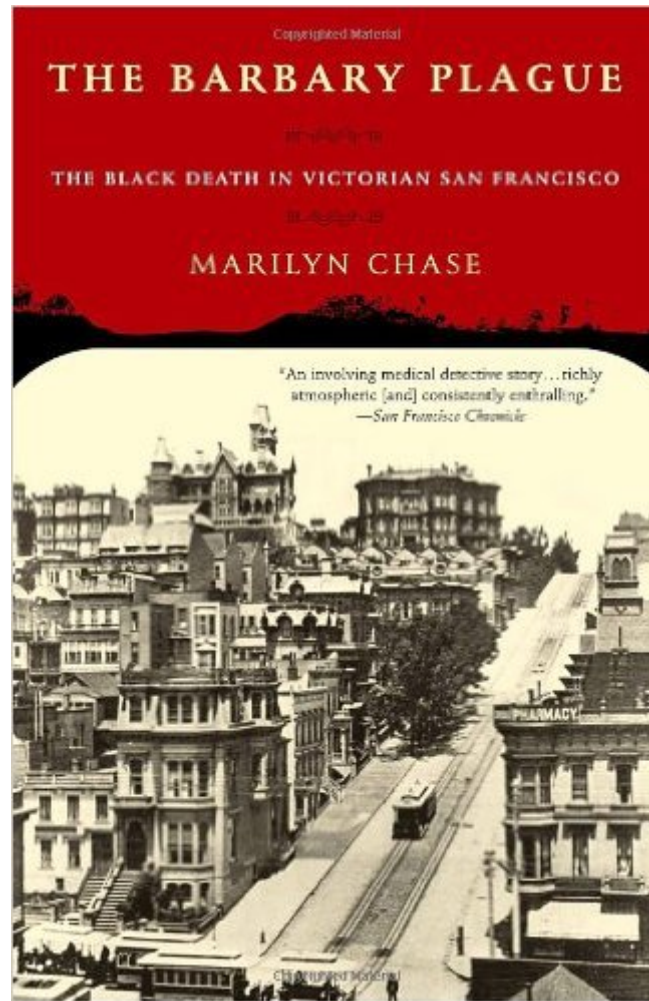


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The Barbary Plague: The Black Death In Victorian San Francisco



Synopsis

The veteran Wall Street Journal science reporter Marilyn Chase's fascinating account of an outbreak of bubonic plague in late Victorian San Francisco is a real-life thriller that resonates in today's headlines. The Barbary Plague transports us to the Gold Rush boomtown in 1900, at the end of the city's Gilded Age. With a deep understanding of the effects on public health of politics, race, and geography, Chase shows how one city triumphed over perhaps the most frightening and deadly of all scourges.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

If you know anything about medieval history, you know about the Black Death, the mysterious plague that killed off a third of the population of Europe. It may be surprising to learn that bubonic plague has made its mark on modern America. In 1900 in San Francisco's Chinatown, Wong Chut King died of a precipitous and horrifying illness, starting with a rush of fever and chills, continuing to agonizing back pains, painful lumps in the groin and armpits, bleeding, coma, and ending in death. It seemed to be the plague, and it seemed to city government the worst possible news, not because a resident of Chinatown had died, but because it meant bad economic prospects if the cause of death was found out. The amazing story of the arrival of bubonic plague in America and the difficulties involved in its eventual control is told in *The Barbary Plague: The Black Death in Victorian San Francisco* (Random House) by Marilyn Chase. It is a surprisingly exciting tale, with lessons for our own century. The thousands of citizens of Chinatown were worried that discovery of the plague in

their midst would only increase the considerable discrimination against them. They were right; the city quarantined Chinatown, eventually with barbed wire, arbitrarily zigzagged to exclude white stores and churches. Joseph Kinyoun, the federal medical officer for the city, tried to impose the quarantine and force vaccines, but Chinese community groups were able to have them struck down as racially discriminatory. Kinyoun was opposed by civic leaders fearing an economic impact if the plague became well known, and was eventually run out of town. His successor, Rupert Blue, had a little more effect, with some control of the plague before 1906, but then came the earthquake.

I was raised in Contra Costa County to the east of San Francisco. And of course, we went through state history while in grade school. But not once were we told about the Plague, though we heard plenty about the earthquake and the San Andreas faultline. It came as a complete surprise to me that SF had experienced one more trauma during that decade from 1900-1910...they did not just experience the plague once, but rather a series of them. I guess with all the shipping that SF used to be known for, much of it coming from the Orient, it should not have been so unusual. Much of the area that this happened in has changed drastically over the years, including Chinatown, but I still remember going to Chinatown in the 1960s and seeing butcher shops with dead ducks hanging in the windows. Most cities had problems with rats. If they thought SF was bad, I hate to think what Chicago was like with that city being the major one for slaughterhouses throughout the U.S., and of course, NY with all the shipping from around the world. What made SF unique is that it was relatively smaller to both NY and Chicago, and considered a clean city. I guess even after 60 years, the area was still embarrassed by their run-in with the plague and that's why we didn't get that information in school. I love medical history, and we have several very good authors out there, with the late Roy Porter and Laurie Garret being a couple of favorites. Chase's book was alright, but did not have the writing ability of the above authors, and the book seemed dry, and very repetitious at times. She obviously did her research, to the point of having the names of so many of the Chinese who died in the first wave of plague. The book just lack the feeling of urgency conveyed by other authors when dealing with epidemics.

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