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the middlebrow Dissecting the mainstream.

Michael Crichton Planet Earth's novelist of doom.

By Bryan Curtis
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Who dinoasured Michael Crichton? Was it a comet or just the responsibility of being America's prophet of doom? In his new book, *State of Fear*, Crichton once again ascends to the pulpit to warn us of an impending horror. Like the diabolical Japanese businessmen in *Rising Sun* and the corporate vixen in *Disclosure*, these new shadowy forces, Crichton says, lurk among us, poised to wreak havoc. They're among America's fiercest enemies. They're ... environmentalists.

State of Fear is a 600-page tirade about global warming. Crichton thinks environmentalists have become overheated about the threat and have substituted demagoguery for hard science. So he unleashes a cabal of ruthless greens, who build weather machines to punish their SUV-drivin', carbon-dioxide-emittin' neighbors with a plague of hurricanes and tsunamis. For Crichton's fans, this has got to be heartbreaking: The boy-novelist who

engineered a tyrannosaurus in *Jurassic Park* and mysterious pathogens from outer space in *The Andromeda Strain* has become a political pamphleteer, a right-wing noodle.

When I first read Crichton at age 13, I loved the way his writing was curiously formal: He wrote about childlike subjects in a fussy, scientific way that gave them authenticity. Crichton described his human characters as a field biologist describes a giraffe: "He was surprisingly tall, maybe a hundred and ninety centimeters, well over six feet." Crichton's marauding adventurers were invariably white men with advanced degrees—paleontologists, psychologists, lawyers. Like the professor in *Tarzan of the Apes*, he is devoted to the notion that gentlemen-scholars can venture into the wild and, between claps of machine-gun fire, discuss the latest report from the Royal Academy. His heroes have an elegant way of losing consciousness: "[T]here was a burst of pain in her forehead, and she saw brief stars before blackness settled over her and the rumble of thunder faded to endless silence."

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Crichton styled himself as a 20th-century Renaissance man, a dabbler in all the fine arts. After graduating medical school at Harvard, he became, at various turns, a novelist, film director (*Westworld*, *Coma*), screenwriter (*Jurassic Park*), TV series creator (*ER*), [futurist](#), and author of a monograph about [Jasper Johns](#). Crichton deftly juggled all these things, and success came fast and easy. In *Travels*, a 1988 memoir, he wrote about his first midlife crisis: "I had graduated from Harvard, taught at Cambridge University, climbed the Great Pyramid, earned a medical degree, married and divorced, been a postdoctoral fellow at the Salk Institute, published two bestselling novels, and now made a movie. And I had abruptly run out of goals for myself." Crichton was 30 years old.

He eventually gave up movies and solidified his niche as a thriller writer whose books often crept onto the top-10 lists. But Crichton's books have suffered as his right-leaning politics have come to the fore. Titles like *Rising Sun*, *Disclosure*, and *Airframe* (about the mendacity of the electronic media) were naked political screeds designed to land him on the op-ed page.

To understand how Crichton stumbled, it's instructive to compare him to two past masters of suspense fiction: Arthur Conan Doyle (whom Crichton celebrates in *Rising Sun*) and H. Rider Haggard (whose *King Solomon's Mines* is a model for Crichton's safari book *Congo*). Doyle and Haggard opened their most famous novels by setting loose a familiar hero (Sherlock Holmes and Allan Quatermain) on a mystery or quest, complete with new enemies and a cast of supporting players. The joy of reading Doyle and Haggard is to enjoy the conventions and watch the authors sweat to provide inventive variations on a theme. Which clue will Holmes seize upon to crack the case? Upon which corner of Africa will Quatermain inflict his colonialist brio?

Crichton, on the other hand, eschews flesh-and-blood heroes; the star of his book is usually a high-concept premise—dinosaurs! killer viruses! Without a returning hero to lure readers (à la Tom Clancy), Crichton's concepts themselves must be nerdy and sufficiently topical. Crichton has an unparalleled genius for this—a gift for seeing years into the future. He began writing *Rising Sun* when the Berlin Wall was crumbling; by the time the book was published, in 1992, George Bush had thrown up in the lap of the Japanese prime minister. *Jurassic Park* arrived just as Steven Spielberg's imagineers figured out how to bring dinosaurs to the big screen, making it an iconic film of the age of computer-generated special effects. Before Bill and Monica hooked up, Crichton published *Disclosure*, a story of sexual harassment in the corridors of power. It was little surprise that this week, as *State of Terror* hit bookstores, ecoterrorists began popping up in the [newspapers](#).

One of the real pleasures of Crichton's books is their erudite polish. You can imagine Crichton leafing through obscure journals and textbooks to find scientific underpinnings for his outlandish premises—it's an overeducated novelist's penance for writing about the stuff of little boys. (Evidence of Crichton's genius: About half the world still believes you can re-engineer

dinosaurs with DNA from mosquitoes trapped in amber.) But when Crichton begins to proselytize, *State of Fear*-style, the journal citations begin to seem indistinguishable from those contained in the latest study from the Brookings Institution or the American Enterprise Institute. Instead of being charmed by the nerdy footnotes, you feel suspicious of them—they're propaganda.

This isn't to say that Crichton doesn't believe his right-leaning, contrarian poses. It's his belief in these poses that's the problem. Crichton's early novels were escapist fantasies that happened to be instructive. His political books are hectoring screeds that incidentally turn out to be thrillers. (As one character in *State of Fear* moans, "Did all this have to do with weather?") Crichton's early work was often conceived on a dare—How can I convince people that dinosaurs could exist in the real world?—and despite their documentary elements, the books seem to have remained fantasies to him. But as Crichton waded into the real world, and the documentary elements have become the backbone, his charm has disappeared. His novels have gone from dares to graduate seminars.

Crichton is like a college professor who insists on lecturing 10 minutes after the class period ends, when his students are edging toward the door. In *State of Fear*, the narrative stops cold for climate charts that are printed on the page ("Goteborg, Sweden: 1951-2004"). When one of Crichton's heroic skeptics makes a controversial statement about global warming, Crichton tags it with a footnote—look it up for yourself, liberal critic! The novel ends with 20 pages of bibliographical references and the author's 25-point "message" about global warming. It's a bulwark for what Crichton thinks will be a backlash from the newspapers, the same sour reaction that greeted *Rising Sun* and *Disclosure*. But first, doesn't somebody actually have to finish reading *State of Fear*?

Crichton seems to sense that he's become too much of a pedant. As *State of Fear* races to a close, he wedges in some swashbuckling pratfalls. The heroes are kidnapped by cannibals in the Solomon Islands, who tie them to wooden posts and poke at them with bats and knives. A woman named Sarah, fleeing from a man-made lightning storm—don't ask—crawls smack-dab into the middle of a nest of ... scorpions. Why scorpions? I have no clue, but I loved it. It's like something a grade-schooler would have thought up—it has childlike, "top this" passion. Amid the pages of climate charts, it may be the only proof the novelist hasn't become a dinosaur.

*Bryan Curtis is a **Slate** staff writer.*

Illustration by Charlie Powell.

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