What Our Contagion Fables Are Really About

In the literature of pestilence, the greatest threat isn’t the loss of human life but the loss of what makes us human.

By Jill Lepore

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Stories of epidemics are stories of language made powerless and man made brute. Illustration by Karolis Strautniekas

When the plague came to London in 1665, Londoners lost their wits. They consulted astrologers, quacks, the Bible. They searched their bodies for signs, tokens of the disease: lumps, blisters, black spots. They begged for prophecies; they paid for predictions; they prayed; they yowled. They closed their eyes; they covered their ears. They wept in the street. They read alarming almanacs: “Certain it is, books frightened them terribly.” The government, keen to contain the panic, attempted “to suppress the Printing of such Books as terrify’d the People,” according to Daniel Defoe, in “A Journal of the Plague Year,” a history that he wrote in tandem with an advice manual called “Due Preparations for the Plague,” in 1722, a year when people feared that the disease might leap across the English Channel again, after having journeyed from the Middle East to Marseille and points north on a merchant ship. Defoe hoped that his books would be useful “both to us and to posterity, though we should be spared from that portion of this bitter cup.” That bitter cup has come out of its cupboard.

In 1665, the skittish fled to the country, and alike the wise, and those who tarried had reason for remorse: by the time they decided to leave, “there was hardly a Horse to be bought or hired in the whole City,” Defoe recounted, and, in the event, the gates had been shut, and all were trapped.
Everyone behaved badly, though the rich behaved the worst: having failed to heed warnings to provision, they sent their poor servants out for supplies. “This Necessity of going out of our Houses to buy Provisions, was in a great Measure the Ruin of the whole City,” Defoe wrote. One in five Londoners died, notwithstanding the precautions taken by merchants. The butcher refused to hand the cook a cut of meat; she had to take it off the hook herself. And he wouldn’t touch her money; she had to drop her coins into a bucket of vinegar. Bear that in mind when you run out of Purell.

“Sorrow and sadness sat upon every Face,” Defoe wrote. The government’s stricture on the publication of terrifying books proved pointless, there being plenty of terror to be read on the streets. You could read the weekly bills of mortality, or count the bodies as they piled up in the lanes. You could read the orders published by the mayor: “If any Person shall have visited any Man known to be infected of the Plague, or entered willingly into any known infected House, being not allowed: The House wherein he inhabiteth shall be shut up.” And you could read the signs on the doors of those infected houses, guarded by watchmen, each door marked by a foot-long red cross, above which was to be printed, in letters big enough to be read at a distance, “Lord, Have Mercy Upon Us.”

Reading is an infection, a burrowing into the brain: books contaminate, metaphorically, and even microbiologically. In the eighteenth century, ships’ captains arriving at port pledged that they had disinfected their ships by swearing on Bibles that had been dipped in seawater. During tuberculosis scares, public libraries fumigated books by sealing them in steel vats filled with formaldehyde gas. These days, you can find out how to disinfect books on a librarians’ thread on Reddit. Your best bet appears to be either denatured-alcohol swipes or kitchen disinfectant in a mist-spray bottle, although if you stick books in a little oven and heat them to a hundred and sixty degrees Fahrenheit there’s a bonus: you also kill bedbugs. (“Doesn’t harm the books!”) Or, as has happened during the coronavirus closures, libraries can shut their doors, and bookstores, too.

But, of course, books are also a salve and a consolation. In the long centuries during which the plague ravaged Europe, the quarantined, if they were lucky enough to have books, read them. If not, and if they were well enough, they told stories. In Giovanni Boccaccio’s Decameron, from the fourteenth century, seven women and three men take turns telling stories for ten days while hiding from the Black Death—that “last Pestilentiall mortality universally hurtfull to all that beheld it”—a plague so infamous that Boccaccio begged his readers not to put down his book as too hideous to hold: “I desire it may not be so dreadfull to you, to hinder your further proceeding in reading.”

The literature of contagion is vile. A plague is like a lobotomy. It cuts away the higher realms, the loftiest capacities of humanity, and leaves only the animal. “Farewell to the giant powers of man,” Mary Shelley wrote in “The Last Man,” in 1826, after a disease has ravaged the world. “Farewell to the arts,—to eloquence.” Every story of epidemic is a story of illiteracy, language made powerless, man made brute.

