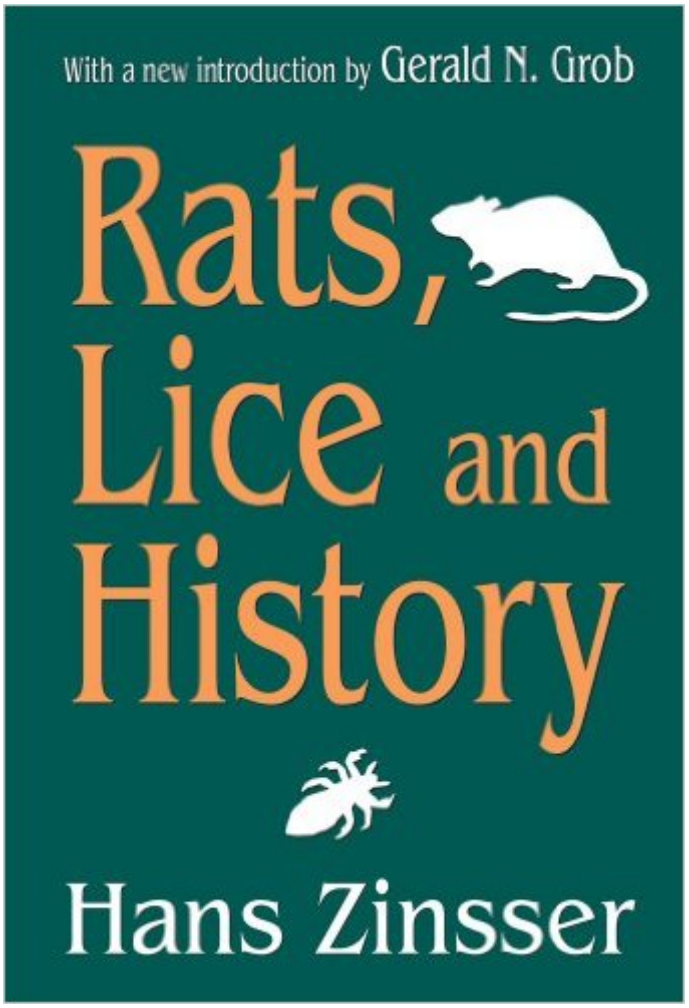
Rats, Lice And History (Social Science Classics Series)



Synopsis

When Rats, Lice and History appeared in 1935, Hans Zinsser was a highly regarded Harvard biologist who had never written about historical events. Although he had published under a pseudonym, virtually all of his previous writings had dealt with infections and immunity and had appeared either in medical and scientific journals or in book format. Today he is best remembered as the author of Rats, Lice, and History, which gone through multiple editions and remains a masterpiece of science writing for a general readership. To Zinsser, scientific research was high adventure and the investigation of infectious disease, a field of battle. Yet at the same time he maintained a love of literature and philosophy. His goal in Rats, Lice and History was to bring science, philosophy, and literature together to establish the importance of disease, and especially epidemic infectious disease, as a major force in human affairs. Zinsser cast his work as the "biography" of a disease. In his view, infectious disease simply represented an attempt of a living organism to survive. From a human perspective, an invading pathogen was abnormal; from the perspective of the pathogen it was perfectly normal. This book is devoted to a discussion of the biology of typhus and history of typhus fever in human affairs. Zinsser begins by pointing out that the louse was the constant companion of human beings. Under certain conditionsâ “to wash or to change clothingâ “lice proliferated. The typhus pathogen was transmitted by rat fleas to human beings, who then transmitted it to other humans and in some strains from human to human. Rats, Lice and History is a tour de force. It combines Zinsser's expertise in biology with his broad knowledge of the humanities

