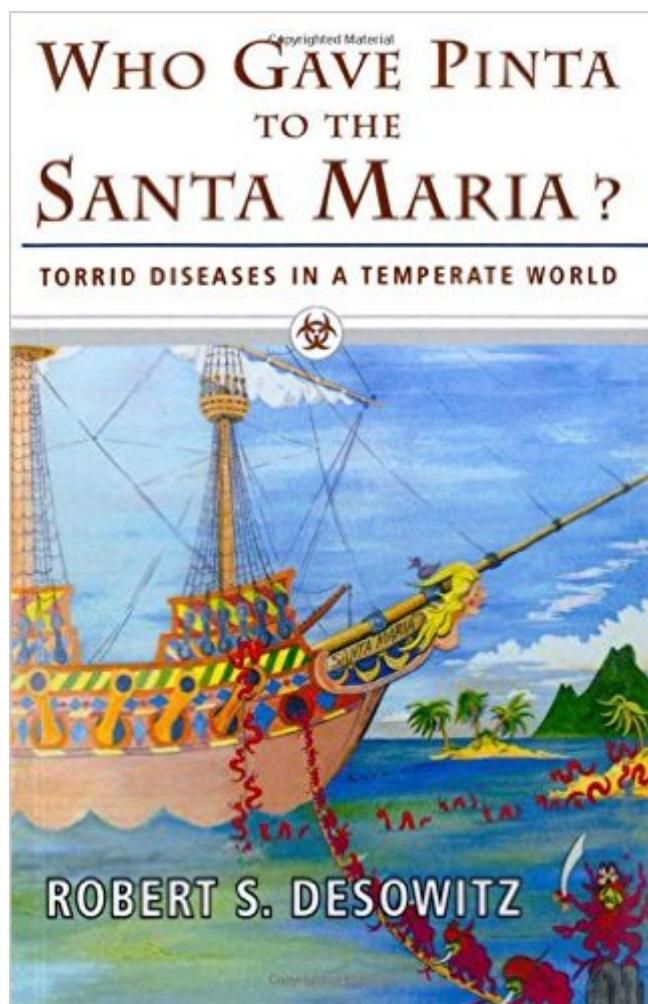


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Who Gave Pinta To The Santa Maria?: Torrid Diseases In A Temperate World



Synopsis

We live in a medical fool's paradise, comforted, believing our sanitized Western world is safe from the microbes and parasites of the tropics. Not so, nor was it ever so. Past--and present--tell us that tropical diseases are as American as the heart attack; yellow fever lived happily for centuries in Philadelphia. Malaria liked it fine in Washington, not to mention in the Carolinas where it took right over. The Ebola virus stopped off in Baltimore, and the Mexican pig tapeworm has settled comfortably among orthodox Jews in Brooklyn. This book starts with the little creatures the first American immigrants brought with them on the long walk from Siberia 50,000 years ago. It moves on to all that unwanted baggage that sailed over with the Spanish, French, and the English and killed native Americans in huge numbers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. (The native Americans, it appears, got some revenge by passing syphilis--including Pinta, a feisty strain of syphilis--back to Europe with Columbus's returning sailors.) Nor have the effects of these diseases on people and economics been fully appreciated. Did slavery last so long because Africans were semi-immune to malaria and yellow fever, while Southern whites of all ranks fell in thousands to those diseases? In the final chapters, Robert S. Desowitz takes us through the Good Works of the twentieth century, Kid Rockefeller and the Battling Hookworm, and the rearival of malaria; and he offers a glimpse into the future with a host of "Doomsday bugs" and jet-setting viruses that make life, quite literally, a jungle out there.

Book Information

Paperback: 260 pages

Publisher: W. W. Norton & Company; First Edition edition (January 1, 1980)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0393332640

ISBN-13: 978-0393332643

Product Dimensions: 5.5 x 0.6 x 8.5 inches

Shipping Weight: 11.2 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 3.8 out of 5 starsÂ See all reviewsÂ (6 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #2,158,395 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #71 inÂ Books > Medical Books > Medicine > Internal Medicine > Infectious Disease > Tropical Medicine #9398 inÂ Books > Medical Books > Medicine > Internal Medicine > Pathology > Diseases #192946 inÂ Books > Science & Math

Customer Reviews

First, what is pinta, anyway? It's one of four diseases caused by the trypanosome that also causes syphilis and yaws. The Indians gave it to the Spaniards. It was a poor trade, as in exchange they got smallpox, yellow fever and a lot of other unpleasant sicknesses. Anticolonialist literature -- is there any other kind these days? -- always labels these as "European" diseases, although as the historian William McNeill said long ago, most are from Africa. The most important fact to carry away from Professor Desowitz' "Who Gave Pinta to the Santa Maria?" is that "tropical diseases" are not tropical. This is especially so for the worst killer of them all, malaria, which has been Desowitz' lifetime research specialty. Desowitz and I both live in Hawaii, which does not have malaria. The reason is not that Hawaii is too cold. The reason this is important is that the dishonest anti-global warming campaign makes much of the threat that in a warmer world, tropical diseases will move north, where tree huggers who don't give a hoot about 2 million deaths a year from malaria might then have to suffer themselves. True, at least half those 2 million are black, but I think we should count them anyway. Although that is the most important lesson a reader can carry away from this book, given the fact that global warming has assumed a prominence in public debate that it did not have even as recently as 1997, when this book was published, that is not the lesson that Desowitz is hammering, in this and other books. (See my review of his "The Malaria Capers.") He has several. One is the way research money is heaped on trendy topics (molecular biology) while traditional and very effective areas -- including his, parasitological epidemiology -- are starved.

Robert Desowitz's Who gave Pinta to the Santa Maria? (published in other countries under the less silly title of "Tropical Diseases") deals with the spread and treatment of a number of infectious diseases, with emphasis primarily on yellow fever and malaria in North America. The book approaches its subject from a primarily historical standpoint--the chapters are arranged in terms of chronology rather than by disease, and the biological details of the diseases are only discussed to the extent that they're necessary to understand what was happening historically. Desowitz's treatment of the subjects he chooses is generally very good. His style is friendly and readable without particularly ever seeming to be too drawn out, and as a nonspecialist I feel like I learned a fair amount from the book. It's also very interesting, and a bit disturbing, to read Desowitz's speculations about what lies ahead for infectious diseases in the new century. However, the scope of the book is a little narrower than I would have liked. A number of diseases often viewed as "tropical" in origin--cholera immediately comes to mind--are mentioned only in passing. Also, with the exception of a brief chapter about England, it seems like the only times the book ventures outside the U.S. and its territories (which included Cuba after the Spanish-American War, where the

transmission vectors for yellow fever were discovered) is to discuss the efforts of the U.S.-based Rockefeller Foundation. There are a lot of places in the world where infectious diseases are still killing many people, and a number of organizations not based in the U.S. that are working tirelessly to do something about it--it seems like at least a chapter devoted to this would have been in order.

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