The Andromeda Strain

How do you stop something that's totally alien--and savagely lethal?

By Michael Crichton
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Review by Mark Wilson

In *The Andromeda Strain*, scientific evidence has begun to suggest that it's not only possible but quite likely that new and strange organisms await us in space. The American military has, characteristically, co-opted this information--and the related technology--for its own ends, developing two secret, and originally unrelated, programs. One, Project Scoop, was set up to carefully harvest new and deadly pathogens from space for future use in the Cold War. The other, Project Wildfire, was charged with figuring out how to deal with alien organisms should they happen to make it to Earth. The two projects collide when a mysterious space capsule recovered by the puzzled inhabitants of tiny Piedmont, Ariz., (population: 48) turns out to be the latest Scoop satellite--newly returned from a disastrously successful mission. Only two of the locals, a crying baby and a crotchety old man, escape the wave of sudden and bizarre deaths that follows.

The events at Piedmont activate Project Wildfire, throwing together a team of four brilliant and idiosyncratic scientists. The team descends into a laboratory bunker that's been painstakingly designed to allow a rigorous, wide-ranging and cutting-edge study of lethal organisms in total isolation. Unfortunately, a simple but important imperfection in this splendid bunker mirrors the fallibility of the scientists working in it.

This is a story not of machines and computers, but of men who must deal with a heart-stopping crisis. Told in retrospect, as if the events described were a matter of record, *The Andromeda Strain* cagily discloses the scientists' mistakes as well as their breakthroughs. As the pressure builds and the clock ticks down, readers are left in anxious suspense over how these remarkable men at the end of their rope will prevent total catastrophe.

**Mixing suspense and science fiction**

Michael Crichton's *The Andromeda Strain* is a science fiction landmark. On its surface, it's the prototype of the techno-thriller, the forerunner not only of Richard Preston's *The
Hot Zone but also of Tom Clancy and Dean Koontz. It's also, at its core, one of the purest specimens of science fiction on bookshelves today. This book explores not imagined worlds in far-off galaxies, but where science leads humanity, and where humanity leads science.

Crichton crafts a story that's unhurried but immediate, carefully researched but with an everyday plausibility that strikes close to home. There's nothing extraneous: even where he seems to dally for a moment, he's surreptitiously building the story around readers brick by brick, shunting them deeper into the tale. His cleanness and clearness in exposing the raw humanity of his characters pays off in a climax that feels like a shot of adrenaline.

Crichton's effort to explain technologies that were new or theoretical in 1969 ought to make the narration feel quaint and dated. Instead, these explanations are written in such a way that the advanced capabilities of the Wildfire laboratory are placed in context, allowing readers to react to each innovation with contemporary eyes. This is the key to making a techno-thriller, which might have fallen flat over time (once things like computer time-sharing were old news), into an engrossing time capsule not only of technologies but of attitudes and expectations. (The complete absence of substantive female characters, while troubling, may be viewed in this context as well: The scientific establishment's boy's-club mentality was still a potent force in 1969.)

Compared with the turgid, commercial works of today, The Andromeda Strain stands out as a singular achievement both for science fiction and for Crichton himself.

MOVIE PLOT

ANDROMEDA STRAIN begins with a brief scrolling prologue, informing us that what we are about to see is a "true story," of a recent event in U.S. history, one which was never made public. The narrative unfolds over four days, "documenting" the course of a viral threat apparently from outer space. The story is divided into three neat acts: arrival, research, and race for the cure. Date and time are periodically flashed on-screen, adding to the film's documentary feel.

Act I
A U.S. space satellite crashes in a desert town, and the officials sent to retrieve it discover that the town's inhabitants have been killed, simultaneously with the satellite's fall. These unfortunate officials die as they radio this alarming find, and the U.S. military personnel involved soon issue a red alert. The satellite was part of Wildfire, a classified government space-exploration project. Four scientists, previously assembled to analyze the satellite's data, are immediately summoned to Wildfire's top-secret desert headquarters.

