



The Children's Hospital

Chris Adrian

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A hospital is preserved, afloat, after the Earth is flooded beneath seven miles of water. Inside, assailed by mysterious forces, doctors and patients are left to remember the world they've lost and to imagine one to come. At the center, Jemma Claflin, a medical student, finds herself gifted with strange powers and a frightening destiny. Simultaneously epic and intimate, wildly imaginative and unexpectedly relevant, *The Children's Hospital* is a work of stunning scope, mesmerizing detail, and wrenching emotion.

The Children's Hospital Details

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From Reader Review The Children's Hospital for online ebook

Sharon says

I don't usually give a rating to a did not finish book, but this book was pretty unpleasant to read. It was joyless, and confusing, and it felt like the author was trying to make it meaningful by throwing a bunch of meaningful-sounding things together into the book and assuming that people would read meaning into it. And a lot of people did, judging by the reviews. I did not.

There were angels, and an apocalypse, but no idea of a god. There were doctors and a hospital, but no notion of what healing means, or of why people do this hard work, what pleasure or even grim satisfaction they get from it. There was a great flood, but no attempt by the survivors to understand how or what or who. They spend some time on "why," but never get anywhere, and don't appear to dwell on it too hard. There's a lot of ugliness, and even the occasional beauty is ugly.

If someone can explain what they liked about this book, I'd be grateful. I really don't understand what there is to like.

Patrick says

Holy mother, what a slog this book was. Where to begin with my frustrations with this read. Okay, first of all, let me just get this off my chest: the novel is absolutely riddled with typos—not exclusively a reflection of Mr Adrian's work, but between the author and the publisher, the sloppiness is inexcusable and distracts enormously from the story that, as a reader, you simply want to lose yourself in.

And about that story: the one element of this book that strikes me most positively is the imaginative premise: Noah's flood has essentially happened again, and the sole survivors are the inhabitants of this children's hospital—patients, doctors, families, et al.—which is now made to float above the surface of the earth. Chris Adrian is classified as a magical realist, and the genre inherently requires suspension of disbelief; as far as the premise of the story goes, I'm good. But the plot devices that the author fashions in order to drive the story forward are lazily wrought, contrived, and too often simply absurd. Before the flood, an engineer was forewarned and turned the building into a boat; this new reality is governed by an angel, who, despite her divine substance, has no better way to communicate with the flood's survivors than over the hospital PA system; apart from the trauma of the world ending, life as the hospital's inhabitants know it isn't all that different than before—no deprivation of creature comforts—thanks to a "replicator," which makes to order basically anything that anybody wants at any time. How convenient.

And the major plot turn centered on Jemma, the novel's heroine—I won't spoil it here, in case you decide to read the novel yourself, but: 1) I don't recommend you do; 2) COME ON. I would so much rather that the time spent on weird cartoonish scenes and green fire and everything else were spent on character development, so that I would give a damn about any of these unfortunate people. On the contrary, I couldn't care the slightest bit what happened to any of them. I kind of hoped they would all just die already so that I could go on to another read.

Oh yeah, and about that angel—or rather, angelS, plural—they take turns narrating chapters, which is only very obscurely indicated by an innocuous symbol that heads each chapter, which, if you figure out early enough,

congratulations, but otherwise is simply a source for greater confusion. Not that it much matters, since the novel is essentially narrated in third-person omniscient voice, until the author seemingly remembers that the multiple angel narration was supposed to be one of the book's central conceits, and he changes tone for a couple of pages at the end of any given chapter.

One last gripe: Mr Adrian's training is in medicine, and don't you know it just about every other page. The guy gratuitously drops a shit ton of medical jargon—diseases, diagnoses, treatments—like it was common parlance—which, incidentally, we have a cousin who does the same, and it annoys the hell out of me.

What a relief to finally be through with this book.

