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In the Wake of the Plague: The Black Death and the World It Made

Norman F. Cantor
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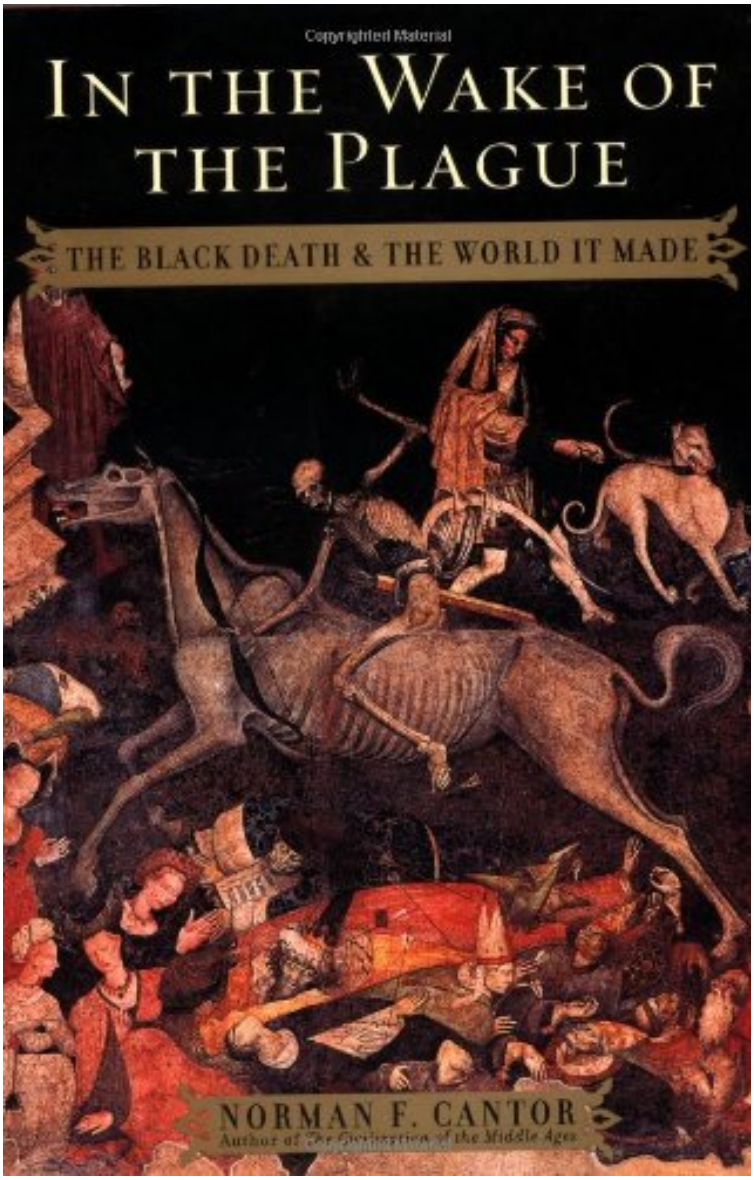

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Norman F. Cantor : In the Wake of the Plague: The Black Death and the World It Made before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised In the Wake of the Plague: The Black Death and the World It Made:

23 of 24 people found the following review helpful. Avoid this like the plague...By Dr. Christopher ColemanCantor strikes a populist direction with this book. He affects a breezy writing style (one can easily imagine much of his

