

Particles in the Air: A Dr. Mallory Hayes Medical Thriller

Jenna Podjasek

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Particles in the Air is a slow-burn medical thriller in which a capable but troubled doctor tries to stop a horrific pandemic.

In Jenna Podjasek's thriller *Particles in the Air*, a medical investigator discovers a deadly and unstoppable new virus.

A tsunami strikes the coast of Southern California, leaving a large swath of the population homeless and trapped. FEMA establishes a camp to provide medical services and other necessary help to the growing group of displaced people. The CDC sends one of their best medical investigators, Dr. Mallory Hayes, to survey and evaluate the camp in the hopes of preventing the spread of disease—and of figuring out if the virus is natural or human-made.

While Hayes finds that the camp is doing a good job at keeping hygiene standards up while treating the expected ailments, she fears the worst. Still, the virus seems close to burning itself out in the camp. But then reports pour in of infections occurring across the country—with a 100 percent mortality rate. Hayes's fears are confirmed. Hayes races to discover the virus's origins—or a cure.

Hayes is developed as a fascinating, complicated heroine. She shoulders the burden of solving the medical mystery almost wholly by herself. She's determined and capable, but she also contends with several phobias. Her drive to protect people's lives and stop the virus forces her to confront her issues, even if overcoming them seems impossible. As she pursues the truth, she becomes more strained.

Methodically paced, the book builds its narrative tension well, as when it reveals that the virus's creator is building connections with terrorists. A personal revenge scheme is introduced along with a villain who doesn't care how the virus they developed is used. And even as it becomes clear that terrorists plan to use the virus against the American people, the revelation of how and why is slow to come. The suspense increases as Hayes and the CDC deal with the virus's immediate effects.

Throughout the book, the conversations—both between the book's villains and between Hayes and other people working to stop the virus—are deep and varied; they help to ground and humanize the story. In addition, the clarity with which the medical elements of the story are handled—including in its coverage of the virus's sinister development and Hayes's research—makes the tale both sobering and convincing. Subtle connections are drawn between Hayes's personal life, the virus creator's revenge plot, and the virus itself as the book works toward its satisfying ending.

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JOHN M. MURRAY (February 7, 2023)

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