Gregor Xane says

This is a literary novel with science fictional, fantastical, and horrific elements. It's a novel with overt religious themes that's filled with black humor, curse words, sexual situations, bleakness, and just a sprinkle of hope. It is dark and funny. The writing is top notch. Some characters are chillingly true-to-life while others are wonderfully over-the-top. The author creates a true microcosm of the world in his children's hospital afloat on God's second great flood. He's smashed a little bit of everything inside and let everything loose to wreak havoc. Is it a bit much? A bit overlong? Perhaps. But the more I think on it, I can't think of anything that I'd cut. I liked every scene, and especially those featuring Jemma's big brother, the young psychopath who wants to be undone. This character is so well drawn that his chapters alone are worth the read. Folks seem to be evenly divided on this work. I'm on the side that thinks this is one hell of a literary accomplishment.

Zach says

[This is as much an attempt on my part to puzzle some sort of meaning out of this book as it is a review, so beware of spoilers - not that this is really a plot-driven book, because everything that happens is pretty clearly telegraphed anyway, but you have been warned]

They say to write what you know, so Chris Adrian, a “lapsed atheist” divinity student pediatrician, wrote a story in which God breaks his covenant to never again flood the Earth and buries the world under seven miles of water, sparing only a miraculously-buoyant children's hospital. God's involvement, I should say, is actually questionable - there are a number of angels involved (one each of the preserving, recording, accusing, and destroying varieties) but God himself never puts in an appearance, and Jesus certainly never does (this is all very Old Testament).

Our hero is Jemma Claflin (note the initials), a bumbling medical student who blames herself for the deaths of everyone she's ever loved: a father lost to cancer, a mother who burned herself alive, a boyfriend who drunkenly drove himself into a tree, and, above all else, a brother: Calvin (hint, hint), three years older than Jemma, is the dominant figure in the childhood flashback sections of the book, which focus on the creepy almost-incestuous relationship between the two (complete with an insistence on Calvin's part that Jemma never marry anyone but him...?) and always build up to an attempt on Calvin's part to leave the Earth behind. This effort is successful at age 17 when he cuts out his own eyes and tongue and sets himself on fire (I think? The gruesome deaths in this book all kind of run together).

Calvin, or Calvin's spirit, resurfaces in some sense or another as the recording angel who narrates the book, aside from those sections in which he is caught up in an argument with the preserving angel. This latter figure is so named because she, in the form of a huge computer lodged within the base of the hospital, keeps the hospital afloat and its denizens fed, clothed, and entertained by means of a series of replicators that can produce any non-organic item they ask for. The humans get creative with this from time to time (most memorably in the form of a gadget that translates dolphinese), but mostly they just synthesize themselves new clothes and endless food and drink. No one, for example, seems to be curious enough to ask for any sort of vessel with which to explore their new world.

This lack of curiosity is itself part and parcel of Adrian's larger attack on the banality of our modern existence, I suppose. The hospital, sealed off and removed from the rest of the world in the middle of the night, has only a skeleton crew of medical personnel left to deal with a large number of very ill children, and so the continued business of daily micro-apocalypses of healing and dying simply overshadows the Apocalypse outside - for a while. I imagine this kind of blind-to-the-world, head-down-power-through insularity is something experienced by doctors/med students even without miles of water sloshing outside their hospital windows, and Adrian is nothing if not adept at showing his readers exactly how miserably tedious and banal this situation is. Readers are given no hand-holding at all as they are dropped into scene after scene of dense and alienating medical techno-jargon which is almost as far out of poor Jemma's grasp as it is ours.

Adrian also sets his sights on the banality of *evil* bureaucracy, that most-favored target of authors of post-apocalyptic, in the form of Dr. Snood (ugh), a surgeon and the de facto head honcho at the hospital. When Jemma finally manifests her miraculous healing powers (did I mention that Jemma magically gains some sort of miraculous healing powers?), Snood insists that she refrain from healing any of the children until her powers have been extensively tested and quantified. The work, Snood insists, is what they are there for, and what will get them through the end of all things.

