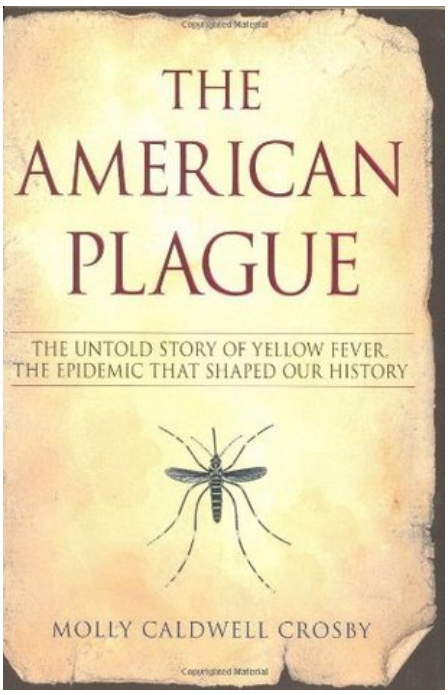


# The American Plague: The Untold Story of Yellow Fever, the Epidemic That Shaped Our History

*Molly Caldwell Crosby*

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Slave ships brought it to America as far back as 1648-and over the centuries, yellow fever epidemics plagued the United States. Carried along the mighty Mississippi River, it ravaged towns from New Orleans to St. Louis. New York City lost 2,000 lives in one year alone. It even forced the nation's capital to relocate from Philadelphia to Washington, DC.
"The American Plague" reveals the true story of yellow fever, recounting Memphis, Tennessee's near-destruction and resurrection from the epidemic-and the four men who changed medical history with their battle against an invisible foe that remains a threat to this very day.

## The American Plague: The Untold Story of Yellow Fever, the Epidemic That Shaped Our History Details

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# From Reader Review The American Plague: The Untold Story of Yellow Fever, the Epidemic That Shaped Our History for online ebook

### Aiyana says

A medical history along the same lines as "Ghost Map" and "The Great Influenza," this book tracks, with expert detail, the history of yellow fever in America and some of the remarkable outbreaks of this virulent and deadly disease. Carried to this continent by slave ships, yellow fever caused terrifying epidemics throughout the Americas.... and could still do so again. This book is about the quest to understand the disease, and the tragic and heroic stories of the researcher who put themselves into mortal danger to discover (and then prove) that the illness is carried by mosquitoes.

The book got bogged down in places with an excess of names and facts, and I found the timeline a little difficult to follow at times. However, the research was remarkably thorough (the author includes marvelously detailed notes at the end about the source material). Primary source quotes from letters, diaries, and newspapers abound. I read this alongside another medical history book set only shortly before this one, and it's intriguing to see how theories under fierce debate only a decade or so earlier had become generally accepted knowledge by the time of this book. Some of this may, of course, be due to the way two different contemporary authors frame the same time period, which is interesting in its own right.

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### Lauren says

Crosby has written a solid history of 3 events in yellow fever history, one leading to the other.

1) the Mississippi Valley yellow fever epidemic of 1878 (she focuses primarily on Memphis, the hardest hit area) and the forensics that studied how the disease was carried to Memphis via a steamer that eluded quarantine in New Orleans. Also successive cases that plagued the southern US (and even northern areas in warm summer months) and the need for research into what was causing this disease.

2) the US Army's Yellow Fever Commission in Cuba, and the scientists that worked to prove the mosquito as vector theory proposed by Carlos Finlay twenty years earlier. Chief among the scientists was Walter Reed. (I enjoyed her short biographical sketch of Reed - someone I knew very little about, despite years of working down the street from the hospital that bore his name...) While several of the scientists and medical volunteers succumbed to the disease (or later complications from the disease) it is clear that the work done at the dawn of the 20th-century forever changed medical history.

