

The Winter of Visions and Forgetting: A Novel of the Near Future

By Jack Birnbaum, MD

Review by Scott Prussing, MS



New York: Writers Club Press; 2002. ISBN 0-595-26011-X, paperback. 304 p; \$16.95.

The year is 2008, three years after some unspecified terrible event has ravaged New York City and has cost Dr Daniel Newman his wife. Now, his 11-year-old niece, Kate, has begun to experience a mysterious collection of medical symptoms: blackouts, increasing physical lethargy, and realistic visual hallucinations. As the symptoms worsen, Daniel promises his sister he will spare no effort to discover the cause of her daughter's illness and a way to cure her. He has little idea what this endeavor will ultimately entail.

In *The Winter of Visions and Forgetting*, Jack Birnbaum, MD, has crafted an interesting, fast-moving medical mystery that could have been pulled from today's headlines—or even tomorrow's. In the first half of the book, which is particularly good, Birnbaum teases us with hints of a horrific event that occurred three years previously. One such hint is given when Daniel takes Kate to a hockey game at New York's Madison Square Garden and muses how this sports mecca will never be the same—either for him or for the whole city. Not until page 88, after a number of other referrals to the “event” and its after-effects, do we finally learn what the disaster was. It would be a mistake to reveal it here and thus undo all Dr Birnbaum's good work.

Daniel's search for the cause of Kate's illness brings him into contact with several government agencies, including the Centers for Disease Control and Pre-

vention (CDC) and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), which seem to have a hidden agenda surrounding Kate's (and two other young girls') illness. Roadblocks are placed in Daniel's path to prevent him from becoming too involved in the investigation, but he stubbornly persists in pushing past all the bureaucratic obstacles. Eventually, he becomes intimately involved in the rush to find the answer and the cure. This last part of the book is not as strong as the first—it becomes a typical suspense novel and is not completely believable.

The Winter of Visions and Forgetting is easy to read and is infused with pleasant bits of humor, including some funny jokes told by an FBI agent. One particularly clever bit in the book involves persuading an Arab suspect to talk by threatening to use hormones to turn him into a female—just as they did to Osama bin Laden when they found him! The dialogue is occasionally a bit wooden (characters sometimes speak the way people write, not how they talk) and some characters are stereotypical, but none of this really gets in the

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way of the reader's enjoyment. A practicing internist working in primary care at the KP San Diego facility, Dr Birnbaum handles the medical parts well, and he shows a keen sense of his troubled protagonist's inner emotions. All in all, he has fashioned an interesting and thought-provoking first novel. ❖

Scott Prussing, MS, is a counselor for Kaiser Permanente's Positive Choice Wellness Center in San Diego. He earned his Master's Degree in Psychology from Yale University and is the author of several unpublished novels.

To Be a Great Writer

It's splendid to be a great writer, to put men into the frying pan of your imagination and make them pop like chestnuts.

Gustave Flaubert, 1821-1880, French novelist, in a letter written in 1851