writing as a spoken, off-the-cuff lecture punctuated by more-or-less amusing asides, some of which totally derail his train of thought), the book is short (only 220 pages of text) and there is not a single footnote. The obvious comparison in terms of subject matter is to Barbara Tuchman's A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous 14th Century. Tuchman made a best seller from her remarkable approach in spite of her scholarly writing-style. Cantor's book lacks that sophistication of approach, and is further marred, as other reviewers have already noted, by too much repetition, too many asides, too much unsupported speculation, too many inconsistencies, and too many factual errors. There is some merit to the book, but its flaws far outweigh its worth.Cantor at his best cites an interesting theory: that the Black Death was not a single disease, but two or more--not bubonic plague alone, but also some cattle-borne disease such as a particularly virulent form of anthrax. Supporting this theory are the Black Death's infestation of Iceland, an isolated island not known to have rats until the 17th Century, the often extremely rapid course of the disease--faster than that of bubonic plague; the lack of typical bubonic plague symptoms in many victims; the evidence that cattle were ravished by the Black Death; and the continued virulence of the plague in winter months when flea hosts would not normally live. The theory is not Cantor's own, but he has researched and supported it in convincing fashion. Less adequate is Cantor's chapter "Heritage of the African Rifts", which discusses the three pandemics of smallpox, gonorrhea, and plague and places their origin in "the great mortality chute from East Africa. Certainly that is where the bubonic plague came from after A.D. 500." But in his bibliography Cantor cites William H. McNeill's Plagues and Peoples and says, contradicting his own earlier statement written with such certainty, "McNeill thought the Mongols, their migrations and conquests, were a key to plague history; there may be something in that."Also of interest, but clearly quirky, was Cantor's chapter on various speculations on the true cause of the Black Death. "Serpents and Cosmic Dust" covers alternative explanations for the "biomedical catastrophe" from the medieval to the present, focusing on two suggestions: the first, that snakes were the carriers; the second, that plague came from outer space. Cantor is kind, although not entirely enthusiastic, about these speculations: at one point he says "It is just possible that medieval writers who placed the origins of the Black Death in serpents dispensing plague as they swam up rivers were on to something." Unfortunately, the only "evidence" he offers is that another historian on an unrelated issue once took medieval writers at their word in the face of academic thought and has since been vindicated. The argument in favor of the cosmic dust theory is basically that it was proposed by eminent astrophysicist Fred Hoyle--what is not mentioned is Hoyle's second career as a well-known science fiction writer. Hoyle's is a fascinating speculation, which only the most flimsy of circumstantial evidence can currently support.Cantor mentions one fascinating fact in this chapter that needed to be explored much further: plague was not widespread in Poland and Bohemia. This has been explained "by the rats' avoidance of these areas due to the unavailability of food the rodents found palatable." This seems unlikely -- elsewhere Cantor points out the relative agricultural wealth of Poland and the Ukraine. Could Polish grain really be considerably different than Western European grain--and what of the anthrax theory, which would have the disease unaffected by the rodent's diet?Socio-cultural differences between Poland and Bohemia and the rest of Europe would make an ideal testing ground for those theories concerning the effect the Black Death had on society, the arts, and religion. But rather than do any original research comparing plague-ridden and plague-free areas, Cantor merely launches into various criticisms of his colleagues' work in his final chapter, "Aftermath". Cantor examines these theories and subjects them to a much less forgiving critique than the far wilder speculations mentioned previously. Some of these attacks are odd indeed, such as critiquing a book published in 1919! This is the most poorly written and argued part of the entire book, and honestly I cannot tell to what conclusion Cantor comes-whether the Black Death did or did not have any profound effect beyond killing off certain talented individuals.Finally, the outright errors. Rather than repeat those caught by other reviewers, I'll discuss the extraordinary apparent claim of time-travel. Cantor recounts the story of the le Strange/Talbot family. Richard Talbot inherited the la Strange estate from the dowager Mary upon her "dying in 1396." (Whether this was a plague-related death Cantor apparently deems unimportant.) Later in the chapter we are told "Richard Talbot, newly enriched by the le Strange fortune, got his father out of debtor's prison and the old soldier died of the plague in 1387 in Spain..." How could Richard have paid his father's debts with money he wouldn't receive for nine more years? I cannot account for the chronology of events without either contemplating a typographical error, a rift in the space-time continuum, or a mis-informed or deeply confused author. Hopefully it is the former, and Mary died ten years earlier than Cantor reports; but I am left with the discomforting concern that the dates are correct and Cantor simply speculated on Talbot's source of funds. Unfortunately this is not an isolated error.While Cantor's book is more up-to-date than Barbara Tuchman's is, I can't recommend it, even as a supplement. It is too deeply flawed on too many levels. I'm left to wonder if some horrible computer virus didn't work its way through the manuscript, decimating the writing and killing at least 40% of the ultimate value of the book. As Cantor says, "It is just possible."11 of 12 people found the following review helpful. UnsatisfyingBy Richard RCantor was once a scholar of medieval history, but this book reads like it was written on a deadline, without any serious research. Don't be intimidated by the 230 pages. The large font and small pages disguise the fact that it is little more than a brochure. In the early pages the reader gets hints that it will be a wide-ranging review of causes and consequences of the great European plague of 1348. Suggestions that the labor shortage created when 40% of the population perished led to the destruction of ossified social institutions and paved the way for the

