

The Methuselah Strain

J. P. Helak

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Science and politics blend in this sci-fi thriller, clearly and eloquently describing intriguing theories of DNA and mortality.

A quest for immortality lies at the heart of *The Methuselah Strain* by J. P. Helak. Power, politics, love, greed, and grief motivate the characters in this action-packed story. The book delivers a combination of science and suspense that is sure to entertain.

When a young lab tech steals the elixir for eternal youth, the scramble to get it back is desperate and deadly. The tech has made a deal to sell the elixir to a Russian named Colonel Ivanovich, but the creator of the elixir is determined to get it back, and his hired henchman are ready to make sure that he does. But YouthCorp, the company where the elixir was created, has another problem—an old woman has escaped from her sick bed and is discovered just before dying in the alley behind YouthCorp. When the body is identified as the young adult daughter of Senator Kingsley, the mourning father wants answers no one seems to have. He hires well-known investigator David Stryker to find out how his little girl died of old age, and his search seems to start and end with YouthCorp.

The author has a clean and clear writing style that flows nicely and leads easily through the plot. He is particularly eloquent when offering scientific explanations on which the story hinges. For example, Stryker explains the idea behind the elixir: “I get the whole telomere thing: how they shorten with every replication, losing their ability to protect the ends of the DNA strands so that damage occurs, causing aging. And telomerase is the enzyme that repairs the telomeres. Therefore if a virus can insert a DNA sequence that codes for telomerase into our cells, it should slow the aging process.” The plot is quite complex, and Helak has masterfully woven multiple story lines while keeping the book fast paced and interesting.

Despite the strong story and writing, the characters are very two-dimensional, generally falling too neatly into categories of good or evil. Colonel Ivanovich is a particularly villainous ex-KGB officer, killing his own people as freely and easily as he does his enemies. He wants to gain control over the elixir so he can use it as a weapon to destroy capitalism. John Abrams is a researcher completely lacking in morals. He does not want to grow old and is willing to do whatever it takes, including illegal human trials and even murder, to prevent himself from aging. David Stryker is the good guy in the story—a dedicated investigator who is still deeply in love with his ex-wife Kim. The lack of complexity in these characters makes the book less compelling and less memorable than it otherwise might be.

Over all, *The Methuselah Strain* is an enjoyable book. Though it is not likely to leave a strong lasting impression, it offers an interesting story and some fascinating scientific ideas.

CATHERINE THURESON (October 31, 2013)

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