

Specific Gravity

J. Matthew Neal

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Historically physicians as authors have contributed greatly to literature. W. Somerset Maugham attended medical school and gave up a promising career to become a grand master playwright novelist essayist critic short story writer anthologist and travel writer. Family practitioner William Carlos Williams wrote poems on prescription pads and revolutionized and revitalized poetry. Robin Cook M.D. almost single-handedly created the medical thriller with his many novels like *Coma Brain* and *Fever*. Michael Crichton wrote thrillers throughout med school and later established himself as a man of letters his work continuously appearing on the best sellers list with novels like the *Terminal Man* *Andromeda Strain* *Jurassic Park* and the most recent *Next*. Dr. J Matthew Neal endocrinologist is no slouch following in the footsteps of these pioneers. His first novel *Specific Gravity* deserves to be held within the cannon of Cook's and Crichton's best.

Specific Gravity begins when John Markham CEO of Clystarr a billion dollar pharmaceutical company dies from a cancer that with the proper treatment statistically should not be terminal. Enter Dr. Alexander Darkkin an arrogant but brilliant oncologist and software magnate whose intellect is matched only by his vices. Darkkin is disturbed by the final report of Markham's death and uncovers inconsistencies that may indicate some kind of cover up. Neal writes "He checked his calculations a dozen times before he lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply. He thought he'd thrown them away but was glad he found half a pack. What the hell had he *found*? Markham's CT images appeared to be forgeries."

Darkkin seeks the aid of Bonnie Mendoza genius police scientist escape artist and finely honed athlete. Mendoza wears cochlear implants to compensate for being hearing impaired. Her intensity of concentration and uncanny synesthete senses are more than a match for the average human being. To Mendoza people have an unmistakable trace odors and colors. Numbers have colors and tones. Neal writes "The smells were interesting today. The old woman who passed by had the faint but distinct odor of octyl-acetate-the olfactory component of oranges. Words and numbers had a comfortable orderly exactness resulting in her compulsion to speak in verbose stilted sentences...She was lost in her thoughts when the tall fiftyish woman tapped her on the shoulder and kissed her on the cheek. She heard the familiar C-major cord and smelled bananas and caramel." Together Darkkin and Mendoza uncover not only the murder of Markham but also a giant medical-terrorism plot that reaches further than either would ever suspect.

Neal has written a first class techno-medical thriller that readers will find themselves unable to put down. The combination of his experience as a physician and researcher his natural abilities to create unforgettable characters and a great sense of plot and pace add authenticity and accomplishment rarely achieved in a first novel.

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