Not banal enough for you? How about the fact that the flood, a world-ending deluge that left behind nothing but the hospital, some marine life, and a cruise ship (more on that in a bit), is referred to by the survivors as the Thing. This is later amended to "the First Thing" or "the Bad Thing" after "the Thing Two:" Jemma's restoration of the health of every person on board the hospital, an occurrence rendered banal in its own right by page after repetitious page of descriptions of Jemma laying hands upon the sick in order to inundate them with green fire. Thing Two, in turn, gives way to the Third Thing - which, in a book so concerned with the banality of not only the miraculous but also the mundane, turns out of course to be that most banal of all exercises in ceremonial (un)creativity: a wedding.

Although never named as such in the text, there is also a Fourth Thing, a plague which kills all of the surviving adults and renders the children comatose (at least until they are deposited upon the new Eden), and which is the real apocalypse of the tale. It seems that we are supposed to understand this as a further punishment wrought by God upon the survivors for turning their replicator-supplied post-scarcity utopia into a non-stop party, but as the whole thing lasts only nine months (hint, hint) it hardly seems enough time for them to have stabilized their society into... what, anyway? And as mentioned above God never seems much involved with any of this - there's certainly no burning bush anywhere here, the angels themselves are wracked with guilt and uncertainty, and, even if no one else sees it that way, Calvin/the recording angel is convinced that it was his own auto da fe that brought about this end.

"I have such violent dreams, and yet they are never nightmares. The nightmare is the one where I wake up fifty years from now, happily married, and see a picture by my bed of the family I have happily fathered, every face smiling, every heart black with the sin I put in it," he tells us, and the blackness of sin there is

literalized inasmuch as the plague slowly or quickly dissolves its victims into black ash - another repeated occurrence with which readers are beaten over the head via endless repetitious descriptions, although I must admit that this ending section, suffused with despair and ennui, is among the best in the book. The plague (or "the botch") makes its appearance after the hospital encounters a derelict cruise ship creepily inhabited only by a thick coating of black ash and a single comatose boy. The boy, we and the hospital survivors find out by means of a conveniently preserved diary, was serially sexually abused by the other people aboard. Presumably, given Adrian's predilections, this character was supposed to be some sort of Whore of Babylon stand-in, and is presented as the initiator of these sexual encounters.

Now, I tend to use the word "creepy"--in the sense of the uncanny or grotesque--as a superlative in describing a lot of horror/dark fiction. With Adrian, though, some of what he is doing here is "creepy" more in the distasteful sense that I do not trust what he, as an author, is trying to accomplish... "good creepy" versus "bad creepy," to put it bluntly. This lengthy--and, for all that I can tell, entirely superfluous--aside about sexual assault, the incestuous subtheme of the insufferable childhood chapters, the fact that Jemma's role appears to boil down to motherhood alone - all leave me deeply suspicious of Adrian's purposes here. I'm not sure what else I expected from a book so deeply rooted in Biblical allegory, though.

But anyway, what are we to make of any of this?

Why was this cruise ship spared, alone among all the world outside of the hospital? I understand the symbolism there, but the hospital itself had become something of a party ship by this point, and was already full of children who needed saving, so why introduce this new (bad creepy) element into a book that was already much, much longer than it needed to be?

What was the significance of Brenda, the King's Daughter, who was born the night of the Thing and who seems to be the Eve to Jemma's child's Adam, but then why "the Book of the King's Daughter" to refer to the narrative of the hospital?

Or, if Jemma is Mary and her child is Jesus, what does that make Brenda?

Jemma is also in some sense Moses, leading her flock to the new land, but are we supposed to understand that she has successfully aided the children, or that she has failed the adults and been struck down for it? Both? Neither?

