



The Great Mortality: An Intimate History of the Black Death, the Most Devastating Plague of All Time

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La moria grandissima began its terrible journey across the European and Asian continents in 1347, leaving unimaginable devastation in its wake. Five years later, twenty-five million people were dead, felled by the scourge that would come to be called the Black Death. The Great Mortality is the extraordinary epic account of the worst natural disaster in European history -- a drama of courage, cowardice, misery, madness, and sacrifice that brilliantly illuminates humankind's darkest days when an old world ended and a new world was born.

The Great Mortality: An Intimate History of the Black Death, the Most Devastating Plague of All Time Details

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From Reader Review The Great Mortality: An Intimate History of the Black Death, the Most Devastating Plague of All Time for online ebook

Julie says

I really, really wanted to like this book.

After all, it combined two of my nerdiest obsessions: Late Middle Ages history and Y. pestis, my favorite bacteria. (I'm a microbiology nerd- and besides, everyone should have a favorite bacteria.)

Sadly, John Kelly tweaked too many of my pet peeves to make me truly enjoy this book.

Allow me to list a few:

"... Petrarch dined with the aristocratic Colonna, walked the beaches of Naples with the beautiful Queen Joanna, attended audiences with Clement VI- if there had been a fourteenth century "People", the fish-eyed poet would have been on the cover under the headline, "The Fabulous Francesco!" (pg 123)

No- just- no.

Also- he implied that the Templars should have known to be careful on the day they were nearly wiped out because it was Friday the 13th. Except that Friday the 13th was not mentioned as unlucky until, at the earliest, the 19th century.

I can almost forgive the ridiculous and the unintentional anachronisms. Those can be the product of an over eager author and a limited knowledge of popular folklore. But I cannot forgive bad editing. The footnote on pg 153 states, "Life is rarely so heat". That was not my typo- it was his. Surely he meant "Life is rarely so neat", but that seems like something that should be caught during proofreading.

The most damning of both the author and the editor, however, is when he tells us that Bristol "literally exploded". No, sir, it did not. Bristol did not literally explode. It may have figuratively exploded, but I count on you, and certainly your editor, to understand the difference between something "literally" happening and something "figuratively" happening.

I realize that these may seem like small complaints, but I have high expectations for a nonfiction book. I have a hard time with it because I went to this book to learn, and I have difficulty trusting an author's research and expertise on a topic when he cannot bother to understand the meaning of the word "literally".

Over all I was pretty disappointed with this book.

Sharon says

Most of us know the history of how the Black Death marched around Europe. We know it probably started in Caffa and made its way full circle to Russia leaving horrible suffering in its wake. John Kelly could have

gone the dry as dust scholarly route but instead makes the Plague almost like the villain in a novel. I don't know if its possible to anthropomorphize a disease but that's what he did. It skipped, it ran, it lay in wait. It hid in corners and ran from fire. Some readers liked it, some thought it over the top. If nothing else it made for an interesting way to read about an old story.

It did tend to examine some areas more closely than others but that might be because we have more complete records of the after effects of the contagion in places such as England than we do in other parts of Europe. There is technical and medical language that might make some readers feel the need to read some explanations several times over.

He makes an attempt to describe the over the top 'wild' behavior of the surviving population after the disease had run its course. There is an easy explanation for that. It is what some in our day call a 'survivor's high'. Being a cancer survivor I recognized the pattern. While I did not descend into any kind of debauchery I did engage in some rather reckless behavior when I first went into remission. That was the reason the remaining people 'partied hard'.

I would recommend this to anyone interested in the Great Plague. Just be prepared for the author's approach to the disease itself. It is described in human rather than in cold clinic terms.

Delbert says

This author wrote that Xerxes was a "Greek king."

Kaethe says

We all (me, the Spouse, my mom, my mom-in-law) love well-written non-fiction about plague.

That's probably the most revealing sentence I've ever written.

Anyway, this is a very engaging, entertaining even, read. Kelly covers the known and the possible, such as, maybe it wasn't bubonic plague, maybe it was something else like anthrax or Ebola. Its the sort of book that gives you an insight into how history and science work, which alone makes it valuable reading.

