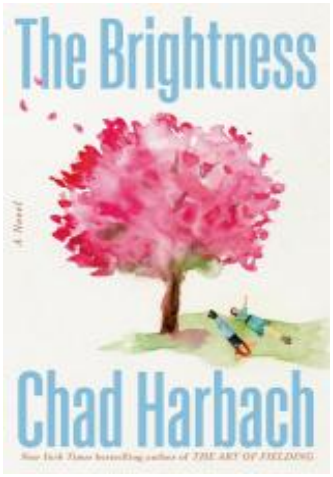
The Brightness

by Chad Harbach



About the Book

From the bestselling author of the literary sensation THE ART OF FIELDING comes an urgent, deeply felt story of friendship, art, love and grief, following two young women on the brink of irrevocable change.

Parties and weddings, messy hookups and marred friendships, art and love and grief --- THE BRIGHTNESS follows the electric, chaotic, everything-can-happen lives of Pella and her best friend, Irma, as they fumble their way out of sleepy, Midwestern Westish College and into a larger world that will upend their connection and everything they thought they understood about their own place within it.

At 27, Pella?s life looks settled. She?s a recent college grad; engaged to her longtime boyfriend, Mike; and helping her friend, Owen, pull off his own destination wedding on Block Island. But over that wild wedding weekend, Pella?s past and present collide spectacularly, blowing up her plans and sending her spiraling toward an unplanned future in New York City.

Meanwhile, back at Westish College, 21-year-old Irma?s involvement with a politically charged prank --- one that has roiled both the campus and the world beyond --- threatens to derail her brilliant future. As Irma and Pella cycle through possibilities and identities, both navigate the heights and depths of passion and ambition, and the incalculable wages of love and loss.

In stunning scenes and spectacular characters --- each drawn with an almost superhuman vividness and humanity --- Chad Harbach captures that specific, shimmering anxiety of your 20s when life still feels wide open, even as hard and irreversible choices start closing in.

Energetic, funny and deeply human, this much-anticipated follow-up to THE ART OF FIELDING confirms Chad Harbach as one of the most accomplished and deep-seeing writers of our time.

Discussion Guide

Note: There are spoilers ahead for THE BRIGHTNESS.

1. Chad Harbach?s bestselling debut novel, THE ART OF FIELDING, appears a few times as a book-within-a-book within Harbach?s follow-up novel, THE BRIGHTNESS. If you?ve read THE ART OF FIELDING, how did it inform your experience reading THE BRIGHTNESS?

2. How do you think the college campus setting shapes the novel?s central conflict? Does THE BRIGHTNESS remind you of any other campus novels? Why or why not?

3. What do you make of Dahlia and Pammy?s decision to tattoo men that night with that particular phrase? How does this decision affect Dahlia's life in the long term?

4. How does Hunter Stroman interact with and incite the ?Witches of Westish?? Is he culpable in any way?

5. What do you think makes Irma so magnetic at Owen and Martin?s wedding? Is it the article she wrote, the persona --- modeled after Dahlia --- that she was performing, or had she simply found the right audience?

6. Pella inspires Owen to write his bestselling sensation, *The Art of Fielding*. What is it like to be a muse for someone else?s art? How would you feel in her shoes?

7. Mike appears in THE ART OF FIELDING as well as THE BRIGHTNESS. Discuss his arc, and how he grows and changes throughout the latter novel.

8. How culpable are Pella and Mike in the dissolution of their relationship and in Pella?s move to New York? What do you make of the decisions each of them makes?

9. What traits do Irma and Pella have in common with Nicholas? mother? Do you think those traits were part of what drew Nicholas to them? Discuss why.

10. What do you think is Sylvie?s ultimate message in her video, *The Death of My Husband*? How do you interpret the final line of the video, when the interlocutor asks if she would prefer a son or a daughter and Sylvie replies, ?There?s no way out??

11. What do you make of Pella?s choice to become a mother at the end of THE BRIGHTNESS?

Author Bio

Chad Harbach is the author of the novels THE BRIGHTNESS and THE ART OF FIELDING, which has been translated into more than 20 languages. He is a founding editor of *n+1* and the editor of the essay collection *MFA vs. NYC*. He lives in northern California with his son and dog.

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