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# *The Andromeda Strain*

by

**Michael Crichton**

**1969**



MonkeyNotes Study Guide by Shane Strate

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## KEY LITERARY ELEMENTS

### SETTING

The action starts out in the small town of Piedmont Arizona, which has been decimated by an unknown bacterium. Afterwards, the scene shifts to an underground government laboratory in Flat rock Nevada. The rest of the story takes place here as scientists try to unlock the mystery of the Andromeda strain. Because.....

### LIST OF CHARACTERS

#### Major Characters

**Dr. Jeremy Stone** - Dr. Stone is a Nobel prize-winning scientist and the acknowledged leader of the Project Wildfire team. In 1963, Stone wrote a letter to the President concerning the possibility of alien bacteria infecting earth aboard returning American satellites. Based on his ideas, the government organized a protocol for disinfecting all men and equipment returning from space. Stone also formed a.....

**Dr. Mark Hall** - Of all the *Wildfire* scientists, Dr. Hall pays it the least amount of attention. He agreed to join the team in 1966 when approached by Leavitt, but did not follow the updates he was given and doubted anything would ever come of the project. His inattention to the details annoyed.....

**Dr. Charles Burton** - A fifty-four year old pathologist and professor at Baylor medical school. He made his reputation working on various strains of the *staphylococcus* virus before eventually being brought on to the project. Burton has a brilliant mind, but is rather lackluster as a physical specimen. Stone is.....

**Dr. Peter Leavitt** - A clinical microbiologist trained to treat infectious disease. He has seen enough plagues and epidemics to know the importance of quick action. Leavitt recruited Hall to the project in 1966, while they were working at the same hospital – Leavitt was the Chief of Bacteriology. Although Stone has.....

#### Minor Characters

**Arthur Mancek** - Major Mancek is the army officer in charge of recovering the "Scoop" satellite. He makes the decision to call in the wildfire team to the Flat Rock facility in Nevada. Mancek has the ability to think clearly in a crisis, which is why he's in charge of this operation. He also gets called to.....

**Peter Jackson** - The old man from Piedmont, that seems so mysterious at first, turns out to be the key to unlocking the Andromeda mystery. Stone and Burton transport Jackson as only one of two survivors to the Wildfire facility where Hall studies him overall the next few days. Jackson has a.....

**Dr. Robertson** - The Head of the President's Science Advisory committee in Houston. Robertson serves as a liaison between the White House and the scientists working on.....

**Officer Willis** - An Arizona highway patrolman who happens to drive through Piedmont as the bacteria is spreading. Because of his diabetes, his blood was too acidic to coagulate completely, and.....

**Dr. Smithson** - The medical officer for the Arizona highway patrol west of Flagstaff. Dr. Hall calls him to get Officer Willis' medical history and whereabouts on the night the satellite.....

### CONFLICT

This book is a classic science fiction struggle between man and nature.

**Protagonists** - the Wildfire team of scientists. They are assembled to grapple with the mysterious bacteria from outer space that threatens to destroy mankind. They must determine the process by which Andromeda kills, and hopefully design a way to interrupt that process. Because of the catastrophic potential.....

**Antagonists** - The Andromeda Strain, a bacteria brought to earth from space by a U.S. Military space probe seeking new weapons. After it comes to earth, it kills off the entire small town of .....

**Climax** - There are two possible moments that could be identified as the climax of the novel, depending how one would like to structure the presentation. The more obvious event would be Hall's pressing the red button, stopping the countdown, and thus avoiding a nuclear explosion that would kill.....

**Outcome** - Stone explains to Hall that the bacteria which wiped out Piedmont has somehow mutated into a harmless form and so is no longer a danger to humanity. Even if it were to.....