But, then, the existence of books, no matter how grim the tale, is itself a sign, evidence that humanity endures, in the very contagion of reading. Reading may be an infection, the mind of
the writer seeping, unstoppable, into the mind of the reader. And yet it is also—in its hidden intimacy, an intimacy in all other ways banned in times of plague—an antidote, proven, unfailing, and exquisite.

Stories about plagues run the gamut from “Oedipus Rex” to “Angels in America.” “You are the plague,” a blind man tells Oedipus. “It’s 1986 and there’s a plague, friends younger than me are dead, and I’m only thirty,” a Tony Kushner character says. There are plagues here and plagues there, from Thebes to New York, horrible and ghastly, but never one plague everywhere, until Mary Shelley decided to write a follow-up to “Frankenstein.”

“The Last Man,” which is set in the twenty-first century, is the first major novel to imagine the extinction of the human race by way of a global pandemic. Shelley published it at the age of twenty-nine, after nearly everyone she loved had died, leaving her, as she put it, “the last relic of a beloved race, my companions, extinct before me.” The book’s narrator begins as a poor and uneducated English shepherd: primitive man, violent and lawless, even monstrous. Cultivated by a nobleman and awakened to learning—“An earnest love of knowledge . . . caused me to pass days and nights in reading and study”—he is elevated by the Enlightenment and becomes a scholar, a defender of liberty, a republican, and a citizen of the world.

Then, in the year 2092, the plague arrives, ravaging first Constantinople. Year after year, the pestilence dies away every winter (“a general and never-failing physician”), and returns every spring, more virulent, more widespread. It reaches across mountains, it spreads over oceans. The sun rises, black: a sign of doom. “Through Asia, from the banks of the Nile to the shores of the Caspian, from the Hellespont even to the sea of Oman, a sudden panic was driven,” Shelley wrote. “The men filled the mosques; the women, veiled, hastened to the tombs, and carried offerings to the dead, thus to preserve the living.” The nature of the pestilence remains mysterious. “It was called an epidemic. But the grand question was still unsettled of how this epidemic was generated and increased.” Not understanding its operation and full of false confidence, legislators hesitate to act. “England was still secure. France, Germany, Italy and Spain, were interposed, walls yet without a breach, between us and the plague.” Then come reports of entire nations, destroyed and depopulated. “The vast cities of America, the fertile plains of Hindostan, the crowded abodes of the Chinese, are menaced with utter ruin.” The fearful turn to history too late, and find in its pages, even in the pages of the Decameron, the wrong lesson: “We called to mind the plague of 1348, when it was calculated that a third of mankind had been destroyed. As yet western Europe was uninfected; would it always be so?” It would not always be so. Inevitably, the plague comes, at last, to England, but by then the healthy have nowhere left to go, because, in the final terror of pandemic, there is “no refuge on earth”: “All the world has the plague!”

If, in “Frankenstein,” Shelley imagined the creation of a man by the stitching together of body parts, in “The Last Man” she imagined the dismemberment of civilization. Death by death, country by country, the human race descends, rung by rung, down a ladder it had once built, and climbed. Shelley’s narrator, the erstwhile shepherd, bears witness to the destruction and abandonment of all the “adornments of humanity” that had adorned his own naked self: law, religion, the arts, science, liberal government (“The nations are no longer!”), freedom, commerce, literature, music, theatre, industry, transportation, communication, agriculture. “Our
minds, late spread abroad through countless spheres and endless combinations of thought, now retrenched themselves behind this wall of flesh, eager to preserve its well-being only.” As the pestilence lays waste to the planet, those few who survive are reduced to warring tribes, until only one man, our narrator, is left, shepherd once more. Wandering amid the ruins of Rome, he enters the home of a writer and finds a manuscript on his writing table: “It contained a learned disquisition on the Italian language.” The last book is a study of language, humanity’s first adornment. And what does our narrator do, alone in the world? “I also will write a book, I cried—for whom to read?” He calls it “The History of the Last Man,” and dedicates it to the dead. It will have no readers. Except, of course, the readers of Shelley’s book.

