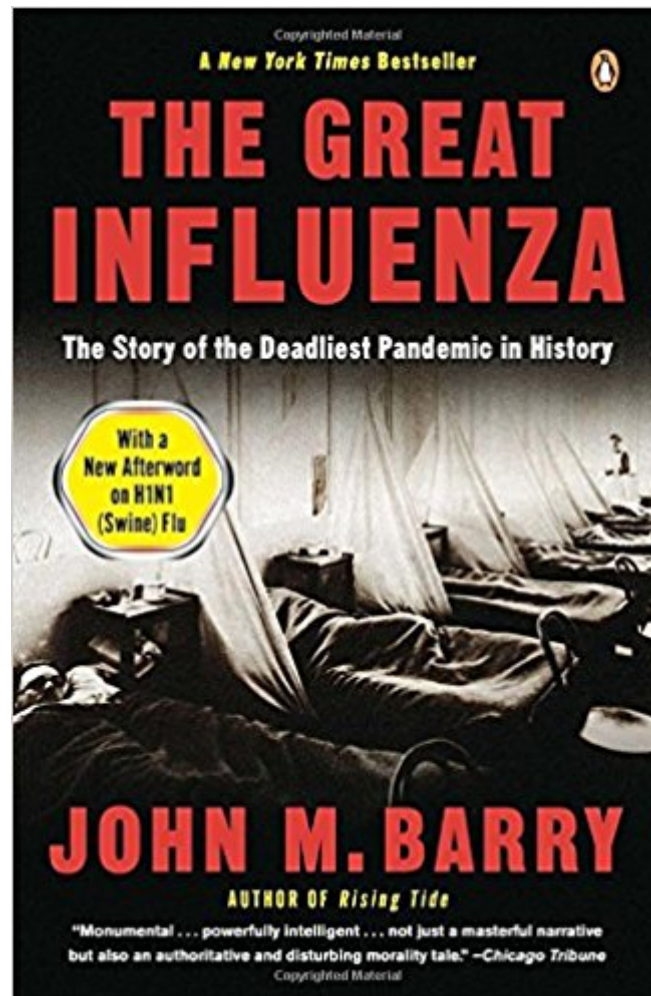




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# The Great Influenza: The Story Of The Deadliest Pandemic In History



## Synopsis

The definitive account of the 1918 Flu Epidemic. "Monumental"-Chicago Tribune. 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. Masterful 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 1918, a plague swept across the world virtually without warning, killing healthy young adults as well as vulnerable infants and the elderly. Hospitals and morgues were quickly overwhelmed; in Philadelphia, 4,597 people died in one week alone and bodies piled up on the streets to be carted off to mass graves. But this was not the dreaded Black Death-it was "only influenza." In this sweeping history, Barry (*Rising Tide*) explores how the deadly confluence of biology (a swiftly mutating flu virus that can pass between animals and humans) and politics (President Wilson's

all-out war effort in WWI) created conditions in which the virus thrived, killing more than 50 million worldwide and perhaps as many as 100 million in just a year. Overcrowded military camps and wide-ranging troop deployments allowed the highly contagious flu to spread quickly; transport ships became "floating caskets." Yet the U.S. government refused to shift priorities away from the war and, in effect, ignored the crisis. Shortages of doctors and nurses hurt military and civilian populations alike, and the ineptitude of public health officials exacerbated the death toll. In Philadelphia, the hardest-hit municipality in the U.S., "the entire city government had done nothing" to either contain the disease or assist afflicted families. Instead, official lies and misinformation, Barry argues, created a climate of "fear... [that] threatened to break the society apart." Barry captures the sense of panic and despair that overwhelmed stricken communities and hits hard at those who failed to use their power to protect the public good. He also describes the work of the dedicated researchers who rushed to find the cause of the disease and create vaccines. Flu shots are widely available today because of their heroic efforts, yet we remain vulnerable to a virus that can mutate to a deadly strain without warning. Society's ability to survive another devastating flu pandemic, Barry argues, is as much a political question as a medical one. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an alternate Paperback edition.