Pickie Beecher is either a child with a variety of ailments, including pica, which leads to him eating blood, or else a 130-some-year-old vampire, which also leads to him eating blood. Either way, he's Jemma's chief disciple, and is viewed by the preserving angel as an abomination, and is then tossed overboard by the accusing angel (who has been disguised as an amnesiac pulled from the sea - why?), a while after which he floats back onto the hospital with no trace of his former character. Why?

What? Why?

Drew Krassowski says

Let's start with, "...Oh, my god..." in a very, very good way. So good, I kissed its cover when I finally finished it. What - you've never done that?

Now, first of all, I'll admit that there are a good 100-150 pages that could really be lobbed off the top. That being said, you must understand that it is these 100-150 pages that could either pull you in further or annoy you incredibly. Fortunately, myself belonging to the former category, there is a payoff to getting to know these people so well. Trying to keep up with all the medical jargon really isn't necessary in order to understand the bigger picture. It's ok - and it can even further bring out the book's humor - to look up certain diseases or conditions, but there are far too many to worry so much about. You'll know when you get there.

Next issue is with the editor. Know that there are a LOT, a TON, an ORGY of grammatical errors, mis-attributed pronouns, punctuation mistakes, etc., especially towards the 2nd half. On the other hand, though, they don't really get in the way as much as you might think. As long as you're confident in your reading memory, you'll be fine.

Apart from having a great story, the writing is exquisitely beautiful and modernly eloquent. I don't mean that in a poetic way, but rather a very attractive style that infuses the blackest humor throughout the book with excruciating details. Details that stimulate a very specific inner sense that also affects the physical senses. It's difficult to describe, but easy to fall prey to. Let yourself.

Did I mention the "trick" to reading this? Without giving any spoilers, I'll say a word about the insignias that head each chapter. There are only four, and each of them correspond to a different part of the narrative. Pay attention to which symbol heads the chapter, and you'll better know what to expect from that section.

That's my rhyme. Take it to the streetz. Biatch.

Hashi says

Even though I have slightly less than zero recreational reading time these days, I borrowed this fat hardcover book from the library last week. I'm about 20 pages into it, and loving both the premise and the style. It'll probably take me months to get through it.

Hmm, I just read all the other reviews on this site, and wonder if I should have chosen such a deep and dense book to read in my snatched ten minutes here and there ... we'll see how it goes.

11-19: Well, it took me six weeks, but I finally finished this tome last night. I have to say I was disappointed with the ending. My main thought was ... "What was the point?" I'm sure the story is an allegory for something deep and meaningful but I frankly didn't get it. I kept reading, braving my annoyance and confusion with the many interludes by too many angels, because I wanted to find out how it would end, but I really didn't feel satisfied when I closed the book. Perhaps it was because I never read for more than fifteen minutes at a time ... maybe this just isn't a book for bedtime reading. Dunno ... but I can't say it was worth the effort.

Sarah says

A children's hospital is the only surviving structure after a great flood, and then all sorts of who knows what huh why oh why what a waste of my life happens. Ugh, even now, I think I would still read a book with this premise, because it sounds like it could be so great. That this book ruined this premise so thoroughly and in

so many distinct ways is a feat on par with a magic hospital with an angel in the basement and a replicator machine, that organically opens up new rooms while upon the sea, that is staffed by the least questioning, most inert group of medical professionals ever to have had, at some point in their life, enough initiative and passion to undergo tens of years of training focused on curiosity, drive, and, eventually, innovation, but have become, through time, trial, and indescribably, bafflingly poor writing and plotting full of holes, copouts, and inanity, framed by obscenely cloudy theology and medicine, and by what clearly has been the author's truly unenviable negative experience of humanity, both pointedly repulsive and mind-bogglingly uninteresting. And if you followed one-tenth of that, you just had an experience of greater clarity than I did reading the entirety of this book.

Lena Webb says

I hit the biggest brick wall ever while reading this novel. What could have been a wonderful piece of modern fiction was instead an overblown, poorly-presented, self-assured, long-winded and ultimately unsatisfying attempt at science fiction.

