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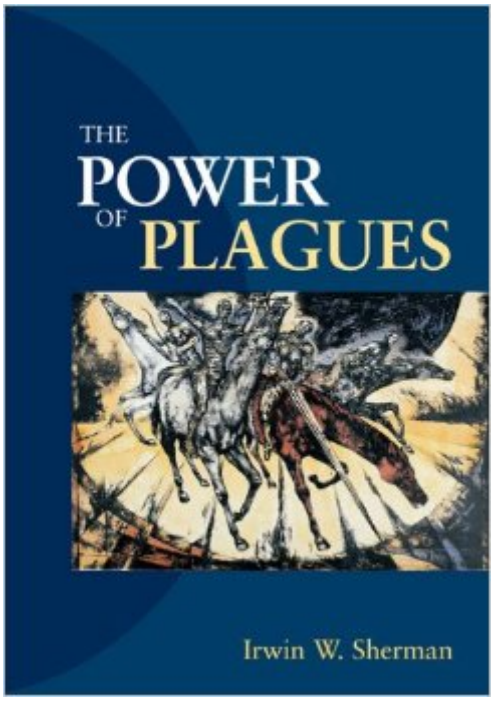
The Power Of Plagues



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Synopsis

A fascinating examination of epidemic diseases within a historical context. â ¢ Describes the nature and evolution of diseases.â ¢ Explains how scientists discovered the causes of infectious diseases and outlines how controls were developed.â ¢ Examines the interrelationship between plagues and culture and details the ways this shaped the traditions and institutions of Western civilization.â ¢ Highlights current epidemics such as AIDS, cholera, tuberculosis, influenza, West Nile virus, mad cow disease, and others.â ¢ Addresses the publicâ ™s curiosity with outbreaks and diseases of public health concern.

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Customer Reviews

This book languishes in some obscurity, published at a high price by a rather arcane scientific society. I hope some mass publisher has the sense to buy the rights and bring it out in paperback. It deserves the widest circulation. The book is a survey of major diseases, their biology, their transmission, and their major historic effects. Irwin Sherman talks about disease in general, then about such famous historic crises as the Black Death in medieval Europe, then about major diseases such as malaria and tuberculosis. Much of the book covers fairly familiar ground, if you have read such well-known disease histories as William McNeill’s PLAGUES AND PEOPLES. However, several things set this book apart. First, it’s extremely accurate. Few know the biology better. The history has been carefully researched and updated. Controversial statements are flagged as such. Second, Sherman covers all the new plagues that have afflicted us in recent years.

I think this is the first such general history to deal with hantavirus, mad cow disease, bird flu, and the rest. Third, the book is well written and reasonably well illustrated (I wish there had been more pictures). Some minor limitations: Sherman is too quick to assume the Black Death was largely bubonic plague. This has been challenged, and the debate could have used more coverage. I wish, also, that a bit more had been done with some of the great recent disease-fighters. Sherman covers Koch, Pasteur, Semmelweisz, and the other classic names, but I wish he had mentioned some of the modern ones not covered in other books. Some are appealing characters, such Maurice Hillebrant, the would-be hog farmer and hog veterinarian who (fortunately for humans but unfortunately for hogs) got interested in people and developed the MMR and several other standard shots, thus saving tens of millions of lives. There is also James Grant, who as head of UNICEF in the 1980s got those shots actually out to the world; at the start of his tenure only a quarter of the world's children got all their shots, but when he retired some three-quarters did. Again, tens of millions of children saved. We all know the names of mass murderers from Hitler to Pol Pot; why don't we know the names of people who saved so many lives? There are very few outright errors in Sherman's book, and those few are pretty trivial. One concerns the Chinese medical text "Huangdi Neijing" or "Nei Ching." It is misspelled "Nei Chang" here, and given two different dates, both wrong (2700 BC on p. 136 and ca 250 BC on p. 304; some of the book does date as early as the latter date, but the actual date of the final product is around 100 A.D., and there was some subsequent updating). In short, anyone looking for a fascinating, authoritative, up-to-date book about disease should check this out. Full disclosure: I have to admit bias. For years and years, at the University of California, Riverside, Sherman taught a basic introduction to the biology of disease while I taught a basic introduction to the social and cultural side of medicine. We loosely coordinated these courses--at least we didn't step on each other's toes. Now we are retired, and he has turned his course into book form. So have I, but it sits in first-draft state and probably always will (I'm busy with other projects), so if you want it, email me and I'll send you it to download (it's pretty long). It complements Sherm's book pretty neatly. Anyway, congratulations to Dr. Sherman for great work all the way through.

