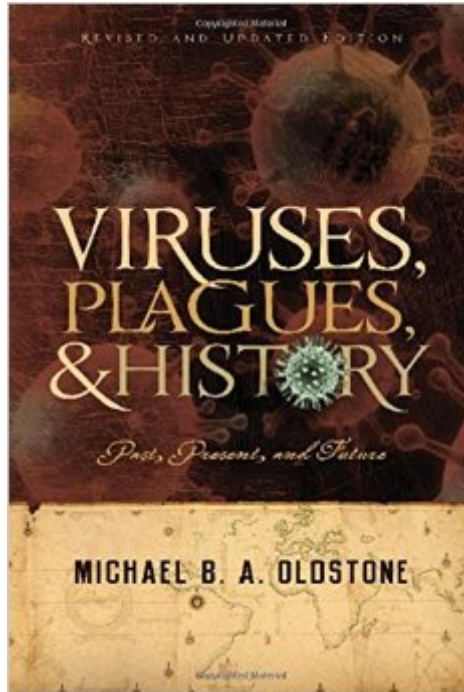


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# Viruses, Plagues, And History: Past, Present And Future



## Synopsis

The story of viruses and humanity is a story of fear and ignorance, of grief and heartbreak, and of great bravery and sacrifice. Michael Oldstone tells all these stories as he illuminates the history of the devastating diseases that have tormented humanity, focusing mostly on the most famous viruses. Oldstone begins with smallpox, polio, and measles. Nearly 300 million people were killed by smallpox in this century alone and the author presents a vivid account of the long campaign to eradicate this lethal killer. Oldstone then describes the fascinating viruses that have captured headlines in more recent years: Ebola, Hantavirus, mad cow disease (a frightening illness made worse by government mishandling and secrecy), and, of course, AIDS. And he tells us of the many scientists watching and waiting even now for the next great plague, monitoring influenza strains to see whether the deadly variant from 1918--a viral strain that killed over 20 million people in 1918-1919--will make a comeback. For this revised edition, Oldstone includes discussions of new viruses like SARS, bird flu, virally caused cancers, chronic wasting disease, and West Nile, and fully updates the original text with new findings on particular viruses. *Viruses, Plagues, and History* paints a sweeping portrait of humanity's long-standing conflict with our unseen viral enemies. Oldstone's book is a vivid history of a fascinating field, and a highly reliable dispatch from an eminent researcher on the front line of this ongoing campaign.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

First of all, to clear up a possible confusion from the title and publisher's reviews, this book doesn't

focus on how viruses have affected world history. There is some information about this, but it is relatively few pages scattered throughout the book. What "Viruses, Plagues, and History" does, and quite well, is present a fine popular account of doctors' and scientists' efforts to identify and control these diseases, that is written by an expert to be understood by the "medically aware" general reader. This won't be everyone, so I'd sample a page or two before rushing out to buy it. The original edition of ten years ago has been brought up to date (as of 2010) with new chapters on SARS and West Nile; information in other chapters (e.g., HIV/AIDS) has also been updated for this new edition. Be sure you get this one, rather than the 2008 paperback (which is just a reprint of the older edition). It is obviously a fast-changing field, so this is one case where it really matters which edition you purchase. The publisher and author deserve a lot of credit for recognizing the need and following through with this inexpensive and well-updated edition.

So I like geeky books. I keep a copy of Bacon's *Novum Organon* in my car in case I get stuck somewhere without a book. I'm a semi-academic physician and I've got degrees in environmental sciences and music and "minored" (as close as they had to minors at my college) in social psychology and physics. So I looked forward to reading this. After all, I graduated from college in 1976 and figured I could use a brush-up on modern virology. After two chapters, however, I gave up on the book and won't read the rest of it. Why? Because the writing is so bad. Let me rephrase that: either the writing OR the editing is so bad. A good editor with cojones could have forced the author to do a better job... but didn't. The story has great opportunities for storytelling, starting with the historical discovery of viruses... but that's not the way it plays out in the book. No drama, no excitement, for what can be a very exciting story. Rather than providing a staged development of the story of viruses and plagues and history, the first two chapters repeat the same information. Now some repetition is OK when material is likely to be new to readers, but you really need to approach it from a different angle the second or third time. And, he introduces new terms without defining them in a way that's appropriate for a general audience. For example, he explains that T lymphocytes come from the thymus. Come on, guy. I happen to know what a thymus is, but that's because of having gone to medical school. The thymus is one of those Rodney-Dangerfield-ish organs. Anatomy texts tend to leave it out, especially because it involutes and is basically just vestigial in adults (though its appearance above the heart on chest X-rays of small children still stumps my residents on a regular basis). Give it a pass. There are better alternatives.

Oldstone's book tells the human history of viruses, how did viruses cause havoc among populations

of different countries throughout history. Often such epidemics happened during wars with the consequence that losses caused by viruses were larger than those caused by guns. There also are many details about the pioneer virologists (Pasteur, Koch, Sabin, Salk, Koprowski, etc.) who studied different viruses (while risking their own lives) and in several cases succeeded to produce an effective vaccine. The consequences inflicted on people by most viruses are scary but some are more scary than others: ebola and related hemorrhagic fever viruses, for example, have the ability to liquefy internal organs thereby producing terrible suffering to the infected individual. One of the last chapters in the book (ch. 15) is concerned with mad cow disease and spongiform encephalopathies caused by misfolded proteins which self-assemble to form prions (proteinaceous particles). These are not viruses and, although very interesting, the information in this chapter appears not be strongly connected to the main subject of the book. On the other hand, besides details on the discoverers of the viruses, information about those involved in determining their fascinating 3D structures was not included. Anyway, by reading this book you will gain further awareness about the threat that viruses pose to human health.

I have read several books on contagious diseases and Dr. Oldstone does an excellent job of presenting the diseases & the history behind each one. Although much of the information I already knew, Dr. Oldstone did present some new information which is why I like reading books of the same topic from different authors.

A bit dry, academic, and long on detail at the expense of narrative. Might be better for a professional or med student. A more casual reader might try Quammen's *Spillover* but if you want depth, this would get the job done.

This second edition is a fascinating view of history based on the powerful influence of plagues and viruses, not human politics. It also details the investigative work of pioneers in biology in discovering agents we take for granted today. In light of ebola (and possibly other future epidemics/pandemics), the book offers insight into containment and management. Overall, an exciting reading experience.

An eye-opening review of the impact of viruses on world history. An interesting read that will be appreciated by the layman and medical professional. It will provide a little continuing education for those in any medical field.

Michael Oldstone covers the material very well. As a virologist, I found it interesting and enlightening and I learned some things that I didn't pick up in my immunology courses. Parts of the book are at a college reading level, which may be too detailed for the casual reader, but the sections on the history of various viral diseases is very readable.

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