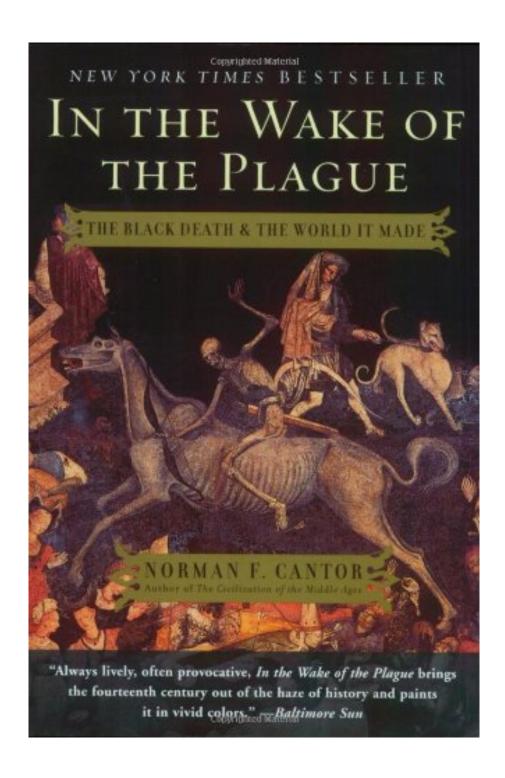


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The Black Death was the fourteenth century's equivalent of a nuclear war. It wiped out one-third of Europe's population, takingmillion lives. And yet, most of what we know about it is wrong. The details of the Plague etched in the minds of terrified schoolchildren -- the hideous black welts, the high fever, and the awful end by respiratory failure -- are more or less accurate. But what the Plague really was and how it made history remain shrouded in a haze of myths.

Now, Norman Cantor, the premier historian of the Middle Ages, draws together the most recent scientific discoveries and groundbreaking historical research to pierce the mist and tell the story of the Black Death as a gripping, intimate narrative.

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Most helpful customer reviews

30 of 30 people found the following review helpful.

Sloppy and Unsatisfying

By Richard R

This book reads like it was written on a deadline without any serious research. Don't be intimidated by the 230 pages. The large font and small pages disguise the fact that it is little more than a brochure. In the early pages the reader gets hints that it will be a wide-ranging review of causes and consequences of the great European plague of 1348. Suggestions that the labor shortage created when 40% of the population perished led to the destruction of ossified social institutions and paved the way for the Renaissance while fundamentally changing land ownership patterns and the Catholic church. Now that would have been an

interesting book.

Unfortunately, it's not this book. The next chapter is little more than an ad-libbed 33-page anti-royalty sermon. The English Princess Joan dies of plague in Bordeaux on her way to Spain. The book's peculiar approach to this event is not to separate and examine the historical strands of consequence so much as to provide an outlet for a strange loathing for medieval nobility. "Joan was a top-drawer white girl, a European princess"; "Most kings filled their roles weakly and uneasily, like third-rate actors playing Hamlet on road circuit in the boondocks"; "Three flunkies of the royal household were dispatched to purvey (that is, extort) food from Devon". Two pages describing Joan's baggage and another four on chapels that English nobles built for themselves. No depth, just a silly down-with-the-crown sensibility while discussing nothing but a string of English kings, and even then without drawing any connections to the plague.

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The cynical style and lazy disregard for facts can be grating. The book never misses a chance to call someone gay, to stick in pointless factoids about wine, oddly to call the Nile the "great mortality chute" while confusing the direction of its flow. In chapter two, we read that one theory, "a minority opinion", suggests that the 1348 plague was combined with an anthrax outbreak. By chapter eight, we are assured that there is "consensus" that anthrax was involved. Or the throwaway comment that the Ottomans took Constantinople in 1453 "on their way to Bosnia" - not only had the Ottomans defeated the Serbs in Kosovo in 1389, but Constantinople wasn't captured on the way to anything, it was the crown jewel of their conquests.

The shame of it is that readers won't come away knowing much more about the plague and its consequences than they did before. There is still a gap on the shelf for a good book on the topic. "In The Wake of the Plague" is unsatisfying - a sore disappointment

10 of 10 people found the following review helpful.

Avoid this like the Plague

By Dr. Christopher Coleman

Cantor strikes a populist direction with this book. He affects a breezy writing style (one can easily imagine much of his writing as a spoken, off-the-cuff lecture punctuated by more-or-less amusing asides, some of which totally derail his train of thought), the book is short (only 220 pages of text) and there is not a single footnote. The obvious comparison in terms of subject matter is to Barbara Tuchman's A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous 14th Century. Tuchman made a best seller from her remarkable approach in spite of her scholarly writing-style. Cantor's book lacks that sophistication of approach, and is further marred, as other reviewers have already noted, by too much repetition, too many asides, too much unsupported speculation, too many inconsistencies, and too many factual errors. There is some merit to the book, but its flaws far outweigh its worth.

