

## The Devil's Workshop

by Stephen J. Cannell

William Morrow & Company, \$25.00, 421pp  
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REVIEWED BY LAINE FALK

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*The Devil's Workshop* is a novel about a laboratory in which the US military secretly develops biological weapons. Here a few renegade officers convince a weak-willed microbiologist named Dr. Dexter DeMille to develop a mutant form of infectious prion protein that will kill within hours instead of years. The fast-acting agent (spread by insect vectors) causes its victims to go mad and kill everyone around them. When a scientist who recently started working with DeMille, Dr. Max Richardson, dies under strange circumstances, the whole plot kicks into motion...an awkward, embarrassing sort of motion, but motion nonetheless.

The most thrilling thing about this book is its exuberant combination of randomness and cliché. A clan of white-supremacist hobos, for example, plays a large part in the plot. It shouldn't take more than a few pages for the reader to figure out that the hobos want to obtain the mutant prion strain for their evil purposes — to alter the strain further so that it will only replicate in ethnic minority groups. An egomaniacal Hollywood producer pops up as well (his son was a hobo before he was killed; it's very complicated), along with an alcoholic Gulf War vet, and, of course, a sexy blond woman. She is Stacy Richardson, Max's widow and a graduate student in microbiology, who says things like, "You haven't seen anything yet!" As you might guess, she's going to unravel the secret of Max's death.

I suppose this novel could be classified as a 'bio-thriller'. There is seldom a word or lengthy phrase to which the prefix "bio" has not been attached: Bio-containment, bio-stream, bio-hazard, bio-unit, bio-defense, bio-accident. One page shows three "bio-weapons" in a single paragraph, surely a dangerous stockpile. It is as if Cannell is repeating a 'bio'-mantra to convince himself and

us that the book is somewhat scientific in nature; but this very insistence reveals how rapid the book is. How many times do you need to say 'bio' before you realize there's nothing else to say?

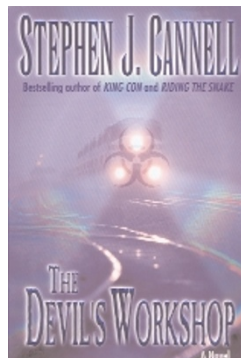
Aspects of the book can be entertaining if you're in a particularly schlocky sort of mood. Stacy, for example, has to disguise her "drop-dead" figure in shapeless clothing so as not to distract her professors from her brilliant mind. (What student couldn't relate to that?). Cannell also takes a touching pride in his insider's terminology: Stacy does not take her qualifying exams but her "Quals," and she rides the trains not with hobos but with "Bos." The initialized abbreviations for arcane military and made-up phrases (A.A.R, E.T.A., U.D.T., F.T.R.A.) run wild across the pages. And Cannell really proves he has scoop on the scientific community when he refers to a prestigious journal called *Nature and Medicine*, probably this journal's first near-entrance into world literature.

The rest of the novel fails even more horribly. Clearly one can devote innumerable paragraphs to loading a gun, but I never really imagined what that would feel like to read. The methods of characterization border on the rudimen-

tary. The hobos' lack of intelligence, for instance, reveals itself when they say "yer" instead of "your." When Stacy hears of her husband's death, she feels, "a mixture of emotions too complex to even describe."

Indeed, if it's complex, why bother trying to describe it? If you're tempted to consider Cannell a feminist because he gives us a female protagonist, look out for the only other female biologist in the novel, who is "man-nish, Janet-Reno-sized." And count on the language to be offensive. This journal can't print exact quotes, but, if you ever happen by this book on your way to a real novel, look on the top of page 339. Was that really necessary?

By the end, the Hollywood producer character regrets making movies just for money, and wishes he had financed more subtle and emotionally-fulfilling projects. Cannell seems to equate this book with just such a spiritual venture. His introduction is terribly sincere, and several of his characters improve themselves morally by the end of the book. But it is difficult to swallow these attempts at decency amid such idiocy. Maybe the incongruity between the well-meaning desire and the kitschy result is what's really interesting.



## Memory: From Mind to Molecules

By Larry R. Squire & Eric Kandel

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Learning and memory have traditionally held a central place in psychology and, during the past several decades, have also become very important—a preoccupation, some would say—for neurobiology. Squire and Kandel, arguably the world's two leading memory researchers, have authored a readable and elegantly produced summary of where knowledge in this field stands.

Squire, an expert in psychobiological studies of memory, and Kandel, who works mostly at the cellular and molecular end of memory research (although trained as a psychiatrist), have teamed up to cover the entire range of memory studies from invertebrates to man and from molecules to behavior.

Memory research uses all of the tools available to the modern biologist: molecular biology, 'made-to-order' mutant animals, electrophysiology, anatomy (from electron microscopy to human brain imaging), and physiological testing of experimental animals and humans. Because the research ranges so widely over various disciplines, it would be easy to lapse into the jargon of each field and write a book comprehensible only to the cognoscenti. Squire and Kandel have avoided this trap, however, by carefully explaining everything at a level that should be accessible to any scientist or physician and to most edu-