

The hot zone by richard preston: style critique

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“ Style Critique on The Hot Zone”

“ Lassa is a Level 4 virus from West Africa, and it was one of Peter Jahrling’s favorite life forms-he thought it was fascinating and beautiful, in certain ways. He had held in his gloved hands virtually every hot agent known, except for Ebola and Marburg. When people asked him why he didn’t work with them, he replied, “ I don’t particularly feel like dying.”

Richard Preston traces the known paths of Ebola and Marburg in The Hot Zone. He tells of their discovery, effects, and the outbreaks. Level 4 scientists for the Army, the CDC, and several civilian scientists track down the viruses in order to conduct tests and find the secret hiding place of the viruses. The height of the story occurs when Ebola Zaire is discovered in a monkey house near Washington, D. C. and the Army has to decontaminate the entire facility. Luckily, the airborne strain only affected monkeys and didn’t infect humans. Preston concludes with his own trip to Africa to look at a possible reservoir of the viruses.

Preston’s style is sensational journalism. He uses graphic detail when describing the effects of the viruses to make it sensational. Doctors would be brief and scientific in their reports on the symptoms. Preston description’s are not brief and are graphic. “ His face lost all appearance of life and set itself into an expressionless mask...the eyeballs themselves seemed almost frozen in their sockets, and they turned bright red. He began to look like a zombie...and then you see that his lips are smeared with something slippery and red, mixed with black specks, as if he has been chewing coffee grounds. He is going into shock. He leans over, head on his knees, and brings up

an incredible quantity of blood from his stomach and spills it onto the floor with a gasping groan. The only sound is a choking in his throat as he continues to vomit while unconscious. Then comes a sound like a bedsheet being torn in half, which is the sound of his bowels opening and venting blood. The blood is mixed with intestinal lining." No doctor would ever describe the effects like Preston did. He is graphic to make it more interesting and exciting. He "spices" it up to attract and draw the attention of the reader, to get his point across.

Preston occasionally adds the character's thoughts as they recalled them during their interviews with him. Preston states that "if you ask a person, "What were you thinking?" you may get an answer that is richer and more revealing of the human condition than any stream of thoughts a novelist could invent." He's right; fact is stranger than fiction. "Aw, crap! They'll put me into the Slammer. And Tony will be filling out accident reports while I'm breaking with Ebola. And a week later, I'll be in the Submarine. Shit! Jerry's in Texas. And I didn't go to the bank today. There's no money in the house. The kids are home with Mrs. Trapane, and she needs to be paid. I didn't go to the market today. There's no food in the house. How are the kids going to eat if I'm in the Slammer?" Preston used their thoughts to make it more realistic and to give the human perspective. Their thoughts showed that some were "*censored* scared" and didn't want to touch it while others were fascinated with the virus and wanted to work in Level 4.

Preston tries to develop the characters, make them more real. He gives background information, physical description, and occasionally talks about

some personal habits or what others thought of them. “ Some of the officers at Fort Detrick had noticed a certain abrupt quality in her hand motions and had accused her of having hands that were “ too quick” to handle delicate work in dangerous situations. Nancy had begun martial-arts training partly because she hoped to make her gestures cool and smooth and powerful, and also because she had felt the frustrations of a woman officer trying to advance her career in the Army.” Preston’s outline of the characters makes it easier to understand their actions and why they were involved with the viruses. It makes them more of a human, not just a character in some story.

The story narrated by Preston. He is the omniscient narrator; he comments and acts like he knows their thoughts. “ First Nancy inspected the monkey, looking through the bars. It was a large male, and he looked as if her was really dead. She saw that he still had his canine fangs, and that made her nervous.” Periodically he tells about his interviews in the 1st person, “ Are you worried about a species-threatening event?” He stared at me. “ What the hell do you mean by that?” “ I mean a virus that wipes us out.” The final chapter, when he visits Kitum Cave in Africa, is also told in the 1st person. Preston uses the 1st person to make it more personal. He also uses it at the end in order to portray his feelings toward the subject.

” Ebola had risen in these rooms, flashed its colors, fed, and subsided into the forest. It will be back.”