3) the after-effects: prevention through public health information, public works implementation, urban planning and sanitation, finding a vaccine, an African origin point, and the looming threat of viral mutation/adaptation and more yellow fever cases worldwide (including a 2002 case of a south Texas man).

The book was fascinating, both in its cultural and scientific history. I learned a lot from the stories and accounts of the doctors in the Yellow Fever Commission, and the discussion of medical ethics in that time, e.g. vivisection, patient consent, and medical "martyrs" who gave their lives for scientific progress. An interesting quote from Crosby (page 223): "I can think of no other disease that killed so many scientists

studying it."

My 4-star rating is more of a 4.5 or 4.75 - there were a few instances when Crosby's melodramatic style was too much for me. Her section and chapter endings are over-the-top. I can almost hear the organ music or the Twilight Zone music fading in. (One that particularly stood out was "Then, the prey turned on the predator." *Dun Dun Duuuunnn*) But it was easy to just roll my eyes and continue reading...

Highly recommended if you are interested in medical and scientific history, the Spanish-American War, Caribbean/Latin American studies, and/or public health.

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### Debbie says

I've heard of yellow fever, but was sorely lacking in any real knowledge of what it is exactly and the toll it took in the U.S., more specifically. I liked the narrative style of the book, finding that it made the subject less "textbook"and more comprehensible, allowing me to better "see" the disease's effect on those who suffered from it, as well as those who fought so persistently to understand it. So scary.

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### Darryl says

*The fever attacked each person in the Angevine family, one after the other, until none were well enough to help the others. It hit suddenly in the form of a piercing headache and painful sensitivity to light, like looking into a white sun. At that point, the patient could still hope that it was not yellow fever, maybe just a headache from the heat. But the pain worsened, crippling movement and burning the skin. The fever rose to 104, maybe 105 degrees, and bones felt as though they had been cracked. The kidneys stopped functioning, poisoning the body. Abdominal cramps began in the final days of illness as the patient vomited black blood brought on by internal hemorrhaging. The victim became a palate of hideous color: Red blood ran from the gums, eyes and nose. The tongue swelled, turning purple. Black vomit roiled. And the skin grew a deep gold, the whites of the eyes turning brilliant yellow.*

During a trip to New Orleans for a medical conference last month I and several colleagues visited Lafayette Cemetery No. 1, the city's oldest public cemetery, which has been featured in several books and movies. It contained numerous tombs from the 19th century; the one that struck me the most was the Ferguson tomb, which listed the names of three children that died on consecutive days due to yellow fever in 1878: one day old Sercy and 22 month old Mary Love on August 30, and four year old Edwin Given, on August 31.

After I pointed out the Ferguson tomb to my friends we stood in front of it for a minute in quiet reflection and mourning for the deaths of three young siblings in such a short space of time, and how it must have affected their parents. I read more about yellow fever in New Orleans after we returned home, and learned that the worst epidemic in the United States took place in 1878, which killed thousands of people in New Orleans and Memphis. I remembered that I owned The American Plague, and made plans to read it this month.

In The American Plague, Molly Caldwell Crosby focuses on two major topics: the 1878 yellow fever epidemic in her hometown of Memphis, Tennessee, and the efforts of Dr. Walter Reed and his fellow researchers to determine the cause of that dreaded disease, risking their own lives and health in doing so.

In 1878 Memphis was one of the major cities of the southern United States, as it was a transportation hub for steamboats from New Orleans to the south and the Ohio Valley to the north that arrived there via the Mississippi River, and trains that came from all over the country. It prided itself on its diversity and rich culture, and it served as the last major southern city between the developed eastern US and the largely untamed frontier that extended from Arkansas just across the Mississippi River westward to California. However, the city was also in severe financial difficulty, due to corrupt local politicians and the national Panic of 1873, which hit the South especially hard. As a result, the city was filled with thousands of people who migrated there from small towns, and the city's sanitation and water supply were public health hazards to all Memphians.

