

# California Literary Review

**Book Review:** *The Night Circus* by Erin Morgenstern  
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## KINDRED SPIRITS

**By Mark Fitzgerald**

Magic is all around us, if only we'd pay attention more—if only we'd dream. Maybe then we'd sense its dark secret is really light, a bonfire of belief beyond understanding, but real. The kind of magic—or is it love?—that slays dragons and rescues princesses and lives happily ever after in the imagination of children.

The kind of enchantment that sometimes happens at the circus. And what if it came to town tonight? Arrived without warning under black and white striped tents? Called itself *Le Cirque des Rêves*?

*“No announcements precede it, no paper notices on downtown posts and billboards, no mentions or advertisements in local newspapers. It is simply there, when yesterday it was not.”*

This is where Erin Morgenstern's debut novel, *The Night Circus*, begins and also returns at the close. Black is at times difficult to discern from white, and what's not there is just as important as what is. Told in omniscient narration, the story covers nearly thirty years, from 1873 to 1902 in a variety of cities around the globe. London, Paris, Prague, Munich, New York, and other well-known places serve a tightly woven plot hinging on a cast of more than a dozen characters.

Yet this is mostly Celia Bowen's story. Most of the action and suspense gravitates towards her. At the age of five, through no choice of her own, she is locked into a challenge, which consumes most of the novel. For this, she can thank her father, Prospero the Enchanter, a celebrated magician who mistakenly confuses magic with immortality. Prospero makes a deal with Alexander, an old teacher who has some tricks of his own.

*“You would wager your own child?”* Alexander asks at the outset. *“She won't lose,”* replies Prospero. And so the game is set in motion. But what are the rules? And who is

Celia's opponent? These questions propel the narrative, and bit by bit we come to understand that winning may be worse than losing.

The venue of the contest, Le Cirque des Rêves (the circus of dreams), is rich territory for imagery and description and Morgenstern does a nice job at making the extraordinary feel so natural. The writing is deft and vibrant with little excess. Short but concise, the chapters are almost storyboards; you can easily imagine how this could come alive on the screen.

Morgenstern invites the reader to experience the circus through a host of second person vignettes, which are carefully placed throughout the narrative. Notice the layers in this description of the bonfire:

*“As you walk closer, you can see that it sits in a wide black iron cauldron, balanced on a number of clawed feet. Where the rim of a cauldron would be, it breaks into long strips of curling iron, as though it has been melted and pulled apart like taffy. The curling iron continues up until it curls back into itself, weaving in and out amongst the other curls, giving it the cage-like effect. The flames are visible in the gaps between and rising slightly above. They are obscured only at the bottom, so it is impossible to tell what is burning, if it is wood or coal or something else entirely. The flames are not yellow or orange, but white as snow as they dance.”*

Can magic be taught, or is it an elusive gift possessed by the few who are able to channel its energy? While Celia is trained by her father to harness her natural talents, Marco, her opponent, is taught by Alexander through ancient practices found in books. Both are connected to the circus, and, yes, before long love takes hold and challenges the deal that binds the players to see the game through.

And so we have Juliet and so we have Romeo. And there are outside forces—namely Prospero and Alexander—that disapprove of their relationship. But is this really a love story?

*“Come away with me,” Marco says. “Anywhere. Away from the circus, away from Alexander and your father.”*

*“We can't,” Celia says.*

*“Of course we can,” Marco insists. “You and I together, we could do anything.”*

*“No,” Celia says. “We can only do anything here.”*

Here, as in the circus. Here, as in the venue for a game they were forced to play as children and eventually struggle to escape. Tent after tent, they show that collaboration is a stronger kind of magic. Choice and the lack of choice are emphasized through the anxieties and constraints of several characters.

Bailey (the name is loaded and a bit too easy) must choose between taking care of the farm and going to Harvard. But he loves the circus. And the circus needs him. His future is read in tarot cards, and he knows something big is expected of him. The weight of this horizon is conveyed through his interactions with his circus friends, Poppet and Widget, and the psychology of the rural landscape that surrounds him in Concord. He must decide, and the pressure of making such a commitment adds to the suspense and resolution in the final pages.

Chandresh Christophe Lefèvre, who throws lavish midnight dinners at his residence in London, is the proprietor of the circus. He has grand plans, but is manipulated into forgetfulness and consuming large quantities of brandy. Given the powers that play over him, he too has little choice.

It's tempting to say that this is another plot-driven novel with plenty of smoke and mirrors but little social virtue; secrets are concealed, pressures mount, people are killed. Upon closer look, however, there are philosophical complexities that blur the lines of black and white. Surprisingly, it is Alexander, the man in grey, who reminds us of the importance of these kinds of stories:

*“Someone needs to tell their bits of overlapping narrative. There’s magic in that. It’s in the listener, and for each and every ear it will be different, and it will affect them in ways they can never predict. From the mundane to the profound. You may tell a tale that takes up residence in someone’s soul, becomes their blood and self and purpose. That tale will move them and drive them and who knows what they might do because of it, because of your words.”*

From the very first pages, this is a book that hooks you and is hard to put down. The dialogue is sharp, and sentence to sentence little is superfluous or predictable. Perhaps what's most remarkable is not so much the story—it's essentially a heroic tale—as the rendering of evocative and mysterious worlds that accrue and converge at a literal and figurative center. The circus is a magnet, and the players and spectators come to depend on its charm. There are even rêveurs, or dreamers, like Herr Friedrich Thiessen (a German clockmaker), who follow the circus from place to place:

*“They seek each other out, these people of such specific like mind. They tell of how they found the circus, how those first few steps were like magic. Like stepping into a fairy tale under a curtain of stars. They pontificate upon the fullness of the*

*popcorn, the sweetness of the chocolate.... They sit over their drinks smiling like children and they relish being surrounded by kindred spirits, if only for an evening.”*

I think this is what Morgenstern may have wanted most to say—that true magic must come from the inside, in trusting in our powers to heal ourselves. In seeking out others who can appreciate the dark as much as the light. As Celia and Marco illuminate, looking in is also a way of looking out. In this way true magic, for those who know its ways, is not magic at all—it’s real. What happens after we enter through the iron gates is up to us, even if the card we pick suggests otherwise. Even if everything requires energy. And what do waking dreams require? It’s why we wind our watches, Prospero tells us. Because we must put effort and energy into anything we wish to change. It’s why the show must go on.

*This review is available online at:*

<http://calitreview.com/22728/book-review-the-night-circus-by-erin-morgenstern/>