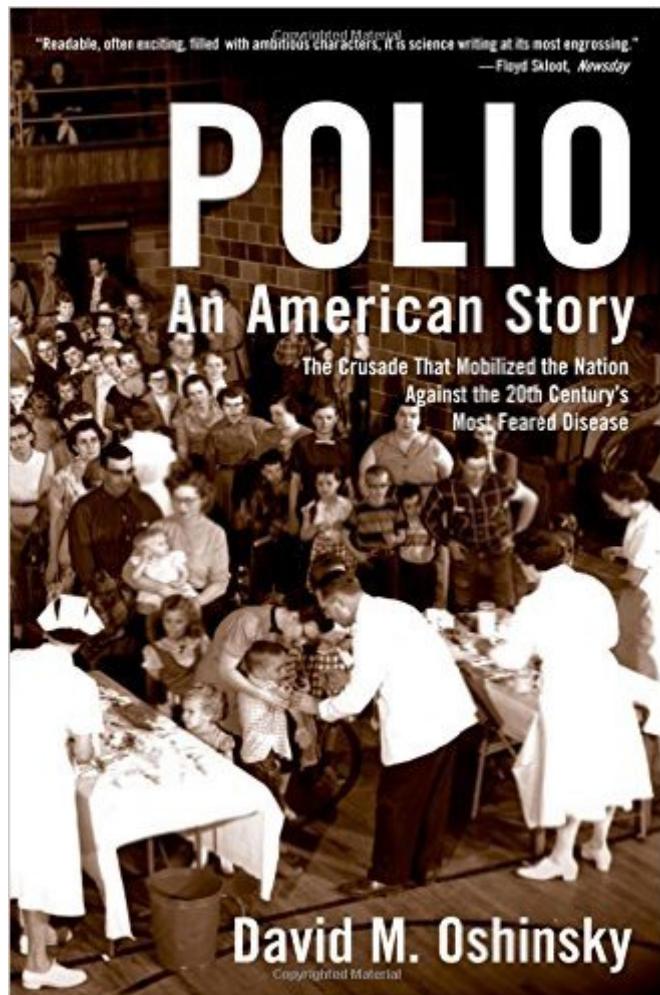


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Polio: An American Story



Synopsis

Here David Oshinsky tells the gripping story of the polio terror and of the intense effort to find a cure, from the March of Dimes to the discovery of the Salk and Sabin vaccines--and beyond. Drawing on newly available papers of Jonas Salk, Albert Sabin and other key players, Oshinsky paints a suspenseful portrait of the race for the cure, weaving a dramatic tale centered on the furious rivalry between Salk and Sabin. He also tells the story of Isabel Morgan, perhaps the most talented of all polio researchers, who might have beaten Salk to the prize if she had not retired to raise a family. Oshinsky offers an insightful look at the National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis, which was founded in the 1930s by FDR and Basil O'Connor, it revolutionized fundraising and the perception of disease in America. Oshinsky also shows how the polio experience revolutionized the way in which the government licensed and tested new drugs before allowing them on the market, and the way in which the legal system dealt with manufacturers' liability for unsafe products. Finally, and perhaps most tellingly, Oshinsky reveals that polio was never the raging epidemic portrayed by the media, but in truth a relatively uncommon disease. But in baby-booming America--increasingly suburban, family-oriented, and hygiene-obsessed--the specter of polio, like the specter of the atomic bomb, soon became a cloud of terror over daily life. Both a gripping scientific suspense story and a provocative social and cultural history, Polio opens a fresh window onto postwar America.

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Customer Reviews

The Foundation for Infantile Paralysis and their March of Dimes campaign was started by FDR and

managed by his law firm colleague Basil O'Connor. O'Connor continued the movement after Roosevelt's death in 1945 and financed the research into a vaccine. The competition between Salk and Sabin was very interesting and the large number of cases that hit in the early 1950s was the impetus for Salk's accelerated assault on the disease using the dead form of the virus. Sabin believed in a live virus and there were many debates about how to proceed with scientific research and when to announce findings. Also the ethical issues as to when and how to do vaccine experiments on humans was a major point of contention. The book is extremely well-researched by Oshinsky and covers the facts, the research and the myths that surrounded the virus along with the fears that hit and the damage that was caused by this disease when it would flare up in the hot summers. All the major contributors are discussed and some biographical background is given for the key players. In the summer of 1953 at age six I contracted a mild case of the disease. I knew nothing about it, felt so sick when it first struck that I thought I was going to die. I can relate well to the suffering described. My family was lucky as among the three children I was the only one to get it. I was placed in St. Charles Hospital in Port Jefferson Long Island, a Catholic hospital that specialized in treating polio and I recovered after 3 months of treatment with only a weakening of my stomach muscles. The book is detailed and covers how people reacted to the perceived epidemic. It was interesting to me that 1952 was the year that polio cases hit their peak in the US and 1954 was the year of the Salk vaccine trial.

The 2006 Pulitzer Prize Winner for Best History Book Polio: An American Story is so much more. Author David M. Oshinsky looks at the public health menace of polio but also notes it was the first disease to benefit from a good P.R. machine. While it was a menace more people died of other diseases in the same time frame. What made polio so important was that it had a surviving public face--those children and adults in iron lungs coupled with the fact that it was the first to have a mobilized force in the form of the March of Dimes to raise public awareness and public philanthropy. Oshinsky gives thumb nail sketches of the political and public circumstances that drove John D. Rockefeller to give buckets of money to develop a U.S. equivalent of the Pasteur Institute. He also looks at the research, deadends and, ultimately, the rivalry between the three men key behind the race for a cure--Sabin, Salk and Koproski all of whom took slightly different approaches to achieve the same end. We also get a rare glimpse into the private feud between Sabin and Salk. The author paints these heroes of the modern age with their feet of clay intact including their petty arguments and jealousy about each person's accomplishments. The author provides an unflinching portrait of a desperate race driven as much by politics as science and the some of the snafus that

effected it. This includes the 200 deaths due to contaminated Salk vaccine that was produced without proper supervision at Cutter Labs in Berekely, California. We also discover little details for example how the direct-to-consumer advertising effected the anti-septic culture in a negative way we live in.

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