Greer says

This was a very readable and meticulously researched account of the Black Death that made great use of contemporary accounts. The statistics are a bit numbing at times, but this reflects the nature of the Black Death itself. The author has a tendency to overuse certain metaphors and occasionally becomes a bit fanciful in recreations of what a particular medieval figure may have been thinking or feeling, but overall I would recommend this book.

Hannah says

Rating Clarification: 3.5 Stars

This book had its ups and downs, but overall it was a very informative book for anyone with more than a passing interest in the black death - and hey, who doesn't like reading about black buboes, vomiting, violent pain, abandonment by family/friends, and a lonely death - especially around the Christmas season?

On the plus side, author John Kelly knows his stuff. His book takes the reader to the original ground zero on the Eurasian steppes, and follows the progression of this 14th century plague via the trade routes through the Black Sea, the Middle East, the Mediterranean and through Europe - stopping off in each country with depictions (based on first hand accounts) of the wrath and devastation of *Yersinia pestis*.

On the minus side, there wasn't a lot of immediacy in his book, which is sometimes the case with non-fiction. It was at times a dry and academic read, rather than a soulful one. But that's more of a personal quibble, and doesn't detract from what was an interesting read.

Susanna - Censored by GoodReads says

Actual rating about 3.5 stars.

Very interesting account. Kelly writes with verve, and tells some great stories, but has a couple of tics as a writer which annoyed me, the most prominent being personifying the plague as if it were a living, decision-making animal.

Kelly covers how it came to Europe (the chroniclers of the time universally blamed the Genoese), and tracks it scrupulously through Italy, France and England. Scandinavia gets barely a mention, as does Iberia (except for how it treated its Jews; that 15,000 or 20,000 people died in Barcelona is almost a side note), and Germany is covered almost entirely by either what the Germans did beforehand (it's the Jews poisoning our wells, so let's kill as many as we can find before we are affected by this horrible international conspiracy), or as the heartland of the Flagellants during the height of the Black Death. Eastern Europe gets bare mention, as is also the case with Russia.

He also discusses what exactly was the cause of the Black Death. It's pretty clear the virus was *Yersinia pestis* (French scientists have found its DNA in the death pits), but what flea spread it? (The question remains open.) Why did it behave differently from subsequent outbreaks? (That question, too, remains open.)

Emma Sea says

Topic = 5

Writing = 2

Anna (Bobs Her Hair) says

If you LOVED Fifty Shades of Grey...

this is not the book for you.

I'm curious about the psychological, sociological, and economical impact the Black Death had on the affected countries. How did it invade their outlook on life, their culture, and how did it impact religion.

Jill Hutchinson says

This book was recommended by a friend who shares my love of world history. Again, he was correct in assessing this little book as good reading.....I was fascinated by the march of the Black Death as a living entity across the continents of Asia, Europe and beyond (I was surprised that it actually reached Greenland). Utilizing the writings of survivors of the plague and "after the fact" observers, Kelly weaves a tale of unremitting horror, death, suffering and economic chaos as Y pestis struck down almost half the population that it touched.

He follows the Death from the wilds of Mongolia to the fateful journey of the Genoan ship that brought the sickness to the Continent. The story drags and becomes somewhat repetitive in spots as he moves with the plague from city to city. But it is a forgivable sin. The author has done an immense amount of research and in the last chapter he offers the arguments and theories of modern scientists regarding the question.... "was it bubonic plague, pneumonic plague, anthrax, or some unknown illness that died out after its dance of death?" A very interesting and informative telling of one of the greatest catastrophes in the history of mankind.

K. says

I picked up this book because it seemed to coincide so naturally with both my scholastic pursuits and my personal interests. Nevertheless, I expected a textbook-neutral but overall in-depth account of the Black Death that swept across medieval Europe.

I was more than pleasantly surprised. Though I was slightly annoyed at Kelly's anthropomorphising of the disease itself and all the awful metaphors that come with it (the disease takes rest in towns, then goes to attack another "feeling refreshed", it "follows people", et cetera), this book is a highly accessible narrative non-fiction that I could not really put down until I read it cover to cover.

