



Book review: RESISTANCE or misguided beliefs of invincibility

Santosh Kumar, PhD (Linguistics)

Assistant Professor, Department of English and Cultural studies, Christ University (Deemed to be University), Bengaluru

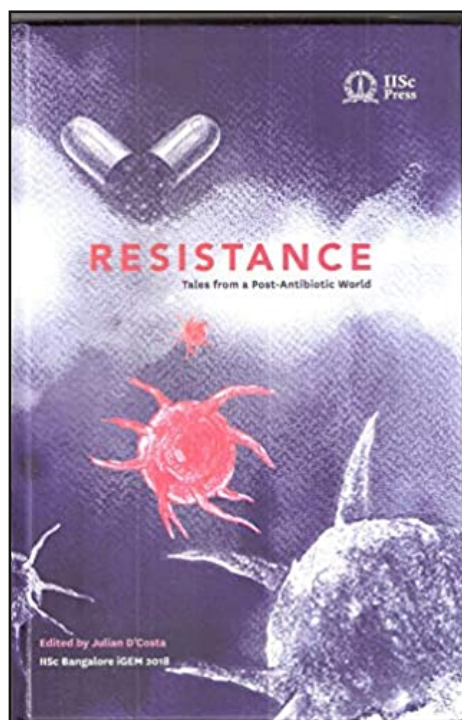
Corresponding Author:

Santosh Kumar
Department of English & Cultural studies,
Christ University (Deemed to be University),
Bengaluru - 560029, Karnataka, India.
Email: santoshk dot du at gmail dot com

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RESISTANCE:
Tales from a Post-Antibiotic world
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The enthusiastic and eager young crowd of school students are welcomed cautiously to the Open Day of the Indian Institute of Sciences even as Covid-19 spreads ominously. The historical and iconic lawn of the institute holds an exhibit of the institute's souvenirs. A blue-jacketed book draws my attention. The title RESISTANCE is in all-caps and in red coloured font, but it is the subtitle - 'Tales from a Post-Antibiotic World' - that

intrigues me to grab the book. In the wake of the pandemic, the red microbes with their spikes that adorn the book cover are appropriately enticing.

RESISTANCE is an anthology of seven short stories that depict a post-antibiotic world in the near future. The anthology is the result of a pedagogical practice of the undergraduate microbiology lab. The stories reveal how the

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IISc iGEM (International Genetically Engineered Machine) teams of 2018 are deeply engaged in the growing antibiotic resistance crisis not only in terms of science but also its implication on humanity. As observed by the editor, the worldwide problem of antibiotic resistance has so far not been dented by technical fixes. Rather, it requires a public understanding of why antibiotic resistance happens and what to do about preventing it. It was this realisation that prompted a pedagogical innovation of writing stories linked to antibiotic resistance that can be enjoyed and understood by all ages. This anthology is a fine example of how complex concepts of microbiology can be told as simple yet interesting tales to engage the community. The stories are in the genre of science-fiction and they anticipate the fall-out of antibiotic overuse through real data and imaginative diction.

The anthology contains a foreword by Prof. Dipshikha Chakravorty who stresses the need to understand our problems not merely as scientific, but also as cultural. It is a fact that in our country pharmacists readily dispense antibiotics without a doctor's prescription. Then, there is the widely prevalent belief among the general population that all infections respond to antibiotics. These beliefs and practices perpetuate inappropriate use.

The current pandemic makes this anthology even more relevant in that it mirrors the dystopian world of a novel. The stories in the anthology depict such a world and it is rightly dedicated "to the more than seven hundred thousand people who will lose their lives to drug resistant pathogens this year".

The first story is Aditi Pujar's 'Fleming Remembers' that takes a revisionist approach to Alexander Fleming's rumination on the eve of receiving the Nobel Prize for penicillin. Pujar beautifully visualises the thoughts that Fleming would have been preoccupied with in the current time over the commercialisation of penicillin and over the threat of antibiotic

resistance.

The next story is 'Tick Tock' by Preetham Venkatesh. It depicts the race against time in the wake of a pandemic akin to the quest for a vaccine that we witnessed with the Covid-19 pandemic. It meticulously sketches out the inner conflict of a young scientist who is on a quest for a new antibiotic while also wrestling with her conscience and scientific ethics. The story deftly depicts the ugly nexus of corporate investment and government policies in scientific research.

Gopika Ranjith's 'Dear Diary' depicts a dystopian world which is slowly dying at the hands of 'oh-so-common' bacterial infections which have become antibiotic-resistant. The diary belongs to a young scientist who pens down the reasons that antibiotics are failing to kill microbes. It simplifies for the reader advanced developments in the field of microbiology like phage therapy, quantum dots, and the use of cadmium, a semiconductor that produces reactive chemicals that affect only pathogens.

Vidhi Sinha's 'Wade's Law' is an interesting story set in a post-antibiotic world and is about the death of a football player during a match when tackled by an opposing player. What makes this story my favourite is how it rethinks the existing medico-legal laws in a post-antibiotic world in which these laws will not be able to serve justice unless they are reformulated.

Bhaskar Kumawat's 'Zero Point One' is the story of Hades, a newly developed phage therapy or a cocktail of multiple viruses in action that target bacteria and don't infect human cells. It captures the macabre tale of the global politics around this new therapy in which the distinction between public good and private gain is blurred.

Ashim Kumar Dubey's 'The Outsider' offers an alternative vision of a future where we fail to mitigate the slow crisis in time. The story highlights the tendency of humans to always

find a way to mess up: using antibiotics as chicken feed so that the chicken grow faster and stay healthy, for example.

Last but not the least, Hari Narayanan's story 'If You Say So' appears to be a resolution of the anthology. The story shows how cooperation rather than competition may be the way forward in dealing with global conflicts rooted in scientific misadventures. This thrilling tale of intrigue depicts the highest level of world diplomacy through the lens of interpreters. This approach can not only prevent us from fighting wars but also enable us to fight drug resistant microbes.

This anthology represents a pedagogical innovation that other scientific and technological courses should consider emulating. It tries to disseminate complex concepts and terminologies to lay people through lucid storytelling using easy vocabulary. Storytelling is a powerful tool and has the potential to help the community learn of scientific facts through entertaining means. This anthology is recommended to both scientists and lay people, alike, in order to bring home the implications of antibiotic misuse and how it gives birth to antibiotic resistant microbes.