## **SHORT PLOT / CHAPTER SUMMARY (Synopsis)**

An American space satellite has re-entered the earth's atmosphere and landed off course just outside the town of Piedmont, Arizona. When Army officials arrive to retrieve the satellite, they notice everyone in the town is dead except for an old man. Before the Army investigators can discover the cause, they also die. Since Army surveillance photos show the bodies have died quite recently, Major Mancek believes the deaths are related to the satellite and notifies a top-secret government agency called Project Wildfire.

That same night the army begins rounding up the team of scientists that will make up the Project Wildfire team responsible for investigating the cause of deaths in Piedmont. We learn that the "Scoop" satellite that landed in Piedmont was part of a military mission to develop biological weapons. The satellite may have brought an alien (extra-terrestrial) bacteria back with it, a bacteria that has wiped out the entire town of Piedmont, Arizona.

The next morning, two of the scientists, Stone and Burton, put on protective rubber suits and are lowered from a helicopter into the town of Piedmont. They discover that the satellite at the home of the town doctor, who had opened it and unwittingly unleashed a plague upon the town. Many people in the town appear to have committed suicide the night before. When Burton autopsies their bodies he.....

## **THEMES**

The book's prominent theme is the danger that man's intelligence poses to himself. Man is capable of inventing all sorts of ways to destroy the planet, but not rational enough to control these means. Crichton believes that man's capacity for critical thinking breaks down too easily under stress. In the book, the army succeeds in bringing an alien bacterium to earth in the hopes of supplementing its biological.....

## **MOOD**

For this book, Crichton adopts a very cold, detached, scientific approach to the material. All the description is done in a very matter-of-fact tone, including even the characters. The only superfluous material in the book is the multiple explanations of past scientific theories or discoveries intended to enhance the.....

## **BACKGROUND INFORMATION - BIOGRAPHY**

John Michael Crichton was born October 23, 1942 in Chicago, Illinois. He grew up in Roslyn, New York on Long Island. He graduated from Harvard University (summa cum laude) in 1964. He then attended Harvard Medical School, where he graduated as an M.D. in 1969. After medical school he began his writing career. Called "the father of the techno-thriller," his novels include *The Andromeda Strain*, *Congo*, *Jurassic Park*, and *Timeline*. He has also written four books of non-fiction, including *Five Patients*, *Travels*, and *Jasper Johns*.

His books have been translated into thirty languages. Twelve have been made into films, including *Jurassic Park* and most recently, *Timeline*, now filming. He is also the creator of the.....

## **LITERARY / HISTORICAL INFORMATION**

"I thought THE ANDROMEDA STRAIN was a great title, but for many years I had no book to go with it. I worked on draft after draft, never completing one, obsessing about the project. And all because I was so fond of the title I couldn't abandon it.

The story itself was originally suggested by a footnote in George Gaylord Simpson's scholarly work THE MAJOR FEATURES OF EVOLUTION. Simpson inserted an uncharacteristically lighthearted footnote saying that organisms in the upper atmosphere had never been used by science-fiction writers to make a story.

I set out to do that.

Eventually I finished a whole draft and sent it to my new editor, Bob Gottlieb, at .....

## **CHAPTER SUMMARIES WITH NOTES / ANALYSIS**

### **CHAPTER 1**

#### **Summary**

On a cold winter night, by a deserted stretch on highway in the Arizona desert, Lieutenant Roger Shawn stands atop a hillcrest and stares through his binoculars at the sleepy town of Piedmont, Arizona. In the back of the van, Private Lewis Crane, an electronics technician, is making the final calculations in an attempt to triangulate the final position of their target. The two soldiers have driven all day in search of satellite that has recently returned from orbit. Shawn and Crane know nothing of their objective except that the satellite, containing a series of specialized capsules, was designed to study the upper atmosphere before falling back to earth. Although the team had expected to recover the satellite from a spot twelve miles north or town, they are perplexed when their latest transmitter trace locates the capsule in the center of Piedmont. In the moonlight, the men can see birds, which appear to be vultures, circling the small array of buildings. They decide to drive into town and take a look.

