

THE STEM CELL DILEMMA; Beacons of Hope or Harbingers of Doom? *

SECTION: NONFICTION **LENGTH:** 356 words

* A star is assigned to books of remarkable merit, determined by the editors of *Kirkus Reviews*.



Bill Hoffman

Timely, levelheaded investigation of stem-cell medicine.

Stem cells possess the power to regenerate and repair body tissue, Furcht and Hoffman (both: Laboratory Medicine and Pathology/Univ. of Minnesota Medical School) remind us. Some of that power has been tapped, for instance, in countering bone-marrow failure.

But stem cells' theoretical potential to regenerate and restore all of the body's tissues, particularly via embryonic stem cells, will be fully realized, if ever, only after extensive research. Nothing is starry-eyed in this plainspoken, well-tuned text. Although researchers are unveiling the mystery of stem cells everyday, and much lies in the province of possibility, the authors aver that those possibilities are based on good science, which they capably explicate for the reader. Their treatment of the stem-cell issue is thoroughgoing, acknowledging that embryonic stem-cell research raises bioethical as well as biological questions, and that economic considerations play a role in its development. They treat the ethical issue with respect, applying a cross-cultural perspective to everything from designer babies to the commodification of life. They make a case for continued research with some intelligent form of governance: "Ethical lines move all the time within the polity, subject to the dynamics of the polity -- that is, politics." The denial of federal funds, they fear, will contribute to the brain drain of researchers from the United States, despite infusions of state, philanthropic and venture capital. They also warn of the technology's dual use: "To understand the immune system enough to re-create it is to possess the potential biological power of annihilation" -- a threat only knowledge can check.

Noting that the biorevolution gives humankind a potentially vast power to expand the boundaries of life, the authors ask, "Are we...prepared to understand that power, seize it, and use it wisely?" Their cogent survey gives readers the tools to address that daunting question.

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