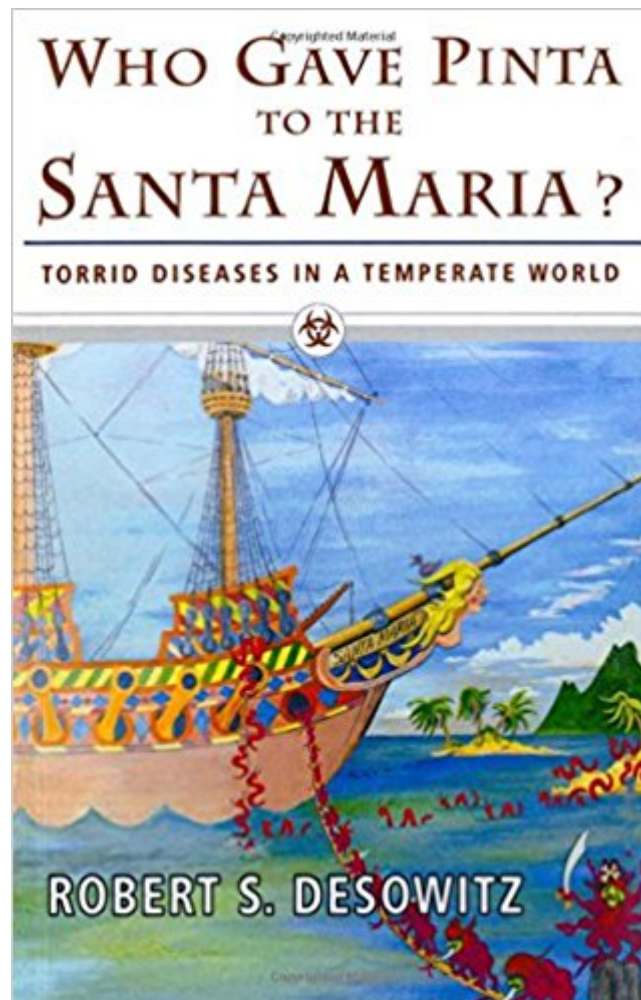




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Who Gave Pinta To The Santa Maria?: Torrid Diseases In A Temperate World



Synopsis

We live in a medical fool's paradise, comforted, believing our sanitized Western world is safe from the microbes and parasites of the tropics. Not so, nor was it ever so. Past--and present--tell us that tropical diseases are as American as the heart attack; yellow fever lived happily for centuries in Philadelphia. Malaria liked it fine in Washington, not to mention in the Carolinas where it took right over. The Ebola virus stopped off in Baltimore, and the Mexican pig tapeworm has settled comfortably among orthodox Jews in Brooklyn. This book starts with the little creatures the first American immigrants brought with them on the long walk from Siberia 50,000 years ago. It moves on to all that unwanted baggage that sailed over with the Spanish, French, and the English and killed native Americans in huge numbers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. (The native Americans, it appears, got some revenge by passing syphilis--including Pinta, a feisty strain of syphilis--back to Europe with Columbus's returning sailors.) Nor have the effects of these diseases on people and economics been fully appreciated. Did slavery last so long because Africans were semi-immune to malaria and yellow fever, while Southern whites of all ranks fell in thousands to those diseases? In the final chapters, Robert S. Desowitz takes us through the Good Works of the twentieth century, Kid Rockefeller and the Battling Hookworm, and the rearrival of malaria; and he offers a glimpse into the future with a host of "Doomsday bugs" and jet-setting viruses that make life, quite literally, a jungle out there.