Act II
Upon the arrival of Drs. Jeremy Stone, Charles Dutton, Mark Hall, and Ruth Leavitt, ANDROMEDA STRAIN embarks on the film's lengthy middle section. It is part
exposition, part showcase for the set by Boris Leven and William H. Tuntke, as the team of four are introduced to the Wildfire facilities: five ring-shaped levels that descend into the ground. As one progresses further down, security measures tighten.

We follow the scientists through their isolated debriefings and skin/clothing cleanings, in the course of which their characters are (somewhat) developed, as individuals and as a group. There is Dr. Stone (Arthur Hill), the family man; Dr. Dutton (David Wayne), a venerable, if conservative, veteran; Dr. Leavitt (Kate Reid) is sharp as a tack with a pack a day cigarette habit; and Dr. Hall (James Olson), a good looking young guy and something of a live wire.

The intimate physical examinations to which all four are subjected include repeated MRI-like body scans; automatic showers and powderings; question and answer sessions with a frustratingly cool computer-generated female voice over the PA system. The disembodied presence of a higher power, the Wizard of Oz, is more than slightly menacing, especially as Leavitt and Hall test the limits of their controlled environment. As they soon find out, you cannot "sneak" a cigarette past level one, nor can you avoid answering any prying questions.

The film (and Michael Crichton, in his later works) goes on to explore this theme more fully: science's claim to objectivity, belied by its actual manipulations, often with grave, or fatal, human consequences.

At last (the descent into purity lasts approximately 45 minutes), Wise steers the film back to the task at hand: to isolate and identify whatever viruses the satellite brought back. There were two survivors at the crash down site: an old alcoholic man, whose preferred drink is Sterno, and a months-old baby, crying his eyes out. So the doctors have two living subjects, as well as the satellite fragments to study.

Because no one knows how the virus is transmitted, much less an antidote, Wildfire is not only quarantined, but equipped with a nuclear bomb to detonate on premises and thus destroy the virus, if something should go horribly wrong. At each level of the lab, are locking devices to initiate the self-destruction. Only one person may have the key to abort the explosion, and Dr. Hall is chosen; in part, Dr. Dutton explains, because he is a single man. The microscopic research that ensues is another good opportunity for gizmo display (courtesy of Special Effects team, James Shourt and Douglas Trumbull, and set decorator Ruby R. Levitt). The total coverage, telescoping white lab suits and bubble head gear (by Costume Designer Helen Colvig), perhaps inspired by actual scientific garb, was no doubt an inspiration for the laboratory scenes in OUTBREAK and E.T.

For ANDROMEDA STRAIN, an unusually subtle suspense/disaster film, costuming like this is crucial to the story-telling, emphasizing the constant and imminent danger the Wildfire team is in. Petri dish samples are divided and magnified up to 100,000 times, until a microorganism is finally found. Looking like bread mold, clinging to a crevice of the satellite, is the virus: pulsing like a heartbeat and self-reproducing. Wildfire names it: The Andromeda Strain.
Act III
The Andromeda Strain kills its animal victims (humans and lab testees alike) by turning their blood to powder within seconds of contact. Farfetched, perhaps, but sufficiently horrifying that if Wildfire cannot produce a fail-safe cure or quarantine -- for an air-borne virus, not likely -- those nuclear bombs may detonate.

The film now focuses on the alcoholic and the baby; what shared conditions have rendered them both immune to the Strain? The scientists' eventual discovery plays out like a Holmes mystery, the conclusion is so simple it was not even considered. I won't reveal it here. And after Drs. Stone, Dutton, Hall, and Leavitt solve their mystery, they have an even more serious obstacle to overcome.

Although Wildfire is presented as rivaling NASA's space program in size and cost and pains-taking care, it (like all real-life government operations) is not totally fool-proof. The nuclear detonator is automatically activated, due to a false contamination signal, and will go off in five minutes.

These five minutes, filmed in real time (taking an actual five minutes to watch), bring THE ANDROMEDA STRAIN to a pulsing conclusion. Dr. Hall's race to override the detonation system is a truly suspenseful, nightmarish sequence. Chemical gases are emitted into the Wildfire atmosphere, to tranquilize the unfortunate prisoners, each level is sequentially sealed off, as crucial seconds tick away. The chaos and emotion mount exponentially, in the face of so much preceding order and methodical behavior.