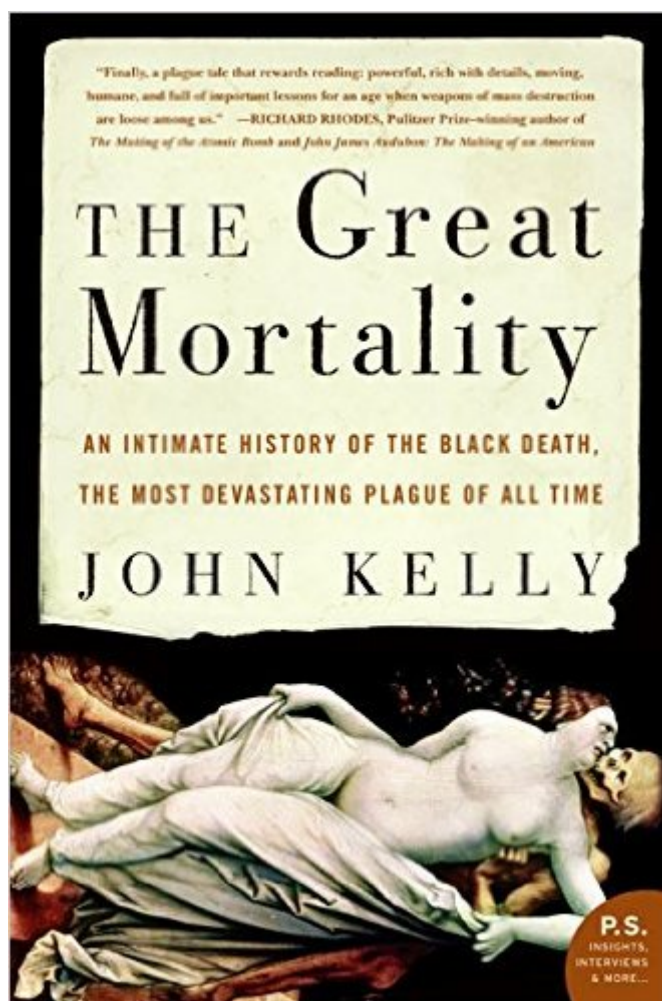


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The Great Mortality: An Intimate History Of The Black Death, The Most Devastating Plague Of All Time



Synopsis

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.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

In this book exploring the times and the details of the Black Plague, John Kelly introduces the lay reader to the pestilence that wiped out up to sixty percent of some of Europe's most bustling cities. From Messina to Florence to Paris to London - and all the cities and towns between and around them, the populace could not stop the spread of this particularly virulent form of *Yersinia pestis*, whether they sought laws to restrict it or simply chose to ignore it. The book provides insights into some of the potential causes of why this bout of plague is unequalled in history: sanitation, specific rodent populations (including that of the tarabagan of the Russian steppes), societal traditions, a burgeoning "global" economy, warfare, bacteriology, and other theories. The epidemiology of the disease and the forms it takes, from the "gurgling" bubos of bubonic plague to the respiratory infection that sounds frighteningly close to the hemorrhagic fevers, make for fascinating, if gruesome, reading. The author recreates the events of individuals who succumbed to *Y. pestis*

through written documentation and his own imagination. For an example, he writes "The headstone tells us only enough to suggest the following scenario . . ." He then continues for a page and a half to describe in detail the final days of a husband and wife. I found the method to make the plague more "intimate" through invented details somewhat troubling, although readers will find these passages the most compelling because of their focus on the individual. The book can occasionally be repetitive, stating in one chapter what was stated earlier.

At it's best, John Kelly's "The Great Mortality" is a gripping, in your face look at the Black Death that began in 1348. Using a host of primary sources he draws the reader into what feels like a firsthand account of those grim days, all while remaining grounded in modern science and history.

Unfortunately, at its worst it is a meandering account full of poorly identified speculation that fails to effectively straddle history and science. The result is an engaging, but ultimately uneven account that while worth reading fails to live up to its potential. Kelly's introduction immediately reveals some of these flaws. He offers an overview of how the plague arose in nature, how it burst out of its generally isolated ecological niche, and its impact on society and history. There is much to commend this introduction, as it quite nicely captures the evolution of a pseudo-global economy, and its impact on the spread of the disease. He also offers some interesting insight into where plague fits in the natural order, and how it made the jump from rodents to humans. However, Kelly also tends to pass off assumptions of human behavior as fact, and frequently takes contemporary sources at face value, a cardinal sin in a history, but particularly when dealing with an era as steeped in superstition as the Middle Ages. Moreover, a problem that plagues (no pun intended) "The Great Mortality" is that Kelly never seems quite sure if he wants to be primarily a historian or a scientist. The result is a flirting with scientific theory that never quite meets expectations, and leaves the reader frustrated.

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