Cantor at his best cites an interesting theory: that the Black Death was not a single disease, but two or more-not bubonic plague alone, but also some cattle-borne disease such as a particularly virulent form of anthrax. Supporting this theory are the Black Death's infestation of Iceland, an isolated island not known to have rats until the 17th Century, the often extremely rapid course of the disease--faster than that of bubonic plague; the lack of typical bubonic plague symptoms in many victims; the evidence that cattle were ravished by the Black Death; and the continued virulence of the plague in winter months when flea hosts would not normally live. The theory is not Cantor's own, but he has researched and supported it in seemingly convincing fashion, but he ignores the actual nature of the disease in its "pneumatic" form. Less adequate is Cantor's chapter "Heritage of the African Rifts", which discusses the three pandemics of smallpox, gonorrhea, and plague and places their origin in "the great mortality chute from East Africa. Certainly that is where the bubonic plague

came from after A.D. 500." But in his bibliography Cantor cites William H. McNeill's Plagues and Peoples and says, contradicting his own earlier statement written with such certainty, "McNeill thought the Mongols, their migrations and conquests, were a key to plague history; there may be something in that."

Also of interest, but clearly quirky, was Cantor's chapter on various speculations on the true cause of the Black Death. "Serpents and Cosmic Dust" covers alternative explanations for the "biomedical catastrophe" from the medieval to the present, focusing on two suggestions: the first, that snakes were the carriers; the second, that plague came from outer space. Cantor is kind, although not entirely enthusiastic, about these speculations: at one point he says "It is just possible that medieval writers who placed the origins of the Black Death in serpents dispensing plague as they swam up rivers were on to something." Unfortunately, the only "evidence" he offers is that another historian on an unrelated issue once took medieval writers at their word in the face of academic thought and has since been vindicated. The argument in favor of the cosmic dust theory is basically that it was proposed by eminent astrophysicist Fred Hoyle--what is not mentioned is Hoyle's second career as a well-known science fiction writer. Hoyle's is a fascinating speculation, which only the most flimsy of circumstantial evidence can currently support.

Cantor mentions one fascinating fact in this chapter that needed to be explored much further: plague was not widespread in Poland and Bohemia. This has been explained "by the rats' avoidance of these areas due to the unavailability of food the rodents found palatable." This seems unlikely --elsewhere Cantor points out the relative agricultural wealth of Poland and the Ukraine. Could Polish grain really be considerably different than Western European grain--and what of the anthrax theory, which would have the disease unaffected by the rodent's diet?

Socio-cultural differences between Poland and Bohemia and the rest of Europe would make an ideal testing ground for those theories concerning the effect the Black Death had on society, the arts, and religion. But rather than do any original research comparing plague-ridden and plague-free areas, Cantor merely launches into various criticisms of his colleagues' work in his final chapter, "Aftermath". Cantor examines these theories and subjects them to a much less forgiving critique than the far wilder speculations mentioned previously. Some of these attacks are odd indeed, such as critiquing a book published in 1919! This is the most poorly written and argued part of the entire book, and honestly I cannot tell to what conclusion Cantor comes-whether the Black Death did or did not have any profound effect beyond killing off certain talented individuals.

Finally, the outright errors. Rather than repeat those caught by other reviewers, I'll discuss the extraordinary apparent claim of time-travel. Cantor recounts the story of the le Strange/Talbot family. Richard Talbot inherited the la Strange estate from the dowager Mary upon her "dying in 1396." (Whether this was a plague-related death Cantor apparently deems unimportant.) Later in the chapter we are told "Richard Talbot, newly enriched by the le Strange fortune, got his father out of debtor's prison and the old soldier died of the plague in 1387 in Spain..." How could Richard have paid his father's debts with money he wouldn't receive for nine more years? I cannot account for the chronology of events without either contemplating a typographical error, a rift in the space-time continuum, or a mis-informed or deeply confused author. Hopefully it is the former, and Mary died ten years earlier than Cantor reports; but I am left with the discomforting concern that the dates are correct and Cantor simply speculated on Talbot's source of funds. Unfortunately this is not an isolated error.

While Cantor's book is more up-to-date than Barbara Tuchman's is, I can't recommend it, even as a supplement. It is too deeply flawed on too many levels. I'm left to wonder if some horrible computer virus didn't work its way through the manuscript, decimating the writing and killing at least 40% of the ultimate value of the book. As Cantor says, "It is just possible."

11 of 11 people found the following review helpful.

Unsatisfying

By Richard R

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