Ships coming to southern cities like Memphis, New Orleans and Charleston from Cuba and other Caribbean countries were supposed to be kept in quarantine for 40 days some distance away from the cities' ports, so that the crews could be observed for signs of yellow fever, malaria, cholera and other transmissible diseases. However, local business and civic leaders put pressure on government and public health officials to relax these standards; that, in combination with a lack of understanding of epidemic disease by medical and public health professionals, climates that were hospitable to *Aedes aegypti*, the mosquito that served as the insect vector for transmission of yellow fever from one person to another, and the high susceptibility of Caucasians to serious and fatal disease in comparison to people of African descent, led to frequent epidemics during the later half of the 19th century.

The 1878 yellow fever epidemic in Memphis was the worst of all, due to a combination of hot weather, frequent rains that allowed mosquitoes to breed and survive in higher than usual numbers, and a worse than usual yellow fever outbreak in Cuba. As news of the extent of the epidemic spread Memphians who had the means to do so fled the city by the thousands, decreasing the city's population from 47,000 to 19,000 in a matter of weeks. Of those who remained, 17,000 contracted yellow fever, and over 5,000 of them died. The mortality rate for whites who contracted yellow fever was approximately 70%, versus 8% for blacks, many of whom were previously exposed to the virus in the Caribbean and Africa. Those four years of age and under were particularly hard hit, including the Ferguson children mentioned above.

The author uses archived letters, books and media to provide a vivid portrait of the "city of corpses", told by nurses and doctors who tended the ill, many of whom succumbed to the plague itself. After the epidemic was finally over in autumn 1878 the city, which was the second largest in the South after New Orleans, never recovered spiritually or financially, as many of the wealthiest Memphians moved elsewhere, and immigrants from other states and countries chose other places to live.

The second part of the book describes the tireless and heroic efforts by Major Walter Reed and his colleagues in the United States Army to determine the mode of transmission of yellow fever, through experiments conducted primarily in Cuba at the turn of the century. Although it would be many years until the yellow fever virus could be identified, their work conclusively determined that *Aedes aegypti* was the insect vector that permitted the disease to be passed from person to person. Several researchers and soldiers died of yellow fever or were left permanently disabled by it. As one doctor wrote, "I can think of no other disease who killed so many scientists studying it."

Crosby closes the book with a brief discussion of the yellow fever vaccine and the disease, which still exists in South America and Africa. *Aedes aegypti* is a common species in the southern US (and I can personally

attest to its presence in Atlanta), so this country is at risk for yellow fever epidemics in the future, due to easy travel, a lack of knowledge of the symptoms of the illness in nearly all US medical professionals, who have never seen a case of the disease, and the preponderance of an unvaccinated and unprotected population.

The American Plague is a superb book about the 1878 yellow fever epidemic in Memphis and the work and personal sacrifice that led to the discovery of its mode of transmission and the development of an effective vaccine against the causative virus. Other topics are only lightly discussed, such as the epidemic of the same year in New Orleans and other cities in the Mississippi Valley, which killed a total of 20,000 people, the 1793 epidemic that decimated Philadelphia, and current efforts to control yellow fever in South America and Africa. It reads like a well written novel, making it a very enjoyable and enlightening book, and it is highly recommended to all readers.

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### Diane Lynn says

Very well done and informative. I would recommend this to anyone interested in Memphis, TN, Walter Reed, yellow fever or just history in general.

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### MJ says

This book had so much potential. I picked it up as a lender from my mom on a lark after reading the introductory chapter and thought it would be really interesting.

And in some ways it was! However, Ms. Crosby's "storyline" jumped around too much, seemingly without any rhyme or reason. Also, I felt that she should have either stuck to the science bits or the history bits, or made the book twice as long.

In some instances, I felt that there should have been more written about Dr. Reed. In others, I wanted the book to be all about the Memphis epidemic. In others, I wanted to know all about the final research which resulted in a successful vaccine. In the end, she glossed over a lot, while lingering too much in other areas.

