He was the most powerful Sith lord who ever lived.

But could he be the only one who never died?

“Did you ever hear the Tragedy of Darth Plagueis the Wise? It’s a Sith legend. Darth Plagueis was a Dark Lord of the Sith, so powerful and so wise that he could use the Force to influence the midi-chlorians to create life. He had such a knowledge of the dark side that he could even keep the ones he cared about from dying.”

—Supreme Chancellor Palpatine, Star Wars: Episode III Revenge of the Sith

Darth Plagueis: one of the most brilliant Sith Lords who ever lived. Possessing power is all he desires. Losing it is the only thing he fears. As an apprentice, he embraces the ruthless ways of the Sith. And when the time is right, he destroys his Master—but vows never to suffer the same fate. For like no other disciple of the dark side, Darth Plagueis learns to command the ultimate power . . . over life and death.

Darth Sidious: Plagueis’s chosen apprentice. Under the guidance of his Master, he secretly studies the ways of the Sith, while publicly rising to power in the galactic government, first as Senator, then as Chancellor, and eventually as Emperor.
Darth Plagueis and Darth Sidious, Master and acolyte, target the galaxy for domination—and the Jedi Order for annihilation. But can they defy the merciless Sith tradition? Or will the desire of one to rule supreme, and the dream of the other to live forever, sow the seeds of their destruction?

[Note: I tried to make this review 100% spoiler-free, but read at your own risk. Once the book is published, I will update the review to discuss a few plot points and characters in greater depth. However, I'm happy to answer specific questions in the comments section.]

I think it's fair to say that Star Wars: Darth Plagueis is the most eagerly anticipated Star Wars novel of the past 5 years. However, Star Wars: Darth Plagueis is also one of the most risky because it delves into the backstory of Darth Sidious/Emperor Palpatine, easily the most evil villain in all of Star Wars. Some fans were worried that the book might demystify Palpatine or humanize him a bit too much (just as Episode I made Anakin a bit too sympathetic a character).

So let me begin my review by stating that Star Wars: Darth Plagueis does not destroy Palpatine's character—it makes him even more evil and chilling. We do not see Palpatine as a cute little blond boy. While the book spends a good deal of covering Palpatine and his machinations, it's quite clear how the younger Palpatine presented in this book grew up to become the sadistic Sith Lord of the films. There were a few times when Palpatine's actions even sent a slight shiver down my spine. We do, however, learn a bit more about how exactly Palpatine rose to power and where his urges stem from.

As for the title character, I think James Luceno does a great job of bringing Darth Plagueis to life. I admit I was actually a bit worried because Darth Plagueis is a Munn (the same species as San Hill), and we all know that the Star Wars universe has a tendency to stereotype characters by race. I was worried the book would overplay the stereotype of Munns as bankers. However, Luceno handles this pretty well by giving Darth Plagueis a sort of Count of Monte Cristo personality (or alternatively a mix between Prince Xizor and Darth Bane). Like Sidious, Plagueis lives a double life, and he lives each life with a ferocious intensity. In a few scenes, Plagueis transforms from negotiator to killer with frightening speed. Overall, Luceno created a complex character stands out above most of the other Sith characters.

The plot is more of a political thriller and serves as a backstory for the movies. I personally dislike Star Wars books that throw in a bunch of battles just to see the characters whip out their blasters or lightsabers, so I thought Star Wars: Darth Plagueis was a welcome change of pace. There are only a few fight scenes, but those that are in the book are really emotionally intense and bloodcurdling (yes, I said bloodcurdling). More importantly, the action scenes reveal a lot about the characters and how
much they enjoy violence. Again, without revealing too much, the book reminded me of The Count of Monte Cristo in how the plot develops.

There were two unique aspects to Luceno's writing style in this book that I want to highlight. First, unlike so many Star Wars books (come on, we know Luke, Han, and Leia aren't going to die!), Luceno does not try to build a false sense of suspense. After all, we know Darth Plagueis is killed and we know who killed him (it was revealed in Episode III, but even if you fell asleep during that scene the murder scene takes place on the first page of the book). Rather, Luceno toys with what we think we know about Star Wars history and holds readers attention by focusing on HOW and WHEN events unfold. At his best, Luceno forces readers to rethink and relearn the events of the prequels. I for one thought the book filled in many of the holes left by the movies, even more so than the movie novelizations. I finally understand what happened in Episode II!

Second, the narrative style in the book is unlike anything I've seen in Star Wars novels, with the exception of Matt Stover's books. The narrator has a voice of his/her own, one that doesn't intrude into the story but rather makes it more epic. For example, the narrator places certain planets or events in historical context, even referring to events and places from the movies. My favorite line [mini-SPOILER Alert] in the book is: Naboo and Gungan alike couldnt recall a colder winter than the one that followed [Plagueis] autumnal visit... [end SPOILER alert]. The narrator also provides a lot of physical detail making it easy to envision the characters and the scene. It's a different style for Luceno, whose previous books seemed a bit lighthearted, but I think this tone suits this book really well.

One more thing: Luceno worked closely with LucasFilm in writing the book. My understanding is that the book is as close as any novel can get to being canon (although the Star Wars Expanded Universe canon system is pretty confusing). In other words, this is THE story of Plagueis and Palpatine.

Overall, I was pleased to see how James Luceno built Darth Plagueis, Darth Sidious, and Darth Maul into truly compelling and evil characters. It easily stands head and shoulders above most Star Wars novels both for its character development and its storytelling. I haven't been the biggest fan of Luceno's books in the past, but it's clear he dedicated a lot of time, thought, and love to this book. A must read for any Star Wars fan!

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