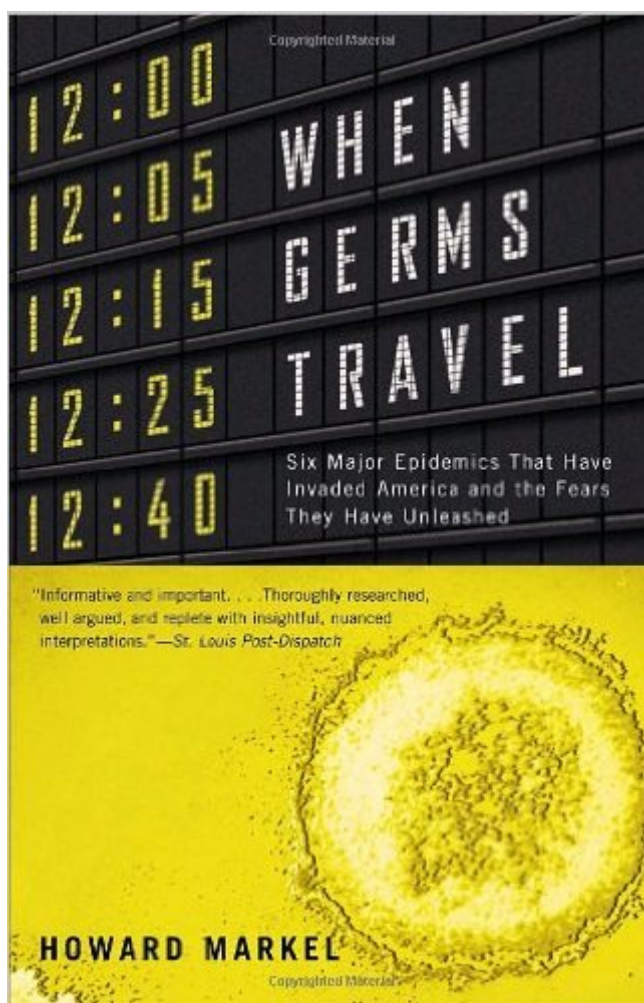


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# When Germs Travel: Six Major Epidemics That Have Invaded America And The Fears They Have Unleashed



## Synopsis

The struggle against deadly microbes is endless. Diseases that have plagued human beings since ancient times still exist, new maladies like SARS make their way into the headlines, we are faced with vaccine shortages, and the threat of germ warfare has reemerged as a worldwide threat. In this riveting account, medical historian Howard Markel takes an eye-opening look at the fragility of the American public health system. He tells the distinctive stories of six epidemics—tuberculosis, bubonic plague, trachoma, typhus, cholera, and AIDS—to show how our chief defense against diseases from other countries has been to attempt to deny entry to carriers. He explains why this approach never worked, and makes clear that it is useless in today's world of bustling international travel and porous borders. Illuminating our foolhardy attempts at isolation and showing that globalization renders us all potential inhabitants of the so-called Hot Zone, Markel makes a compelling case for a globally funded public health program that could stop the spread of epidemics and safeguard the health of everyone on the planet.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Markel's book discusses the American reaction to six major illnesses that struck the United States in the last century: tuberculosis, typhus, trachoma, bubonic plague, AIDS, and cholera. He juxtaposes the extremely egalitarian nature of deadly viruses with the decidedly discriminatory responses they evoke in human societies. The common knee-jerk reaction to the onset of disease is to blame the victims, who often are immigrants or 'Other' in some way. While Markel uses specific historical

examples to illustrate this point, everything he discusses applies to current global health challenges, such as AIDS in Africa. This negative and unproductive reaction works against the protection of public health, to the detriment of all. Markel cites other responses, namely: public overconfidence in the ability to conquer disease; the fear and worry over relatively rare but frightening diseases versus indifference to the slower moving but more long-running and widespread ones; and the tendency to not think about allocating resources before major outbreaks occur. The message is crystal clear for all those willing to heed Markel's words: global public health is purchasable, and most effective when bought in a preventative capacity.

Dr. Markel has written a very interesting book, one that not only enlightens but stirs emotion about policy (which is pretty hard to do, one must admit). This book discusses some of the more famous epidemics, as well as their effect on immigration laws and practices in the US, and vice versa. Dr. Markel is well qualified to discuss these issues: he was highly involved in helping us understand the SARS virus, its etiology and containment. He also speaks of the victims discussed in the book with caring and respect, leading one to believe that if they came down with the next plague, whether foreign-born or not, one would want this man as one's physician. I have some reservations about the book, however. Its format--discussing each diagnosis separately, in its own chapter--made the book seem choppy. This may be a compliment to the author, rather than a complaint: finishing each chapter left me wanting to know much more about the disease discussed. Also, I did not feel convinced by his argument for policies to contain future epidemics; this could have been flushed out better. And a small thing that didn't figure into my rating but is simply a personal gripe...there is nothing mentioned about the influenza epidemic of the early 1900s. But how many diseases can you fit into a good book? I work at the hospital where Dr. Markel is based, and my coworkers and I are pleased with his success. We're definitely looking forward to more (and even better) books from his pen.

Howard Markel's *When Germs Travel* shows what disastrous decisions can be made as fear of the other (often represented by newly arrived immigrants) combines with fear of contagious diseases. The author examines tuberculosis, an early 20th century outbreak of bubonic plague in San Francisco's Chinatown, trachoma at Ellis Island, typhus on the Mexican border, and Haitian refugees with AIDS. He also looks at his own response when a possible case of cholera may be uncovered in Detroit. The author's historical perspective helps make his points all the more clear. We live in a global environment, even more so than in these cases from the past, and the spread of

these diseases will have to be tackled at their source through interational coordination financed by the richer nations. Attacking the victims of the disease will be no more effective now than it has been in the past, nor does it go to the root of the problem, such as no access to clean water. This is a powerful little book, particularly the chapters on Chinatown and the Mexican-American border, both in the first decade and a half of the twentieth century. An important read that is both frightening and very cautiously hopeful.

Germs did major damage to the Native American population but have had smaller effects on the USA in the past 200+ years as a nation. Still, the relative lack of knowledge about germs has led to massive prejudice against a variety of ethnic groups including Eastern Europeans and Mexicans. The book outlines well the etiology of several outbreaks, the emotional responses in the community at the time, the sometimes effective and sometimes extreme responses of fledgling medical knowledge, and the effects of all of these on those who lived during these times.

These medical mysteries are fast paced, vivid stories as much about people, including immigrants and their complicated travels and tribulations, as medicine. Vivid, sympathetic descriptions and memorable characters.

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