Renaissance while fundamentally changing land ownership patterns and the Catholic church. Now that would have been an interesting book.Unfortunately, it's not this book. The next chapter is little more than an ad-libbed 33-page anti-royalty sermon. The English Princess Joan dies of plague in Bordeaux on her way to Spain. Cantor's peculiar approach to this event is not to separate and examine the historical strands of consequence so much as to provide an outlet for his loathing for medieval nobility. "Joan was a top-drawer white girl, a European princess"; "Most kings filled their roles weakly and uneasily, like third-rate actors playing Hamlet on road circuit in the boondocks"; "Three flunkies of the royal household were dispatched to purvey (that is, extort) food from Devon". Two pages describing Joan's baggage and another four on chapels that English nobles built for themselves. No depth, just a silly down-with-the-crown sensibility while discussing nothing but a string of English kings, and even then without drawing any connections to the plague. The cynical approach toward the topic, and to the readers, begs the question of why Cantor writes about something he despises (kings), rather than about the subject he chose (plague). The answer, presumably, is that he already knows about kings.Next come long bios of two Oxford intellectuals, both interesting fellows, but there is no serious analysis of consequences, just that they were smart and they died of the same disease. Like the review of Aquinas' Aristotelian theology and the sad story of Edward Hastings, it's all sort of interesting, but it doesn't have much to do with the plague. The only strong chapter is the discussion of pogroms against Jews in plague-afflicted countries that ultimately led to large Jewish communities in Poland and Ukraine.The cynical style and lazy disregard for facts can be grating. Cantor never misses a chance to call someone gay, to stick in pointless factoids about wine, oddly to call the Nile the "great mortality chute" while confusing the direction of its flow. In chapter two, he explains that one theory, "a minority opinion", suggests that the 1348 plague was combined with an anthrax outbreak. By chapter eight, he assures us that there is "consensus" that anthrax was involved. Or the throwaway comment that the Ottomans took Constantinople in 1453 "on their way to Bosnia" - not only had the Ottomans defeated the Serbs in Kosovo in 1389, but Constantinople wasn't captured on the way to anything, it was the crown jewel of their conquests.The shame of it is that readers won't come away knowing much more about the plague and its consequences than they did before. There is still a gap on the shelf for a good book on the topic. "In The Wake of the Plague" is unsatisfying - a sore disappointment.1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. I have always been fascinated by the medieval era and ...By Kathleen EganI have always been fascinated by the medieval era and the impact of the Black Death and the Hundred Years' War. I found this book to bea font of information about this horrific biomedical disaster and the way it impacted life in Western Europe. I have always felt sympathy forour ancestors who lived through this terrifying event because they had no knowledge of it's cause or how to deal with it. A terrifying thought butsimiliar to our experience with AIDS and Ebola today. Thank you Professor Cantor for your insight into this devastating medical disaster andhow it shaped our world. K. Egan

Much of what we know about the greatest medical disaster ever, the Black Plague of the fourteenth century, is wrong. The details of the Plague etched in the minds of terrified schoolchildren -- the hideous black welts, the high fever, and the final, awful end by respiratory failure -- are more or less accurate. But what the Plague really was, and how it made history, remain shrouded in a haze of myths.Norman Cantor, the premier historian of the Middle Ages, draws together the most recent scientific discoveries and groundbreaking historical research to pierce the mist and tell the story of the Black Death afresh, as a gripping, intimate narrative."In the Wake of the Plague" presents a microcosmic view of the Plague in England (and on the continent), telling the stories of the men and women of the fourteenth century, from peasant to priest, and from merchant to king. Cantor introduces a fascinating cast of characters. We meet, among others, fifteen-year-old Princess Joan of England, on her way to Spain to marry a Castilian prince; Thomas of Birmingham, abbot of Halesowen, responsible for his abbey as a CEO is for his business in a desperate time; and the once-prominent landowner John le Strange, who sees the Black Death tear away his family's lands and then its very name as it washes, unchecked, over Europe in wave after wave.Cantor argues that despite the devastation that made the Plague so terrifying, the disease that killed more than 40 percent of Europe's population had some beneficial results. The often literal demise of the old order meant that new, more scientific thinking increasingly prevailed where church dogma had once reigned supreme. In effect, the Black Deathheralded an intellectual revolution. There was also an explosion of art: tapestries became popular as window protection against the supposedly airborne virus, and a great number of painters responded to the Plague. Finally, the Black Death marked an economic sea change: the onset of what Cantor refers to as turbocapitalism; the peasants who survived the Plague thrived, creating Europe's first class of independent farmers.Here are those stories and others, in a tale of triumph coming out of the darkest horror, wrapped up in a scientific mystery that persists, in part, to this day. Cantor's portrait of the Black Death's world is pro-vocative and captivating. Not since Barbara Tuchman's "A Distant Mirror" have medieval men and women been brought so vividly to life. The greatest popularizer of the Middle Ages has written the period's most fascinating narrative.

