Michael Crichton: Sophisticated Pop-Artist

The novelist Michael Crichton had great popular success with his books yet critics were generally harsh on them. Their main criticism was that his characters were not fully rounded and that his books were formulaic. The first criticism he dealt with by admitting that he wasn't interested in the effect of individual personalities on the kinds of scientific disaster stories he was writing. The second criticism, that his novels were derivative, is, I believe a failure of the vision of those critics. I think they failed to see how sophisticated and clever those novels were.

Michael Crichton had some success at a young age with his novel 'The Andromeda Strain' (1969) (which went on to be made into a movie directed by Robert Wise who went on to direct Star Trek the motion picture), written while he was still in medical school. He had the title in his mind for years and worked on multiple unfinished drafts. It was only when studying in the U.K. and reading Len Deighton's novel 'The Ipcress file' that his inspiration for how to write the novel was unlocked.

The novel was undoubtedly helped in its success by two factors. Firstly, obviously, the public interest in space at the time of the Apollo missions. And secondly that it had benefited from the editing of Bob Gottlieb (who also edited Catch 22), who initially made him completely re-write the novel. Then asked for multiple sections to be rewrite and new chapters created. I think Gottlieb was important to the success of the novel. Crichton later said that books are not written, but rewritten. Jurassic Park reportedly went through more than seven full rewrites. Gottlieb also encouraged him to enhance the realism of the story, giving it an almost documentary feel.

Another formative influence on Crichton was George Orwell, who was an advocate of a very clear and straightforward writing style. This kind of simplicity is not something that literary critics generally admire.

Writing a believable, exciting book that can entertain and hold the interest of millions of people is hard, disciplined mental work. If it wasn't so hard, more would do it.

With 'The Andromeda Strain', and subsequent novels, Michael Crichton was credited with creating the techno-thriller. Tom Clancy called him the father of the Techno-thriller. Crichton apparently phoned him to thank him yet dispute this title. There had, he said to Clancy, been other Techno thrillers before. Clancy replied that they were all political. Crichton was the first to put the emphasis on technology.

However, most of his later successful genre novels are just as much science fiction as thriller. I guess you could say he blurred the boundaries between thrillers and science fiction.

Many science fiction novels that feature advanced or new technologies are, to my tastes, overly complicated in a particular way. A very typical science fiction novel will be set in the future and feature a whole array of new technologies and social structures. Yet their very specific combinations of technologies make them unrealistic. Technology can change our world in multiple ways, some unexpected. Predicting the impact of just one revolutionary technology is hard. Imagining the impact of many, and their interaction effects is next to impossible. So those novels always feel so unrealistic to me that they feel more like fantasy than science fiction. There is also kind of a randomness and a lack of discipline to those books which makes them feel kind of cheap to me.

Where Crichton succeeds is in the opposite: verisimilitude. He makes highly realistic stories, which have an element of the

fantastical but in a way that you really buy into. This just heightens the excitement of the novels. It makes them more thrilling. It also generally adds to our ability to relate to the novel.

There are a number of literary tricks he employs to generate this effect. These include creating realistic seeming references, and using a matter-of-fact writing style that often feels similar to non-fiction. He takes great care in making his central fantastical concept believable to you as the reader before fully beginning his story. In Jurassic Park, for example, a large part of the book is dedicated to making the idea of real dinosaurs in our world realistic before we even arrive at the park.

The big science fiction thrillers that Crichton wrote – Congo, Sphere, Jurassic Park, The Lost World, Timeline, Prey and Micro – all explore one central concept (sometimes called 'high concept'). They are set in our everyday world that we know, but then something unexpected erupts into the lives of a limited number of people in that world.

One other author who was also good at turning such simple high concept intrusions into our everyday world into gripping novels was John Wyndham. In 'Chocky' a alien makes contact with Humanity through the mind of a young boy. In 'Day of the Triffids' it happens to be two ideas that come together, but, still, its just two big ideas, not a whole mixture. The first idea is what if there was a type of plant that could move and also harm Humans through its sting, the second was what would then happen if Humanity was rendered blind through an asteroid collision?

This pattern of taking one thing, and then exploring the effects of it is a reflection of the scientific method itself! I see in Crichton's novels a style that mimics the science that he was writing about.

Another part of scientific thinking – Occam's Razor – is evident in Crichton's work too. The notion of making the minimal number of assumptions or leaps of thought. His work builds on what is known. It's notable that he never once set a novel in the future and he never featured any aliens in his novels. The closest he came to aliens was the novel Sphere, which features an alien artefact.

These self-imposed disciplines in his writing also echo his interest in modern and pop art. In some Pop art, such as that of Andy Warhol, or Jasper Johns (on whom Crichton wrote a book), the art is a repeating of designs that already exist. Such as the American flag or a can of Campbell's soup.

Critics say Crichton's work is formulaic or derivative. This is not entirely fair as he did write a number of experimental novels, like Eaters of the dead and Next. Nevertheless, he was interested in structures and formulas in his novels. A kinder way of expressing it is that his novels are part of a tradition. His stories fall into the tradition of Jules Verne and Arthur Conan Doyle.

Rather than be derivative because he wasn't creative, I believe he realised the power of the structure of some of those stories and was just fascinated to work within it, as a discipline. Just like Jasper Johns and Andy Warhol were drawn to mix and mash pre-existing designs.

Crichton's work may have an apparent simplicity yet I believe it's actually highly sophisticated.