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

The copy of "Rats, Lice, and History" that I own was published in 1963, and this was the 33rd time it had been reissued since first appearing in 1934. I can’t imagine Dr. Zinsser’s grumpily discursive, masterfully written, and ultimately profound biography of typhus fever ever going completely out of print. Stylistically the only work I can compare it to is Gibbon’s "Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire". Where Gibbon occasionally dipped his pen in vinegar and excoriated the Christians, Zinsser dips his pen in hydrochloric acid and savages all of the quaint human customs that have kept Typhus alive and thriving. He shows much more affectionate sympathy for the louse than he does for the General or the Politician. Witness:"The louse shares with us the misfortune of being prey to the typhus virus. If lice can dread, the nightmare of their lives is the fear of some day inhabiting an infected rat or human being. For the host may survive; but the ill-starred louse that sticks his haustellum through an infected skin, and imbibes the loathsome virus with his nourishment, is doomed beyond succor. In eight days he sickens, in ten days he is ’in extremis’, on the eleventh or twelfth his tiny body turns red with blood extravasated from his bowel, and he gives up his little ghost."In the interests of research, Zinsser carried pill boxes of lice under his socks for weeks at a time before taking "advantage of them for scientific purposes." He is not able to tear himself away from these little creatures and address the true subject of his biography, i.e. the typhus virus, until Chapter 12!However, the journey to Chapter 12 is well worth taking because along the way, Zinsser wittily savages modern biographers, psychoanalysis, astronomers and physicists who "scamper back to God" (Biologists evidently are much less prone to being ’born again’), and of course, all of the wars that have given Typhus countless opportunities to murder lice and humans alike."Rats, Lice, and History" should be required reading for would-be writers for its style, would-be Generals for its lessons on how soldiers really die, and for anyone else who is interested in a passionate, eminently witty, one-of-a-kind history of medicine.

First let me say that after you read this book, you should then read Jared Diamond’s Guns, Germs and Steel, which is its logical successor.Second: this book was written in the 1930’s. This is before much of what we know about modern antibiotics was discovered - but that’s one of the reasons you should read it: a reminder of just how recent modern medicine is, and how much power disease still has over us. This book is a stark reminder of how much hygiene has done to lengthen our lifespan,

too - improving water supplies and eliminating rats from most households has done as much or more to extend the human lifespan as all the antibiotics we've invented.Zinsser's list of what historical battles would have ended completely differently had not epidemic disease swept through one or another army is also chilling reading. Much of what we think of as inevitable human superiority was actually the work of bacteria, who didn't really care about our affairs. But despite the gloomy topic, as my title says, this book is the most fun you can possibly have while reading about epidemics. His humor is dry and biting - the deadpan recital of damages here, of misguided so-called scientists there... the editorial review above gives a couple such examples. The entire book is a fascinating read.Some of the writing assumes that all readers were educated under an aristocratic university system, so that there are bits thrown in in Latin and Greek, not to mention French and other modern languages. The book can be read despite those, however. It might be tough going for high school students or even university undergrads, but would be a terrific addition to a history research paper, worth the slog for anyone willing to try it. And for those who have medicine and/or biology as an amateur interest, this is must reading.

I'd read this maybe 30 years ago and thought it was great then (I was about 15, so it's readable for younger people). It has survived the test of time. Readers have to remember that this was one of the first books written by a scientist for a lay audience, and that such "slumming" by scientists was looked down on by colleagues (an attitude that survived well into the '60s).Sure, there are much better histories of plague & disease around now & obviously with more up to date information. Zinsser's book, though, is great for it's historical value--a window on a period when writers could drop greek and french phrases untranslated into their books and assume readers would know (irritating, yes, but I still enjoyed it). It also stands on it's own for the information, though I'd also read something more current for that.

The book is a private conversation between the reader and the author. Zinsser presents a whole world in his seemingly unrelated first chapters' musings, but lays the groundwork for understanding his view of a world laid to waste by a humble bacterium. I have loved this book for at least 25 years, and have loaned and lost any number of copies to dear thieving friends.

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