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Customer Reviews

A fascinating tour through the world of tropical diseases, led by a guide with a lively sense of humor and a keen knowledge of medical history. While most people would prefer to think of tropical parasites and pathogens as inhabitants of some distant world, Desowitz, a specialist in tropical medicine and medical microbiology (*The Malaria Capers*, 1991), brings them perilously close to home. Malaria he calls "as American as the heart attack or apple pie," and yellow fever once killed one-tenth of Philadelphia's population. It was yellow fever, the author explains, that brought Louisiana into the US, for its high death rate convinced Napoleon that his American holdings were a "worthless, pestilential sinkhole." Of the diseases whose history Desowitz recounts, perhaps the least known is chronic hookworm anemia, a profoundly debilitating illness once epidemic in the American South. In a chapter subtitled "Kid Rockefeller and the Battling Hookworm," Desowitz describes how Rockefeller philanthropy not only transformed the South but led to global anti-hookworm programs. While Desowitz ranges over thousands of years in this chronicle, his concern is the present and the future. In a tale of medical detection reminiscent of Berton Roussau, he relates how a group of Orthodox Jews in Brooklyn--who, of course, shun any form of pig's meat--recently became infected with a pig tapeworm from Mexico. His message is clear: The threat of infectious diseases is ever present. Coming ecological-epidemiological shifts may bring some bad times--global warming creates a wonderful world for insects and the diseases they carry--and our present antibiotic agents have already begun to fail us, Desowitz concludes somberly. He urges increased support for all science, for just as threats come from unexpected sources, so do answers. (For the record, Desowitz believes that Pinta, a form of syphilis, was carried back to Europe by Columbus's crew.) A real-life thriller. (First serial to *Natural History Magazine*) -- Copyright ©1997, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

A epidemiological history, this book looks at tropical diseases that were able to thrive in temperate North American climates. Occurrences of malaria in New York City in 1993 are enough to make one want more quinine water in those gin and tonics. -- *Chicago Sun Times* Like Stephen Jay Gould and Lewis Thomas, Desowitz manages to make the basic principles of his subject immediately comprehensible to the general reader. -- Michiko Kakutani, *New York Times* Like a novelist, [Desowitz] draws the reader into the human tragedy of disease. -- Betty Ann Kevles, *Los Angeles Times* --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

Human parasites have been our close companions throughout evolutionary journey. Their complex

life cycles are enough to make anybody squeamish. Hookworm larvae, for example, burrow through the skin of bare feet, and chew their way into a blood vessel. They wash through the heart, and lodge inside the delicate capillaries of the lung. The hookworms then crawl up the airways until they are coughed up and swallowed into the digestive tract, forming a blood-sucking worm burden that lays eggs to complete the life cycle through infected human feces. Hard to believe that in areas of the American South up to 12 % of the inhabitants (particularly children) were infected with hookworm less than a hundred years ago. Such subjects become fascinating in the hands of Dr. Desowitz, who never fails to lighten his dark topic with a bit of wry humor. Reading this book is like sitting in on a great medical school lecture that you'll want to remember all your life -- but watch out! You may never want to leave home again!-- Auralgo

WHO GAVE PINTA is a disjointed but entertaining discussion of how several diseases were conquered. The book's disjointedness, however, makes it somewhat difficult to follow and leaves more questions open than it closes. For example, the author introduces yellow fever, degresses to other diseases and microbes, then returns several times to add more to the yellow fever story. It is easy to get confused between microbes, diseases and disease conquerors. Perhaps that's the price of Desowitz' attempt to portray his accounts chronologically rather than by disease or microbe. Desowitz also touches on various diseases' effects on culture, history and future events without exploring any topic in any depth, which is more tantalizing and frustrating than it is enjoyable. I don't think this book is as good as many other recent books of its genre, but is worth the price

This is one of the most captivating books on disease written. The facts in this book are far more interesting than any fiction written on the same subjects. Robert S. Desowitz does an excellent job of explaining these topics for those unfamiliar with tropical disease and epidemiology, but doesn't make the book boring for those with a vast knowledge in this area. This is a must read for anyone interested in parasitic diseases.

