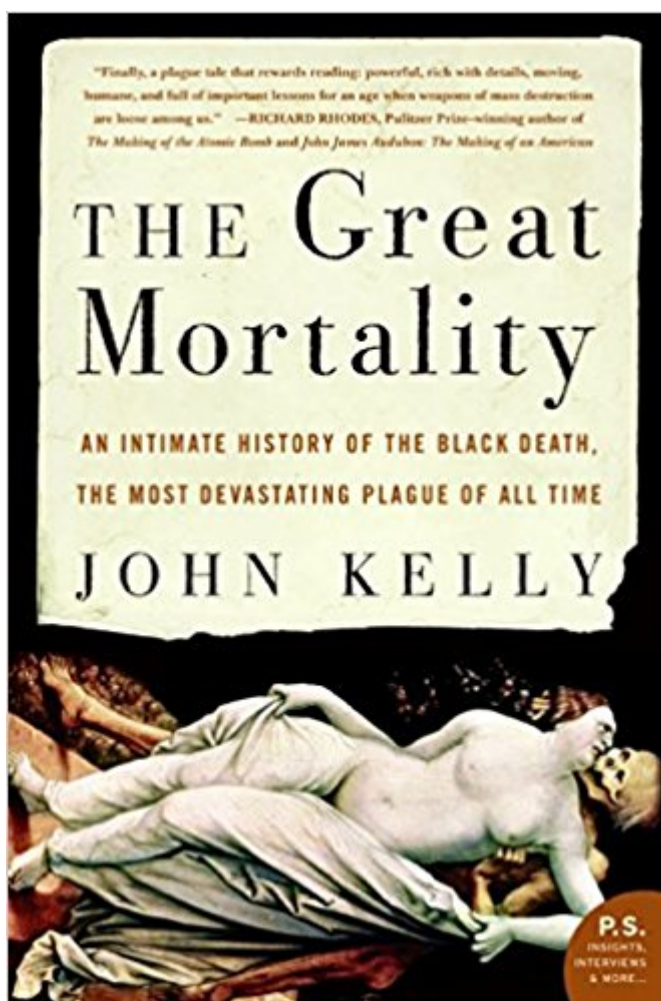


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# The Great Mortality: An Intimate History Of The Black Death, The Most Devastating Plague Of All Time



## Synopsis

La moria grandissima began its terrible journey across the European and Asian continents in 1347, leaving unimaginable devastation in its wake. Five years later, twenty-five million people were dead, felled by the scourge that would come to be called the Black Death. The Great Mortality is the extraordinary epic account of the worst natural disaster in European history -- a drama of courage, cowardice, misery, madness, and sacrifice that brilliantly illuminates humankind's darkest days when an old world ended and a new world was born.

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## Customer Reviews

A book chronicling one of the worst human disasters in recorded history really has no business being entertaining. But John Kelly's *The Great Mortality* is a page-turner despite its grim subject matter and graphic detail. Credit Kelly's animated prose and uncanny ability to drop his reader smack in the middle of the 14th century, as a heretofore unknown menace stalks Eurasia from "from the China Sea to the sleepy fishing villages of coastal Portugal [producing] suffering and death on a scale that, even after two world wars and twenty-seven million AIDS deaths worldwide, remains astonishing." Take Kelly's vivid description of London in the fall of 1348: "A nighttime walk across Medieval London would probably take only twenty minutes or so, but traversing the daytime city was a different matter.... Imagine a shopping mall where everyone shouts, no one washes, front teeth are uncommon and the shopping music is provided by the slaughterhouse up the road." Yikes, and that's before just about everything with a pulse starts dying and piling up in the streets, reducing the

population of Europe by anywhere from a third to 60 percent in a few short years. In addition to taking readers on a walking tour through plague-ravaged Europe, Kelly heaps on the ancillary information and every last bit of it is captivating. We get a thorough breakdown of the three types of plagues that prey on humans; a detailed account of how the plague traveled from nation to nation (initially by boat via flea-infested rats); how floods (and the appalling hygiene of medieval people) made Europe so susceptible to the disease; how the plague triggered a new social hierarchy favoring women and the proletariat but also sparked vicious anti-Semitism; and especially, how the plague forever changed the way people viewed the church. Engrossing, accessible, and brimming with first-hand accounts drawn from the Middle Ages, *The Great Mortality* illuminates and inspires. History just doesn't get better than that. --Kim Hughes --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

