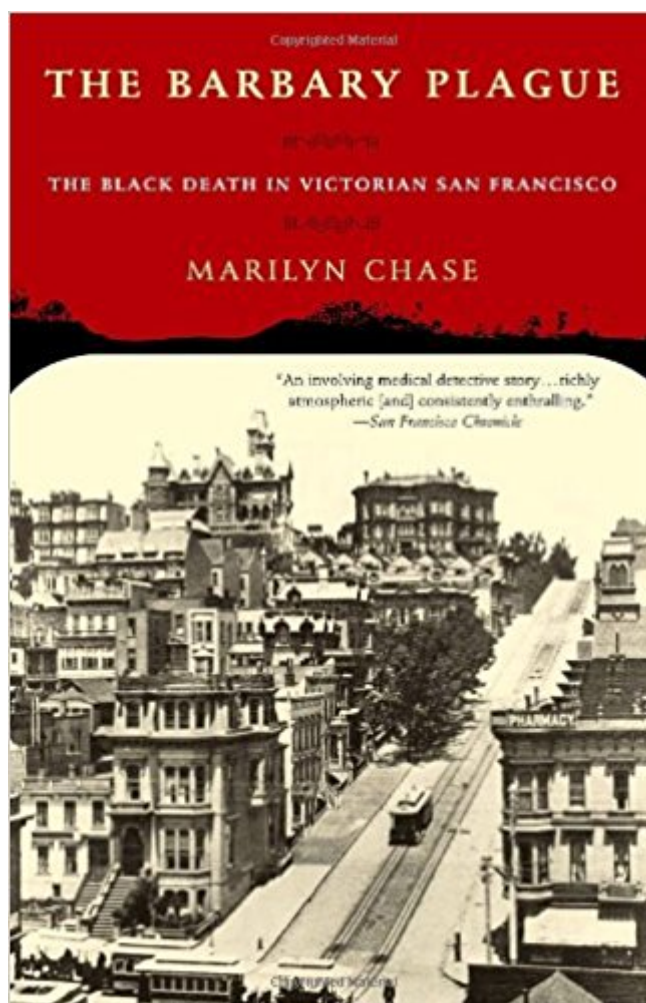


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# The Barbary Plague: The Black Death In Victorian San Francisco



## 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

In 1900, a ship called the *Australia* docked in San Francisco, carrying infected rats that launched a plague epidemic in the city, which raged sporadically for five years before it was subdued. Chase, a reporter for the Wall Street Journal, argues in this engaging narrative that social, cultural and psychological issues prevented public health officials from curtailing the outbreak. Relying on published sources, diaries and letters, Chase shows how the disease first hit Chinatown and explains that most San Franciscans denied the outbreak, while others blamed the city's Chinese population (city officials hid behind worries about tourism and the city's reputation). But Chase goes beyond sociological analysis in this lively work and focuses on the players. While the first public health official assigned to stem the epidemic, Joseph Kinyoun, was an innovative scientist, Chase shows how he lacked the strategy and tact necessary for the task-his plan to quarantine Chinatown caused as many problems as it solved. Only when Rupert Blue, a new official, was assigned to the

case after a second outbreak five years later, was the epidemic quashed. Avoiding pedantry and tediousness, Chase tells a story that highlights the true nature of epidemics-and how employing a combination of acceptance, perseverance and diplomacy are key to solving them. As she notes in her final pages, the parallels with the AIDS crisis are striking, and the lessons worth salting away for any future epidemics. Copyright 2002 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Adult/High School-Chase's knowledge of the city and skill for making scientific concepts accessible to educated lay readers make this snapshot of a relatively unknown event vivid and thought provoking. Bubonic plague entered the port of San Francisco with the 20th century. For the next decade, it defied both medical and political efforts to eradicate it from an urban landscape fraught with ethnic distrust, new money, and old customs. The author offers a clear and telling portrait of the roles played by Chinese merchant societies, the white press, and Sacramento officials that initially enabled the disease to gain a foothold. She then turns most of her attention to detailing the scientific and personal strengths and weaknesses of the national public health officials who worked to determine efficient ways to diagnose, treat, and eventually halt the spread of the disease. In addition to finding readers among students already interested in modern medicine, Chase's book is a fine selection for ethnic studies and political science classes. Although the few photos do little to expand the narrative, the thumbnail descriptions of the disparate lives altered, ended, or detoured by San Francisco's experience with rats, fleas, and disease provide concrete images for readers with any imagination. Francisca Goldsmith, Berkeley Public Library, CA Copyright 2003 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Indeed a page turner. It can also be said a harbinger for today's problems only in a different venue. There was at the time a pestilence in the making. However the victims were mostly a minority that was held in contempt--the Chinese. Few whites were affected. Thus the state went into full denial mode. The state was even totally obstructionist in finding relief for the problem. The local authorities initially were ham fisted and thus incurred the wrath of the Chinese. Then as now the courts intervened without considering the consequences. It was only when the problem spread to the white populace that the problem was confronted. In fairness though it can be rightfully said that science intervened to find a somewhat solution to the problem. I do wish to suggest that indeed there are lessons to be learned from this situation that can be applied to today's sociological disquietness.