Overall, I was left with a much dissatisfied feeling and a desire to find a book on the same topic that might satisfy my lingering questions which she left unanswered.

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### Sidna says

One of my book discussion groups is discussing this book this month. I thought the topic was too depressing, and someone in the group mentioned that it contained a lot of boring detail, so I had decided not to read it. The subtitle is "The Untold Story of Yellow Fever, The Epidemic That Shaped Our History." However, one of my friends in the group lent me her copy so I felt obligated to look at it.

When I finally began reading it, I could barely put it down! Parts One and Two, which describe the yellow fever epidemic in Memphis, are fascinating! Having toured Elmwood Cemetary several times, I've heard a lot of stories about the yellow fever epidemic in 1878 that nearly wiped Memphis off the map, but I have a much better understanding of it after reading this book. Also interesting was the fact that 134 years ago

politics in Memphis were just as corrupt as they are today. The names have changed, but the graft and corruption are the same.

In Part Three I learned more about Walter Reed and the members of the Yellow Fever Board than I really care to know, although I always wondered who Reed was and why the military hospital in Washington, DC was named for him. The research on discovering how the disease was spread and what happened to the team members was recounted in great detail.

This is another book that might have more appeal to Memphians than anyone else. Caldwell lives in Memphis and is a young mother with school-aged children. I spoke with her on the telephone once when I invited her to speak at a luncheon. Unfortunately, her committments at her children's school, prevented her from speaking.

Caldwell's writing style keeps the reader involved. Her research is meticulous. She has 47 pages of notes, 15 pages of selected bibliography, and a detailed index at the end. I guess this proves that you cannot judge a book by its title and topic. I highly recommend it!

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### Jan C says

Fascinating and enjoyable book. Very informative. First, Crosby shows us Memphis before the epidemic - having a fine old time and then a ship comes to port bearing sick sailors from Cuba. Sailors sick with yellow fever (although often misdiagnosed as malaria). The wealthy pretty much leave town. Then we see how those who remain behind get struck down. Some barricade themselves in the house but even they are struck down.

Much dispute as to how people contract yellow fever – through infected clothes, bacteria or a mosquito bite? There was a famous incident during the Civil War when a trunk of infected clothes was sent north hoping to infect the Union lines/leaders that way. Unfortunately, people do not get yellow fever that way.

During the Spanish-American War, hordes were falling from the disease. Many more than from actual fighting. Walter Reed and a corps of dedicated doctors established several camps looking at each theory. A camp where they looked at the infected clothing, a camp where they looked at bacteria and a camp where they experimented with mosquitos. And they experimented on themselves. Costing their minds and their lives. If not directly, then by putting them in an early grave.
They tried to eradicate the striped mosquito but it mutated so that other mosquitos would carry it. Because yellow fever, also known as the yellow scourge, is back. Primarily, so far at least, in West Africa and South America.

Watch out for the striped mosquito. Although I have to wonder how close you have to get to the mosquito to find out if it is striped.

I'm not usually much of one for books about science but I found this fascinating - almost a detective story. This was actually a fairly fast read once I got into the story.

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### Bridget says

I'm always surprised by how much we collectively forget about our past. This book sucked me right in, and made me very, very glad that I wasn't born 100 years ago. It chronicles the history of Yellow Fever in the United States, and the effort led by Dr. Walter Reed to understand, and eradicate, the disease. Learned a lot reading this one.

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### Jeanette says

Although the style, primarily the hyperbole factor or at other times the grandiose sentimentality of the writing itself, did became annoying- this still, IMHO, remains more than a three star. 3.5 to detailing the Memphis situation of 1878 and its subsequent results upon that city's history. Also in the later sections, the path to the etiology of the disease. Many names, and many personal histories- most within their Cuban intersect years! And what chances they took in their experiments. Mostly with themselves, but also on a wider scale to the soldier population. Bravery beyond any considerations to caution or protection. Volunteers most but absolutely not all. Lazear especially- his story! And I had never heard of him or read his name. The others I had, especially Reed.