To be fair, parts of this novel were wonderful. These parts were all contained in a young gay cruise ship passenger's diary, where he documents his sexual exploits in code using Presidents' names.

But in the end, my housemate and I decided that we hated it as much as your typical Dave Eggers novel/fictional autobiography. She hated it one full star less than I do.

Kris says

This book was long and pointless. The characters were unpleasant and not compelling in the least. At the end I found myself saying "yes of course" and also "what was the point? What happens now?". One of the most irritating things in the book was the fact that many many things were written to seem to be of significance, except they ended up having no meaning at all. If this book were given a piece of string for every plot point or event that just ended in nothing, there would be a myriad of dangling ends and no loop at all.

Oriana says

This is one of the latest offerings from McSweeney's Rectangulars. It's gotten a lot of press from unexpected corners, even including Oprah's magazine. And it is all deserved--this book is sensational. The plot is dazzlingly original, the characters are compelling, and the voice is just fantastic. This is one of the best books I've read in a long time.

(update:)

I've just finished reading and crying both. What a stunning book. It is devastating without being angst, lofty and epic-ish without being overblown... High, high art, and serious beauty. When was the last time I cried while reading? I really can't remember. Please read this book. It's almost unbearably great.

Corey says

Oh Yeah, SPOILERS.

A fairly strange book, in the sense that I never knew exactly where it was taking me. Two hundred pages of hospital melodrama with hardcore medschool level diseases and afflictions start this one off, albeit there's quite a bit of "Angels" and whatnot thrown in, plus the world ends. However, this doesn't seem to faze the Hospital peoples, as they basically go on about their daily business of trying to keep the kids alive and whatnot, even though they have a machine that will make ANYTHING THEY WANT (except carbon based life forms). Seriously, if it's one thing I learned from this book, it's that Doctors are all whore faced bitches lacking imagination and are so regimented and tied down to their craft that they ignore the fact that THE WORLD HAS ENDED AND THEY ARE ON A MAGICAL FLOATING HOSPITAL IN THE MIDDLE OF AN ENDLESS OCEAN.

Jemma, the main character, doesn't have much of a personality other than being bossed around by everybody around her and dazing off into rather tame daydreams where she eventually, kind of, maybe, sort of, controls reality. Then she discovers she can heal people with green fire, so shit gets real. Everybody's saved, no more sickness, throw the beds out the window! So shit gets sunny for a couple hundred pages, all is good, let's start a government now that we've finally realized we're the last people left alive, and so on. But then a big dude gets pulled out of the drink, he has no memory, Jemma is pregnant (DINGDINGDING as if we haven't been beaten to death with the religious imagery already of Jemma being some Angel/Savior of the world). There's a bunch of subtext shit about Angels and brothers (Pickie, the hilariously out-of-touch-but-nobody-really-recognizes-it vampire boy, "I'm 136 years old,") that don't really tie into anything except that there are four Angels of the apocalypse (a preserver, recorder, etc.) and then when it all happens, everybody dies, land is discovered, the virgin miracle jesus baby is born to Jemma (who dies immediately afterwards), the kids wake up and flood the new world.

Not a bad read overall, just kind of tone deaf. Was it supposed to be nonsensical? No, and it really wasn't, but I just never "got" what was pseudo religious malarkey and what was supposed to be taken seriously.

Also, they say to write what you know, and the dude that wrote this spent time at Harvard's Divinity School and is a Pediatric Med Student, so well done bro.

Seriously though, who was Pickie? Why a vampire? And if he wasn't supposed to be a vampire, then why was he always drinking blood and complaining about "never being full" and so on. It's things like this that just left me confused. There are tons of hints and allusions that just never play out or get spelled out enough to where the reader can be certain that this was the author's intent. Is it supposed to be open ended, leaving us guessing the roles of all these not-quite-fleshed-out characters? I don't think so. I feel like he was trying to set up something grand and in the end, everything just turned into ash and fell apart, which is exactly what happens to all the adults at the end/beginning of the world.