Kelly's comprehensive research shows through with the passion with which he accounts the lives and culture before, during, and after the pandemic passes through "from the China Sea to the sleepy fishing villages of Portugal". Not only do we get a window into people's lives in various countries before the pandemic, but we get vivid pictures of how the spreading sickness impacted lives and the "end of the world" paranoia that came with it, including a section detailing the anti-Semitic fervor that sprung across Europe as a response to a growing desperation felt throughout different countries. Kelly also discusses the science behind the disease, clearly illustrates probable and possible routes, and gives an idea of how its passing affected religion,

science, medicine, industry, culture, and people's general outlook after having survived the horrors of the pandemic. Also included was a glimpse into controversial theories about the plague, including contemporary arguments about what really caused the sickness and comparisons to later plague epidemics.

Anyone wanting to learn about the Black Death and the world it terrorised over the span of a few years would do well to give this book a try.

Jennifer (aka EM) says

This is an excellent overview, written for the layperson. Extremely well-researched (once I figured out the endnote section!!) without being ponderous. Kelly's anecdotal, story-telling style--which does take his interpretation a little far beyond the facts (see comments)--is like a spoonful of sugar, which is not to say that he's making the Plague more palatable, but he is bringing energy and momentum into what could have become a truly mind-numbing set of statistics.

A couple of things I really appreciated:

- he devotes the last chapter to debunking the theories of modern Plague Deniers: that the Black Death was not bubonic plague, but anthrax, Ebola, something else. He carefully details then counters the current controversies. Then, he presents new evidence (DNA samples from the teeth of 14th C plague victims compared to those of the third and last plague pandemic in India, which confirm it was the same bacteria that caused both). I've seen synopses of this book where it makes it appear as though this book supports the Plague Deniers' position. It does not.

- yes, he anthropomorphizes the *y. pestis* bacteria. He follows it on its journey from its origins to its final destination, likening it to an army, a military campaign, a terrorist attack. This is remarkably effective at 'humanizing' not just the disease, but its effects on individuals and on societies. Most of all, it is an organizing device that provides never-flagging momentum, and helps him avoid repetition and backtracking. I have almost zero tolerance for most non-fiction but here, while there was a little repetition, overall Kelly was able to synthesize a whack o' information without (in my view) becoming too pedantic.

Couple of things to brace yourself for (other than the obvious gruesomeness):

- where he does not have direct evidence, he uses comparisons from later events as proof points. I can give him the benefit of the doubt when he compares 14th C Black Death plague in London to 17th C plague in London. But comparing the effects of Nagasaki/Hiroshima to those of 1347 Italy? The post WWI Lost Generation to 1352 Western Europe? It's a bit of a stretch.

- I sniffed a sexist Anglophile in places. The British response to Plague was portrayed with a lighter hand; their behaviour presented as slightly more heroic. Why introduce Monica, St. Augustine's overbearing mother, along with Churchill's? Some other places too, more egregious. I've blocked them from my memory now.

- he often drops major fact bombs, draws a conclusion, but doesn't tell the whole story. Checking the endnotes, there IS more of a story to tell. The little girl, named Ryke ('wild bird'), who was the sole survivor of a Nordic village found months later by a rescue party. OMG. Can you imagine? Details, I want details.

- typos, typos, typos. Where the hell are the copy editors/proofreaders these days!? I'm available, and my rates are reasonable.

aPriL does feral sometimes says

After finishing 'The Great Mortality' by John Kelly, I am not certain what is more horrific - being sick with the Bubonic Plague, or daily life in the 14th century, especially in European cities.

Please note I am a modern person of the female gender. This means I like a daily hot shower, household cleansers utilized almost every day, flushable toilets connected to piping which whisk away invisibly whatever is in the bowl, toilet paper and my vacuum (with attachments). I highly appreciate fresh smelling clothes, people and streets. Household pets get baths when they smell, as do husbands who work out, fix cars or repair broken steps on porches. Everything that is garbage is shoved into black bags, which are tied up and placed outside on the curb once a week to be picked up and taken away.

