

BOOK REVIEW

The Atlas of Disease: Mapping deadly epidemics and contagion from the plague to the zika virus *by Sandra Hempel*

Hardback, 224 pages
White Lion Publishing
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This book attempts to describe and chart the spread of a wide variety of infectious diseases through a combination of text, images and maps. These include: viral diseases such as smallpox, Ebola and HIV; bacterial diseases including plague and diphtheria; and protozoal diseases like malaria. The book is up to date as Ebola and Zika viruses are discussed. The author, Sandra Hempel, is a prize-winning medical journalist.

Each disease is given a short chapter, starting with a brief tabular overview, followed by a history of occurrence, historical spread and control, and other relevant details. There is a good mixture of general information and more specific historical accounts of pertinent aspects of each disease. Naturally, as each infection is only given a few pages, it is impossible to go into very great depth on any one subject.

The double-page maps for each disease are useful. Random examples include: the dates of eradication of smallpox, cases of scarlet fever in WW2 in Europe, and the spread of plague in Europe in the 1300s. Some of the maps were more informative than others: for example, the world map showing dates of leprosy “epidemics” is largely grey, which is not explained in that figure but means “no data” in some others. Lack of data would obviously be a major problem in our understanding of the spread and occurrence of a slowly developing and progressing disease such as leprosy. It would have been useful if the author had discussed these limitations in more detail.

This highly illustrated book, with ample and well-chosen pictures, would be a welcome addition to many collections. In fact, it is the sort of book that one can leaf through, looking only at illustrations and maps, and so is suitable for the informed and curious lay reader. It would make an excellent coffee-table book that would awaken intelligent debate.

Healthcare professionals and historians should also find it of interest, especially if wanting a brief overview of the spread of old and “new” infectious diseases. The all-encompassing title “The Atlas of Disease” is a slight misnomer as the book only covers infectious diseases. Other modern epidemics, cardiovascular disease and diabetes for example, could perhaps be incorporated in future editions.

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