The great dream of the Enlightenment was progress; the great dread of epidemic is regress. But in American literature such destruction often comes with a democratic twist: contagion is the last leveller. Edgar Allan Poe’s 1842 tale “The Masque of the Red Death” is set in a medieval world plagued by a contagious disease that kills nearly instantly. “There were sharp pains, and sudden dizziness, and then profuse bleeding at the pores, with dissolution,” Poe wrote. “The scarlet stains upon the body and especially upon the face of the victim, were the pest ban which shut him out from the aid and from the sympathy of his fellow-men.” In particular, the rich have no sympathy for the poor. (Not irrelevantly, Poe’s rich stepfather had entirely cut him off, leaving Poe penniless, and his wife was dying of consumption.) A haughty prince and his noblemen and women retire “to the deep seclusion of one of his castellated abbeys,” where they live in depraved luxury until, one night, at a masked ball, a figure arrives wearing a mask “made so nearly to resemble the countenance of a stiffened corpse that the closest scrutiny must have difficulty in detecting the cheat.” The visitor is the Red Death itself. Everyone in the abbey dies that night. The nobility cannot escape what the poor must endure.

Poe’s red death becomes a pandemic in Jack London’s novel “The Scarlet Plague,” serialized in 1912. (The disease is the very same: “The whole face and body turned scarlet in an hour’s time.”) The plague had come in the year 2013, and wiped out nearly everyone, the high and the low, the powerful nations and the powerless, in all corners of the globe, and left the survivors equal in their wretchedness, and statelessness. One of the handful of survivors had been a scholar at the University of California, Berkeley, a professor of English literature. When the disease hit, he hid out in the chemistry building, and turned out to be immune to the virulence. For years, he lived alone in an old hotel at Yosemite, availing himself of its stores of canned food, until, emerging, he joined a tiny band—the Chauffeurs, led by a brute who had once been a chauffeur—and even found a wife. When the novel opens, in the year 2073, the professor is a very old man, a shepherd, dressed in animal hide—“about his chest and shoulders hung a single, mangy garment of goat-skin”—and living like an animal. He tells the story of the scarlet plague to his grandsons, boys who “spoke in monosyllables and short jerky sentences that was more a gibberish than a language,” but who are very handy with a bow and arrow. Their primitivism distresses the professor, who sighs, as he looks out across what was once San Francisco: “Where four million people disported themselves, the wild wolves roam to-day, and the savage progeny of our loins, with prehistoric weapons, defend themselves against the fanged despoilers. Think of it! And all because of the Scarlet Death.”

London stole the red death from Poe and took the plot of “The Scarlet Plague” from “The Last Man”—except that London’s argument, about the decline and fall of humankind, is far less
subtle than Shelley’s. “The human race is doomed to sink back farther and farther into the primitive night ere again it begins its bloody climb upward to civilization,” the professor explains. For London, it’s industrial capitalism and imperialism, not the Enlightenment’s engine of moral progress, that drive the climb from savagery to civilization and from scarcity to abundance. London’s descent of man is a descent into a very particular age-of-empire heart of darkness: the professor’s grandsons have “brown skin.” Before the plague came, capitalists and imperialists amassed staggering fortunes. “What is money?” the boys ask their grandfather, when he uses that word to describe a coin they find, minted in 2012. (“The old man’s eyes glistened, as he held the coin.”) All this—the white skin, the fortunes—was lost! The professor’s greatest distress concerns the onetime chauffeur’s having wed, by force, the former wife of a magnate: “There she was, Vesta Van Warden, the young wife of John Van Warden, clad in rags, with marred and scarred and toil-calloused hands, bending over the campfire and doing scullion work—she, Vesta, who had been born to the purple of the greatest baronage of wealth the world had ever known.” Equally distressing, having conquered the continent, the white man has, in the end, lost the West, and the East, too. The professor attempts to describe to his savage grandsons the fall of American cities, whose fate he learned of in the earliest days of the pandemic, when news could still reach California from other parts of the country, before the last telegraph operators died:

New York City and Chicago were in chaos. . . . A third of the New York police were dead. Their chief was also dead, likewise the mayor. All law and order had ceased. The bodies were lying in the streets un-buried. All railroads and vessels carrying food and such things into the great city had ceased running, and mobs of the hungry poor were pillaging the stores and warehouses. Murder and robbery and drunkenness were everywhere. Already the people had fled from the city by millions—at first the rich, in their private motor-cars and dirigibles, and then the great mass of the population, on foot, carrying the plague with them, themselves starving and pillaging the farmers and all the towns and villages on the way.

