



Dread: How Fear and Fantasy Have Fueled Epidemics from the Black Death to the Avian Flu

Philip Alcabes

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The average individual is far more likely to die in a car accident than from a communicable disease...yet we are still much more fearful of the epidemic. Even at our most level-headed, the thought of an epidemic can inspire terror. As Philip Alcabes persuasively argues in *Dread*, our anxieties about epidemics are created not so much by the germ or microbe in question—or the actual risks of contagion—but by the unknown, the undesirable, and the misunderstood. Alcabes examines epidemics through history to show how they reflect the particular social and cultural anxieties of their times. From Typhoid Mary to bioterrorism, as new outbreaks are unleashed or imagined, new fears surface, new enemies are born, and new behaviors emerge. *Dread* dissects the fascinating story of the imagined epidemic: the one that we think is happening, or might happen; the one that disguises moral judgments and political agendas, the one that ultimately expresses our deepest fears.

Dread: How Fear and Fantasy Have Fueled Epidemics from the Black Death to the Avian Flu Details

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Marcie says

My grandma got this for me for graduation, after hearing the speaker discuss how the role of epidemics in world history has been under-recognized and/or down-played. As a firm believer that everything has to do with health and health has to do with everything, I'm excited to read it.

Lara Amber says

Dread is definitely a thought provoking read. While I didn't agree with all of his conclusions, I could see his viewpoint. It's an interesting discussion of: the history of how we view epidemic diseases; how we couch modern concerns in the terms of communicable diseases, even when not a disease (obesity, autism); how communicable diseases have changed our views of governmental powers; the search for a single "cause"; and the desire to predict future outbreaks.

Pancha says

A look at how classicism, racism, and sexism have affected and been effected by emerging germ theories. Looks at views of disease from the antiquity (plague, cholera, malaria) to the present (HIV, bird flu).

Marc says

The book was OK and I mostly liked it. However, I was quite repetitive and it seemed to drag at times. Much better editing of Ch2 and most of Ch3 could have reduced the volume to about half as much text. It just went on and on. Overall, I'd give it 2.5 but I couldn't quite go to 3 stars.

I thought the analysis at the end of Ch3 (Miasma and the Rise of Science) was perhaps where the began to get interesting and the Ch4 on Science was insightful in places.

p. 96

"A germ theory would tend to undermine the physicians' craft, since doctors' work was based on knowledge of the patient and attention to observable signs, not microscopic creatures."

The Epilogue, "The Risk-Free Life" was the best part of the book.

p. 215 "To wish to escape peril entirely is to yearn for the unattainable."

Michelle says

Didn't even finish it. And I love me some disease non fiction ;)

Julia says

Meh

Matthew says

Because I love anything that challenges the reader to think differently about the dominant narratives of our society, this gets five stars. And, according to the author, epidemic is primarily a narrative we tell ourselves, with the usual features of biases and "hidden" goals. Highly recommend.

Margaret Sankey says

Why do some diseases get classified as "epidemics" while others (often more dangerous or frequent) don't? Alcabes deals with the sociological side of medicine, in which a three step process of occurrence, social reaction and narrative formation shape the way people deal with outbreaks from syphilis to black plague to anthrax. As usual, when something is of sufficient threat for authorities to take action, it is usually to restrict people in ways that cause them to be more at risk--fatalistically taking chances, blaming the wrong people or actions, and often exploding towards scapegoats, at the very least rousting some poor people and burning down the nearest shetl.

Trisher says

After watching the author on the Daily Show (a long while back), I had a certain expectation of what the book would be like. It really didn't turn out to be what I had expected and that's not really a fault. The author makes some very interesting points about power and race and ideology as they relate to society's perception (and creation) of epidemics.

Tiffany says

Dreadfully boring.

Neil Powell says

An interesting read, if somewhat spoilt by some fairly boring sections and a little too much liberal thinking (and I think of myself as fairly liberal)

The theory that most epidemics are actually not about disease and link into other prejudices such as racism, homophobia and poverty seem highly accurate. Making links to diseases based on certain stereotyping has been the norm since ancient times. Nowadays, this has moved away from racial groups towards other minorities (homosexuals and HIV), and even more recently to the obese and autistic; conditions described as epidemics, but aren't linked to a virus or bacteria, and therefore shouldn't be treated as such.

His theories around how the media and government distort scientific theory to meet their own needs have some merit, but tend to get drowned out a little by his very obvious liberal bias

Richard Williams says

read last chapter first. author has a difficult thesis, i'm not sure he got his point across to me firmly enough. in places i felt he had a hidden agenda that i could only see dimly, trying to understand it kept me reading.

Erin says

I have comprehensive exams for my MPH - Biosecurity/Disaster Preparedness degree in two weeks, and I picked this book up as a potential source. It starts out strong, and Alcabes makes some good points about how disease research is funded and the history of epidemics; however, the book goes off the rails while talking about AIDS and emerging infections. The book descends in to accusations of racism and ignores the genetic factors in disease susceptibility, some of which are associated with different races. Also, Alcabes denies any concerns about the globalization of everything and how this allows for the increased spread of emerging infections. I planned on bringing this book with me to use in my case presentation, but the second half of the book negates any points in the first half.
