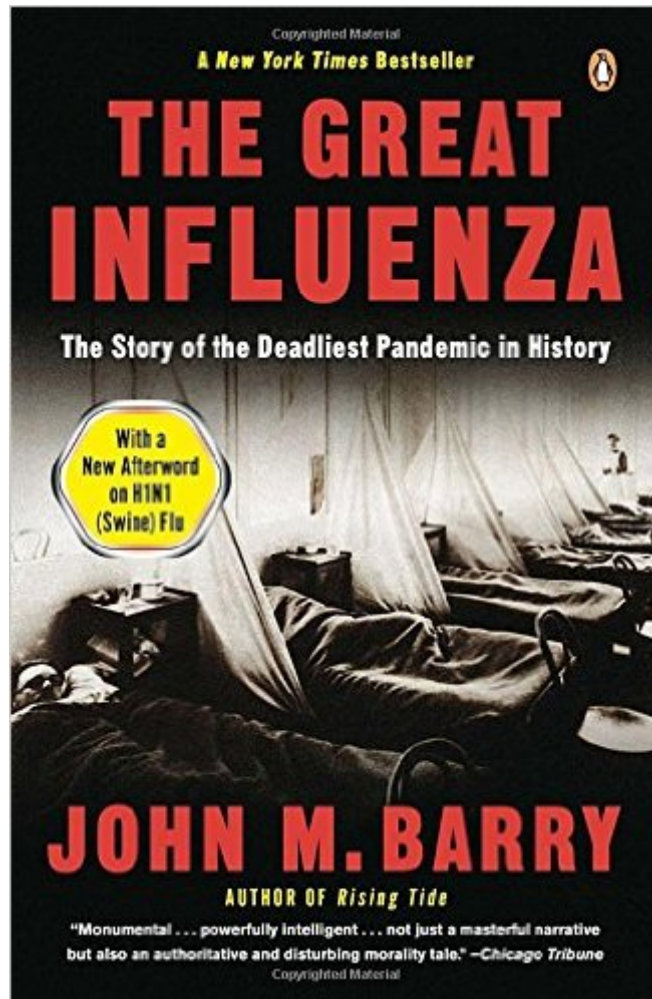


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The Great Influenza: The Story Of The Deadliest Pandemic In History



Synopsis

At the height of WWI, history's most lethal influenza virus erupted in an army camp in Kansas, moved east with American troops, then exploded, killing as many as 100 million people worldwide. It killed more people in twenty-four months than AIDS killed in twenty-four years, more in a year than the Black Death killed in a century. But this was not the Middle Ages, and 1918 marked the first collision of science and epidemic disease. Magisterial in its breadth of perspective and depth of research and now revised to reflect the growing danger of the avian flu, *The Great Influenza* is ultimately a tale of triumph amid tragedy, which provides us with a precise and sobering model as we confront the epidemics looming on our own horizon. John M. Barry has written a new afterword for this edition that brings us up to speed on the terrible threat of the avian flu and suggest ways in which we might head off another flu pandemic.

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.

As an initial, rough draft, this manuscript shows amazing potential as an important look at a terrifying and prescient topic. As a finished work, it is the most poorly edited book I've ever read. In the acknowledgments, Barry writes the most important thing that the reader needs to know about getting through this book: "This book was initially supposed to be a straightforward story of the deadliest epidemic in human history, told from the perspectives of both scientists who tried to fight it and political leaders who tried to respond to it.... Instead.... it didn't seem possible to write about the scientists without exploring the nature of American medicine...." He was wrong. Rather than the exploration of American medicine being essential, enlightening, or even remotely relevant, the result is two completely unrelated books in one. One book is a terrifying and page-turning "straightforward story of the deadliest epidemic in human history." The other book is a mind-numbingly boring list of names of doctors and scientists, descriptions of university politics, and confusing explanations of experiments that have nothing to do with the influenza pandemic. In fact, on page 259 of the book, Barry says that the people who the first 89 pages are about had nothing to do with research or medical breakthroughs regarding the influenza epidemic in any way! My favorite example of what Barry considered essential to include in this book about the 1918 pandemic is the story of a scientist named Lewis. Barry tracks Lewis's career almost to the minute.

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