#### **Notes**

In this first chapter, Crichton creates the atmosphere of suspense that drives the novel. Many factors enhance the mystery surrounding this secret military satellite. The stretch of deserted highway, the cold winter night, the fact that the capsule is not being tracked to the center of Piedmont when it should be twelve miles north of town, and especially the vulture-like birds circling the town in the moonlight, all contribute to a sense of impending danger.

### **CHAPTER 2**

#### **Summary**

Back at "Project Scoop" mission control center, Lieutenant Edgar Comroe lethargically monitors the radio communications from Shawn and Crane's van, which is coded "Caper One". As the vehicle enters Piedmont, Shawn reports that there are bodies strewn throughout the town. Upon hearing this discovery Comroe instructs Caper One to leave their radio open and proceed towards the capsule. Comroe then seals off the control room to prevent any news from getting out. He hears Lieutenant Shawn report seeing a man in white robes walking through the town and checking over the bodies. Suddenly, the white-robed man stops and begins coming towards the van. Horrified, the mission control team hears a high-pitched scream followed by a crunching noise, and the radio transmission ends.

#### **Notes**

In the second chapter, Crichton heightens the tone of apprehension by changing perspectives and telling the story from the point of view of mission control. Since the reader knows only what mission control can hear over the radio, we feel completely helplessness upon hearing the screams just before the radio goes dead. Finally,

Crichton leaves us with the new mystery of the white-robed man who has somehow survived the epidemic, and who appears to have killed Shawn and Crane.

## CHAPTER 3

### Summary

In the opening narrative, Crichton describes the common nature of all crises and explains that the United States has never had a biological crisis – until the Andromeda Strain.

Back in the mission control center, Major Mancek slowly replays the tape from the radio broadcast from the van. Based on the rhythmic static picked up by the computer, Mancek decides that the van is probably still running and the van radio is still broadcasting. He orders a flyover of Piedmont and calls in a technician named Jagger to analyze the film. Minutes later, a scavenger plane drops phosphorus bombs around Piedmont and photographs the town. As Jagger analyzes the body temperature images picked up by the plane's infrared camera, he determines that most of the people died quite recently. Further images indicate that one person is still moving around the town, checking the bodies. The plane's motion pictures show the white-robed man, standing in the center of town, staring at the planes as they buzz past the town. Major Mancek puts in a call to General Wheeler and declares a state of emergency within the army base.

### Notes

By moving the narrative from the town to the army base, Crichton heightens the suspense surrounding the disease and the lone figure that survived it.

## CHAPTER 4

### Summary

Sitting in a soundproof booth next to a telephone, Mancek decides to place a telephone call to a classified government agency called *Project Wildfire*. He remembers a briefing he attended years ago, where a government scientist explained the agency's purpose: formulating responses for extra-terrestrial life forms introduced on American spacecraft returning to earth. After using a binary code to decipher the telephone number, Mancek picks up the phone and dials.

### Notes

This chapter, a brief explanation of binary codes and computer language, highlights Crichton's technical style and his fascination with scientific jargon and theory. The mechanisms of computers were still relatively new when the book was originally published in 1969. *Project Wildfire* is also introduced, although we learn little about it.

## CHAPTER 5

Mancek leaves a message on an answering machine, stating that he is calling for a Wildfire alert. He waits for return calls but receives none. Instead, the Wildfire agency sends out a first telex confirming notification, and then a second telex with a list of names of people authorized to receive information. Because of an error with the machine, certain names are validated quicker than others, meaning some team members are not notified until early the next morning.

