

Coma Short Guide

Coma by Robin Cook

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Characters

Susan Wheeler is a third-year medical student, the protagonist who single-mindedly jeopardizes her career, life and family's lives in order to explain why patients at Boston Memorial Hospital lapse into irreversible comas during minor surgery. She is also Robin Cook's vehicle for attempting to portray the medical world's hostile attitudes towards women in medicine.

She has a brief fling with her supervisor, Chief Resident Mark Bellows, whose wooden dialogue is as unconvincing as his insouciance when Susan explains that there has been an attempt on her life within the previous hour.

Dr. Robert Harris, chief of anesthesia, is such a poorly contrived male chauvinist that he serves only as a parody of Cook's poor skills at characterization and dialogue. Consider this deprecation of Susan Wheeler: "'So you reverted to the vestiges of your sex,' said Harris condescendingly." Dr. Howard Stark, the chief of surgery, is the one character who is willing to listen to Susan's suspicions and hypotheses.

This apparently sympathetic ear belies a conspirator who listens only so he can monitor her investigation and try to terminate it — a repeated pattern in Cook novels.

Indeed, Stark sends a thug to murder Susan Wheeler. When the job is botched, Stark lures her to his office, drugs her, and has her wheeled into the operating room — ostensibly for an emergency appendectomy; there he attempts to send Susan, too, into an irreversible coma.

Social Concerns

In the years since this novel was published, its central concern — the shortage of available transplant organs — has become a growing issue in the media and American legislatures. In *Coma*, the premise is that demand for organs will so outdistance supply that a black market will develop.

In *Coma*'s scenario, the black market for human organs mimics the more mundane black market for automobile parts: instead of removing needed parts from a brain-dead person — equivalent to a totaled car — the black marketeers render a normal, essentially healthy person permanently comatose in order to fill orders for highly marketable organs. The sabotaged bodies are stripped of hearts, lungs, livers, and kidneys — in the same way parked cars are stripped of radios, batteries, and bumpers — and sold piecemeal to the highest bidders.



Techniques

Cook's third-person narrator is omniscient, telling what the characters are thinking but providing little explanation as to how they have come to think that way. Another Cook technique is to casually intersperse key clues with insignificant medical details, keeping the reader's mind churning as it tries to sort things through and find a focus.

Cook's most interesting and oft-used technique is the repetition of allusions to a facility or institution which, shrouded in mystery and surrounded with security against the outside world, seems linked to the ongoing crimes. Both the protagonist and the reader crave to sneak inside, snoop around and finally solve the puzzle.

In *Coma*, the mysterious facility is the Jefferson Institute, an intensive care facility for comatose patients. Inside, Susan Wheeler discovers that the intensive care is administered by a mainframe computer that continuously monitors each patient's bodily functions, automatically making adjustments to maintain homeostasis. Naked patients are suspended in space by wires strung through their bones, eliminating potential bedsores. The environment is bathed in ultraviolet light to minimize bacterial infections. All these bodies are maintained in a state of readiness — awaiting orders for organs with the right tissue match and price.

Themes

If *Coma* has a theme, it is that doctors are apt to be mad scientists who must be controlled by society before they destroy it. In the book's afterword, Cook bemoans "the failure of society in general and medicine in particular to anticipate the social, legal, and ethical ramifications of a technological innovation. For some inexplicable reason, society waits to the very end before creating appropriate policy to pick up the pieces and make sense out of chaos."

Coma's ghoulish plot stems from the motives of Dr. Howard Stark, who enters the business of selling used human organs in order to finance an expansion of his hospital's research facilities. Stark is the persona of the mad scientist who recurs over and over in Robin Cook novels. The mad scientist's inverted sense of priorities makes medical science an end in itself; Stark offers up human lives in order to further the science of medical technology.

"We need people like myself, indeed like Leonardo Da Vinci, willing to step beyond restrictive laws in order to insure progress," Stark raves, explaining to protagonist Susan Wheeler why he must kill her. "What if Leonardo Da Vinci had not dug up his bodies for dissection? What if Copernicus had knuckled under to the laws and dogma of the church?"

Adaptations

A movie version of *Coma*, released in 1978, was scripted and directed by Dr.

Michael Crichton who, like Robin Cook, has been lured from the comparatively meager pay of practicing medicine to the millions that can be made from writing about it. Movie critics suggest that the involvement of too many doctors has ruined the story; physicians are too accustomed to the specter of cadavers and autopsies to understand their shock effect on laymen. Genevieve Bujold plays Susan Wheeler, who in the movie is a doctor instead of a medical student. Her investigation begins with the death of her best friend instead of a stranger.

And while the movie mirrors the novel in exploiting the layman's fear of hospitals and medical procedures, it has lost the suspense which made the book so much more successful.

Literary Precedents

The Howard Starks in Robin Cook novels are throwbacks to the deadly mad scientist — often a physician — who recurs in such Nathaniel Hawthorne stories as "The Birthmark" and "Dr. Heidegger's Experiment." In "Rappacini's Daughter," Hawthorne wrote: "His patients are interesting to him only as subjects for some new experiment. He would sacrifice human life, his own among the rest, or whatever else was dearest to him, for the sake of adding so much as a grain of mustard seed to the great heap of his accumulated knowledge."



Related Titles

Godplayer (1983) is another combination of suspense, murder and medicine.

Cook is concerned that unpoliced doctors are making ethical decisions only God is qualified to make. The book has two primary social concerns. The first is the failure of "peer review" to weed out incompetence. In Godplayer, physicians investigate their colleagues' blunders with all the vigilance of a Nixon Administration investigation of the Nixon Administration. Cook also is concerned about "the impaired physician"; a doctor's access to psychoactive drugs combines maximum temptation with maximum opportunity, resulting in addicted physicians who practice their profession as badly as addicted athletes. The protagonist is Dr. Cassandra Kingsley, perhaps Cook's most successful attempt at developing a rounded character. The omniscient narrator takes readers inside the head of a person with clear albeit conflicting motives, feelings and perceptions.

Through Cassie, Cook does a very creditable job of creating suspense using a classic literary technique: the mental confusion and moral dilemmas that develop out of a person's realization she cannot distinguish between what is real and what is imagined — and how to act accordingly.

Cassie Kingsley is married to the country's foremost heart surgeon, Dr.

Thomas Kingsley — who is also a murderer, drug addict and philanderer.

This makes him a much more interesting character than his wife; it is unfortunate that Thomas is not the focus of Cook's labors in character development.

The mystery that Cassie must solve is why postoperative patients who are progressing well suddenly die for no apparent reason. She is joined in this investigation by Robert, a homosexual friend in the pathology department, who has labeled the phenomenon SSDS: Sudden Surgical Death Syndrome.

In Outbreak (1987), mysterious deaths are caused by a series of outbreaks of Ebola, or viral hemorrhagic fever — a highly contagious virus which is almost always fatal. These outbreaks always occur in hospitals — specifically health maintenance organizations — killing scores of doctors and their patients before being brought under control by strict quarantines.

The Center for Disease Control in Atlanta assigns an investigator to the case, Dr. Marissa Blumenthal. But Marissa is transferred to other duties because she asks too many unsettling questions, suggests too many unpopular hypotheses — and because she refuses to have sex with her supervisor.

Marissa lacks the courage to scream: "Sexual harassment!" But she has the dogged resourcefulness and fortitude to defy her superiors by secretly continuing to work on the

case. She dashes around the country at her own expense, imperiling her career and life as she pursues clues of a conspiracy that seem to point back inside the Center for Disease Control itself, whose futuristic laboratory is the only repository of Ebola samples.

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