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# Dread: How Fear and Fantasy Have Fueled Epidemics from the Black Death to Avian Flu

*Philip Alcabes*

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"With its analysis of historical and modern epidemics, both real and imagined, *Dread* convinces that the fear can be worse than the disease." —*SEED Magazine*

  
**DREAD**

[ HOW FEAR AND FANTASY  
HAVE FUELED EPIDEMICS FROM  
THE BLACK DEATH TO AVIAN FLU ]

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**Philip Alcabes : Dread: How Fear and Fantasy Have Fueled Epidemics from the Black Death to Avian Flu**  
before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Dread: How Fear and Fantasy Have Fueled Epidemics from the Black Death to Avian Flu:

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Excellent PrimerBy David S. WellhauserThis is an excellent primer

for the subject of the history of disease, medical science, and the popular reactions to epidemics and pandemics. If you are well acquainted with the history it may read as redundant but for those new to the topic it is highly recommended. Accessible, intelligent, adroit, enlightening, and entertaining. Highly Recommended. 1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Gets better with re-reading. By Customer Hearing Alcabes on the WNYC radio show The Takeaway this morning (re Cholera in Haiti), reminded me how brilliant this book is. Alcabes gives us a way to understand disease in the context of our social and political systems. It's simultaneously comforting and disturbing. Most of all it's worth reading. 4 of 6 people found the following review helpful. DREAD. By hannah arthur Philip Alcabes is a public scholar. By that I mean a cross-disciplinary professor who reaches beyond the ivy walls to make his ideas accessible to those outside of the academy. Anyone who is familiar with Dr. Alcabes' essays in *The American Scholar* and *The Chronicle of Higher Education* knows he routinely questions generally accepted wisdom. *Dread* is Dr. Alcabes' first book. I approached it the way I approach all his writings, wondering which sacred cows of mine he will slay. As a Jew, I was riveted by his discussion of the plague and the belief that Jews were responsible for the epidemic, perhaps because so many of them were physicians who knew a lot about poisons. As a nutritionist, I was equally interested in Dr. Alcabes' examination of obesity--not the obesity epidemic per se, but of the people whose careers depend on it. Dr Alcabes never fails to disappoint! If you dread having your beliefs challenged, don't read this book. But if you want to learn about the intersections of history, geography, religion, economics, mores and disease, *Dread* is just what the doctor ordered.

Deaths from epidemic disease are rare in the developed world, yet in our technically and medically advanced society, an ever-present risk of disease has created an industry out of fear. As Philip Alcabes persuasively argues in *Dread*, our anxieties about epidemics often stray from the facts on the ground. In a fascinating exploration of the social and cultural history of epidemics, Alcabes delivers a different narrative of disease one that requires that we reexamine our choice of enemies, and carefully consider the potential motivation of epidemic alarm-bells to further medical, moral, or political campaigns.

From Publishers Weekly Starred . According to Alcabes, an essayist and expert in public health, "epidemics fascinate us"; hopeful projection or not, his study provides enough gruesome details and unexpected sidelights to captivate history fans. Looking first at the plague that swept Europe in recurring waves from 1300 to 1700 ("the model for the epidemic"), Alcabes sorts through the widespread confusion over its cause and method of transmission. Rubbing up against theories of "contagion, intemperate air, poisoned water, astrological influence" and "devilry," accounts of brutal pogroms and apocalyptic dread, Alcabes makes the science behind the history--as in a description of infected fleas regurgitating the plague bacteria into a victim's system--just as gripping. Cholera reached epidemic proportions in England in 1831, when efforts to clean sewage from the streets poisoned the Thames; at the time, experts were focused on foul air, not foul water. Turning to the present, Alcabes chastises the use of "epidemic" for behavioral issues like obesity or teen sex, and the panic over isolated events like the Anthrax outbreak (only 22 cases), while 9 million cases of tuberculosis go untreated every year. Showing how even epidemics hinge on societal attitudes and expectations, Alcabes presents an engrossing, revealing account of the relationship between progress and plague. Helen Epstein, author of *"Invisible Cure: Why We Are Losing the Fight Against AIDS in Africa"* "In this richly detailed and fascinating book, Alcabes explores the meaning of epidemics throughout history, and what our fears of them tell us about ourselves. Like Susan Sontag, he reminds us just how hard it is to see these diseases for what they are." Barry Glassner, author of *"The Gospel of Food"* and *"The Culture of Fear"* "Exceptionally insightful and persuasively argued, *"Dread"* is at once a chronicle of the uses and (more often) abuses of the term epidemic and an antidote to the modern tendency to transmute fears of strangers and societal and personal failings into diseases." Harriet Washington, author of *"Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on Black Americans from Colonial Times to the Present"* "Dread" is an insightful education in how art and science inform each other in a cultural synergy that, even today, keeps us from discerning what is medicine and what is myth. The word "genius" has been debased by frequent use, but this is a work of undeniable genius in the most exalted sense. What Stephen Jay Gould did for natural history, Philip Alcabes has done for public health." About the Author Philip Alcabes is an Associate Professor of Urban Public Health at Hunter College and Visiting Clinical Associate Professor at the Yale School of Nursing.