The Black Death raced across Europe from the 1340s to the early 1350s, killing a third of the population. Drawing on recent research as well as firsthand accounts, veteran author Kelly (*Three on the Edge*, etc.) describes how infected rats, brought by Genoese trading ships returning from the East and docked in Sicily, carried fleas that spread the disease when they bit humans. Two types of plague seem to have predominated: bubonic plague, characterized by swollen lymph nodes and the bubo, a type of boil; and pneumonic plague, characterized by lung infection and spitting blood. Those stricken with plague died quickly. Survivors often attempted to flee, but the plague was so widespread that there was virtually no escape from infection. Kelly recounts the varied reactions to the plague. The citizens of Venice, for example, forged a civic response to the crisis, while Avignon fell apart. The author details the emergence of Flagellants, unruly gangs who believed the plague was a punishment from God and roamed the countryside flogging themselves as a penance. Rounding up and burning Jews, whom they blamed for the plague, the Flagellants also sparked widespread anti-Semitism. This is an excellent overview, accessible and engrossing. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

In the classic 1964 movie "Fail-safe" Walter Matthau, playing a Kissingeresque civilian advisor to the Pentagon, makes an argument for the survivability of nuclear holocaust. He observed chillingly that nuclear aftermath would be similar to medieval times, when plagues wiped out entire populations. It is not comforting to read that in real life, the US Atomic Energy Commission to this day uses the Great Plague of 1347-52 as the best predictor of the aftermath of nuclear war.[11] John Kelly gives

us a look into the causes, the experiences, and the effects of an epidemic that literally destroyed half the known world, the so-called Black Death. In a story that lends itself naturally to superlatives, Kelly's chronicle begins in a sanguine fashion with an explanation of the evolution of the bacillus "Y Pestis." Y Pestis was no stranger to man before 1347; the organism was probably responsible for a notorious plague during the reign of Justinian. One of the disturbing features of viruses, one that is now becoming more acutely implanted in the contemporary human consciousness, is the ability to mutate or adapt. The great concern over Avian flu is that precisely such an adaptation may be occurring as of this writing. Y Pestis made one of its routine mutations in the fourteenth century, in the flatlands between Russia and China. Initially this was a problem only for the local field rat population. Kelly observes, though, that any kind of natural phenomenon--earthquake, drought, flood--often spelled trouble for humans, as rats were displaced from normal burrow habitats and moved closer to human settlements and villages, carrying their diseases du jour. Unfortunately, the timeless rat and the inventive Y Pestis found themselves in a revolutionary new epoch, the zenith of the Middle Ages. The barren Asian prairies were now crisscrossed by trade routes heading in both directions. As Europe evolved into a continent of commercially driven cities, and as feudal isolation gave way to urban congestion, the demand for markets and goods by land and sea made a global pandemic possible for the first time. By 1347 a Tartar army laid siege to the city of Caffa on the northern shore of the Black Sea. Kelly favors the theory that the Tartars brought Y Pestis with rats in their train. In any event, the siege petered out when both forces succumbed to the disease and Caffa would become an historical marker for the disease's entry into Europe. From Caffa the disease was communicated quickly by seafarers, first infecting Constantinople and then in rapid progression the major ports of the Mediterranean, from whence it progressed along rivers and highways alike. Eyewitnesses reported that contagion seemed to occur with incredible speed; just the slightest conversation with infected sailors seemed to transmit the illness. The actual manner of transmission, by fleas or by airborne bacilli, appears to be somewhat in dispute to this day. The speed of contagion, and the attendant morbid symptoms, produced near panic conditions. The term "bubonic plague" is derived from an outbreak of egg-sized growths or "buboes" on the human torso, particularly in the area of the groin and armpit. The bubo was only the worst of a series of catastrophic symptoms, about as severe and unusual as the human imagination wants to go. Kelly discusses in considerable detail why medieval Europe was ripe for such a catastrophe. Generally speaking, the prosperity of the Middle Ages had crested about a century earlier, c. 1250. The next century would see a general decline in farm productivity due to constant warfare, weather, and a demographic shift to cities. In fact, much of Europe was emerging from drought and food shortages,

