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Pox: Genius, Madness, And The Mysteries Of Syphilis



Synopsis

From Beethoven to Oscar Wilde, from Van Gogh to Hitler, Deborah Hayden throws new light on the effects of syphilis on the lives and works of seminal figures from the fifteenth to the twentieth centuries. Writing with remarkable insight and narrative flair, Hayden argues that biographers and historians have vastly underestimated the influence of what Thomas Mann called "this exhilarating yet wasting disease." Shrouded in secrecy, syphilis was accompanied by wild euphoria and suicidal depression, megalomania and paranoia, profoundly affecting sufferers' worldview, their sexual behavior, and their art. Deeply informed and courageously argued, *Pox* has been heralded as a major contribution to our understanding of genius, madness, and creativity.

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Customer Reviews

Were Abraham and Mary Lincoln's well-known health problems symptoms of syphilis? Was Adolf Hitler's final descent into madness due to an early syphilitic infection acquired from a prostitute? Did James Joyce make hidden allusions to his own infection in works like *Ulysses*? According to Hayden, a California-based scholar and marketing executive, scholars and medical professionals have too often overlooked the evidence of "pox," or syphilis-often called the "Great Imitator" because its symptoms mimic those of many other diseases-in the biographies of historical figures. Few would argue that some of Hayden's subjects, like Flaubert and Karen Blixen (subject of the movie *Out of Africa*), suffered from the disease. Her arguments for others, like the Lincolns and Beethoven, are sure to provoke debate. Hayden pulls together fascinating medical histories for

figures like President Lincoln and Hitler, but with Mary Lincoln in particular her background documentation seems spotty. She overlooks Mary's vigorous, and very sane, campaign to be released from the mental institution that her son Robert had her committed to. Hayden suffers from an unfortunate tendency to romanticize the final stages of syphilis: she claims repeatedly that artists attain some sort of mystical breakthrough in their art when they're on the verge of paralytic collapse, an assertion straight out of Thomas Mann and other early 20th-century writers. The sprawling chapter on Hitler is the climax of the book but suffers from poor organization and loose writing. Readers will be divided on whether or not they are convinced by Hayden's arguments, but with the reemergence of syphilis in many urban populations, the subject is sure to attract attention. Copyright 2002 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to the Library Binding edition.

Deborah Hayden's *Pox: Genius, Madness, and the Mysteries of Syphilis* is the biography of an infection that has fascinated and frustrated clinicians for more than half a millennium. The book is a repository of all that had been forgotten about a sinister bacterium and the disease that was its legacy. It is also a compendium of what Hayden refers to as the "veiled revelation" of syphilis that can be found in the intimate details of the lives of famous people if one searches with sufficient determination and vigor. Most of all, the book provides fodder for the imagination. Envision a book, written by the owner of a direct-marketing firm, about the history, microbiology, pathogenesis, clinical manifestations, diagnosis, and treatment of one of humankind's most enigmatic disorders. The author has no formal medical training but has gleaned sufficient expertise in syphilology from lavishly illustrated 19th-century and early-20th-century medical books "written in language remarkably accessible to the layperson" to qualify her to lecture clinicians and peer-reviewed medical journals about what she calls "faulty assumptions about a disease no longer familiar in clinical practice." Imagine that same authority examining the case histories of scores of illustrious personalities through "the selective lens of a possible diagnosis of syphilis" and, time and again, finding evidence of the one disease she knows in depth. Imagine a concept that Hayden calls "creative euphoria," whereby "the syphilitic was often rewarded, in a kind of Faustian bargain for enduring the pain and despair, by . . . electrified, joyous energy when grandiosity led to new vision." Beethoven had it. Guy de Maupassant did too. In fact, Hayden says that "Maupassant's literary leap from mediocrity in 1876 to the supreme mastery of the short story in 1880 might have been the result of a tremendous stimulation of the brain cells" by what biographer Robert Sherard refers to as "myriads of spiral-shaped germs darting to and fro." Because Vincent van Gogh committed suicide, says Hayden, we do not know whether he experienced "the ecstasy and the misery of the stage that

