

Murder in the Lab

Leonid Heifets

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This fiction debut probes the dark side of human nature in the competitive field of biological science.

Leonid Heifets creates a sordid scenario in which the suspicious deaths of two important people propel a high-stakes investigation. *Murder in the Lab* features an overwhelming cast of characters—twenty-one to be precise, based on the opening list. Primarily scientists and FBI agents, the sheer number of characters dilutes the impact of a drama that, while packed tightly into a novella, could have filled the pages of a five-hundred-page novel.

The mystery opens near a facility in Montana and revolves around laboratory employees researching potentially lifesaving genetics in an aggressive, jealousy-ridden environment. This situation makes US government officials nervous due to the dangerous manipulation that could occur behind the scenes, including the risk of espionage and malicious use of the technology.

Advanced genetics—constructive or destructive—sets the stage for a time-is-of-the-essence pursuit of answers. Though fueled by stakes imperative enough to warrant the attention of the most knowledgeable professionals, the story comes to repeated halts, lecturing rather than storytelling. Genuinely fascinating, yet superfluous, prolonged diversions into textbook-style narrative give this work a nonfiction delivery in places.

In this dialogue excerpt, what should be a simple explanation about tuberculosis takes on a documentary tone. “You do have a reasonable perception that TB is a curable disease. There are at least twelve drugs that have been developed to treat this disease, but only some of these drugs are available in countries with the highest incidences of TB, such as India, China, and African countries. In addition to this, the greatest problem of today is the improper use of the limited number of drugs.”

Occasional off-the-mark speeches mar the mounting intrigue, supplying trivial information that appears unnecessary to advance the murder mystery. Often lapsing into long monologues, the underdeveloped characters plummet into extensive evaluations of a topic, a dry approach that is better suited to a medical text. In a working lab, conversations would not likely take this tone, which detracts from believability. The characters remain less fleshed out than ideal, without sufficient personality traits to make them human. In a short format that demands limitation, an overabundance of players in a lethal situation turns them into prop-like devices as opposed to people.

An eye-catching cover depicting a distant facility set against a mountainous landscape, along with a somewhat awkward blurb that opens far too many avenues for such a brief story, may trigger the expectation for a more involved, lengthy novel. Like attempting to insert large items into a small box, the subject matter does not fit the format.

Heifets is an experienced physician, epidemiologist, and microbiologist, as well as a globally recognized authority on tuberculosis—expertise that has clearly provided the material for this book. He has published extensively on scientific and medical topics. *Murder in the Lab* is his fiction debut.

Although the ability to convey complicated material in a comprehensible manner is an admirable accomplishment, this

technique veers too far from the purpose of the plot, since entertainment, not education, is presumably the essential goal. This informative novella will appeal to those with a passionate interest in genetics.

JULIA ANN CHARPENTIER (April 14, 2014)

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