.com One-third of Western Europe's population died between 1348 and 1350, victims of the Black Death. Noted medievalist Norman Cantor tells the story of the pandemic and its widespread effects in In the Wake of the Plague. After giving an overview, Cantor describes various theories about the medical crisis, from contemporary fears of a

Jewish conspiracy to poison the water (and the resulting atrocities against European Jews) to a growing belief among modern historians that both bubonic plague and anthrax caused the spiraling death rates. Cantor also details ways in which the Black Death changed history, at both the personal level (family lines dying out) and the political (the Plantagenet kings may well have been able to hold onto France had their resources not been so diminished). Cantor veers from topic to topic, from dynastic worries to the Dance of Death, and from peasants' rights to Perpendicular Gothic. This makes for amusing reading, though those seeking an orderly narrative may be frustrated. He also seems overly concerned with rumors of homosexual behavior, and his attempt to link the savage method of Edward II's murder to a cooling in global weather is a bit farfetched. Cantor wears his considerable scholarship lightly, but includes a very useful critical biography for further reading. While not an entry-level text on the Black Death, In the Wake of the Plague will interest readers looking for a broader interpretation of its consequences. --Sunny DelaneyFrom Publishers WeeklyThe author, currently an emeritus professor at New York University, has had a distinguished career as a medieval historian, and his textbook The Civilization of the Middle Ages has been popular with many students over many years. Here Cantor produces a popular account of one of the greatest disasters ever to befall the people of Europe. The great plague that struck in the mid-14th century, and returned intermittently for centuries thereafter, had a mortality rate of perhaps 40% and consequently ushered in several profound changes. Beginning with a biomedical survey of the disease, the author points out many problems with current beliefs about its origins, transmission and nature. He suggests that in many instances the likely cause of death was anthrax, which has the same initial symptoms as plague. The plague fell on all classes and regions, and the author uses the stories of several individuals to personalize the devastation and its consequences. He makes a particularly compelling case that the death of Thomas Bradwardine, newly consecrated archbishop of Canterbury, had deep repercussions for the development of both science and religion. In some instances the book raises points that deserve fuller treatment, such as the possible role of serpents in the transmission of plague, but the final chapter neatly summarizes the consequences of this calamity. This book will be welcomed by anyone who wants a good introduction to the topic. Copyright 2001 Cahners Business Information, Inc.From Library JournalCantor (emeritus, New York Univ.; The American Century, LJ 8/99) here looks at the effects of the Black Death on 14th-century Europe. The author believes that our future may be threatened by epidemics as devastating as the Black Death, whether brought on by natural causes or by bio-terrorism. Surveying recent biomedical research on the Black Death, he believes that two diseases were at work in the 14th century the Bubonic Plague, long identified as the major component of the Black Death, and a variety of anti-humanoid Anthrax. The result was devastating, with up to 40 percent of Europe's population dying from the diseases. Among the historical consequences, Cantor believes, was the end of the Plantagenets' Anglo-French Empire, for the Black Death decimated the peasant population that supplied the English kings with the skilled infantry archers that were the backbone of England's military might. This work should appeal to both specialists and general readers and is highly recommended for public and academic libraries. Robert J. Andrews, Duluth P.L., MN Copyright 2001 Reed Business Information, Inc.