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The Great Influenza: The Epic Story Of The Deadliest Plague In History



Synopsis

No disease the world has ever known even remotely resembles the great influenza epidemic of 1918. Presumed to have begun when sick farm animals infected soldiers in Kansas, spreading and mutating into a lethal strain as troops carried it to Europe, it exploded across the world with unequalled ferocity and speed. It killed more people in twenty weeks than AIDS has killed in twenty years; it killed more people in a year than the plagues of the Middle Ages killed in a century. Victims bled from the ears and nose, turned blue from lack of oxygen, suffered aches that felt like bones being broken, and died. In the United States, where bodies were stacked without coffins on trucks, nearly seven times as many people died of influenza as in the First World War. In his powerful new book, award-winning historian John M. Barry unfolds a tale that is magisterial in its breadth and in the depth of its research, and spellbinding as he weaves multiple narrative strands together. In this first great collision between science and epidemic disease, even as society approached collapse, a handful of heroic researchers stepped forward, risking their lives to confront this strange disease. Titans like William Welch at the newly formed Johns Hopkins Medical School and colleagues at Rockefeller University and others from around the country revolutionized American science and public health, and their work in this crisis led to crucial discoveries that we are still using and learning from today. The Washington Post's Jonathan Yardley said Barry's last book can "change the way we think." The Great Influenza may also change the way we see the world.

--This text refers to the Library Binding edition.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This is an amazingly detailed account of the Great Flu epidemic of 1918, which killed millions around the world. Mr. Barry's research is astounding. I strongly urge anyone interested in how it happened to read his book. Besides a new strain of influenza (which happens repeatedly), much of the world was at war. This resulted in tremendous overcrowding of military bases, combined with censorship. Thus, the flu spread quickly, and the governments refused to acknowledge it. This allowed it to spread even faster. A fascinating read of the disaster, and the human response to it.

Interesting read concerning events that shook the world. I was surprised by lack of concern, the educational standards or lack of for MDs, the absence of effective medicines, the arrogance of most of the medical and government leaders, the failure of the military to use basic measures in treatment of the outbreak, and the persistence of the investigators to push to find cause and treatment for the Flu. We certainly owe them greatly.

John Barry spent seven years writing this fascinating account of the worst epidemic in history. Nearly every household was affected by the 1918 Influenza yet little has been told of it. Except for Katherine Anne Porter's *Pale Horse Pale Rider* fiction writers have largely omitted it. Yet it was perhaps the most influential event in the early 20th century. Barry traces the state of medical preparedness and details the disease as it spread across America into Europe during WWI and thence to all parts of the globe. This is very much a study of how this disease led to greater medical science and advancement but it is also a study of human frailties and the danger of a dictatorial government and a restrained press.

I bought this book as a requirement for a college history course and am very glad the teacher asked us to do so. It is insightful and informative. Alongside what I learned in the class about this time period in American history, it not only gave me more information about this horrific epidemic, it opened up a lot of understanding for me about our society. I greatly enjoyed it.

This book is a sobering wake-up call to those of us who fret about exotic diseases like smallpox and the Ebola virus when we should be worrying instead about "only" influenza. Barry does an excellent job of describing why and how the 1918 influenza epidemic was so lethal, and he does not shy away from the disquieting conclusion that another lethal epidemic is inevitable. Moreover, it is clear that the greater mobility and density of modern life will work to our disadvantage when the next

epidemic hits. This book was extremely well-researched, exhaustive, and well-written. However, it was not without its disappointments. First and foremost, the book got off to an extremely slow start, devoting approximately the first third to a detailed (and largely unnecessary) history of medicine throughout classical times and, in particular, the 19th century in the United States. Particularly grating was the author's rather gushing portrayal of the establishment of the Johns Hopkins University, a fine institution to be sure, but not quite deserving of the idolatry displayed by Barry. More generally, I was disappointed that so much of the book was devoted to institutional reactions to the epidemic, and less time and space was devoted to the human aspects of the story. The parts of the book I enjoyed the most were when Barry presented people's individual experiences with the epidemic, as revealed in letters, books, and interviews. These anecdotes conveyed much more vividly what it must have been like to live through the fear and panic wreaked by the epidemic. Alas, this kind of detail was in the minority in this very long book, which tended to stress instead the system-level reactions to the epidemic, for example, the (irritatingly apathetic) response of the military. Do these criticisms mean that the book is bad? No, not at all; it just means that it is a more scholarly work, intended to place the epidemic within a larger historical context, rather than provide an oral history of what it was like to live through the epidemic. Thus it is probably unfair of me to criticize it for not being something it did not intend to be; I'm just saying that readers who want primarily the more sensationalized, personalized story of the epidemic may very well be bored and frustrated by this book. I also wish the author had devoted more time than the brief chapter he included on discussing what lessons we can learn from the 1918 epidemic in helping us to cope with the (inevitable) next influenza epidemic. To me, the most interesting and provocative finding of the book was the author's description of how a very few communities were able to escape the epidemic virtually unscathed, and this was through a rapid response to the encroaching epidemic accompanied by a drastic and total closing of city borders. Quite simply, the areas that did not lose any lives to the epidemics were the towns that did not allow anybody to come in. This policy was effective where no other measures (wearing masks, shutting down public meetings, making spitting a crime) were, but the legal and logistical implications of such isolationism are staggering, and I wish Barry had explored them in depth. I wish this because--even though it is only influenza--we will probably in our lifetimes be confronted with such a crisis. Barry's book does an excellent job of explaining why we should be terrified at this prospect, but it falls short in telling us what we can do to minimize it.

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