All the cities burned. Even the dirigibles of the rich exploded into flames, the world a Hindenburg.

“The Scarlet Plague,” published right before the Great War, also contains a warning about the cost of world war, the cost, even, of living in a world. “Long and long and long ago, when there were only a few men in the world, there were few diseases,” the professor explains. “But as men increased and lived closely together in great cities and civilizations, new diseases arose, new kinds of germs entered their bodies. Thus were countless millions and billions of human beings killed. And the more thickly men packed together, the more terrible were the new diseases that came to be.” His grandsons cannot fathom any of this. “The census of 2010 gave eight billions for the whole world,” he tells them. They can hardly believe him, and have no idea what a billion could be, or a census, or a world.

“Ten thousand years of culture and civilization passed in the twinkling of an eye,” the professor says. He has made it his life’s work to become a librarian, to archive those ten thousand years. In a cave on Telegraph Hill, he has stored all the books he could find, even though he is the only man living who knows how to read. “In them is great wisdom,” he tells his grandsons, in the novel’s final chapter, explaining that he has left, as well, a key to the alphabet. “Some day men
will read again,” he promises them. They have no idea what he is talking about. Still, the reader does.

The structure of the modern plague novel, all the way to Stephen King’s “The Stand” and beyond, is a series of variations on “A Journal of the Plague Year” (a story set within the walls of a quarantine) and “The Last Man” (a story set among a ragged band of survivors). Within those two structures, though, the scope for storytelling is vast, and so is the scope for moralism, historical argument, and philosophical reflection. Every plague novel is a parable.

Albert Camus once defined the novel as the place where the human being is abandoned to other human beings. The plague novel is the place where all human beings abandon all other human beings. Unlike other species of apocalyptic fiction, where the enemy can be chemicals or volcanoes or earthquakes or alien invaders, the enemy here is other humans: the touch of other humans, the breath of other humans, and, very often—in the competition for diminishing resources—the mere existence of other humans.

Camus, in his 1947 novel, “The Plague,” sets the story within the walls of a quarantined French-Algerian town during the Second World War (the year is given as “194-”). With all its omens, prophecies, and scapegoats, it might as well have been London in 1665. Dr. Bernard Rieux, along with everyone else, at first fails to read the signs. (The novel purports to be written from Rieux’s notebooks, his journal of a plague year.) He watches a rat stumble, at his doorstep:

It moved uncertainly, and its fur was sopping wet. The animal stopped and seemed to be trying to get its balance, moved forward again toward the doctor, halted again, then spun round on itself with a little squeal and fell on its side. Its mouth was slightly open and blood was spurting from it. After gazing at it for a moment, the doctor went upstairs.

Rats come out from cellars and die on the streets, in heaps. And yet neither the doctor nor anyone else does anything at all, until after the first human death, of a concierge. Then remorse dawns: “Reviewing that first phase in the light of subsequent events, our townsfolk realized that they had never dreamed it possible that our little town should be chosen out for the scene of such grotesque happenings as the wholesale death of rats in broad daylight or the decease of concierges through exotic maladies.”

Soon, we learn, “the whole town was running a temperature.” The number of cases rises, and then it leaps. Eleven deaths in forty-eight hours, then more. The government health committee wishes to avoid using the word “plague,” but unless it is used emergency measures cannot be put in place. Notices are posted, but only in obscure places, and in very small type, and, as the doctor observes, “it was hard to find in these notices any indication that the authorities were facing the situation squarely.” Finally, in desperation, the government adopts a policy of “deratization” and, when thirty people die in a single day, closes the town.

