

Demi Moore vamps it up in "Disclosure."



Crichton's next blockbuster

Car crashes, freak diseases and robots wreak havoc in 'Prey'

By MICHAEL GILTZ

Michael Crichton — who created TV's "ER" and wrote "Disclosure," and "Jurassic Park," both of which were turned into blockbuster movies — is equal parts sci-fi visionary and horror master.



Michael Crichton

Killer bees? "Invasion of the Body Snatchers? Chillingly smart computers? They're all here in "Prey" (HarperCollins, \$26.95), a much more satisfying read than Crichton's last book, "Timeline."

In "Prey," a dangerous, out-of-control swarm of tiny little robots terrorizes a suburban California family.

Jack is an unemployed Silicon Valley techie who has lost his job after trying to blow the whistle on corporate malfeasance.

While Jack plays Mr. Mom, his wife, Julia, works longer and longer hours at Xymos, a start-up focusing on new forms of technology. The company is desperate to secure more financing — which may explain why Julia is growing irritable with Jack and the children. Or it may be that Julia is having an

affair.

But Jack and Julia's marriage problems go out the window when their youngest child develops a rash that spreads over his body with frightening speed. Jack rushes the baby to the hospital where a team of doctors frantically try to figure out what's wrong. Then they're baffled when the baby suddenly recovers. If that isn't confusing enough, Julia avoids the baby after Jack brings the child home.

But Jack gets suspicious after Julia then breaks her arm in a car crash, so he heads to the Xymos manufacturing site, where he discovers the truth: Nanotechnology — in the form of tiny robots — has been leaked into the

environment and can't be controlled.

Like all of Crichton's books, "Prey" careens along at breakneck speed, aided in part by his utter lack of interest in anything but plot. Character development?

Fancy writing? Those are for authors who don't sell books by the truckload (not to mention screenplays — a movie adaptation of this one is already in the works). Crichton delivers his information in a tone-deaf style that gives you just the facts you need — and not a whit more.

Still, that flat, emotionless style lets Crichton present unlikely events in a very convincing way, and it pays off nicely in the creepiest moment in "Prey": Early on, Jack is trapped outside the facility by an army of tiny robots. They hover in the air in front of him, buzz menacingly, anticipate his moves and — worst of all — are clearly thinking predators.

Once again, Crichton has tapped into the big fear befitting an age in which cloned animals are considered cute and scientists just announced they're trying to create a brand new life form: What will happen if and when our new technologies turn on us?

IN 100 WORDS OR LESS

From 'Prey' by Michael Crichton

“The swarm was inventing new behavior, appropriate to the situation. Instead of pursuing me, it had fallen back and trapped me. It had gone beyond its programming — way beyond. I couldn't see

how that had happened ... The intelligence of the swarm was necessarily limited. It shouldn't be that difficult to outsmart it. I tried to feint to the left, then the right. The cloud went with me, but only for a moment. Then it dropped back to the door again. As if it knew that my goal was the door, and by staying there it would succeed.

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Anthony Edwards and Alexandra Kingston operate in "ER."

