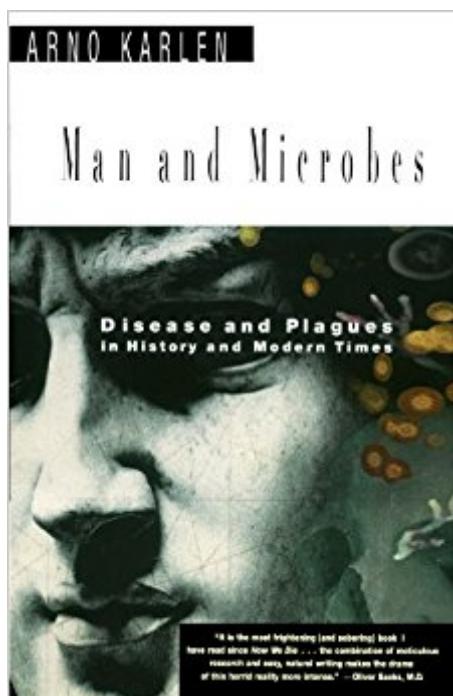


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# Man And Microbes: Disease And Plagues In History And Modern Times



## Synopsis

AIDS, Lyme disease, and the deadly hantavirus are just a few of the dozens of new diseases to arrive in recent years. Old ones such as TB and cholera have returned with sharper virulence. Where do new diseases come from? Why are old ones back as vicious changelings? Why now? We created this epidemic of epidemics by transforming our environment and behavior - our landscape, technology, and sex lives. Thus we hasten microbes' evolution and our own, making the world a global village for diseases. In *Man and Microbes*, respected science writer Arno Karlen presents a dramatic panorama of the natural history of disease. Drawing on case studies and tales of medical detection, he uncovers the ills of ancient hunter-gatherers, relates the rise of diseases that came with each domesticated species, and exposes the origins of modern urban epidemics. Citing original sources and extensive research, Karlen recounts the terror of measles and smallpox that raked the ancient empires of Rome and China; the intertwined stories of leprosy and tuberculosis throughout thousands of years of history; the onslaught of European microbes that devastated the peoples of the Americas far more than did the firearms of their conquerors; and the much-forgotten influenza pandemic of 1918 that killed tens of millions. He also analyzes the most recent medical reports of mysterious new diseases from around the world and provides a view of how they have arisen and what they bode for the future. *Man and Microbes* makes clear that infection is a natural and necessary part of life. It shows how the search for food, shelter, and a safer, more prosperous life has altered the environment, changed the dance of adaptation between humans and microbes, and generated new diseases. The means to surmount the growing public health crisis in our ever-accelerating global society lie in the same ingenuity that created it. Understanding the complex and vital relationships

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## Customer Reviews

Whereas many popular books on microbes focus on contemporary pathogens and emerging epidemics, Arno Karlen's *Man and Microbes* provides a historical look at the coevolution of humans and microorganisms. Karlen speculates that infections are integral to the process of life itself, that the mitochondria in every animal cell, for instance, are likely descendants of infectious agents. He then traces the development of man from primitive hunter-gatherer to urban dweller to world traveler, pointedly analyzing how socio-ecological changes have contributed to the changing incidence of disease. With amazing detail, Karlen describes the origins of historical plagues (smallpox, cholera, influenza, polio, and others) as well as the emergence of scourges such as hemorrhagic fever (Ebola and its cousins), Lyme disease, Legionnaires' disease, and even the deep mysteries of retroviruses such as HIV.

Karlen (Napoleon's Glands) has produced a disturbing, succinct, compelling report on the current global crisis of new and resurgent diseases. Covering cholera, leprosy, cancer, AIDS, viral encephalitis, lethal Ebola fever, streptococcal "flesh-eating" infections and a host of other killers, he shows how the present wave of diseases arose with drastic environmental change, wars, acceleration of travel, the breakdown of public health measures, and microbial adaptation. In the book's first half, he entertainingly charts humanity's relationship with microbes, from the earliest hominids' probable encounters with bubonic plague to hunter-gatherers' comparative good health, the explosion of sickness in Bronze Age cities and the spread of infections with trade, conquest and empire. Karlen concludes that today's epidemics are part of an ancient pattern-whenver people make radical changes in their lifestyle and environment, disease flourishes. He suggests that improved surveillance could help defuse the crisis we face now. Copyright 1995 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

