



The Demon in the Freezer: A True Story

By Richard Preston

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“The bard of biological weapons captures the drama of the front lines.”

-Richard Danzig, former secretary of the navy

The first major bioterror event in the United States—the anthrax attacks in October 2001—was a clarion call for scientists who work with “hot” agents to find ways of protecting civilian populations against biological weapons. In **The Demon in the Freezer**, his first nonfiction book since **The Hot Zone**, a #1 *New York Times* bestseller, Richard Preston takes us into the heart of Usamriid, the United States Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases at Fort Detrick, Maryland, once the headquarters of the U.S. biological weapons program and now the epicenter of national biodefense.

Peter Jahrling, the top scientist at Usamriid, a wry virologist who cut his teeth on Ebola, one of the world’s most lethal emerging viruses, has ORCON security clearance that gives him access to top secret information on bioweapons. His most urgent priority is to develop a drug that will take on smallpox—and win. Eradicated from the planet in 1979 in one of the great triumphs of modern science, the smallpox virus now resides, officially, in only two high-security freezers—at the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta and in Siberia, at a Russian virology institute called Vector. But the demon in the freezer has been set loose. It is almost certain that illegal stocks are in the possession of hostile states, including Iraq and North Korea. Jahrling is haunted by the thought that biologists in secret labs are using genetic engineering to create a new superpox virus, a smallpox resistant to all vaccines.

Usamriid went into a state of Delta Alert on September 11 and activated its emergency response teams when the first anthrax letters were opened in New York and Washington, D.C. Preston reports, in unprecedented detail, on the government’s response to the attacks and takes us into the ongoing FBI investigation. His story is based on interviews with top-level FBI agents and with Dr. Steven Hatfill.

Jahrling is leading a team of scientists doing controversial experiments with live smallpox virus at CDC. Preston takes us into the lab where Jahrling is

reawakening smallpox and explains, with cool and devastating precision, what may be at stake if his last bold experiment fails.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

On December 9, 1979, smallpox, the most deadly human virus, ceased to exist in nature. After eradication, it was confined to freezers located in just two places on earth: the Center for Disease Control in Atlanta and the Maximum Containment Laboratory in Siberia. But these final samples were not destroyed at that time, and now secret stockpiles of smallpox surely exist. For example, since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, and the subsequent end of its biological weapons program, a sizeable amount of the former Soviet Union's smallpox stockpile remains unaccounted for, leading to fears that the virus has fallen into the hands of nations or terrorist groups willing to use it as a weapon. Scarier yet, some may even be trying to develop a strain that is resistant to vaccines. This disturbing reality is the focus of this fascinating, terrifying, and important book.

A longtime contributor to *The New Yorker* and author of the bestseller *The Hot Zone*, Preston is a skillful journalist whose work flows like a science fiction thriller. Based on extensive interviews with smallpox experts, health workers, and members of the U.S. intelligence community, *The Demon in the Freezer* details the history and behavior of the virus and how it was eventually isolated and eradicated by the heroic individuals of the World Health Organization. Preston also explains why a battle still rages between those who want to destroy all known stocks of the virus and those who want to keep some samples alive until a cure is found. This is a bitterly contentious point between scientists. Some worry that further testing will trigger a biological arms race, while others argue that more research is necessary since there are currently too few available doses of the vaccine to deal with a major outbreak. The anthrax scare of October, 2001, which Preston also writes about in this book, has served to reinforce the present dangers of biological warfare.

As Preston eloquently states in this powerful book, this scourge, once contained, was let loose again due to human weakness: "The virus's last strategy for survival was to bewitch its host and become a source of power. We could eradicate smallpox from nature, but we could not uproot the virus from the human heart."
--Shawn Carkonen

From Publishers Weekly

Never mind Ebola, the hemorrhagic disease that was the main subject of Preston's 1994 #1 bestseller, *The Hot Zone*. What we really should be worrying about, explains Preston in this terrifying, cautionary new title, is smallpox, or variola. But wasn't that eradicated? many might ask, particularly older Americans who remember painful vaccinations and the resultant scars. Officially, yes, nods Preston, who devotes the first half of the book to the valorous attempt by an army of volunteers to wipe out the virus (an attempt initially sparked by '60s icon Ram Dass and his Indian guru) via strategic vaccination; in 1977 the last case of naturally occurring smallpox was documented in Somalia, and today the variola virus exists officially in only two storage depots, in Russia and at the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta (in the freezer of the title). To believe that variola is not held elsewhere, however, is nonsense, argues Preston, who delves into the possibility that several nations, including Iraq and Russia, have recently worked or are currently working with smallpox as a biological weapon. The author devotes much space to the anthrax attacks of last fall, mostly to demonstrate how easily a devastating assault with smallpox could occur here. He includes an interview with Steven Hatfill, who has received much press coverage for the FBI's investigation of him regarding those attacks; his description of meeting Hatfill, hallmarked by a quick character sketch ("He was a vital, engaging man, with a sharp mind and a sense of humor.... He was heavy-set but looked fit, and he had dark blue eyes") is emblematic of what makes this *New Yorker* regular's writing so gripping. Preston humanizes his science reportage by focusing on individuals-scientists, patients, physicians, government

figures. That, and a flair for teasing out without overstatement the drama in his inherently compelling topics, plus a prose style that's simple and forceful, make this book as exciting as the best thrillers, yet scarier by far, for Preston's pages deal with clear, present and very real dangers.

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From School Library Journal

Adult/High School-This book about smallpox begins with the anthrax attacks of October, 2001, and, by the end of this thriller, Preston has chillingly linked the two topics. All of the anthrax evidence from the Hart Senate Office Building was taken to the United States Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases (USAMRIID) in Fort Detrick, MD, and it is here that the author first brings smallpox into consideration by introducing Peter Jahrling, the organization's senior scientist. He believes that smallpox, which has killed more people than any other infectious disease, is the greatest biological threat facing humanity. Preston relates the history of smallpox from 1000 B.C. to the outbreaks in the 1970s. He goes into great detail about the World Health Organization's campaign to eradicate it and the lost opportunity to destroy it forever. His final chapter introduces the idea of genetically modified smallpox that might be resistant not only to vaccines, but also to acquired immunity. The author draws readers into his narrative by humanizing his facts; researchers, WHO workers, and smallpox victims relay parts of this vivid and alarming story. Fans of Preston's *The Hot Zone* (Anchor, 1995) will definitely want to read this work for that subtle blend of information and horror that he is so adept at providing.

Jody Sharp, Harford County Public Library, MD

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Users Review

From reader reviews:

Betty Giuliani:

Have you spare time for just a day? What do you do when you have a lot more or little spare time? Yep, you can choose the suitable activity with regard to spend your time. Any person spent their spare time to take a walk, shopping, or went to often the Mall. How about open or maybe read a book entitled *The Demon in the Freezer: A True Story*? Maybe it is for being best activity for you. You know beside you can spend your time with the favorite's book, you can wiser than before. Do you agree with their opinion or you have various other opinion?

Julia Sullivan:

The feeling that you get from *The Demon in the Freezer: A True Story* will be the more deep you rooting the information that hide into the words the more you get interested in reading it. It does not mean that this book is hard to comprehend but *The Demon in the Freezer: A True Story* giving you thrill feeling of reading. The copy writer conveys their point in certain way that can be understood by anyone who read the idea because the author of this guide is well-known enough. This kind of book also makes your own vocabulary increase well. That makes it easy to understand then can go along with you, both in printed or e-book style are available. We propose you for having this specific *The Demon in the Freezer: A True Story* instantly.

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