Knowing that many in the South had died of this before the Civil War, and soldiers in the Spanish-American, I really did not realize how many died in the Memphis epidemic. And why.

Excellent background history. This is not meant to be a scientific treatise on the virus. But the history of the path it has wroth. Highly recommend it to those who are from the Southern USA, travel to South America, or Africa on occasion. Those in particular. We all know about Ebola, Typhoid, Cholera far more than about this Yellow Jack.

Overall, it make me glad for the umpteenth time in my life that my preferred climate has a winter that kills the bugs. Especially those mosquitos.

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### Gerald says

As a life-long Memphian, I have heard many stories of devastating effect on the city the 1878 Yellow Fever Epidemic had. More than 2,500 victims are buried in Memphis’ historic Elmwood Cemetery (founded 1852). I attended a reading at Elmwood Cemetery in early 2007 by first-time author Molly Caldwell Crosby from her then new book: . She did a great job of describing the terrible effect of this horrible disease both in Memphis and elsewhere.

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### Grumpus says

My interest in this book was piqued by a series that appeared our local newspaper.

The summers of the 1870s in the south was a scary time to be alive. Just think about how bad mosquitoes are

today and all the bites you get. Imagine not knowing that these little insects were the cause of whole families being wiped out. The horrible symptoms, the fear...the sadness!

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### Sarah says

This is a fascinating story, but very poorly written. And also poorly edited. There are confusing syntactical errors, idioms the author (weirdly) doesn't get quite right, as if she isn't a native English speaker, and the overall tone is maudlin, overwrought, and florid. The story is quite compelling enough without all the self-conscious literary flourishes. If this had been a novel, I would have quit after the first 20 pages. But the history is good, and the information new to me, so I stuck with it as with unpalatable but life-saving medicine.

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### Amanda says

It begins with a piercing headache. Movement becomes painful and the skin burns. Fever rises to 104 or 105. The kidneys stop functioning, and abdominal cramps begin. In the final days due to internal hemorrhaging, the patient vomits black blood. The skin and eyes become bright yellow.

These are the terrifying effects of yellow fever, a disease that struck fear like no other among Americans. For over 200 years yellow fever would claim 100,000 deaths in the U.S. and shape the history of the country. In fact, the U.S. capital was moved to Washington, D.C. after an epidemic in Philadelphia in 1793.

The first third of The American Plague, my favorite part, discusses the devastation of the 1878 epidemic in Memphis. While the city celebrated its extravagant Mardi Gras celebration, it was oblivious to the fact that in a few months a ship would leave Cuba transporting sugar and death. All of the elements were in place for an outbreak- a mild winter, poor sanitation and drainage, and new immigrants with no previous exposure to the disease. In July the Emily B. Souder made its way up the Mississippi River with infected crew aboard. When the outbreak began in August, so began a mass exodus. 25,000 people fled the city within five days. In July before the outbreak, the population had been around 47,000. By September 19,000 people remained and 17,000 of those had yellow fever. By December it was over. 5,000 had perished in Memphis, and 20,000 total died in the Mississippi Delta. The descriptions of the city during those months is horrific. This epidemic changed the demographic landscape of a burgeoning city and the course of its future.

The remainder of the book focuses on the studies in Cuba by Walter Reed and his team to find the source and means of transmission of yellow fever. Ultimately, it is determined that the disease is spread by a vector, a mosquito. This part of the book was interesting because I was unaware of Walter Reed's contribution to medicine. It was surprising to read about medicine in the U.S. at the turn of the century because it was truly in its infancy.

I would recommend this book to anyone who enjoys history and medical research. I found it engrossing and informative. I would rate it 4.5 because the author meticulously researched the material, even though at times the information was almost overwhelming.