First, what is pinta, anyway? It's one of four diseases caused by the trypanosome that also causes syphilis and yaws. The Indians gave it to the Spaniards. It was a poor trade, as in exchange they got smallpox, yellow fever and a lot of other unpleasant sicknesses. Anticolonialist literature -- is there any other kind these days? -- always labels these as "European" diseases, although as the historian William McNeill said long ago, most are from Africa. The most important fact to carry away from Professor Desowitz' "Who Gave Pinta to the Santa Maria?" is that "tropical diseases" are not

tropical. This is especially so for the worst killer of them all, malaria, which has been Desowitz' lifetime research specialty. Desowitz and I both live in Hawaii, which does not have malaria. The reason is not that Hawaii is too cold. The reason this is important is that the dishonest anti-global warming campaign makes much of the threat that in a warmer world, tropical diseases will move north, where tree huggers who don't give a hoot about 2 million deaths a year from malaria might then have to suffer themselves. True, at least half those 2 million are black, but I think we should count them anyway. Although that is the most important lesson a reader can carry away from this book, given the fact that global warming has assumed a prominence in public debate that it did not have even as recently as 1997, when this book was published, that is not the lesson that Desowitz is hammering, in this and other books. (See my review of his "The Malaria Capers.") He has several. One is the way research money is heaped on trendy topics (molecular biology) while traditional and very effective areas -- including his, parasitological epidemiology -- are starved. Another is that diseases of the impoverished tropics -- impoverished in large part because the people are sick -- are already in the United States and likely to become more troublesome in the 21st century. (In the least satisfying part of the book, he attributes this threat to global warming. It would be the same if the globe were cooling. As he says himself, somewhat contradictorily, "money is the best antimalarial.") His method is to trace the first recognition and exchange of the insect-borne killers, malaria and yellow fever especially, but also Chagas disease, syphilis and its still mysterious cousins, and some others. At times he strays off into invertebrate parasitology (tapeworms, the subject of his earlier book, "New Guinea Tapeworms and Jewish Grandmothers" and hookworm). (All his books are well worth reading.) Then he follows the growing understanding of what the diseases were and how they spread. Between the 1860s and 1890, the basic relationship of humans to insects, other mammals and various viruses, bacilli and other microbes was understood. Southerners, like myself, will find special interest in his lengthy discussion of the disease-load of the South and how John D. Rockefeller made us all healthier. (He does not mention Rockefeller's simultaneous, successful attack on pellagra, a characteristic disease of the South but not a parasite. We owe Rockefeller much.) He sums up with another eloquent plea for broad-based research: "Every biomedical scientist knows that the great, beneficial discoveries come from both logical, rational, dogged investigation and from serendipitous, empirical, seemingly remote, unconnected findings. More often than not, logic follows serendipity. . . . It is just as important, in the long run, to train and support the person whose life is devoted to the study of the bumblebee as it is to train and support the person whose life is devoted to the study of the AIDS virus." Since "Who Gave Pinta" was published, a heartening revolution has occurred in medical research on "tropical" diseases.

With a symmetry unremarked in the press, another billionaire, Bill Gates has acted where governments and public opinion have failed and has started funding the work on malaria that legislators have found unrewarding in terms of esteem, publicity and votes. But all the late news is not good. Desowitz credits Rockefeller with a strong role in reversing anti-American feeling among Mexicans with his support of yellow fever eradication in the 1920s. He says, "For the first time the United States was seen as a benefactor rather than a predator." Maybe that happens among some societies. More recently, Americans and Norwegians almost managed to eradicate a particularly gruesome parasite, guinea worm, that affects only Moslems. It was almost as complete a triumph as the destruction of smallpox and it would have been the first time in history that an invertebrate parasite of humans had been conquered. However, religion stopped that campaign short, as it also has poliomyelitis. No discernible favorable opinions about Americans have been generated by the self-sacrifice, either.. Professor Desowitz is an ironist. His profession provided him unlimited scope for irony.

I really liked this book. It really introduced to me the history of some of the most scary diseases of our past and present. This book is very technical with great examples of subject points. Anybody reading it I recommend a big thick dictionary in your lap and a empty stomach.

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