At 1 AM the next morning, two army men arrive at Dr. Jeremy Stone's house near Stanford University and escort him away in the middle of a dinner party. On the way to the airport, Dr. Stone looks at a slim file with the words "Project Scoop" stenciled on the cover. He thinks back on a symposium several years earlier where he first heard a scientist named Dr. Merrick hypothesize that if mankind ever encountered extra-terrestrials they would most likely be in the form of bacteria. Merrick's ideas inspired Stone and other scientists to warn the defense department about the possibility of alien microbes returning to earth aboard American spacecraft. This

recommendation had led to the creation of new government agencies designed to study various aspects of microbiology. A team of scientists, including Stone was also mobilized to prepare the country for the possibility of a biological catastrophe.

"Project Scoop" had ostensibly been designed as part of this overall mission. Before this latest capsule, six other "Scoop" satellites had been sent into orbit, but each had either burned up during reentry or returned to earth empty-handed. "Scoop" VII had been in orbit for two and a half days when it somehow malfunctioned, left its stable orbit, and had to be called back prematurely by mission control.

During his flight to Arizona, Dr. Stone is informed of the status of the other team members. Professor Kirke, an anthropologist from Yale, is in the hospital with appendicitis is thus will not immediately join the team. Leavitt, a clinical microbiologist, and Burton, a pathologist, will be meeting Stone at the site. The last person to be notified, a surgeon named Hall, is forced to leave a patient on the operating table and hurry out to meet Leavitt and catch a plane leaving for Nevada. When Hall asks he is involved in the project instead of other more distinguished surgeons, Leavitt replies that they wanted a candidate who was single.

### Notes

In this chapter Crichton reveals that "Project Scoop" was, in reality, designed by the army as a way to enhance their biological weapons capability. Thus, it appears that the army's efforts to bring back an extraterrestrial microbe for military use is now responsible for wiping out the town of Piedmont. The negative attitude towards the armed forces that begins to emerge reflects the anti-Vietnam war influences, which were at or near their height in 1969 when Crichton published *The Andromeda Strain*.

Furthermore, there is a question of whether or not the five scientists who make up this specialized task force will be able to work together to solve this crisis. Although Stone respects Kirke immensely, he does not care for Burton. In addition, both Leavitt and Stone doubt that Hall, who has not done any prior reading on *Wildfire*, will be of any benefit to the project.....

## OVERALL ANALYSES

### CHARACTER ANALYSIS

**Jeremy Stone** - Stone, along with a few other scientists, is in charge of designing the Wildfire facility in Flat Rock Nevada. He had convinced the U.S. government to plan for a large-scale biological emergency and supervised the development of a biological response program. He also helps choose the scientists who will work in the facility. He does not, however, initially understand why the government so readily accepts his suggestions.

*"Stone could not have known the reason behind Washington's eagerness, or the very real concern many government officials had for the problem. For Stone knew nothing, until the night he left the party and drove off in the blue military sedan, of Project Scoop."*

(Page 43)

Although he knew nothing of the chemical weapons program beforehand, Stone does.....

**Mark Hall** - Much of what we as the reader learn about the Wildfire facility is through the eyes of Dr. Hall, who seems the least familiar with everything that goes on in Flat Rock. Hall shows very little interested in the information designed to keep him up to date because he doesn't believe that any of it will ever really be necessary. As a result, he is the least prepared for work at Flat Rock once it begins. This is another reason that Stone has such a low opinion of him.

Hall's sense of alienation once inside the Wildfire research lab serves two purposes. First of all, he becomes the *everyman*. Although he is a gifted surgeon with an exceptional medical.....

**Peter Leavitt** - Leavitt's character shows how years of preparation and the most advanced technology can easily be undone by human frailty. Next to Stone, Leavitt is the most senior scientist in the group and had the most to do with planning the facility. He is even responsible for keep Hall updated, although he stops bringing Hall files after it becomes clear that the files aren't being read. He has spent years reading.....

**Peter Burton** - Like Leavitt, Burton's character also shows that no amount of equipment or money can compensate for human failure. Burton is in charge of experimenting with animals exposed to Andromeda Strain. While working with white rats that have been injected with.....

