

## Rice's "Light" Dim

BY ELIZABETH A. ALLEN

**F**ull disclosure: I am the same age (26) as Christopher Rice, whose latest thriller, *Light Before Day* debuts this month. I'm also a queer writer with a desire for...well, at least modest success. As a peer of Rice's with similar goals, I envy his achievement. His work also frustrates me, but not only because I wish those were my books on the best-seller rack. Simply put, *Light Before Day* pisses me off because of its poor execution on so many levels.

I wanted to like the book; it's promising, crammed with crack-erjack premises. Third-rate journalist Adam Murphy struggles through break-up blues, alcoholism and occupational fruitlessness in ritzy

**Light Before Day**  
By Christopher Rice  
Miramax Books  
March, 2005  
Hardcover, 320 pp.

Murphy. A black-out drunk and lowly copy writer for a gay lifestyle rag, Adam may not be very appealing at first glance, but he wins my sympathy because he's trying. He tries to stay sober; he tries to become a serious journalist; he tries to get a good lay. Maybe he's a loser, but he's fighting to make himself better, and that I can identify with.

Alas, poor Adam competes for the reader's attention with all the meth, parties, kidnapping and crime that form the bulk of

guidance? I'd like to think so, but I doubt it. Adam does his own detective work quite swimmingly for the second part of the novel, interrupted periodically by realizations that he "needs Jimmy." Jimmy then appears in scenes that add nothing to the story. The mystery writer isn't a foil for Adam's independence. He's just a half-baked idea, eventually abandoned by both Adam and Rice since Rice has no particular trajectory planned for him. (I personally kept waiting for Jimmy to have an affair with Adam, which would twist their investigation and give more insight into both characters, but I guess I was thinking about the characters more than Rice was.)

As in the characterization of Jimmy, the whole novel's thematic balance, pacing, and plot deteriorate quickly, especially since Rice's writing never rises above mediocre. He lacks the voice necessary to sustain a reader's interest; the omniscient, third-person bits come across in the same flat, passionless tone as Adam's first-person narration. Rice shuffles between his multiple subjects as mechanically as a disc changer. Then, when the meth, murder, and porn all turn out to be part of the same nasty operation, Rice doesn't seem to be detailing a mystery so much as throwing up his hands: "It was all just a big conspiracy! Yeah, that'll explain everything!" The would-be exposé collapses, thanks to shoddy workmanship.

Speaking of exposés, I would like to point out how Chris Rice's marketers borrow the glow of his mother's name to distract you from his lack of skill. (Notice how prominent RICE is on the cover, compared to the smaller size and lighter font of the author's first name?) Read books by Anne instead. That's really what you're looking for anyway, isn't it: -a sensual and reasonably well-crafted tale about interesting characters written by someone named Rice. If you must read Chris, wait ten years... or at least until he gets a more ruthless editor. ▼

*Elizabeth A. Allen enjoys well-written novels at home in Boston.*

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North Hollywood. When he gets on the trail of three missing circuit-party boys, Adam thinks he may have his big break. Hearing of Adam's investigation, famous mystery author Jimmy Lawton hires Adam as his assistant. The pair's amateur sleuthing leads them into a morass of extortion, kiddie porn, home-cooked crystal meth and murder. With all these ingredients, you have the makings of a NoHo lifestyle exposé, a recovery novel, a gritty crime drama, perhaps even an exploration into the creative mind of a writer. You've got to admire Rice's ambition in taking it all on.

Rice also creates a likable and accessible protagonist in Adam

*Light Before Day*. Herein lies the problem. Rice's thriller contains many good ideas, but can't follow through on any. For just one example, the Adam/Jimmy relationship, like so many other things, starts off strong. In the first half, Jimmy openly manipulates Adam, thinking that Adam can help him with material for his next true-crime novel. Smart and opportunistic, Jimmy acts as a mentor and a negative role model for Adam.

After this auspicious beginning, Jimmy falls away when Adam goes deeper into the investigation. Is Rice trying to show Adam's maturation into a person who doesn't need Jimmy's dubious

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