



*Micro* is the last of the posthumous publications from Michael Crichton, pictured here in 1993.

## FICTION

# Small wonder

Paul McEuen savours a technothriller from the late Michael Crichton that makes the tiny terrifying.

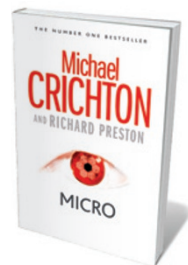
For most people, small doesn't inspire fear. We run from tanks, not integrated circuits. For a novelist writing a technothriller called *Micro*, this could be a problem. But not, it seems, for the godfather of the genre, Michael Crichton.

Crichton died in 2008, and this — following *Pirate Latitudes* (HarperCollins, 2009) — is the last of his novels to be published posthumously. Discovered as an unfinished manuscript with copious notes, it was fleshed out by best-selling author Richard Preston, whose *The Hot Zone* (Anchor, 1994) is one of the best non-fiction thrillers ever written. The result of this joint work, *Micro*, is a fast-paced mix of adventure and cutting-edge science, a novel that takes us deep into a fascinating, if violent, microscale universe.

The set-up is classic Crichton: seven graduate science students are flown to a dangerous spot on the Hawaiian island of Oahu, where a cutting-edge technology company is up to no good. Nanigen is a start-up armed with a breakthrough way to harvest pharmaceutical compounds from the Hawaiian rainforests.

Each student brings his or her own expertise: Peter Jansen is a specialist in venomous creatures; Jenny Linn a pheromone researcher; Karen King a spider expert skilled in martial arts. Also along for the ride is Danny Minot, a postmodernist all-scientific-truth-is-relative sort who is doomed for the roughest treatment. (Remember the preening, pro-environment do-gooder in Crichton's 2004 thriller *State of Fear*? He was eaten by cannibals. Danny fares much worse.)

The book's promoters tell us that the students are "transformed" and set loose to survive in the Hawaiian rainforest. Spoiler alert: I'm going to tell you what "transformed" means. Stop reading



**Micro**  
MICHAEL CRICHTON  
AND RICHARD  
PRESTON  
HarperCollins: 2011.  
448 pp. \$28.99,  
£18.99

if you don't want to know.

Crichton miniaturizes them. *Micro* is the 1989 film *Honey, I Shrank the Kids* re-imagined as a dark, edge-of-seat technological thriller. The shrinking is accomplished by the powers of magnetic tensor fields, whatever those are. Even the characters, post-miniaturization, can't make sense of it: did their atoms shrink, too? How did it work?

But let that go. Give Crichton and Preston their leap. Now you are experiencing the micro-universe first-hand. The result is scary and fun — a wild romp through the Hawaiian hinterland with both man and insect on your tail.

The authors give us a potpourri of facts about chemical ecology, as well as useful hints for surviving when small (katydid 'meat' tastes like sushi). To their credit, Crichton and Preston try to keep the science as close to truth as fiction will allow.

Our heroes find everything from biomechanics to wind resistance dramatically modified, giving them, for example, ant-like super-strength, and rendering them invulnerable to long falls. This gives our protagonists a chance against predators such as insects and birds, with their terrifying arsenals of physical and chemical weapons. It is quite an adventure, pitting the mini-grads against vicious ants and a mynah bird. There is even a life-or-death fight with a bat.

That said, the book lacks some of the elements that made Crichton's best works soar. Where the technology of *Jurassic Park* (Knopf, 1990) stretched, but did not break, scientific credulity, *Micro*'s tensor-field shrinking machine is so 'out there' that it dampens the feeling that the plot could really happen. Furthermore, the story is not driven by a larger peril. If our band of students escape the microworld, they live. If not, they die. There is no ticking time bomb in the real world that makes us root for them even if we don't particularly like them.

Still, it is wonderful to see Crichton's genius — the audacious mix of adventure and techno-speak that made him famous — on vivid display one last time.

If Crichton's work had a recurring theme, it was that complex systems go awry, and that nature cannot be controlled. When Crichton was diagnosed with throat cancer in early 2008, he was expected to recover fully. The cancer had other plans. To borrow a line from *Micro*, Crichton climbed suddenly and unexpectedly into the voracious night. ■

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