Ok, and another thing, what was the deal with the serially sexually molested boy who was found on the abandoned cruise ship? He had every STD known to man, with the exception of "the big one" (I'm assuming AIDS) and was clutching a diary/fuck book that detailed all of his encounters with men and women on the boat in hilarious lack of detail where every sexual act is named after a former president, so it reads like "and then both of them gave me a Reagan and I did a Bush and then a Bush Jr. to them" and so on. But his role is never explicated either. The only connection to anything is that shortly after he arrives everybody starts getting the turning-to-as-sickness they call the Botch. Did he introduce it even though he's in a coma? Who knows. There's no evidence that he did, but no evidence that he didn't.

Plus, I had issues with the role of Calvin, Jemma's brother who also is the "recording angel" doomed to follow Jemma throughout her life (so he apparently relives their own childhood together). They have some

weird, almost-but-not-quite brother sister love going on, petering on the edge of incest but it never quite gets there. He makes her promise never to marry anybody (with allusions to marrying him instead) and they share a bed and spend all their time together and spend all their time together and she dreams about him, all which could be sort of innocuously sweet but just feels kinda dirty, so was that his intention? Who knows.

I guess I'll stop, since this review is already way too long, but I thought I would like this a lot more than I did. It wasn't awful, just unfulfilling at the end. After the first few pages, I thought I was going to like it, but then Jemma became such a wet blanket and there was too much back and forth and no initiative from the survivors and problems with tone that it all fell apart by the end, at least for me.

Nikki says

I was reading this for a book club -- I couldn't get it from the library or as an ebook, so I ended up buying it, and I was quite excited about the idea. But I really could not get into it: the length didn't deter me too much, but the utter lack of sympathetic characters or action in the first hundred pages or so was a turn off. So I confess to not having finished this, and not planning to.

I'm not the only one in the group who found it impossible, so I don't feel too bad about it. There are some awesome reviews of it, though, so... maybe someday.

ETA: Having read a group member's summary of the story, uh, no. I won't ever be trying to read it again. What the HELL.

Amanda says

Finally finished this epic on Sunday night. The sheer size of the book itself -- and the fact that it's a beautiful product and I didn't want to mess it up -- made it a bit difficult to lug around for subway reading. Anyway -- this story is phenomenal. I've never read a book like it, and I always appreciate originality, and not only is it original but it's beautifully written, the characters -- unlike this run-on sentence -- are extraordinarily well constructed (Pickie Beecher should go down as a new literary something-or-another, certainly never been anyone like him before that I've encountered), and even though the scope of the plot couldn't be much more sweeping (the end of this world and the start of the next... although more the limbo before the start of the next... interesting) it's still accessible.

Basically, this book is worth it. Some people might be put off by some of the angel stuff, but I wouldn't describe the book as overtly religious or evangelical. It's just one element of the story, which in the end makes it a much more hopeful apocalypse than that other (and also amazing) *The Road*.

I want other people to read this. You can borrow mine but like I said, the book itself is gorgeous so pony up and get the hardcover. One of the few times it's worth it. And my job is making books so I'm a good source for that.

I'm reading this -- which is about a hospital afloat on the waters of an apocalyptic flood -- tucked in bed while the Nor'easter pounds Brooklyn through the window over my shoulder... it's the perfect Sunday afternoon, but in a kind of too-perfect-a-bit-freaky way.

Anyway, back to it -- only a fraction in but so far completely and absolutely incredible. I took a break to look up the translation of the epigraph (Lettera gesta docet, quid credas allegoria; moralis quid agas, quo tendas anagogia).

Danny says

This book kept me up at night, NeverEnding story style, rain pounding the windows -- I was left paranoid and enchanted, wondering, hoping it would all come true. My wife would wake up to me shouting out the window into the deluge, "JEMMA!"