conditions that generally weakened human resistance and brought vermin closer to urban centers, as the disease arrived. Interestingly, Kelly suggests that without the Great Plague, Europe would have faced what he called "a Malthusian deadlock." [293] The tremendous population growth of the previous century had placed insurmountable strain upon the economic substructure. The post-plague Europe would prove to be a revitalized Europe. This was small comfort for those who lived through this nightmare. Kelly depends upon two invaluable sources: chroniclers and vital statistics. Chroniclers were not always accurate, and their death estimates sometimes exceeded the actual population of the cities reported. What they did report with great accuracy was the temper of the times, which ranged from pure panic to bacchanalian resignation. The Black Death brought out the best and the worst in every stratum of life: parents who abandoned children, parents who died for the children. Priests who tended the dying and dead; priests who fled to the mountains. One group of officials who remained remarkably persistent were notaries. Kelly draws heavily from their record keeping, which appears constant throughout the crisis. Notaries drew wills, settled accounts, recorded burials, and generally gave historians something of a barometer for actual population decreases. Kelly estimates a death rate of about 50% for nearly every segment of Europe; only Ireland's percentage appeared somewhat lower. By 1352 the plague, having arrived in Moscow, finally abated, having completed the hangman's noose around Europe. Kelly provides what might be called a medical Monday morning summary of events, reviewing the scientific literature from medieval times to the present day as to the precise nature of this event. Biological terrorism and recent virus mutations make this a valuable discussion. If there are any deficiencies in this work, it may be the absence of reflection upon the meaning of so terrible a disaster, in the way we reflect upon the meaning of the Holocaust. Sadly, the Black Plague unleashed unprecedented waves of anti-Semitism. Perhaps such searchings for meaning escape words. Look at the grotesque cover of this work [which I tried to discretely obscure from airport security personnel for fear I would be labeled a dangerous fellow.] I have no idea what it means, but it scares the hell out of me.

Wow, this book is simply amazing, recounting the horrors, and I mean HORRORS, of the Black Death that decimated the populations of the medieval world. So why the 4 stars? First let me tell you why I would have given it 5 stars: I love the dramatic events of history that have changed the course of humans and the plague certainly is one. You only need to visit the affected areas in Europe to realize the historical impact of this event. Mr. Kelly seems to have done extensive research (even though I am no historian). He documents his accounting through writings from various sources closely connected to the event, sources who often didn't live to see a brighter day. Yet these very

personal accounts of the plague are the strength of this book. We really can feel the impact of this horrendous event on the individuals whose accounts he discovered in his research. And perhaps more interestingly, we see how the rich and powerful (and holy) tried to escape almost certain death. Another reason I would have given this book 5 stars is the author's research on the origins of this plague and its different strains; I kept a map of Asia/Europe beside me while reading so as to trace the beginnings and follow its destructive path. He answers many questions about how it took hold and was so successful in its biological mission to kill and the various ways scientists, philosophers, teachers, and ordinary people tried to understand and deal with this crisis. (This often made me think about diseases killing us today for which we have no answers for cures.) A third reason I would have given this book 5 stars is its pure "fright" factor. This event must have been one of the most horrifying ever experienced by man; parents watched as their children died one after the other, or worse, they fled to avoid catching the disease, leaving their children to suffer an excruciating death all alone. The details can be gruesomely overwhelming yet fascinating at the same time. So why 4 and not 5 stars? It's pretty much the same story from place to place, whether in Venice, Florence, Avignon, Paris or London- people died in the same patterns and numbers. In fact, I'm half way through the book and may not finish because it's the same thing again and again. True, there are interesting stories tied to specific people, like the Pope in Avignon, that are injected here and there, but basically, once the plague got going, it killed in the same way over and over again. So who should read this book? Anyone who loves history, particularly of Europe, and is familiar with the places so dramatically affected by the plague. Anyone who likes to contemplate how something we cannot see can wreak havoc on the human population (still true today) and anyone who loves a gruesome, gory TRUE story. Maybe I'll give it 5 stars!

John Kelly has done an outstanding job presenting the course of the outbreak, from its probable source in Central Asia in 1346-7, tracing the plague's itinerary to the West. Kelly offers reasoned discussions of many contemporary accounts of the symptoms from various places along the route, and comparing both symptomatic and mortality rates with better documented later outbreaks to the present. The author's style is very appealing for such a morbid subject, retaining fresh commentary in what otherwise could be a repetitive recitation of the progress of the outbreak through many Western cities. Kelly discusses both regional and particular historical and social contexts to illuminate the responses of the governments and populace to the extreme social stress the plague presented. His discussions of the survival of civic order in the face of the calamity is food for thought about the depths of human resilience in the face of what seemed like an inevitable death.

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