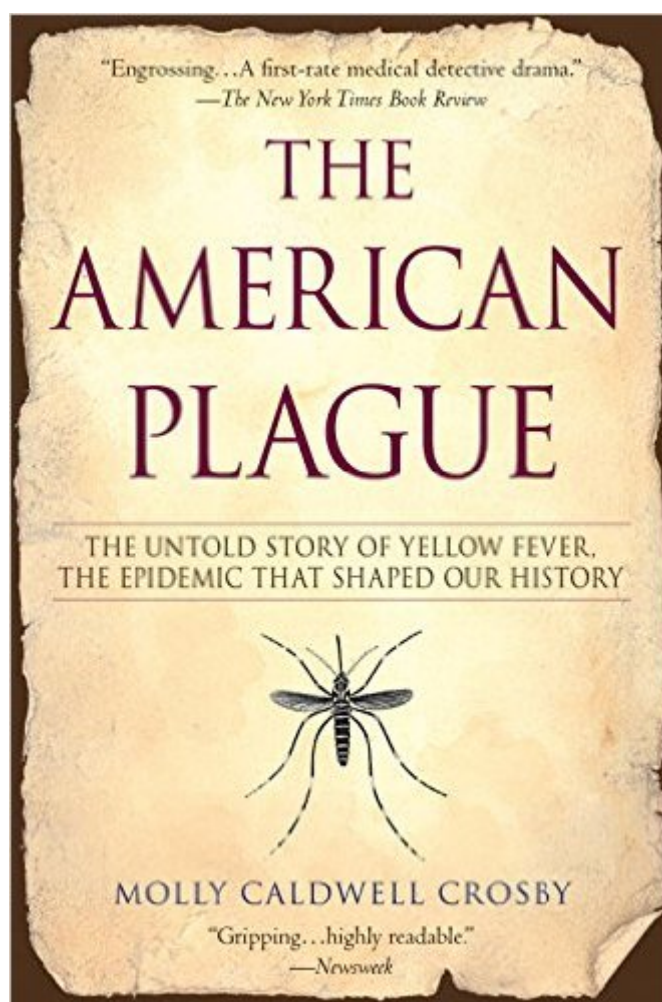


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# The American Plague



## Synopsis

In this national-bestselling account, a journalist traces the course of yellow fever, stopping in 1878 Memphis to "vividly [evoke] the Faulkner-meets-'Dawn of the Dead' horrors,"\*-and moving on to today's strain of the killer virus. Over the course of history, yellow fever has paralyzed governments, halted commerce, quarantined cities, moved the U.S. capital, and altered the outcome of wars. During a single summer in Memphis alone, it cost more lives than the Chicago fire, the San Francisco earthquake, and the Johnstown flood combined. In 1900, the U.S. sent three doctors to Cuba to discover how yellow fever was spread. There, they launched one of history's most controversial human studies. Compelling and terrifying, *The American Plague* depicts the story of yellow fever and its reign in this country-and in Africa, where even today it strikes thousands every year. With "arresting tales of heroism,"\*\* it is a story as much about the nature of human beings as it is about the nature of disease.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This is the first book by a young author from Memphis, Tennessee, and while not without shortcomings, it's a better start than most. Crosby describes some key moments in our fight against this nasty disease, starting with a general overview, moving to the ghastly epidemic that devastated Memphis, then to the scene of the critical triumph in Cuba, and finally to the contemporary world and the potential that yellow fever has for a breakout. Along the way she conveys a good sense of what her home town was like in the 1870s, as well as the hardships faced by the medical staff and

volunteers in Cuba. The book is as much a peek into life in some highly stressed places as a medical story. Crosby's random jumping from scene to scene, however, creates a sense of disjointedness that detracts from the book's interest. One gets the impression that what she really wanted to write was a book about "Memphis," not one about yellow fever. This is entirely fine, and choosing to focus on Memphis as plague city certainly establishes a niche for her product. But how does it connect to the scene in Cuba where the seeds of the fever's defeat are first sown? There have been far more comprehensive treatments of Walter Reed's operation there, and Crosby contributes nothing new and notable, nor does she tie Reed's work strongly back to the subject that is obviously her passion. Quite possibly she felt obliged to include this material simply to make the text long enough to interest a publisher; it's not hard to imagine that her researches had pretty thoroughly mined out the information available on Memphis during the plague years, and it wasn't enough for a stand-alone book.

For as long as we have had illnesses, we have tried to understand them; the earliest of understandings was that some angry deity was sending down punishment for some sort of transgression. It's an explanation that still satisfies many people. Yellow fever could be seen as vengeance direct from God. It was a disease spawned in Africa, and Europeans involved in the slave trade were especially stricken. There is no reason that a yellow fever epidemic has never infested Asia, except that there was no African slave trade there. It infested all of the American colonies, but when the Atlantic slave trade was abolished in the northern states, it went away, continuing in the southern ones. Gods were not involved in the illness, however, or at least their involvement is less direct than the virus that causes the dreadful symptoms and death, or the mosquito that carries the virus. In *The American Plague: The Untold Story of Yellow Fever, the Epidemic That Shaped Our History* (Berkley), Molly Caldwell Crosby details the ravages of the epidemics, the process by which the disease was brought under some control, and the fears that it might again become a player on the world's pathology stage. Crosby lives in Memphis, and the first part of her book tells of the epidemic there of 1878. The passages describing the disease within the city's neighborhoods are a combination of Faulkner and Poe. The disease sounds dreadful. The disease had come to Memphis from Havana, borne by the steamer *Emily B. Souder* up the Mississippi, and starting in July 1878, Memphis residents began dropping; it is a dismal and scary tale. The second half of Crosby's book tells the more familiar story of the eventual understanding of how the disease worked.

Yellow fever, the West African slave trade's gift to the New World, rips through vulnerable populations like a hot knife through butter. In 1801, Napoleon brought 25,000 troops to put down a Haitian slave revolt; 23,000 died from the fever. (That's why he was in such a rush to ditch the Louisiana Territory, and Jefferson knew a bargain when he saw one.) In 1878, the mosquito-borne virus arrived in Memphis TN, and people started dropping like flies. Molly Caldwell Crosby does a great job describing the city's atmosphere before the fever and its descent into hell as Yellow Jack claims more and more victims. There were heroic efforts by caregivers who didn't understand the disease but who nonetheless tended to the dead and dying. Crosby describes doctors, and nuns, who knew they'd eventually catch the fever but who worked as hard as they could, for as long as they could, to comfort the sick. Inspiring and scary! Yellow fever isn't the kind of fever that lets you lapse into delirium after a day of discomfort. It's a hemorrhagic fever, which means you bleed from body parts you didn't even know you had. The Brits called it "Black Vomit" because internal bleeding causes the sufferer to vomit blood. Crosby then focuses on the ultimately successful efforts of Walter Reed and company, military doctors who set up camp in Cuba and doggedly pursued the cause of the disease. Some of these men deliberately infected themselves with the virus in order to prove that mosquito exposure was to blame, and that mosquito control would rein in the disease. Because of Reed and his team, and at least in the Western Hemisphere, we have managed to subdue the Fever. Reed's campaign goes to show that the many of the greatest military victories occur not on the battlefield but in hospitals.

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