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## BOOK REVIEW

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Mark Kritzman, Senior Editor

### THE PREMONITION

*Michael Lewis*

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*(Reviewed by Javier Estrada,  
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Have you ever heard the names Bob Glass, Charity Dean, Rajeev Venkayya, Richard Hatchett, Carter Meecher, Lisa Koonin, Joe DeRisi, and Michael Wilson? If not, you are very far from alone. They are at the center of Michael Lewis' latest book, *The Premonition*, which centers on the Covid-19 pandemic, and in particular on America's response to it.

Some people may think that Lewis is again taking a group of largely unknown people and making them the undeserved heroes of an important event. Some others may think that Lewis is again rising some unsung heroes to their proper place in the history of an

important event. Your call on that. What is clear is that, in Lewis' view, Glass, Dean, Venkayya, Hatchett, Meecher, Koonin, DeRisi, Wilson, and others should have played a more important role in the pandemic than they did, but several obstacles got in the way.

Just like in most of Lewis' books, and particularly in his last few books, there is a cast of 'good guys' (the names above, among others) and 'bad guys' (the government, the CDC, and president Trump in the background, among others). As you might guess, the good guys want to do the right thing, but the bad guys prevent them from doing so; if you're a reader of Lewis' books, this pattern should sound familiar.

Interestingly, if you did not know this was a book about the Covid-19 pandemic, and you skipped the brief introduction,

you would not know it until chapter 7 (of 11), on page 160 (out of 301). In the first half of the book Lewis' introduces his cast of 'unknown' characters, their brief history, and the work they do, which will eventually play an important role in the second half of the book, about the Covid-19 pandemic.

In the first half we learn that Bob Glass, a scientist at Sandia National Laboratories, builds a model (with his teenage daughter) to explore how a disease spreads; that Charity Dean, the chief health officer in Santa Barbara County, California, has a deep interest in crises stemming from communicable diseases; that Rajeev Venkayya wrote the first draft of America's plan to fight a pandemic in the basement of his parents' house in Ohio; and so forth. It should come as no surprise to readers of Lewis' books that the stories told are entertaining, may

be even captivating; nor should it be surprising that Lewis is merely introducing his cast of characters that will end up playing a key role later in his book.

Some of the issues addressed in the book are uncontroversial and largely accepted as the reality in which, like it or not, we live every day. The inefficiency of government bureaucracy is one of those, which should be very far from surprising. Multiple times in the story of the pandemic as told by Lewis things could have been much better if only the government were more efficient. My favorite example: a public hospital in San Francisco that is offered free and fast testing for Covid-19, which it desperately needs, but is rejected... because it was free! (“We don’t know how to do no-cost,” someone from the hospital is quoted as saying.)

Other issues are controversial. Some of the main characters in the book advocated for an early closing of schools, an issue that remains debated and divisive as of today. They also advocated for imposing lockdowns and

other restrictions, not just at the state level but also at the national level. Whether the scientific advice the ‘Wolverines’ (the name the cast of characters was given) gave is correct is debatable, but some of the measures they contemplated (a GPS tracker) are unthinkable in most Western societies.

After reading Lewis’ book two weaknesses, if you will, came to mind. First, that it may be too soon to write about the pandemic when it seems to be far from over. Some countries are faring better than others, some are restoring normality faster than others, but it is clear that no country can yet raise a ‘The End’ banner. Aftershocks of the pandemic will still be felt in most places for quite some time to come, which prevents anybody from assessing this historic event with a proper perspective.

Second, it is very easy to criticize after the fact. Hindsight is 20/20 and it is not difficult now to make a list of things that perhaps should have been done but were not done, and another of

things that perhaps should have not been done but were done. It is interesting that some of the criticism the CDC as an institution, and Dr. Anthony Fauci as the chief medical advisor to the president, are getting in the U.S. is very similar to the criticism their counterpart institutions and advisors are receiving in other parts of the world. Regardless of what side you are on in these debates, it seems natural that people will channel their frustrations through the scientists that make decisions that affect their daily lives.

All of Lewis’ books are readable, entertaining, and you may even say instructive, and *The Premonition* is no exception. Even if the book would have benefitted from a bigger historical perspective that only time can give; or if you disagree with some of the actions that were taken, or should have been taken, to fight the pandemic; or if you are not aligned with Lewis’ view (his sympathies are clear), I think you will find Lewis’ latest book interesting. I know I did.