

A Review of the novel NEXT

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Issues:

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Editor's Note: This review originally appeared at [MercatorNet](#), an innovative internet magazine analyzing current affairs and key international news and trends that touch its readers' daily lives.

Michael Crichton's latest novel, *NEXT*, like most of his previous novels, is based on rigorous research of a specific technical topic—in this case genetic science. Unlike his previous novels, the plot of *NEXT* does not center on a single protagonist. Instead, like the movies *Crash*, *Syriana*, and *Babel*, *NEXT* tells a number of stories, some of which intersect and all of which revolve around or relate to some aspect of genetic science.

Rick Diehl owns a biotech company financed by his soon to be ex-wife and the ultra-wealthy Jack Watson. In order to obtain custody of their children, Diehl insists to his divorce attorney that genetic testing will reveal that Mrs. Diehl has a propensity for genetic disease and that she would therefore be an unfit mother.

Watson wants to take over the company, but he needs to get Diehl out of the way. Watson enlists, among others, his never do well nephew, a security guard at Diehl's company, to sabotage the company's exclusive cell line cultures. And one of the researchers at Diehl's company is conducting illegal genetic testing on family and friends.

Meanwhile a hospital pathologist is stealing bones from cadavers and selling them for transplantation. Bounty hunters who want to retrieve specialized cells pursue a family. A researcher with ties to the religious right works to subvert the views of most in the conservative religious community regarding genetic research.

There is also a transgenic bird that talks, performs mathematical calculations, and has a sense of self; an orangutan in Sumatra that curses in several languages; and a talking transgenic ape that, with a haircut, passes for a second grader, but who is prone to flinging poo during playground altercations.

These and other stories work to set up a judicial ruling in chapter 89, which Crichton ultimately uses to convey five specific points about genetics. His primary point is that we should stop allowing the patenting of genes. Other conclusions Crichton draws include: we need guidelines on the use of human tissues, data related to gene therapy trials should be made public, research bans should be avoided, and the Bayh-Dole Act should be rescinded.

While there is much agreeable here, I take specific issue with his assertion that research bans should be avoided. The main justification he gives is that bans rarely work, and even if one country succeeds in a ban, the activity can simply move to another country. He then asks, "so what have you accomplished?"

A ban clearly states that the citizens of a particular country do not approve of a particular activity, and that we want no part in it. Many activities occur in spite of legal prohibitions, but this does not mean that we simply ignore or regulate (i.e., license) the activity—more likely the proposal when it comes to science. Insider trading, for example, may occur whether it is banned or not, but our society does not simply look the other way or set up a system that licenses insider trading. No, as a society we recognize the harms of insider trading and reject it. If other countries do not, so be it. But that is not justification for overturning our own ban.

I'll also add that those who oppose insider trading are not anti-business or anti-capitalism. Rather, recognizing the threats that insider trading poses, they are trying to protect the free-market economy. In the same way, those who oppose scientific abuses and abuses of science are not anti-science.

A device familiar to Crichton's readers is his use of false documents such as press releases and news clippings within the text. One such document in *NEXT* is a report of a speech on stem cell research from the Beaumont College Alumni News, which includes the following claim:

Science is as corruptible a human activity as any other. Its practitioners aren't saints, they're human beings, and they do what human beings do?lie, cheat, steal from one another, sue, hide data, fake data, overstate their own importance, and denigrate opposing views unfairly. That's human nature. It isn't going to change.

While this serves to introduce the problem of evil, the novel never explicitly returns to this theme. However, the book's characters are almost without exception extremely depraved individuals.

How do we account for this evil? Is it fundamentally a genetic problem? Are we in the process of evolving out of it? Is it an internal hurdle to be overcome through education, opportunity, and scientific advancement? Is there any external component? Do we truly have free will or is everything simply determined by either our genetic make-up or some combination of nature and nurture? These questions are never dealt with; readers are left simply to wonder.

In the end, I find it difficult to recommend this book without a word of caution about its graphic descriptions of human depravity, which in a few places are completely obscene. Evil of stunning depth?obscene evil?does exist in this world. And evil, in all its forms should shock us. However, I found the level of description in *NEXT* to be a thing of ugliness, and I felt sullied by it.¹

Like Crichton's last novel, *State of Fear*, the materials that follow the conclusion of the story may well be the best part of *NEXT*. The Author's Note gives a good overview of Crichton's position on genetic science, and the annotated bibliography is a helpful resource for those wanting to explore the topic on their own. I'm not certain, though, that these resources justify the costs of the book.

Reference

¹ Scriptwriter Barbara Nicolosi gives a brief but helpful treatment of obscenity in a review of the movie *Little Children* on her blog, Church of the Masses (<http://churchofthemasses.blogspot.com/2006/10/little-children-incredible-thoughtful.html>).

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