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Review of: Rabid: A Cultural History of the World's Most Diabolical Virus

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Review of: Rabid: A Cultural History of the World's Most Diabolical Virus

Abstract

Review of: Rabid: A Cultural History of the World's Most Diabolical Virus; Bill Wasik and Monica Murphy; (2012). Viking Press, New York, NY. 240 pages. The fear of rabies lurks deep in the world's collective consciousness. In their book, Rabid: A Cultural History of the World's Most Diabolical Virus, Bill Wasik and Monica Murphy describe the cultural impact of this rare but viscerally terrifying viral infection. This book spans both millennia and the globe with descriptions of Greek myths with rabid overtones and the rabies outbreak in New York's Central Park in 2009. Throughout the book, the authors emphasize both notable rabies cases throughout history and the impact of the disease on shaping our language, religion, literature, cinema, and the science of microbiology.

Disciplines

Agriculture | Animal Diseases | Animal Sciences | Microbiology | Virus Diseases

Comments

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The fear of rabies lurks deep in the world's collective consciousness. In their book, *Rabid: A Cultural History of the World's Most Diabolical Virus*, Bill Wasik and Monica Murphy describe the cultural impact of this rare but viscerally terrifying viral infection. This book spans both millennia and the globe with descriptions of Greek myths with rabid overtones and the rabies outbreak in New York's Central Park in 2009. Throughout the book, the authors emphasize both notable rabies cases throughout history and the impact of the disease on shaping our language, religion, literature, cinema, and the science of microbiology.

The book is organized semi-chronologically, with the first several chapters dedicated to the early history of rabies. The compelling illustrations that open each chapter range from 15th century manuscript woodcuts to modern photographs. For the most part, these images capture the terror rabies has engendered throughout the centuries. The pace of the introductory chapters is, unfortunately, rather slow, with the focus on the dual nature of dogs as both "man's best friend" and demon-hound. These chapters also describe the potential for rabies as the disease that significantly contributed to vampire and werewolf legends.

The pace of the book picks up as it becomes more narrowly focused in the middle chapters. The book builds up to Pasteur's creation of the first known treatment of this invariably fatal disease. There was a large increase in the number of pet dogs and, not surprisingly, rabies cases throughout Europe and the United States in the 1800s. The "hydrophobia hysteria" that the authors describe led to an increase in public awareness. It also led to rather interesting ideas about what causes rabies: from spontaneous generation of the disease in dogs to sexual frustration in humans. These observations make the impact of Pasteur's work disproving spontaneous generation all the more relevant. The contemporary accounts, written by Pasteur's assistants describing the dangers of rabies research and the process of collecting saliva from a rabid animal, give the reader a new appreciation for the dangers faced by this dedicated group.

The final chapters demonstrate the lingering cultural horror that still surrounds the disease as well as describing new directions in rabies research. The authors explain how the rabies-free status of the British Isles impacted public opinion regarding the construction of the tunnel between France and England. On a related note, they describe a recent outbreak of rabies in Bali, a previously rabies-free island, and a rabies incident in Central Park. They also describe how Dr. Willoughby designed the Milwaukee protocol that was used to save Jeanna Giese and the results seen with this treatment. The concluding chapter, fittingly titled “the devil leashed” describes how modern neuroscientists are using the rabies virus’s propensity to invade nerves to deliver inhibitory RNA across the blood brain barrier.

While the first few chapters have a tendency to wander off the topic of rabies, the second half of the book is more focused and useful to a microbiology instructor. The vivid descriptions of the dangers faced by Pasteur’s group engage the reader and could readily be incorporated into a germ theory case study. The balanced discussion of the Milwaukee protocol’s effectiveness could be the foundation of a medical ethics discussion or structured debate in immunology. The extensive bibliography could be the starting point for an advanced microbiology student research project. Overall, this book was both educational and entertaining and worth reading.

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