The ending left me bewildered and wanting more, but not in a bad way. It felt that it couldn't have ended any other way; it seems complete honest and personal, and I am left needing to know more about Chris Adrian. Did he have a brother that killed himself? Did he ever eat mushrooms while rounding? How is Calvin this Christ-like figure, what does his hatred have to do with it? Why Old Testament punishment and not New Testament forgiveness, do we deserve it? Do I secretly want it?

This novel seemed to be some sort of compulsive and necessary project for him...an enigmatic masterpiece steeped in psychedelic divinity and 24 hour shifts in the Intensive Care Unit.

Children's Hospital is incomparable to anything else I've ever read.

Adam says

"I have such violent dreams, and yet they are never nightmares. The nightmare is the one where I wake up fifty years from now, happily married, and see a picture by my bed of the family I have happily fathered, every face smiling, every heart black with the sin I put in it."

I read this book months ago and I'm still thinking about it, so I figured it deserved a bit more of a statement than just 5 stars. That quote above is, I think, a representative one from the book. If it resonates with you, then you'll probably love this book. If not, then maybe not.

This was a book about the apocalypse. While a subject like that can lead to lots of authors inserting their own personal or political issues into the plot as the reason for God's wrath, and thereby make the book into a sermon, that didn't happen at all here.

From reading other reviews, it appears that some people found parts of the book boring. I didn't. Even when the action had slowed down and the events were largely trivial interactions between characters, I felt that the driving mystery behind everything - the question of why God flooded the Earth again - was being explored through their treatment of each other as much as, or more than, when the more dramatic events of the plot were taking place.

I found this book to be haunting and moving. And it's rare that I think even the best books I read are anything more than just interesting.

Brian says

It's hard to know what to say here: I have a distinctly personal relationship with this novel. I want a copy issued to every American, but I don't think I want to talk to anyone else about it.

"Children's Hospital" mercilessly pokes holes in the shields we use to ignore what we do to each other and how little we think about it. Lazy optimism and contented abstractions crumbled.

But despite how this might sound, the experience of reading "Children's Hospital" is not at all like slogging through, say, Enlightenment philosophy. Adrian's ark is populated with a well-drawn (albeit familiar) cast of characters and the story is straightforward, even comic and page-turning at times. The structural evolution of the accusation (other novels have a theme) is perfectly executed--you don't see anything wrong until you realize everything is. It's the best indictment of myself I've ever *enjoyed* reading.

Kecia says

The only reason I picked this up, and the only reason I stuck it out for all 615 pages, was because I was captivated by the initial premise of the story -- people marooned in a children's hospital post-apocalypse -- and I wanted to see how it would resolve itself. Maybe it was because of my attachment to the premise that I found myself bogged down by the huge amount of (very well-written) detail about the characters' interior lives and the activities of a children's hospital. These things by themselves simply weren't that interesting: okay, Jemma and her life are pretty messed up, there are many varieties of sick kids to tend to, but...where the hell are they going?!

After a while (around page 200) I found myself wanting something apocalypse-related to actually happen, and thankfully it did about 40 pages later (no spoiler). Things of an apocalyptic nature actually do happen in the last third of the book but you have to wade through a LOT of (again, very well-written) prose to experience it; detours into the protagonists' childhood were annoying enough such that I ended up skimming/skipping through them. I saw the ending coming from about 150 pages away but I held hope that I might be surprised...I wasn't.

Great themes there are a-plenty, great writing too...but did it really have to be 615 pages long?

Aaron says

I don't even know what to say in this review.

The premise of this book alone is one of the singlemost interesting premises to emerge from American fiction in recent years. However, I don't think the premise alone is enough to maintain the momentum for six hundred plus pages. To support this claim, I will tell you that I tore through the first four hundred pages or so in a day or two; it took me almost two weeks to get through the last two hundred fifteen. It just wasn't engaging to me anymore. There's a nice shocking twist at about this point and from there the book devolves into tedium (several consecutive chapters devoted to the death of a different character, and since they all die the same way, it becomes the very definition of tedium) and outright silliness (bionic legs for one character! roller derbys!). And then the ending, which I just don't get. I'm sure there's some allegory to be deciphered

here, but I'm so tired of this book at this point that I just don't have the energy to decipher it. I'd rather move on to a different book.

