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English - Bensel

The Andromeda Strain

The Andromeda Strain by Michael Crichton is a science fiction book about the fictional 'first crisis' in the biological field. The book starts out by pointing out that technology is growing so rapidly, there is bound to be crises, like Three Mile Island and Chernobyl, and how the biological field of science has never had a major crisis. He also points out that biology is the youngest of all the fields, and a crisis has been long overdue.

It begins with what is known as Project Scoop, a scientific mission to find life in the extreme outer limits of the atmosphere. Many satellites are put into orbit, and most are lost or come back with nothing. Then, with the seventh satellite, they get something. There is just one problem. The satellite lands in a very small town in northeast Arizona called Piedmont. Tracking crews are sent out to find the satellite and find it, and head into the town, but they find most of the inhabitants of Piedmont lying dead, clutching their chest, in the middle of the main street. When they get out of the vehicle to investigate, they die too, while being monitored by radio.

The person in charge is back at base, listening to them. When, after the two find all the dead bodies in the town, everything goes silent, he knows something has gone very wrong, and calls in the problem. The systems that have been set up to take over in the event that something that like this happened start to take over, and certain people are contacted. Years before, a group of biologists proposed to the President that, in case of a unknown biological agent getting out into the country, an underground secret base should be set up to study the organism, and possibly try to find a cure. It would be five levels, each successive level more sterile than the other, from level 1 being non-sterile, to level 5 being as sterile as possible. The base also would have an automatic nuclear device placed at the bottom of it to prevent the spread of the organism if it were to break the seals of any of the levels, and several stations to abort the detonation if it was not necessary. Now, the head of this group of biologists and the team of doctors and other biologists are called into action to turn this base into a disease control center.

After the team has been assembled, two of the members are inserted into the town to find the satellite and any info on the way this mysterious disease is killing people. They go through the town, noting that the blood had clotted solid in the arteries and veins of the victims, that death is mostly instantaneous, and that some victims live long enough to kill themselves in bizarre ways. A child is found with his mouth full of modeling glue, while an older man is found in full battle dress with a gaping, bloodless hole through his head. They find the satellite in the town doctor's office, with a pair of pliers and a screwdriver that were used to open it. Then, an old man and a toddler are found that are still very much alive. They are put in the waiting helicopter and leave directly for the base, and the town is set up for a thermonuclear detonation.

In the base, they submit the satellite to many tests, trying to find any traces of what might be the culprit. When they find it, they see that it's like nothing they've ever seen before. It was a crystal like structure, that used no proteins or amino acids, just really basic elements: hydrogen, oxygen, and nitrogen. It seemed to directly convert energy to matter, and was hurt by carbon dioxide. It killed by attacking the walls of small capillaries, which caused the widespread clotting. Most capillaries are found in the brain, so people that weren't affected as fast as the others went insane because of the

blood pooling in their head. Meanwhile, the president had decided not to bomb the area of the first contact, Piedmont, because of repercussions it would have with the treaties and such that were signed against nuclear testing. This was a good thing, because the new life forms thrived on energy, and the two million degree blast of a hydrogen bomb would be the perfect environment for the creatures.

It was about this time when the life forms mutated. Before, in a training accident, a jet pilot flew over the restricted area of Piedmont. He and his plane crashed in the desert, and were taken to the base also, for the pilot had reported very strange things before he went down. He said that the rubber hose and other things had just disintegrated before his eyes. The scientists in the base dismissed this as the insanity that affected some victims of the disease, but the organism had actually eaten the rubber. This led to another problem. The seals in the base were made out of the same high tech polymer, and as soon as the organism reached the seals in one compartment, they ripped through the bottom level of the base, engaging the self-destruct mechanism in the base.

When the team was first selected, the scientists wanted control of the nuclear device. This was never done, putting atomic weapons in control of civilians. When the team presented a study done by a university, one on reasoning capabilities, the President agreed. The study showed that, when faced with life and death choices, scientific men made the best choices. Of that, single men made the best choices. So the surgeon of the team was chosen to be the 'Odd Man', the man with the key to shut down the self-destruct sequence.

Since the scientists knew that the disease was almost instantaneous, and that nobody was dying, they had to shut down the nuclear bomb. Unfortunately, Dr. Hall, the surgeon, was trapped in a sealed off room where a shut down station for his key had not been installed, in a major design flaw. It was decided that the central core, a cylinder with all the wires, plumbing, lifts, and pipes needed, was the only way out. Luckily, the organism by now had turned all seals in the base to a mud-like crust, so getting to the central core was easy. The thing was, though, that the core was bristling with tranquilizer darts. It would take three well placed shots to bring a man like Dr. Hall down. So he went, and as he was climbing, he got his three, and then some. Enough to where he had to drag himself fifty feet to the nearest station and shut it down. The organism, now inert, drifted west, over Los Angeles. It was going toward more direct energy supplies, away from the carbon dioxide rich lower atmosphere.

