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## Stem Cell Symphony by Ricki Lewis

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A reader cannot help learning about and appreciating the interesting adaptations and behaviors of spiders. Even those who would rather just avoid spiders altogether will come away from this book with a new admiration.



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## STEM CELLS

**Stem Cell Symphony.**  
By Ricki Lewis. 2007.  
Trafford Publishing. (ISBN  
1425154026). 228 pp.  
Paperback. \$25.69.

**Stem Cell Symphony** is a novel that attempts to bring the field of stem cell research to the forefront by combining science and medicine with romance, intrigue, and death. The author utilizes her expertise as a writer of biology textbooks, a science journalist, and a genetic counselor to tell the story of Stuart Matheson, a nursing home resident with end-stage Huntington's Disease who is befriended by a hospice volunteer who changes his life. The main character Kelsey Raye, is a science writer looking for a way to reconcile the cancer deaths of her parents. At her father's funeral, Kelsey meets his former hospice caretaker. This encounter launches Kelsey on an emotional path that forces her to recognize her own spirituality, that seems to compliment her scientific perspective on life and death, and serve as a source of inner strength.

Dealing with death is just one of the overarching themes of this novel. The author succeeds in bringing the reader's attention to our inabilities as a society to confront differences we have about longevity and quality of life issues, as well as the role that stem cells may play in this realm. In this quote, Kelsey admonishes personnel at the headquarters of "Citizens Against Stem Cell Research" for their lack of scientific knowledge and naiveté.

*"What about QUALITY of life? Kelsey stood up and gestured at the baby-themed wallpaper. 'Why don't you paper your room with*



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*photographs of people with spinal cord injuries? Or multiple sclerosis? Or children with diabetes? Or spinal muscular atrophy? What we're really talking about is helping living and breathing people, people in pain NOW, people facing premature death. Not balls of cells that have barely even turned on their own genomes.'*"

This novel opens the reader's eyes to the fatal condition known as Huntington's Disease. By personalizing this inherited disorder, the author tries to inform us about all of the debilitating and terminal diseases that have no treatments or cures and how they impinge on afflicted patients and their families. In one section of the book, the main character appears before a Washington senate sub-committee, accompanied by a cell biologist, who happens to be her "lover," to answer questions about stem cell research. Together they grab the attention of the senators by wowing them with the numbers of individuals in the US, some 9.5 million people, suffering from medical conditions that could potentially be helped by stem cells. In a somewhat melodramatic part of the book, a powerful senator does an about face concerning his support for funding stem cell research.

*"Senator Branch stood up, his hands behind his back. 'Thank you', he said. 'Both of you. We've learned a lot. And I, for one, am 100 percent behind human embryonic stem cell research. Given the numbers, and horrific nature of these diseases, it isn't a crime to use these cells. It is a crime to not use them.'"*

Throughout the book, the author uses current scientific information and does an excellent job of relaying complicated concepts in understandable terms. For those that have a scientific background, it is quite clear when the author takes poetic license and embellishes reality by suggesting that music has healing power. This is depicted when the main character plays her iPod for her hospice patient who afterward shows signs of physical and mental improvement. But with a humorous slant Kelsey doesn't play just any type of music; alas it has to be rock and roll, "the devil's music."

There are a few other places where the book becomes a little unbelievable and diminishes the overall reading experience. However, to her credit, the author weaves numerous societal issues into the plot to help inform readers. But in so doing, she turns the main character from a person we can identify with into somewhat of a superhero that I think detracts from the intent and purposeful value of this novel.

Although I enjoyed reading the book, I grimaced on occasion because of the "far-fetched" twists and turns of the plot. I admire the author's efforts to undertake such an auspicious task of providing scientific facts in a palatable manner, but I think she might have gone a little over-board leaving a "corny" taste in my mouth. I can't in good faith recommend this book for use in a major's science course, but it might inform non-science majors provided the teacher can aptly assist her students in separating truth from fiction.



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