

b o o k
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A touch too soft

Lives of the Circus Animals

- Christopher Bram
- William Morrow
- \$24.95

Novels about the theater are usually written with poison pens. They brim with malice or at least delicious glee in satirizing a tiny, insular world that's melodramatic and over-the-top. But in Christopher Bram's too-gentle new novel, frustrated playwrights, cutting critics, and self-absorbed actors inspire only empathy and good-natured ribbing from the author of *Father of Frankenstein*—the novel on gay director James Whale that became the Oscar-winning film *Gods and Monsters*.

Caleb Doyle is a miserable writer whose new play has bombed; he unwittingly shares a therapist with Kenneth Prager, the second-string critic for *The New York Times* who ripped his play to shreds but likes the new musical *Tom & Gerry* (a spin on the Preston Sturges classic *The Palm Beach Story*), which stars out British actor Henry Lewse, who is smitten with Doyle's recently dumped boyfriend, Toby, and has Doyle's sister, Jessie, for an assistant.

None of this is terribly mad-cap or piercing, and at the predictable finale—a birthday party for Doyle—Bram follows too closely the edict that if a gun is introduced in the first act, it must go off in the third.

—Michael Giltz

