of war; admiration for the soldiers; exaltation of democracy and individual liberties; a new, modern America; brotherhood and the universality of man; egotism and the search for self; and the immortality of man's soul [sources: Walt Whitman, Leaves of Grass; John Addington Symonds, Walt Whitman: A Study; Roy Harvey Pearce, ed., Whitman: A Collection of Critical Essays; and, James E. Miller, Jr., Walt Whitman].

20. Is **Gob's Grief** best described as historical fiction or fictionalized history? How does Adrian successfully blend the genres of fiction and nonfiction, and how does this technique affect a reader's ability to relate to the characters?

21. Excepting his obsession with funerals and empathy for the mourners, does it appear that Tomo's life turned out to be devoid of spirits and fairly ordinary? In what ways is his life different from Gob's, and why?

Author Bio

Chris Adrian (born 1970) is an American author. Adrian completed his Bachelor's degree in English from the University of Florida in 1993. He received his M.D. from Eastern Virginia Medical School in 2001. He completed a pediatric residency at the University of California, San Francisco, was a student at Harvard Divinity School, and is currently in the pediatric hematology/oncology fellowship at UCSF. He is also a graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop.

Adrian's writing styles in short stories vary greatly; from modernist realism to pronounced lyrical allegory. His novels both tend toward surrealism, having mostly realistic characters experience fantastic circumstances. He has written three novels: GOB'S GRIEF, THE CHILDREN'S HOSPITAL, and THE GREAT NIGHT. In 2008, he published A BETTER ANGEL, a collection of short stories. His short fiction has also appeared in *The Paris Review*, *Zoetrope*, *Ploughshares*, *McSweeney's*, *The New Yorker*, *The Best American Short Stories*, and *Story*. He was one of 11 fiction writers to receive a Guggenheim Fellowship in 2009.

Critical Praise

"Unlike many first time novelists, Adrian takes great risks here. He brings to life scores of historical figures, from Walt Whitman to Abe Lincoln, with a startling ease and grace. More remarkable, however, is his ability to inspire sympathy for even faith in Gob's mission."

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