The connection among public health, epidemic disease, and politics can be seen throughout history, from the responses to the Black Death in Italian cities in 1348 to the response -- or lack thereof -- to the resurgence of tuberculosis on the part of the New York City Department of Health in the 1980s. John M. Barry spells out this connection in fascinating detail in *The Great Influenza*. In his meticulous description of the dire consequences that resulted when short-term political expediency trumped the health of the public during the 1918 influenza pandemic, Barry reminds his readers that the government response to an epidemic is all too often colored by the politics of the moment. Barry is neither a scientist nor a professional historian, and some of the details he gives on virology and immunology are clearly targeted at a nonmedical audience, but physicians and scientists will find this book engrossing nonetheless. The influenza pandemic of 1918, the worst pandemic in history, killed more people than died in World War I and more than the tens of millions who have died, to date, in the AIDS pandemic. Barry focuses only on what was occurring in the United States at the time, and he tries to place this unprecedented human disaster both against the background of American history and within the context of the history of medicine. He is right to try to acquaint the reader with the state of American medicine at the turn of the last century, focusing on the dismal

status of medical education and laboratory research, particularly as compared with that in Europe at the same time. Much of his discussion centers on "great men" (and an occasional great woman), however, and the picture given of their lives and professional careers is superficial and occasionally repetitious, and it distracts from the main events. His point, presumably, is to convey the futility of all the efforts of these brilliant minds, and he begins and ends the book with anecdotes about Paul Lewis, a scientist who had helped to prove that poliomyelitis is caused by a virus and then developed a highly effective simian vaccine. Lewis is the symbol of the best and the brightest of the scientific establishment, and we follow him as he weaves in and out of the story. He, like all scientists of his time, failed to grasp the fact that influenza was caused by a virus, believing it to be caused by Pfeiffer's bacillus, and he was therefore unable to develop a successful vaccine or to halt the devastation. The book becomes riveting once Barry begins to describe the origins and early weeks of the epidemic. The fact that it was wartime and that hundreds of thousands of men were being called up, placed in overcrowded camps, and packed like sardines into ships to be delivered as efficiently as possible to Europe enabled influenza to spread rapidly among recruits. From the military camps, the virus spread into the civilian population in the United States and from the United States to France. Barry describes the first catastrophe at Camp Devens, in Massachusetts, in the late summer of 1918, where thousands of previously healthy men in their prime suddenly became critically ill, overwhelming the inadequate camp hospital, infecting the medical staff, and dying by the hundreds, apparently with acute respiratory distress syndrome. The smartest and most hardworking scientists, physicians, and nurses, both military and civilian, were stunned by the rapidity of the disease progression and the inexplicable death toll among the youngest and strongest. (Figure)

Barry provides a fascinating picture of the response of the government -- both federal and local. The former was sluggish at best and secretive and dishonest at worst, desperate to keep the war effort going and the public calm and to minimize the severity of the disease. In one of the more gripping chapters, Barry focuses on Philadelphia and tells us of the backwardness of its social infrastructure, the lack of a functioning health department, and the power of the local political machine. Dr. Wilmer Krusen, a political appointee who was the director of the Philadelphia Department of Public Health and Charities, deliberately ignored warnings against allowing a Liberty Loan parade to proceed, even though influenza had devastated the local Navy Yard and begun to spread into the civilian population. Within 72 hours of the parade, every bed in Philadelphia's 31 hospitals was filled. Within 10 days the epidemic exploded from a few hundred civilian cases to hundreds of thousands and from a daily rate of one or two deaths to hundreds. The horror is most vivid in the dilemma surrounding the disposal of bodies. The city morgue had hundreds of bodies stacked up, which

produced an unbearable stench, and undertakers rapidly ran out of coffins. Hundreds of bodies lay in homes exactly where they had been at the time of death; burial quickly became impossible, since there were not enough people to dig graves. Whether anything might have been done differently, and if it had, whether this would have made a difference, are questions that Barry leaves unanswered. His tone is often irritatingly and unnecessarily sensationalist. But his indictment of the public authorities for their dishonesty and deliberate minimization of the damage and dangers is particularly chilling in today's climate of bioterrorism, in the midst of a war whose damages and dangers have been similarly minimized. Barry makes it all too easy to imagine a similarly devastating epidemic with a similarly inadequate response. I highly recommend this book to all.

Karen Brudney, M.D. Copyright © 2004 Massachusetts Medical Society. All rights reserved. The New England Journal of Medicine is a registered trademark of the MMS. --This text refers to an alternate Paperback edition.

