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## Books

### The Demon in the Freezer by Richard Preston

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Vile villains brace yourself for an unsparing look at the horrors of anthrax, smallpox

Sunday, November 24, 2002

By Chip Walter

In his best-selling 1994 book, "The Hot Zone," Richard Preston opened with a horrifying description of the havoc that the Ebola virus wreaks on its victim. It was a riveting dramatic technique that essentially sets the disease up as a villain.

Preston's chillingly precise description of a man literally unraveled by one of the most potent viruses known to mankind made it impossible to put the book down. You never knew when the villain would strike again.

**The Demon in the Freezer**

**By Richard Preston**

**Random House (\$24.95)**

In his latest book, Preston uses the same technique, except this time he opens with the death of Robert Stevens, one of the victims of a series of anthrax poisonings that terrorized the nation in the wake of the Sept. 11 attacks.

He then quickly follows with the even more unsettling story of Peter Los (a fictitious name for a real person) and an outbreak of smallpox in the small town of Meschede, Germany, in 1970.

Though not as terrifying as the first chapter of "The Hot Zone," Preston's vivid introductions to these killers nevertheless get your attention and roll nicely into a dramatic history of the race to eradicate smallpox from the planet.

The rest of the book goes on to tell a series of cautionary tales about how smallpox, and scourges like anthrax, hang over us today like so many swords of Damocles, biological bombs designed in the crucible of evolution that could detonate at any moment if we aren't careful.

Preston's story draws from the real-life experiences of embattled scientists, victims, military experts and pinstriped government officials, all key characters that he brings to life with the emotional fidelity of a good novel.

He takes you from biological warfare facilities in Siberia to the streets of India to the White House; he escorts you on hair-raising journeys into the viral and cellular machinery of diseases that have once, and could again, wipe out millions of us; and he covers historical ground from the Cold War to the post 9/11 mayhem that gripped the nation last fall, when Washington's rattled leaders and a battalion of scientists grappled with the anthrax scare.

Preston has a knack for storytelling. He elaborates his tales with the urgency of a camp counselor whispering an urban legend around the campfire.

His style is crisp and tight. One of his great talents is his ability to weave immense amounts of painstaking research into his writing. Sometimes, the detail is too much and bogs down his normally rapid-fire storytelling, but mostly it adds a heightened, dramatic dimension that is, unfortunately, almost always lacking in science journalism.

He provides a kind of high-definition version of events as he describes the ravages of the diseases, the people who track and battle them and the microbial, scientific and political worlds in which the whole drama unfolds.

The killers he chooses -- anthrax and smallpox -- are worthy villains. The first is a bacterial infection still vivid in our memories as the form of death that was delivered like guided stealth missiles to its victims in innocent looking No. 10 envelopes last year.

The other, smallpox, the most deadly disease we have ever faced, is a virus most of us have forgotten since its effective eradication from the planet in 1975.

At its best, his new book has the primal appeal of a thriller. Humans investigate and track smallpox and anthrax as though they are alien serial killers who do their work invisibly and with terrible cunning.

You nearly always want to turn the next page. At its worst, the book sometimes feels disjointed, as if Preston is trying to weave several excellent but separate short stories into the whole cloth of a novel.

The end result is that his new one doesn't have the same seamless momentum as "The Hot Zone," an admittedly tough book to top. You get the feeling that Preston had nearly finished a book on the dangers of rogue terrorists getting their hands on wayward strains of smallpox when the terrorists struck.

Those events, together with the mailings of killer doses of anthrax that quickly followed, certainly would have injected urgency into any book

on the dangers of smallpox in terrorist hands.

But the two stories never quite flow as naturally as you might want. In the end, you have the nagging sense that the whole narrative doesn't entirely hang together, although each of the parts is fascinating.

But this is nitpicking. Overall, the book is an excellent read that puts a human and dramatic face on the little-known story of demon diseases we're confident we have conquered, but, in reality, still lurk in laboratories around the world, often "weaponized" to make them even more deadly.

*Chip Walter is co-author with William Shatner of "I'm Working on That," a book that explores how technologies envisioned in "Star Trek" are becoming realities. He lives in Blackridge.*

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