

The Genius Plague

David Walton

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The Genius Plague freshens up the nature-versus-man archetype—we may never look at mushrooms the same way again.

Novelist and engineer David Walton infuses his latest novel with adventure, spycraft, humor, and shudders.

Mycologist Paul Johns spends an extended research visit in the Amazon jungle. On his return trip, he witnesses the mass murder of a boatload of ecotourists. He escapes unharmed but arrives home with cold-like symptoms. They turn out to stem from a fungal infection, caused by a new strain of fungus commonly found where he was doing his research. After a brief illness and anti-fungal treatment, he starts to show improved mental acuity.

His father, Charles, who has Alzheimer's disease, shows the same symptoms and receives the same treatment. Charles begins to act as if he'd never had anything wrong with him, remembering names, faces, and events clearly, though before the infection, he couldn't remember simple details—like the fact that that Neil, his other son, was working for the National Security Agency.

Neil begins to suspect that his brother's fungal infection has changed more than just his mental abilities. The more he learns about a growing network of apparent terrorists in South America and how they communicate, the more he suspects the source of all this activity and change is much closer to home.

Sections focused on the NSA, which is a heavily protected body with a multipurpose mission, rely on particular creativity. Walton's text juggles issues like whether or not factual information should even be used when addressing the agency. In this science-fiction work, though, fibbing may also serve the story better than strict reality, and Walton handles the balance ably, without allowing creative license to lead his NSA in absurd directions.

The Genius Plague freshens up the nature-versus-man archetype with an unusual “critter” and contemporary global politics, resulting in a page-turning read that is also thought-provoking. We may never look at mushrooms the same way again.

J. G. STINSON (September/October 2017)

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