Europeans in the era of the Black Death weren't having it, nothing doing, if it meant being clean - having to scrub anything free of dirt or filth - even if cleaning, washing, sewers, toilets, and garbage pickup had been available, which it wasn't.

Europeans in the 14th century believed taking two baths in one year was one too many. From the descriptions in this book, based on letters, articles, books, and journals written in the time of the Black Plague, people basically *wore* garbage and filth, *slept* in garbage and filth, *ate* garbage and filth, and *worked* in garbage and filth. When the Black Death came, people thought breathing deeply of poop fumes was a cure. So, they sought out and stood in their local bathroom trenches and ditches full of poop, instead of ignoring all of the human and animal waste about them as they had previously.

Rats loved the increased availability of food near prospering European people during the 14th century. More food meant more rats. So. Fleas love rats. A lot of rats mean a lot more fleas - disease-carrying plague-infected fleas. Ships transported goods and food everywhere, so rats and their fleas got transported everywhere.

Suddenly it was 'apocalypse now'. People died in three days if the plague got in their lungs. It took little longer if it went elsewhere in the human body. The plague also killed cats, dogs, goats and sheep. Since rats and fleas are common but plague is not, scientists theorize a superbug or a sudden DNA mutation happened. They suspect the illness may have begun in Russia, or in Mongolia, based on written records and narratives. It spread out along trade routes. But these are educated guesses, likely as they may be. Could it have been an ebola-type thing? Who knows. There have been three major plague-like pandemics. Two are linked because they might have happened by the same disease we generally call the Black Plague (linked by an analysis of DNA from a corpse's tooth). Maybe.

I just finished a book about Arabic science up to the 15 century. Most people in the Middle-East washed a lot, took baths, whenever they could. In fact, most civilizations of earlier times washed and used soap, even though soap was very expensive. Everybody bathed when they could manage it - except the Europeans. Wow.

The ancient Greeks and especially the ancient Romans had public baths, accessible to all of their citizens for a few pennies. And sewers! They had sophisticated sewers, public bathrooms and public fountains, flowing with water from mountain streams. Drinkable free water! But what were Europeans thinking, seven hundred years after the ancient but clean Romans passed? They were thinking baths are bad and Poop Cures are cool. They drank wine all day, even the children. Hmmmm.

Ok, then. Not that living in poop had anything to do with the main subject of this book. It is simply mentioned in passing the fact that Europeans, especially urban Europeans, lived their lives wearing crusted bits of poop ? about their bodies and clothes, with piles of poop surrounding their homes for centuries in the Middle Ages, whether they lived in palaces or hovels. This 'natural-fiber' accidental fashion accessory which also served as a domestic health cure for fad-following hypochondriacs in the Middle Ages fascinates me, even more than watching binge drunks trying to function at ordinary tasks.

'The Great Mortality' actually is a very well-researched and detailed academic book about how the Black Plague, caused by the bacterium *Yersinia pestis*, a close friend of fleas, impacted the daily life of many 14th-century European countries. The author follows the path of the disease in detail across Europe, country by country, month by month. He shows the probable path of the disease across Asia, which appeared to follow trade and troops routes. He describes the general lifestyle of people from Italy to France to England to Germany to Scandinavia, the technology they had, the current politics of the time and the various wars which had been begun shortly before the plague came, the health conditions and what commerce in the cities had been ongoing before and after the Black Plague began to kill.

It is estimated the Black Plague killed from a third to half of the population of Europe. Survivors faced a very different world once the disease mysteriously stopped. Economies by necessity were rearranged from lack of workers, food, and young people, who were disproportionately affected. The average age of death went from maybe 50 down to 30 years of age, for example, for a period of time.

As you can imagine, people went crazy with fear and grief. What is beyond our imagination (unless, gentle reader, you enjoy zombie apocalypse fiction) is the insane (if expected) things people did to 'protect' themselves from becoming sick.

