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Rats, Lice And History



Synopsis

This popular and unusual book by Hans Zinsser, a brilliant physician and researcher, takes an unusual look at history by examining the influence of diseases on society, and will prove a fascinating read for anyone with an interest in biology or medical history.

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. 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 germ, 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.

The book, itself, is fabulous. I owned it many years ago in hardback. But which team of chimpanzees typed it into its online form? It is full of typos. They didn't even get the author's name spelled right! Really, who was proofreading this thing?

I had never realized how much parasites and the plagues they carry have influenced human history, and probably human evolution as well. It appears to be a major factor overlooked by Darwin. This book was written many years before the decoding of the genome, but it is a well-written study in epidemiology that is even entertaining. It is fascinating to realize that rats and lice have been man's constant companion everywhere and forever. Could we even survive on the moon or mars without them?

This biography of a disease is well written and says a lot about military history as well. It remains amazingly current in spite of being written before World War II.

The subject of this book, the role of various epidemics, particularly typhus, in the major events in history, is a fascinating one. Unfortunately the author seems to let himself be distracted by his own erudition and too intent on making sure we know how smart he is. As a result, we find ourselves pulled off in one tangent after another. And the author seems to think that, because he acknowledges this self-serving meandering, that makes it ok. I finished the book. It wasn't all that long. But I did not at all enjoy Dr. Zisser's company, nor did I learn as much as I might have if he had stuck to the subject.

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