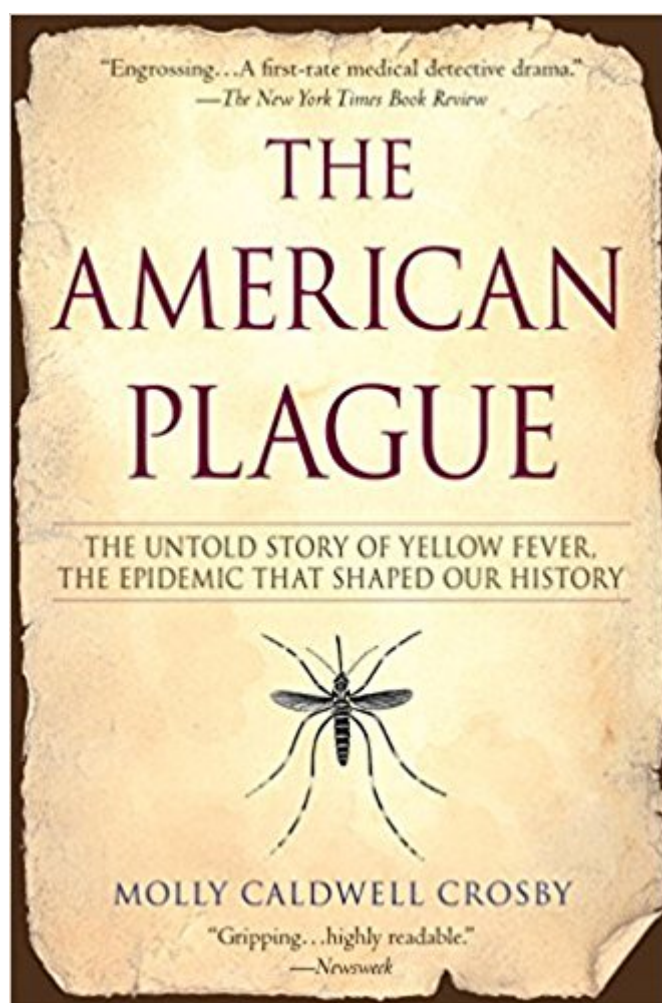


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# The American Plague: The Untold Story Of Yellow Fever, The Epidemic That Shaped Our History



## Synopsis

In this national-bestselling account, a journalist traces the course of yellow fever, stopping in 1878 Memphis to "vividly [evoke] the Faulkner-meets-'Dawn of the Dead' horrors,"\*and moving on to today's strain of the killer virus. Over the course of history, yellow fever has paralyzed governments, halted commerce, quarantined cities, moved the U.S. capital, and altered the outcome of wars. During a single summer in Memphis alone, it cost more lives than the Chicago fire, the San Francisco earthquake, and the Johnstown flood combined. In 1900, the U.S. sent three doctors to Cuba to discover how yellow fever was spread. There, they launched one of history's most controversial human studies. Compelling and terrifying, *The American Plague* depicts the story of yellow fever and its reign in this country-and in Africa, where even today it strikes thousands every year. With "arresting tales of heroism,"\*\* it is a story as much about the nature of human beings as it is about the nature of disease.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

In a summer of panic and death in 1878, more than half the population of Memphis, Tenn., fled the raging yellow fever epidemic, which finally waned when cooler weather set in. The disease had been transmitted by the *Aedes aegypti* mosquito, which came in swarms on ships from the Caribbean or West Africa. This account has a narrower scope than James Dickerson's recent *Yellow Fever*, focusing on the Memphis tragedy, but journalist Crosby offers a forceful narrative of a disease's ravages and the quest to find its cause and cure. Crosby is particularly good at evoking

the horrific conditions in Memphis, "a city of corpses" and rife with illness characterized by high fever, black vomit and hemorrhaging, treated by primitive methods. Crosby also relates arresting tales of heroism, such as how two nuns returned to the quarantined city from a vacation to nurse the victims. The author profiles scientists, some of whom died in their fight to identify the cause of this deadly disease. She also describes more recent outbreaks in Africa: yellow fever is making a frightening comeback despite the existence of a vaccine. Photos. Barnes & Noble Discover New Writers selection. (Nov. 7) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to the Audio CD edition.

"Engrossing...Crosby, a journalist, profiles the outbreak as it rips through Memphis, the city hardest hit. A first-rate medical detective drama...It is good to be reminded of the occasional nobility of the human spirit." - New York Times Book Review "Gripping...highly readable." - Newsweek "...painstaking investigation is important not just for the sweep of detail but for getting things impeccably right. Whether Crosby is writing about...Memphis, the death of a family in a plantation house in Mississippi or the itinerary of Walter Reed in Havana, she provides meticulous documentation to back up the narrative." - The Commercial Appeal, Memphis "Through vivid prose and classic storytelling, Crosby seamlessly blends history and science to tell us how yellow fever haunted the nation--and why, if we're not extremely vigilant, it will haunt us again." - Hampton Sides, author of Hellhound on His Trail and Ghost Soldiers "In her masterful debut, Molly Caldwell Crosby uses rich detail and a stunning cast of characters to bring to vivid life the devastating yellow fever epidemic of 1878...this book captivated me from the first line--and it haunted me long after I'd turned the final page." - Candice Millard, author of Destiny of the Republic and The River of Doubt

This is by far one of the best books I have ever read. The through history of yellow fever and the true heroes behind finding a vaccine and identifying the first ever virus is beautifully told by Mrs Crosby. This new trend in the world where people are not vaccinating children is bringing back dead viruses that we're all but eradicated by immunizations. To read this book is to really understand the great sacrifices doctors and scientists endured to ensure the future didn't have to put up with these diseases. You don't have to be a scientist or a doctor to understand this book and being an avid reader I haven't found a history book but I couldn't put down until I read this one.