I'm sure it sounds like I hated this book. And I didn't. Chris Adrian is a fantastic writer and every step of this journey is nicely described (though it seems that he begins to gloss over things more and more as the book winds to a close). My experience with this book doesn't stop me from wanting to read more of his work. And I've already mentioned that I tore through the first three fourths of the novel. There's a ton of good thought-provoking ideas in this story, but in the end, I don't really think I care very much.

Liz says

I have never been very good at describing books to people.

Mostly, I think, because the story has already been told in a way uniquely perfect to itself.

And how could I try to improve upon that?

So I will not describe this book to you, at least not in detail.

It is 615 pages long, so even the description would be rather lengthy.

But I will tell you to read it.

Because you should.

I don't even know if you will like it.

I have read some reviews of it that weren't too enthusiastic.

But I have also read some that were.

I am no good at critiquing what I read.

I read a book and fall into the story and when that happens I love it no matter what, so my opinions are useless.

So maybe you will hate it.

Maybe you won't even finish it.

But you should try it nonetheless.

It is the story of a modern-day Great Flood.

Instead of an ark, there is a children's hospital that floats atop seven miles of water, God's wrath laid out in H₂O.

Instead of a Noah, there is a Jemma, a medical student in her third year of residency at this children's hospital, who happens to be fucking her boyfriend in a linen closet when the flood strikes.

Instead of Noah's family, there are doctors and nurses and volunteers and aides and parents, all playing their own roles in the workings of the children's hospital.

Instead of animals, there are children, hundreds and hundreds of desperately ill children, all of them relying on the children's hospital to make them well again.

It is a wonderful story, well worth the patience it takes to read 615 pages. It is terrifying and wonderful, heart-warming and soul-crushing, impressive and amazing.

It is terribly beautiful and beautifully terrible.

It is awful, not in the bad way, but literally. It fills you with awe that such an ambitious story could be carried out so well.

It leaves you empty, and full, and completely unexplainable.

I am a nerd.

I don't know why I like it so much.

But I do.

Daniel Roy says

What a chore this book turned out to be. It started strong enough that I stuck with the first few hundred pages despite the lack of significant plot development, hoping something in the overall novel would redeem the whole. But by the time I got to page 400 or so, I realized I had been duped.

The premise of *The Children's Hospital* is pretty cool: it's a modern-day Noah's Ark story, but with a floating hospital, and rare diseases instead of animals. But unfortunately, and perhaps deliberately, Adrian chose not to live up to this idea in any significant way. You'd think it would be impossible to turn such an idea into a total bore, but that would be underestimating Adrian's talent for tedium.

Not that there are not some qualities to this book. For starters, the prose is good. There were moments when I enjoyed just reading the daily lives of the doctors as they focused on the hospital life despite the death of civilization outside the hospital walls. But page after page, my frustrations grew stronger and stronger.

For starters, there are simply no likable characters in the book. Jemma, the protagonist, turns out to be boring, self-centered and totally lacking in imagination, despite having lived a unique childhood, and having extraordinary powers and events thrust upon her as an adult. None of this cracks Jemma's shell of self-defeating doubt.

The same holds true of the rest of the cast. At times, the only notion that kept me sane was to repeat to myself that these characters were intended as satire. They certainly had no depth, and they make their way through the lack of plot with the resourcefulness of imbeciles.

The overall effect is of a literary novel that tries very hard to be self-important and clever, but just exhausts you with each page. If this novel had been trimmed down to a slim 150 pages, it might have made for a quirky, cryptic read; but as it stands, it's just a bloated, preachy, self-deluded mess.