## THEMES - THEME ANALYSIS

**Dangers of Intelligence** - There is an inescapable irony that surrounds Project Wildfire. The army has assembled some of the country's best minds to combat a biological threat that could eventually destroy all of mankind. This danger would never have occurred, however, if another group of brilliant minds had not discovered a way to transport such lethal bacteria from outer space to earth. In an effort to protect one nation another nation, the United States army had unleashed something with the potential to destroy all nations.

Crichton sums up this idea in the thoughts of Dr. Stone:

“(Stone) often argued that intelligence was more trouble than it was worth. It was more destructive than creative, more confusing than revealing, more discouraging than satisfying, more.....

Additional themes are analyzed in the complete study guide.

## PLOT STRUCTURE ANALYSIS

**Initial Incident** - The action begins to intensify as soon as the two army officers are killed by (we think) the mysterious old man in the white robe. This incident starts everything .....

**Rising Action** - Everything that happens from the initial incident up to the moment where Hall makes his “highway diagnosis”. The scientists assemble and go through the decontamination. Peter Jackson and the baby are moved to the Wildfire facility. The President decides not to.....

**Climax** - Since the whole purpose their work is to discover the nature of the Andromeda Strain and thus find a possible prevention for it, the moment where Hall formulates his.....

**Falling action** - After Hall's discovery, a few loose ends need to be wrapped up. Burton becomes trapped in a room with the Andromeda Strain. The seals begin bursting and the.....

**Moment of Final Suspense** - The action intensifies briefly as Hall attempts to enter the core and climb to the fourth level in order to enter his key and press the red button to stop the countdown. He gets shot.....

**Denouement** - Stone's comment “The important thing is that we know understand” gives meaning to the outcome of the novel. By the end of the novel the scientists have discovered the true nature of Andromeda. They've also learned that, despite the most careful preparations, mishaps.....

## POINT OF VIEW

The story of *The Andromeda Strain* is told by a third party omniscient narrator. The narrator not only knows all the details of the character's lives (which he shares rather sparingly), but also relates a great deal of the history of medial and scientific research. From the narrator we learn a great deal.....

## QUOTES - IMPORTANT QUOTATIONS AND ANALYSIS

1. "The true aims of "Scoop" were to find new life forms that might benefit the Fort Detrick program. In essence, it was a study to discover new biological weapons of war." (page 44)

*From the very beginning we see the book has an anti-military message. The use of biological and chemical weapons is now felt by most people to be morally inexcusable. Yet the U.S. government is attempting to develop those very weapons through the discovery of alien bacteria. This attempt results in the tragedy at Piedmont and the deaths of many citizens.*

2. When Leavitt gave him the file, Hall had read the note and whistled. "Don't you believe it," Leavitt said. "Just a scare?"

"Scare, hell," Leavitt said. "If the wrong man reads this file, he just disappears." (page 83)

*The secrecy of the Wildfire Project demonstrates the power of the military and the Federal government. The possibility of someone disappearing because they read the wrong file convokes images of the Gestapo, or the "Night and Fog" decrees of the Third Reich. Crichton portrays a military that does not have to be accountable to the American people because the people have little idea what the military is doing. This secrecy results in tragedy.....*

## STUDY QUESTIONS

- 1) Why is it ironic that Hall is the one to make the "highway diagnosis" and prevent the nuclear device from detonating?
- 2) What is Leavitt's problem and why does he keep it a secret?
- 3) What moral dilemma do the scientists face concerning the destruction of the Andromeda strain? .....

## ESSAY TOPICS - BOOK REPORT IDEAS

- 1) Crichton writes the novel as if he were re-telling an actual biological disaster that happened in the U.S. Throughout the book, what examples can you find where he foreshadows the tragedy that could occur?
- 2) Is *The Andromeda Strain* an example of how man put too much faith in technology to solve his problems? If so, list examples from the novel where the sophisticated machinery causes the scientists to become overconfident.....

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