### Kristen Bauer says

This book was an amazing combination of medical facts and narratiev prose. I really got into the story that was basically pulled together from death logs and medical journals. It was amazing to learn about this period of my history that I didn't know existed. Couldn't put it down - fantastic NF writing.

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### Allison says

This book was interesting from an historical perspective, though it's descriptions were often needlessly hyperbolic, a flaw shared by many books that tackle infection--as if the authors are worried that if they don't remind us that "the victim became a palate of hideous color," for example, or that "the family mansion had now become a tomb," we will get bored with the science and history and go away. I don't regret reading this book, but I gave it a very low rating because of the extremely poor job that the author does in explaining the science behind the epidemic. One of many examples:

*A virus is one of the smallest beings in evolution's survival of the fittest, mutating and coalescing in order to thrive, its ultimate goal being epidemic.*

To begin with, there are problems with the phrase survival of the fittest, as it is commonly interpreted by the lay reader to mean survival of the strongest, which is not what Darwin intended at all. "Fittest" in this context actually means the organism best adapted to its environment will survive to reproduce. Most evolutionary biologists these days stay away from that phrase because of its erroneous implications. Coalescing has no scientific meaning, and just feeds nicely into the "ultimate goal" phrase, which is, of course, ridiculous, as viruses do not have goals. This kind of writing is irresponsible, sows confusion, and reflects poorly on Crosby. She goes on to reveal more incompetence, which frankly I find utterly staggering, **as this is supposed to be a book about a virus(!!):**

*It is uncertain whether viruses evolved from a single cell, becoming more complex, or whether they devolved into something simpler, more efficient, gracefully infectious.*

Though I do love the phrase "gracefully infectious," this passage makes it sound as if viruses are multicellular (specifically "Evolved from a single cell, becoming more complex"). If viruses evolved from the bottom up, as it were, they would likely be evolving from naked RNA.

The text is peppered with other scientific inaccuracies, some flagrant, some more subtle, but far far too many to detail here. I found them to be irritating and to constantly remind me of the poor quality of this text. I am curious if a very knowledgeable historian would find this work similarly peppered with errors and distortions for dramatic effect.

If you would like to read an excellent historical and scientific account of an epidemic, I would recommend Steven Johnson's The Ghost Map . Or Barry's The Great Influenza.

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### Sara says

I had a strong sense that the author had a sense of HOW one writes about epidemics, and it just sounded...overdone. I skimmed the last 1/3 of the book.

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### Blyden says

A solid entry in one of my favorite genres, the popularized history. The strength of this book is the historical research that the author has done into the lives of the principals and the fascinating topic of yellow fever. Molly Crosby does a fair job of weaving the history into a engrossing narrative, but isn't quite up to the quality of the masters of the genre. There are moments when the flow falters, places where points are repeated, and the characters never quite come to life, despite the detail and the narrative.

The book is divided into four sections: an introduction, eight chapters on the history of the Memphis 1878 plague, fifteen chapters on efforts, mainly by American and Cuban doctors in Cuba, to isolate the vector(s) by which Yellow Fever is transmitted, and a few chapters on Yellow Fever in modern times.

The key storylines of the Memphis chapters are professional and public debates about the practice of quarantine, a feel for the devastation that Yellow Fever epidemics cause, and the personal heroism of those who cared for the ill. The topic is fascinating, the peculiarities of Memphis and Yellow Fever interesting, but the scenario is not at all unique. A number of other, fictional, accounts have painted the picture for us. Camus' Plague comes to mind most directly.

The unique story here is the Cuba section, which details the history of the Yellow Fever Commission and particularly the efforts of its doctors to determine how Y.F. was spread. Storylines here include insight into the interpersonal and political factors that underlie medical paradigms, a contrast in the ethics of medical experimentation at the end of the 19th century with those of modern medicine, and the personal heroism of those who fought yellow fever in the trenches, figuratively. This is the section that really makes the book worth reading.