"Man and Microbes" is an excellent precursor for those interested in studying numerous diseases and plagues that have affected humans over time - and how these illnesses subsequently initiated change in many aspects of life in rural areas, cities, travel and more. Yes, more could have been written on each type of disease/plague; however, that was not the reason for the book. There are

books that go into great depth on smallpox, TB, Ebola, etc. that can be studied if one desires, but this book is meant to be a starting place in developing the knowledge of our past dealings with diseases. This book covers in some detail as to how humans have adapted and understand vectors and other factors in order to prevent or limit life-threatening diseases. I strongly recommend this book for everyone, particularly as we try to survive in a world filled with both old and new microbes that can easily change our daily lives.

"Man and Microbes" is a good title for this book. Over time, man's relationship with microbes has changed as human populations have grown, moved, changed from hunter-gatherer to agricultural life and then city life, and exploration and colonization exposed groups of humans to new environments. As new land is cleared for farming, humans stir up microbes that had previously interacted with other species, such as mice or monkeys. Having never been exposed to a given microbe before, man has not developed any tolerance and the severity of the disease is harsh. Every new human population a disease encounters has to go through this introduction, before the effects become less severe. This is why native American populations were devastated when Europeans came to their continents. The microbes themselves also change over time, becoming more powerful, less powerful, or retreating to their original animal hosts. Since this book attempts to span the history of mankind and our interaction with microbes, there is less detail about specific diseases or time periods than a reader might like. I know I was still left wondering about the specifics of polio after reading the book. But I do feel that I have gained much more insight into disease and how it has affected our history. When we developed vaccines and antibiotics we thought that we had defeated the diseases which had killed so many humans, but the microbes continued to change, just as always, adapting to our new defenses. Human populations continued to grow, expanding to previously unpopulated territory, exposing people already vulnerable through poor diet and hygiene to unfamiliar microbes. My view of our war against disease has definitely changed through reading this book.

This is an excellent short history of viruses and infectious diseases that attack humans. Author Arno Karlen writes lucidly and with an economy that makes this book an easy and pleasurable read for lay people who are "serious readers." A highlight is the attention that Karlen pays to the process through which humans and microbes have co-evolved since ancient times. He takes care to frame the issues in the broad context of evolution and the pressures that human behavior change and technology have placed on microbes' natural selection, rather than viewing disease as a

black-and-white battle between "us" and "them." Also of note is the excellent bibliography. Karlen separates the bib into those works that are "core" to the subject and those that are supplemental reading, and he annotates the core selections to differentiate those that are primarily for scholars and those that are useful for the general reader. I found this book very interesting and helpful to my overall understanding of a fascinating subject.

First and foremost, this book is an outstanding, fantastic introduction to the world of infectious diseases. Because of two factors, however, much information is lost. Firstly, the book is rather short - hardly three hundred pages. Secondly, there are thousands of years to cover in such a volume. As a result, the reader is left with a superficial - albeit insightful - look at the history of diseases throughout history. Karlen attempts - and succeeds, as best as expected - to do three things in this book. He begins by discussing the disease, or outbreak, at hand. Syphilis, tuberculosis, legionnaire's, marburg, ebola are all covered - en brief. Then, he goes on to elaborate on the social climate of the time, to set a context for the reader. He then discusses the impact that these diseases had on the populace. As a personal friend of specific, explicit writings on the physiological results of diseases, I was somewhat disappointed: AIDS is hardly discussed, and the physical descriptions and onsets are scant, if existant. However, Karlen's adept critical thinking - he analyzes the social impact, etc of each outbreak - makes this book worthwhile. Overall, a good introduction. I kept notes through this book on topics that I was interested in exploring further, and was not disappointed.

This book is quite literally, along with *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China*, one of the most defining books I've ever read. I read it over the course of a year along with some other supplemental material (it itself is a really small book) and it was amazing. It sweeps through history and is a great introduction to how influential disease has been and will continue to be in the context of human history. The only more interesting thing would be to travel through time and find out the context in our evolutionary history.

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