The plague is, of course, the virus of Fascism. No one in the town gives much thought to the rats until it’s too late—even though the plague “rules out any future, cancels journeys, silences the exchange of views”—and few pay sufficient attention to the rats even after it’s too late. This is
their folly: “They fancied themselves free, and no one will ever be free so long as there are pestilences.”

“The Plague” does not chronicle a pandemic, in the sense that the plague never escapes the town, and yet Camus’s plague is a plague without end. But Rieux learns, from reading history, that there really is only one plague, across all of human history, travelling from place to place, through the passage of time, from “Chinese towns cluttered up with victims silent in their agony” to “the damp, putrefying pallets stuck to the mud floor at the Constantinople lazaret-house, where the patients were hauled up from their beds with hooks,” to “cartloads of dead bodies rumbling through London’s ghoul-haunted darkness—nights and days filled always, everywhere, with the eternal cry of human pain.” Next on the list? Auschwitz, Dachau, Buchenwald. The plague is man.

Haunted by this knowledge, Rieux, locked in an unwanted asylum, suffers from an extremity of solitude and from the alienation and brutality of modernity:

Sometimes at midnight, in the great silence of the sleep-bound town, the doctor turned on his radio before going to bed for the few hours’ sleep he allowed himself. And from the ends of the earth, across thousands of miles of land and sea, kindly, well-meaning speakers tried to voice their fellow-feeling, and indeed did so, but at the same time proved the utter incapacity of every man truly to share in suffering that he cannot see.

For those in isolation, there is no world: “the plague had swallowed up everything and everyone.” They are saved, at the last minute, by a serum, and the town erupts in joyful celebration. In the novel’s closing words, the doctor thinks of his reading. “He knew what those jubilant crowds did not know but could have learned from books: that the plague bacillus never dies or disappears for good . . . and that perhaps the day would come when, for the bane and the enlightening of men, it would rouse up its rats again and send them forth to die in a happy city.” Men will always become, again, rats.

Camus’s observation about “the utter incapacity of every man truly to share in suffering that he cannot see” is the subject of José Saramago’s brilliant and devastating reimagining of the plague tale, “Blindness,” from 1995, in which the Defoe-like doctor is an ophthalmologist and the disease that reduces humans to animals is the inability to see. As historical parable, “Blindness” indicts the twentieth-century authoritarian state: the institutionalization of the vulnerable, the ruthlessness of military rulers. When the disease strikes, the government rounds up all the blind and locks them up in a mental asylum, where, blindly, they go to war with one another. They steal, they rape. “The blind are always at war, always have been at war,” Saramago writes, in the novel’s darkest observation.

But “Blindness” is far darker than any history lesson. For Saramago, blindness isn’t a disease; blindness is the human condition. There is, in the novel, only one person left with sight. She reads to the blind, which, for them, is both a paradise and an exasperation: “This is all we are good for, listening to someone reading us the story of a human mankind that existed before us.” And that, in the modern plague novel, is the final terror of every world-ending plague, the loss of knowledge, for which reading itself is the only cure. It is this realization that grips Saramago’s
ophthalmologist, at the very moment that he loses his sight, before the disease is known: the understanding of the preciousness, beauty, and fragility of knowledge. Puzzled by a patient who has come to his office after being stricken suddenly and inexplicably blind—he sees not black but only a milky whiteness—the eye doctor goes home and, after dinner, consults the books in his library. “Late that night, he laid aside the books he had been studying, rubbed his weary eyes and leaned back in his chair,” Saramago writes. He decides to go, at last, to bed. “It happened a minute later as he was gathering up the books to return them to the bookshelf. First he perceived that he could no longer see his hands, then he knew he was blind.”

Everything went white. As white as a blank page. ♦

A Guide to the Coronavirus

- How to practice social distancing, from responding to a sick housemate to the pros and cons of ordering food.
- How people cope and create new customs amid a pandemic.
- What it means to contain and mitigate the coronavirus outbreak.
- How much of the world is likely to be quarantined?
- Donald Trump in the time of coronavirus.
- The coronavirus is likely to spread for more than a year before a vaccine could be widely available.
- We are all irrational panic shoppers.
- The strange terror of watching the coronavirus take Rome.
- How pandemics change history.

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