Certain conceits of the author are annoying. She titles the book "The" American Plague, and uses the phrase "The Epidemic that Shaped our History" as though this was the only epidemic in US history. Even if, as she argues, Yellow Fever was the most feared disease in the U.S. in the 19th century, it certainly wasn't the only one that reached epidemic proportions nor the only one that significantly impacted our history.

Where is the line between fiction and non-fiction? Shaara's depiction of Gettysburg is very historical, but he created dialogue for the characters, fictionalizing history. It seems to me that even if one doesn't create fictional dialogue, virtually every popularized history is necessarily also fictionalized to a degree because it is inevitable that the author interprets the history in her portrayal and in that interpretation and portrayal will come details that may or may not have had a historical basis. Crosby stresses that The American Plague is a work of non-fiction, as if to say that her work is immune from this issue which characterizes the entire genre. To be sure she has avoided the creation of dialogue, but she does paint settings for us in ways that are unavoidably subjective, she tells us at points how characters feel about their situation and about other characters. No doubt she has bases for doing this in historical documents of her research, but even the act of reporting what is written in a historical document as being necessarily representative of a person's actual feelings is a significant imputation. Of course, any history is subjective, a history as some specific person

sees it or chooses to present it, but histories written in the popularized format add content that is subjectively created to give a richer narrative. At what point doing that crosses a boundary into "fictionalized" I suppose is left to the reader, but I don't think any author of history written in this style is a strong position to argue for the non-fiction purity of their work.

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### Nancy Hollingsworth says

I just read a book about the lack of cooperation among politicians, religious community, medical professionals, and journalists to overcome health concerns...over 100 years ago. Carry on.

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### Megan says

"According to the World Health Organization, even a single case of yellow fever must be treated as epidemic."

I wanted to read something about yellow fever after reading Never Caught: The Washingtons' Relentless Pursuit of Their Runaway Slave, Ona Judge last year, which briefly covered the 1793 outbreak in Philadelphia. The Washingtons fled the city, but the black community there--working off the incorrect assumption that black people were immune to the fever--took to nursing, caretaking, and gravedigging in greater numbers, only to also face down the disease itself as well as a backlash of racial animosity.

And this remained in my head as I read *The American Plague*, because as Molly Caldwell Crosby pointed out very quickly, the yellow fever was carried by the African slave trade: "When the slave trade first began, every European country that profited from the purchase and sale of Africans would see a yellow fever epidemic: the United Kingdom, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Spain, Portugal. Though Asia had the ideal climate and the right mosquito, it has never had an epidemic of yellow fever. It also never participated in the African slave trade."

Yellow fever, unsurprisingly, is intimately intertwined in American history: in slavery and colonialism, in poverty and inequality, in expansion and occupation. Yellow fever also shaped American understanding of public health, sanitation, and quarantine. The story includes some of the best of human nature, in the moments of extraordinary bravery and kindness-in-the-face-of-death of ordinary Americans: scientists, doctors, nurses, clergy members, gravediggers, their families, and more. It's hard not to be moved by the stories of medical professionals and soldiers voluntarily infecting themselves, even after watching others die, in hopes to save more lives. (And yet again, it's also hard not to be frustrated by how little we know--who largely go unnamed in the book--of the Spaniards who also participated in those trials.) Overall, the story of Walter Reed and the rest of the Yellow Fever Board in Cuba was a compelling narrative of investigative medicine.

I enjoyed the writing in this book: it was over the top and melodramatic at times, but Crosby has a particular gift for conveying character, liberally incorporating primary sources with her own explanations and descriptions. (One of my favorite summaries: "Jesse Lazear was the type of man who wrote to his mother every day and loved Cuba because he didn't have to play golf." Also JESSE LAZEAR how could you do

what you did sir!!)