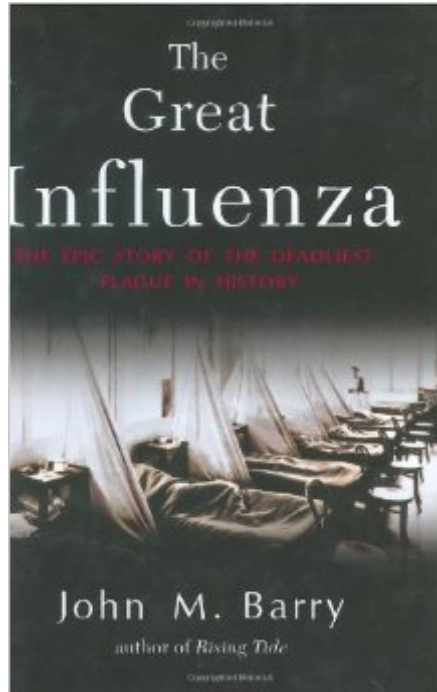


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The Great Influenza: The Epic Story Of The Deadliest Plague In History



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.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

In *The Great Influenza*, John Barry has produced a massive and exhaustively researched description of one of the greatest disasters of human history. At least, from the American point of view. While there are a few glancing references to what was going on in the rest of the world, there is no serious discussion of any attempts to deal with the pandemic in other countries, even in other industrialized countries. On the other hand, Barry has chosen a very specific point of view: the transition of American medicine and medical training from folk wisdom to science. It's a compelling point on which to balance a long and exhaustive (there's that word again) study of how America and, specifically, American medicine confronted an epidemic in which people were dying faster than the technology of the time could handle, an epidemic in which society itself was nearly overwhelmed by death. As other reviewers have noted, the book's weakness is a tendency towards melodrama, as in the far-too-often repeated tag line "This was influenza. Only influenza." After a while, you think to yourself, "Yes, we get it. Give it a rest." On the other hand, the book has one of those quirky displays of real brilliance in the last two chapters in which Barry deals with how science is done well (in the case of Oswald Avery) or done poorly (in the case of Paul A. Lewis). These two chapters are so strong that they could stand on their own, and what they have to say about the process of scientific thought itself is fascinating. Avery's story is that of a man who was just relentlessly focused, who kept digging deeper and deeper into a single issue until he discovered the source of heredity itself. Lewis's story, on the other hand, is that of a man who simply lost his way. Distracted by the need to administer an institute, the need constantly to raise money, to deal with the politics of science, the need to socialize and just plain hustle to support the work of others, Lewis lost the focus that Avery had and ending up flailing in a sea of theories and methodologies. In fact, if you don't read any other part of this book, read these two chapters. There is no question about *The Great Influenza* being a monumental work. It's so good that you just have to overlook the bits of melodrama that pop up from time to time. The research is, well I obviously can't use "exhaustive" again, so let's say nearly encyclopedic. In fact, there's so much research, and so much documentation that Barry has used an odd method of footnoting. Instead of using footnote numbers that refer to the notes section at the end of the book, you have to turn to the notes section and find the specific page and text being referenced. Unfortunately, as a result you don't know while you're reading which bits have footnotes and which don't. I'd prefer actual footnote numbers. Ah, well. I'm sure it seemed like a good idea at the time. In any case, Barry has produced a massive and important work of epidemiological history which is, at the same time, as readable as a thriller. In writing this review, I kept wavering between giving it four stars or five stars and finally decided on five based on the scope, the thoroughness, and what Aristotle would call the "point of attack," that

is, the point at which the story really begins, which is, in this case, the birth of truly scientific medical education in America. All in all, it's a truly fascinating and immensely readable piece of history.

A book that recently caught my eye was one by John Barry titled *The Great Influenza - The Epic Story Of The Deadliest Plague In History*. Now, I generally have a phobia about needles, and have *never* received a flu vaccination, but I think that will change next year. This was scary stuff...Barry details the Spanish influenza pandemic of 1918 in great detail. He starts by setting the stage of how American medicine was practiced at the end of the 19th century, and how there was little control or respect for the profession. And rightly so... Nearly anyone could call themselves a doctor and do nearly anything. But through the efforts of a few key people, John Hopkins university was formed to bring the medical education up to European standards. Most of this transformation was occurring when the flu pandemic started. This is where the book gets interesting... and frightening. Because of World War 1, recruits were overcrowded into training facilities that were less than sanitary. When the flu first broke out in one of the army camps in the states, it was quickly transferred to other camps when soldiers transferred. From there, it easily jumped into major cities, decimating large numbers of people. And when these soldiers went overseas, the flu went with them. Being especially contagious, it swept the globe in short order and left, by some estimates, over 100 million dead. That is so hard to comprehend. When you look at the struggle they had to even identify the cause of the illness, you understand how it could so easily run rampant. One would think that it couldn't happen today, but one would be wrong. SARS, AIDS... diseases that defy attempts to quickly identify the virus, and are resistant to attempts and efforts to treat them. It's not hard to imagine how a pandemic could start so much more quickly today due to the ease of worldwide travel. Well worth reading to understand how precarious the general health of society could be...

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