Over three generations ago Hans Zinsser wrote "Rats, Lice and History" telling the story of lice and men (sorry) and the typhus Rickettsia. He founded the literary genre marked by the examination of

disease, history, and having tripartite titles; Recent examples: *Guns, Germs, and Steel*; *Viruses, Plagues, and History*. Though Ms. Crosby did not call her book "Mosquitoes, Fever, and America," "The American Plague" nicely continues the tradition of this fascinating venue. The subtitle (why must books so often have subtitles now?) claims this to be "The Untold Story of Yellow Fever, The Epidemic That Shaped Our History", which is more than a bit of a reach - Especially, given the existence of the very similarly themed and titled adolescent's book "An American Plague: The True and Terrifying Story of the Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1793" (2003) by Jim Murphy (which, whatever your age, is also worth reading). It is arguable that the subtitle means only to refer to the Memphis outbreak, but that single event did not "shape our history," it was the repeated outbreaks of Yellow Jack beginning with those in the northeast ports in 1699 that truly did change the history of all of North America. The subtitle is simply annoying marketing hyperbole - though such an unfounded, untrue, claim did nearly make me put the book back on the shelf unopened. Which would have been a shame, as I enjoyed the book greatly. "(The) American Plague" details the impact of an outbreak of Yellow Fever (YF) in Memphis, Tennessee (the author's home) in the year 1878, and follows with an in-depth examination of the subsequent discovery of the means of transmission, prevention, vaccination, cause, and sad lack of cure for the disease. This book also traces the origin of the disease, and reviews how it likely came to the Americas from its home in Africa as a consequence of the slave trade. The occurrence of YF epidemics in Europe (perhaps even dating back to the mid 500's) is not discussed, which is forgivable given the focus of the book, though the fact that 300,000 people perished from YF in Spain in the 1800's makes it clear that YF was (is) a scourge far beyond America's shores. The author brings to life the horror and uncertainty of epidemic disease at the dawn of scientific medicine. She recounts the difficulty of seeing the true nature of a disease through the conflicting overlay of current knowledge and cultural belief (a current example: autism). Further, she points to the mendacity of businessmen who may have, in their efforts to prevent disruption of commerce by quarantine, allowed this outbreak to spread from New Orleans to Memphis in the first place. She briefly touches on the ethics of human, of animal, and of self, experimentation. It is not a simple book, though it is clearly, if at times unevenly, written. Unlike most popular science books, she includes an extensive source bibliography that points to precisely where her material has come from. This is a very welcome addition. Over all, this is a solidly written, well researched and interesting book. I strongly recommend it. I also strongly recommend that you consider that the World Health Organization estimates that YF still kills 30,000 people a year. Most of these deaths could be prevented by vaccination and by mosquito control. Over the past few years Yellow Jack has been re-emerging and spreading in the western hemisphere. This spread is, as Ms. Crosby

shows that to a degree the Memphis epidemic was, a political failure marked by primacy of business interests and of underfunded and inadequate public health measures. Pray that it does not return to America.-----Notes and references: The original article which established mosquitoes as the vector of YF was "The Etiology of Yellow Fever: An Additional Note

Outstanding look into a devastating smite of disease in Memphis, TN. At times, it was difficult to read for long periods, because the writing literally made me feel as though I was in the midst of a yellow fever epidemic. The book continues to describe the inspiring story of the medical scientists, who at great risks to themselves, relentlessly tracked down the origin of the disease, ultimately permanently handicapping yellow fever's ability to deal death to the thousands. Good read!!!

As other reviewers before me have said, this was a pretty good book for the first time out. This is not a full history of yellow fever. It isn't even a full history of yellow fever in the U.S. since it doesn't even start until an epidemic in Memphis in 1878. There were other bad epidemics of yellow fever in the U.S. prior to this one, a big one in Philadelphia in 1793. But the author of this book, chose this epidemic as the starting point for her book since many of the people involved in working in Cuba on trying to find the carrier of the disease, had been involved in some way in this previous epidemic. And the author herself is from Memphis. I always enjoy reading medical histories and histories of diseases especially when a lot of information is shared about the people who were involved. I want to know about what drove them, what made them tick, what made them think the way they did. In this story, so many men volunteered to be exposed to yellow fever knowing there was no cure, no medication, not even a simple aspirin to take for the fever (which would have made the hemorrhaging in the stomach worse anyway). I was kind of reading the book with my mouth open because I was appalled at the 'lack of ethical approach' as most people would be here if the study being done in Cuba in 1900 were done today. The military has always been known to skirt the rules as far as 'consent' is concerned...they still do (anthrax vaccines). But this study was totally different because of all the volunteers, even among the doctors. The deaths among the doctors and scientists made me sad, though it was admirable that so many felt they should be equally at risk. One thing, I wish that all men who worked on these diseases (women too) would receive equal recognition and accolades, so there is no bitterness between people who were friends and co-workers. Sometimes, those above do not see when those below are being ignored and not given their due. My main complaints about the book is it didn't see it through until the end...it didn't discuss the discovery of the virus itself. It ended very suddenly with them finding that monkeys also carrying the disease, so

mosquitoes could transfer it from them to man. I wanted more information about the virus from this point. So now I will have to find another book or go online for that. So for that reason it was not satisfying...

The story of the city of Memphis, Tennessee and it's battles with Yellow Fever in 1878. A story about men like Walter Reed and Carlos Finlay, who discovered that mosquitoes were the vector of transmission.

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