This is an amazingly detailed account of the Great Flu epidemic of 1918, which killed millions around the world. Mr. Barry's research is astounding. I strongly urge anyone interested in how it happened to read his book. Besides a new strain of influenza (which happens repeatedly), much of the world was at war. This resulted in tremendous overcrowding of military bases, combined with censorship. Thus, the flu spread quickly, and the governments refused to acknowledge it. This allowed it to spread even faster. A fascinating read of the disaster, and the human response to it.

Interesting read concerning events that shook the world. I was surprised by lack of concern, the educational standards or lack of for MDs, the absence of effective medicines, the arrogance of most of the medical and government leaders, the failure of the military to use basic measures in treatment of the out break, and the persistence of the investigators to push to find cause and treatment for the Flu. We certainly owe them greatly.

John Barry spent seven years writing this fascinating account of the worst epidemic in history. Nearly every household was affected by the 1918 Influenza yet little has been told of it. Except for Katherine Anne Porter's *Pale Horse Pale Rider* fiction writers have largely omitted it. Yet it was perhaps the most influential event in the early 20th century. Barry traces the state of medical preparedness and details the disease as it spread across America into Europe during WWI and thence to all parts of the globe. This is very much a study of how this disease led to greater medical science and advancement but it is also a study of human frailties and the danger of a dictatorial

government and a restrained press.

I bought this book as a requirement for a college history course and am very glad the teacher asked us to do so. It is insightful and informative. Alongside what I learned in the class about this time period in American history, it not only gave me more information about this horrific epidemic, it opened up a lot of understanding for me about our society. I greatly enjoyed it.

This book is a sobering wake-up call to those of us who fret about exotic diseases like smallpox and the Ebola virus when we should be worrying instead about "only" influenza. Barry does an excellent job of describing why and how the 1918 influenza epidemic was so lethal, and he does not shy away from the disquieting conclusion that another lethal epidemic is inevitable. Moreover, it is clear that the greater mobility and density of modern life will work to our disadvantage when the next epidemic hits. This book was extremely well-researched, exhaustive, and well-written. However, it was not without its disappointments. First and foremost, the book got off to an extremely slow start, devoting approximately the first third to a detailed (and largely unnecessary) history of medicine throughout classical times and, in particular, the 19th century in the United States. Particularly grating was the author's rather gushing portrayal of the establishment of the Johns Hopkins University, a fine institution to be sure, but not quite deserving of the idolatry displayed by Barry. More generally, I was disappointed that so much of the book was devoted to institutional reactions to the epidemic, and less time and space was devoted to the human aspects of the story. The parts of the book I enjoyed the most were when Barry presented people's individual experiences with the epidemic, as revealed in letters, books, and interviews. These anecdotes conveyed much more vividly what it must have been like to live through the fear and panic wreaked by the epidemic. Alas, this kind of detail was in the minority in this very long book, which tended to stress instead the system-level reactions to the epidemic, for example, the (irritatingly apathetic) response of the military. Do these criticisms mean that the book is bad? No, not at all; it just means that it is a more scholarly work, intended to place the epidemic within a larger historical context, rather than provide an oral history of what it was like to live through the epidemic. Thus it is probably unfair of me to criticize it for not being something it did not intend to be; I'm just saying that readers who want primarily the more sensationalized, personalized story of the epidemic may very well be bored and frustrated by this book. I also wish the author had devoted more time than the brief chapter he included on discussing what lessons we can learn from the 1918 epidemic in helping us to cope with the (inevitable) next influenza epidemic. To me, the most interesting and provocative

finding of the book was the author's description of how a very few communities were able to escape the epidemic virtually unscathed, and this was through a rapid response to the encroaching epidemic accompanied by a drastic and total closing of city borders. Quite simply, the areas that did not lose any lives to the epidemics were the towns that did not allow anybody to come in. This policy was effective where no other measures (wearing masks, shutting down public meetings, making spitting a crime) were, but the legal and logistical implications of such isolationism are staggering, and I wish Barry had explored them in depth. I wish this because--even though it is only influenza--we will probably in our lifetimes be confronted with such a crisis. Barry's book does an excellent job of explaining why we should be terrified at this prospect, but it falls short in telling us what we can do to minimize it.

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