

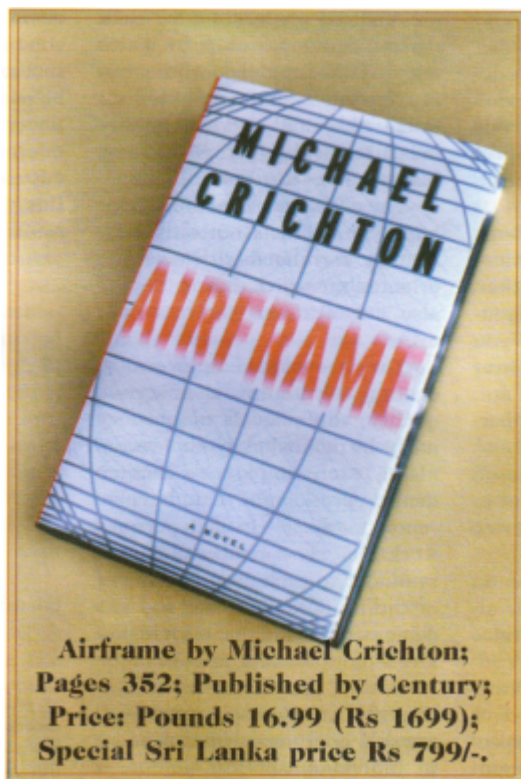
Mid -Air Adventures

Posted on

Michael Crichton is well known to Sri Lankans as the author of Jurassic Park, one of the most successful movies ever made. In his latest book, Airframe, Crichton moves away from pre- historic dinosaurs to events which are up in the air- to be more precise, air travel. He deals with an issue which is very topical to Sri Lanka, with planes from our Airforce being casualties like kites on the Galle Face Green.

It is a book which any frequent air traveller should read because under Sri Lanka's new laws for air tickets introduced in January, the traveller now has only a choice of airline as all tickets to destinations are basically the same. But which airline has better safety precautions, better security checks? These are important questions one should ask before one gets on board, as one's life is at stake. I read the book in mid-March travelling between Colombo and London, but I would not recommend such an exercise to infrequent travellers, who may be disturbed by the slightest vibration or turbulence. It is best read while on the ground rather than at 35,000 feet above sea level.

The plot of Airframe looks simple with a plane from Hong Kong enroute to USA affected by turbulence. The pilot radios ahead nonchalantly and asks for 40 ambulances to be kept ready on the tarmac to take the injured. The air traffic controller cannot believe his ears, but obliges.



**Airframe by Michael Crichton;
Pages 352; Published by Century;
Price: Pounds 16.99 (Rs 1699);
Special Sri Lanka price Rs 799/-.**

The plane lands with 3 dead passengers and 56 injured. What happened on that plane? This is the question all want an answer for. Did the slats extend in flight? Did the thrust reverses deploy? Did the autopilot take over because it thought the pilot had erred? Was the pilot battling for control while the computer systems tried to take over? Crichton unwittingly makes the reader wonder whether this is a story of a modern day Computer Hal.

There are fascinating details to be learnt about planes in the book. We learn that each plane has over a million parts which must function simultaneously. When crashes or has an accident, the first question which is asked is where is the black box? The cockpit voice recorder (CVR) and the digital flight data recorder (DFDR), store details of the behaviour of the plane. A modern DFDR records eighty separate flight parameters every second of the flight. The black box is the size of a shoe box with tough housing to resist any crash impact.

The plot becomes exciting because there are many side shows. The aircraft company is trying to sell planes to China, the workers of the company are worried that the management is surreptitiously trying to give the Chinese the details of the wing, which could mean that they will be unemployed if the Chinese learn how to make the sophisticated aircraft. Meanwhile, the pilot and crew of the illfated plane have flown home and are not available for comment. Any indication that the experienced pilot had been responsible for the

accident would jeopardize Trans Pacific's (the airline company) relations and may lead to the cancellation of 12 planes on order. They already have 10 in service.

One learns frightening things too. For instance, a US Air flight which crashed in Charlotte because the engineers when refixing a computer did not push it far enough and there was a loose connection. Result: it worked by fits and starts. There are other issues raised in the book which are of relevance. The aircraft company builds the plane but the airlines in order to cut costs ask for different engines. In Crichton's book, the rotor of one engine of a plane

bursts into flames on take-off on the runway but luckily all 270 passengers escape. The natural tendency is to blame the plane but it is revealed that the engineers had advised them against fixing the type of engine the airline wanted but the warning was not heeded.

As one air plane manufacturing company executive states, 'we build the plane and then install the brand of engine the customer selects. Just the way you can put any one of the several brands of tyres on your car. But if Michelin makes a batch of bad tyres and they blow out that's not Ford's fault. If you let your tyres go bald and get in an accident, that's not Ford's fault. And it's exactly the same with us.' So, who is to blame if there is a problem on the plane and lives are lost?

Crichton also gives an insight into Board Room battles in big American companies as one executive tries to outdo the boss in order to impress the Board he can do a better job.

But beyond this there is another important aspect highlighted by the author- the power of the media and that truth is sometimes a casualty when young journalists want only a story to cover themselves in glory. Crichton, who is a film director and the creator of the hit TV series, ER, knows the power of media. He uses the book to hit out at journalists hiding under the protection of the First Amendment of the US Constitution and who go to extremes to hide their sins and manipulations. Crichton points out that the fairness doctrine of the US, under which equal time must be provided, was scrapped by the great communicator, President Reagan. He says that a few years after passing the First Amendment, Thomas Jefferson was one of the first to complain about how inaccurate and unfair the press was.

As John Marder, the Chief Operating Officer of Norton Aircraft, the airplane company says, 'we are not talking about 200 years ago. And we are not talking about a few nasty editorials in Colonial newspapers. We are talking about a TV show with compelling images that goes instantly to 40 to 50 million people, a sizeable percentage of the whole country and murders our reputation.'

He takes a swipe at TV. A PR executive briefs the spokesperson of the aircraft company before she appears in an interview with a top TV news personality. She advises, 'a lot of people complain that TV lacks focus. But that's the nature of the medium. TV is not about information at all. Information is active, engaging. TV is passive. Information is disinterested, objective. TV is emotional. It is entertainment. Whatever he says, however he acts, in truth Martin (the TV interviewer) has absolutely no interest in you, or your company, or your airplane. He is paid to exercise his own reliable talent: provoking people, getting them to make an emotional outburst, to lose their temper, to say something outrageous. He doesn't really want to know about airplanes. He wants a media moment.'

As the events unfold one is reminded of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's masterpiece, "The Ancient Mariner." One event leads to another and everything else is forgotten. There are technical aspects dealt with in detail in the book but Crichton's expertise is shown by the fact that it does not bore the reader but instead gets him involved in finding out what happened on board that plane.

He gets his revenge at the end, with TV coming off second best. It is tense and gripping till the end and the reason why the plane behaved the way it did as revealed in the final chapter of the book shows why Crichton is a best selling author.



Vijitha Yapa, Chairman of the Vijitha Yapa Group of Companies, is founder editor of 3 national newspapers (The Island, Sunday Island and Sunday Times). He is Sri Lanka's correspondent for a number of foreign publications including The Times, London.