The Power of Plagues contains a fairly thorough assessment of the historical development of epidemiology. Irwin Sherman goes into considerable detail of not only the major epidemic events of very recent history (from a paleontologist's point of view), but he also provides some general background into the biological processes involved. Many times he tries and succeeds in creating an adventurous account of the historical search for a particular vector or pathological agent. For

anyone interested in a general overview of disease and its development as well as an account of the development of man’s responses to disease, this is a good book.Although there are many good aspects to his accounts, his writing suffers from some very significant negative qualities. First of all, his underlying anti-white prejudice simmers below the surface. An example of this can be seen in the accounts of past incidences of historical human-use studies. When he describes studies that took place in Scandinavia upon test-subjects without their knowledge or consent, he seems almost as if there are no negative ethical considerations involved. However, when he recounts the tales of the major Syphilis study in the American South, which utilized for the most part Afro-Americans, he laments loud and long about the horrible atrocities of the white man. These snap-reaction judgments don’t include consideration that many more people were unfairly affected by the Scandinavian study than the American South study, or any other such "inconsequential items" (in his opinion). For any readers that don’t tend to include analysis of subtle aspects such as tone, this might not pose a problem for them.The other main (and in my opinion, more important) drawback of this book lies in his historical narratives. Many times he will be recounting the development of an historical process chronologically, then without warning or notice he will begin to skip around. For example he will describe an event of 1642, then one in 1659, then 1703, then 1652, then 1801, then 1948, then 1732, then 1989, then 1997. Although this is a hypothetical example, it should help to demonstrate my point. For me personally, a chronological narrative should remain chronological; and if there needs to be a slight temporary backtracking, then this should be brought to the attention of the reader. To do otherwise tends to introduce confusion into your narrative which can result in misunderstandings or improper proportion.A final negative aspect is that his personal agenda sometimes shines through to the expense of his accuracy. He will state an event or discovery by such-and-such, then move along with the narrative, then introduce a later figure and give them full credit for the discovery - irregardless of the inconsistencies within even his own previous narrative. Sometimes he’ll take great pains to point out that an historic figure that was given credit for some-such discovery or other was a later addition, but this practice is entirely inconsistent throughout this work.My final assessment of this book is that: as a fair, unbiased, and organized historic account it fails miserably; however, this being a treatise concerned mainly with epidemiology, his skills as a very well-learned biologist shine through and render the book well worth the time spent on reading it despite its shortcomings. Even though I personally have some major problems with this book, I would still not hesitate to recommend it to any students or interested readers wanting to understand more about the historic power of plagues and the generalized mechanisms behind them.

This is simply one of the best books I've read in the last five years!Presentation of the various "plagues" is made in such a way as to be engaging to both the medical professional and, to some extent, also the lay reader.Sherman's timeline format allows for a lucid trip through time and disease, while the linkage between the various plagues and the course of history provides a new (and very reasonable) perspective for viewing the relationship between global events and human health.For me, there were several little "gifts" of new information along the way. (I won't spoil your fun by revealing them here.)Everyone who works in the medical field will love this book. It is my current favorite Christmas gift for my co-workers.

I purchased this book for a class, and was glad our professor required it. Sherman provides brief overviews of many infectious diseases throughout history in a way that is detailed enough to be interesting, but not so bogged down in historical context that you lose the reader. Our class mostly uses it as an overview of each disease, its historical context and consequences with supplementation of further reading. In this role, this book is perfect.

definetely did the job i needed it to do for schoolused it for a microbiology class called "people, plagues, and society"interesting stuff in it

If you are fascinated in learning about cultures different from your own and how much impact plagues can be on society, I would recommend this. It kept me interested.

I ordered this book for school a few years ago and will keep it on my bookshelf. VERY interesting and informative! A keeper.

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