Two of the 'cures' stood out for me. One was the attempted genocide of Jews. Really? Really. The Jews were blamed in EVERY European country (rumors were passed around that Jews poisoned all of the water wells with plague, but sometimes people just wanted an excuse to rob and loot Jewish property). The other was flagellation associations. Yes. Ok then. A lot of Christian men got together, formed punishment clubs, and went from town to town whipping themselves in obvious ecstasy which increased the longer they flogged themselves. Supposedly, the shredding of their backs, cut to bloody ribbons three times a day (three times!!!!), would appease God. Why? Many, if not all, believers of Christian faith, believed the Apocalypse had come. It was hoped the self-imposed whipping of volunteers, who were somehow absorbing everyone's sins upon themselves as they marched along, might make God stop, just stop. In any case, the men were having a lot of fun torturing themselves (religious ecstasy). I suspect, gentle reader, like many history innocents, you thought 'kink clubs' was a thing invented in the 20th-century (or by 8th-century Shia Muslims by those more up to speed on religious customs. The Catholics were the first to institutionalize flagellation for self-mortification.)

The only thing which irked me is the author enjoyed anthropomorphizing the plague as if it were a black bear scrounging around neighborhoods looking for something to eat. I was extremely annoyed. The book is mostly a dry recital of facts, though, using and quoting from many original sources and historical documents, along with scientists' and historians' analyses.

There is a lot of different non-fiction scholastic material here in one book, making it hard to categorize into one box: history, general science, sociology, industry, cultural studies, medicine, travelogue. There are Notes and Index sections, plus my book had interviews with the author.

Nerds will LOVE this book. Women like me might feel a sudden urge to spread some bleach around.

Cynda says

I so wanted to like this book. I thought at first my brain was not operating right. Then I kept reading anyway. As an amateur historian, I am sorry to say that Kelly has written ambitious book and that perhaps the task was too ambitious. The book is poorly organized. I wanted the major rivers of Europe included on the map as the major cities which experienced the plague. I wanted more information about the 3 plagues. I know the first two and know of the 3rd in passing. An Appendix would have given Kelly a place to explain more about the 3 plagues. I appreciate that Kelly wrote of the English peasant's Revolt where they started earning enough money to improve their standard of living. And work became easier with these new innovations. Kelly does speak of these innovations, yet an Appendix would have allowed him space to explain more. While the English peasants revolted, what about peasants in other places? Without explaining about other places, the reader might assume that peasants all revolted about the same time in relatively the same manner. The French peasants did not revolt up until the late 18th century. It took those peasants that long to get so frustrated, so hungry, so unappreciated that they felt the need to eliminate the royalty, nobility, and the wealthy to a large extent. Revolt for the same reason, at a different time, by a different method.

This book is so ambitious and important. I hope that Kelly might review his work, revise, add appendices, and ask a university press to pick it up.

So was there anything good worth noting? Oh yes. Kelly made excellent use of primary sources that required effort to find, had excellent background information through a long list of secondary sources of stellar quality.

I hope very much that Mr Kelly revises his work.

John says

Having read a couple of historical fiction novels with the Black Death aka the Great Mortality as the book's backdrop, I picked this book up to read to understand this apocalyptic-like event. Between the years of 1346 and 1353, the Black Death crept across Eurasia, initially along major trade routes and later inland, killing one-third of the area's population.

I had to slog through the initial chapters that described the plague cause, Yersinia pestis and its vector, the rat flea, which were carried on rodents such as rats and marmots. However, after this introduction, the author communicated the impact of the pandemic, chapter by chapter as the plague spreads east to west and south to north.

Lacking knowledge of today's epidemiological studies, a panicked mankind behaved in irrational behaviors including the extermination of groups of people thought to be the cause of the disease, including Jews, lepers and gypsies. Others, believing this calamity to be the act of a vengeful God, hoped to atone for their sins through self-flagellation with whips that might have included metal hooks on the ends.

When the plague burned itself out, its departure triggered major historical changes, including the Renaissance. Clergy, being one the hardest hit group, resulted in citizens believing that the ordained were not needed as a go-between with God sowing the seeds of the Reformation a couple of centuries later. Additionally, the depopulation of the workforce spurred technological advances in the invention of labor-saving devices. One invention included the Guttenberg printing press.

I would recommend this book to anyone seeking to understand the impact of the Black Death and its ramifications on public health, society, religion, and technological innovation. This event and its subsequent plague years were true history makers.