precedes paresis when he painted with such intensity in the last months of his life." One must wonder whether Michelangelo's agony and ecstasy represent another example of creative euphoria. Friedrich Nietzsche's syphilis has yet to be confirmed under "the selective lens of presumptive diagnosis," says Hayden. However, the books about syphilis that Hayden relied on to write *Pox* tell us, she says, "that the last expressions of sanity before parietic dementia sets in can be characterized by mystical vision, messianic prophecy, grandiose self-definition, clarity of expression, and extreme disinhibition, while all the time maintaining exquisite precision of form." Could one ask for a better description of Nietzsche's later works? Oscar Wilde seems to have been denied the benefit of syphilitic euphoria, most likely, Hayden says, because it was "effectively doused by a liter of brandy a day." But not Karen Blixen, who wrote *Seven Gothic Tales*, *Winter's Tales*, and *Out of Africa* under the pseudonym Isak Dinesen. Syphilis, she maintained, sold her soul to the devil for the ability to tell stories. Now imagine a pale, fragile bacterium that can dictate why great people do what they do, thereby determining the course of world events. That bacterium may have caused Flaubert to become a writer instead of a lawyer and Hitler to accelerate his war effort beyond reason at the end, for fear that his heart might at any moment balloon with a fatal luetic aneurysm. Finally, imagine a book dedicated to bringing syphilis in from the wings of biography, a book in which evidence obtained from fourthhand accounts, legend, and works of fiction is piled so high on the side of the great pox that even a negative Wassermann test cannot tip the balance in favor of some other disorder. Imagine how difficult it must be to diagnose in a patient a disease other than the "Great Imitator" if it is the only disease you know. For if your foremost assets as a self-made syphilologist are zeal, passion, and persistence in the pursuit of an illness that defies diagnosis at every stage, you are bound to find syphilis wherever you look: in Baudelaire, Schubert, Schumann, Joyce, Columbus, Daudet, Poe, Gauguin, Churchill (Randolph), Al Capone, Ivan the Terrible, Manet, Idi Amin, Darwin, Donizetti, Dostoyevsky, Lenin, Meriwether Lewis, Mozart, Robert Mugabe, Napoleon, Paganini, Rabelais, Stalin, Tolstoy, and Woodrow Wilson. You will see it in any idiosyncrasy -- Mary Todd Lincoln's shopping compulsion and Honest Abe's melancholia and hypochondriasis -- and in any poor, departed soul whose death has generated even a hint of diagnostic confusion. If you can imagine those things, then you have an idea of what awaits you in *Pox: Genius, Madness, and the Mysteries of Syphilis*. Exotic flowers of speculation bloom luxuriantly here. If Oscar Wilde was correct when he said that "history is merely gossip," then *Pox* is history at its best. Philip A. Mackowiak, M.D. Copyright © 2003 Massachusetts Medical Society. All rights reserved. The New England Journal of Medicine is a registered trademark of the MMS. --This text refers to the Library Binding edition.

Great Book, Quite interesting in the way it points out all the amazing similarities between Syphilis and Aids, both viruses were spread through sexual contact, both had a terrible stigma attached to them that was so shameful victims tried to hide the cause of their deaths not only from family and friends but from the public in general (e.g. Obituaries). I highly recommend this book to anyone that wishes to learn about the possibly lethal results of unprotected sex! My only problem with this book is the conclusions it reaches slapping the label of Syphilis on artists with scant evidence.

The book is a well-written exploration of one of the most feared diseases in history. Most of the information about syphilis comes from case histories of famous people and how the disease might explain their lives. It's a wonderful detective story about a disease no one wanted to admit they had.

I am a medical doctor and long-term student of VD in American history. Ms. Hayden has succeeded in a difficult task: writing convincingly about a medical subject when she is not a medical person. She enlisted help from the best of the best, such as my old professor Dr. Eugene Farber, and learned well from their teachings. Without retrospective blood tests, it is impossible to PROVE that a person before 1900 had syphilis, but the combined wisdom of generations of doctors can give us reasonable certainty, and this Ms. Hayden has given us. Some reviewer has asserted that Beethoven could not have had syphilis, because he wrote great music. (Perhaps logic and epistemology are no longer taught in our schools.) I give thumbs up to this book for breaking new ground in an informative and thoroughly researched way.

Bit slow at times but very interesting, make one amazed we lived as a human race as everyone seems to have been infected.

Scary, educational, a fun ride all the way through! You are going to be surprised to discover all the famous people who probably were infected.

Historical and intriguing. What a well researched and detailed book. This author went to great lengths to write this book.

Very informative book. Especially the part detailing Abraham Lincoln's bout with syphilis.

A fascinating account that explains a lot of society's ills.

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