I am a huge fan of books about fighting disease, so this was a great book. Plus, it is more than a micro-history of plague at the turn of the century in San Francisco. It also includes a brief history of the evolution of our understanding of the plague (and some huge discoveries about the disease occurred in the ~8 years that this book covers), a history of San Francisco, a history of Chinese immigration into the area (and the resulting xenophobia), a history of public health and how it evolved, a brief discussion of the 1906 earthquake, an exposé of government corruption, etc, etc. It was fascinating and interesting. I am giving it five stars because the subject matter was interesting, and the book was very readable (and not too technical in nature - sometimes books about disease can get bogged down in technical detail). If you like reading books about the history of disease, you will definitely like this one. If you are coming to this book hoping for it to be like "The Hot Zone" by Richard Preston (about ebola), you will find that the pace is not quite as brisk. Plague is a terrible disease, and its eruption in San Francisco in 1900 was definitely considered an epidemic, but since it is spread by rat fleas and not as easily by person-to-person contact (though some forms of the disease are highly contagious), some of the edge-of-your-seat fear is not present the same way it is in a book about, say, ebola or smallpox. But I still loved the book and would recommend it to other armchair medical enthusiasts or history buffs.

This new work, *The Barbary Plague: The Black Death In Victorian San Francisco* by Marilyn Chase will soon become the standard reference on this fascinating chapter in California history. It is the first book length study covering the two plague outbreaks which visited San Francisco between 1900 and 1909, and it stands alone in its ability to tell this story. Chase's writing is wonderfully easy to read and breathes life into a history forgotten to all but a few medical historians. In addition to the excellent writing, Chase's research into her subject is on par with the best academic standards. She not only has an expert's grasp on the history but has brought the full force of her professional career as a science and medicine reporter with the Wall Street Journal to the telling of the tale. In *The Barbary Plague* Chase is able to tell the story of the two plague outbreaks from the perspective of the two United States public health officers most intimately associated with the story, Joseph J. Kinyoun, founder of the NIH, and Rubert Blue, whose success in dealing with the 1907 plague outbreak in San Francisco led to his elevation to the position of Surgeon General. Both men were sent by the federal government to San Francisco to fight the plague. Kinyoun's career with the public health service was destroyed when his scientific professionalism clashed with the political machinery in California that was determined to bury the truth in 1900. Blue's career, on the other hand, was lifted up to the heights by his

ability to work the prevailing political winds of 1907 to his advantage. Chase asserts that Blue had greater political skill than Kinyoun and that their different fates prove this out. To a certain extent I think this is true, but there were other factors at play. The political climate that the two men worked in was substantially different. Kinyoun faced a hostile political landscape financed by a defensive business community, led by the Southern Pacific Railroad, trying to protect its profits. To defend itself California's business community decided to deny the existence of plague. By the time Blue faced the epidemic, the business community had come to the realization that they could not hide from the outbreak and needed to meet it head on. Where Kinyoun faced extreme hostility, Blue was, in the end, given complete cooperation. Chase describes this change in political climate, but she doesn't provide the reader with the full significance of its meaning to Kinyoun and Blue. While this is an excellent book, it does have a few points where historians might quibble. For instance, Chase suggests that the plague was introduced to San Francisco via the rats aboard the ship *Australia* which arrived from Asia at the beginning of January 1900. The source for her proposition is a note in a letter written by Joseph Kinyoun to his uncle, Dr. Preston Bailhache, in August of 1900. In my own research on the topic, I had an "ahaa!" moment when I read Kinyoun's suspicion about the *Australia*. The problem, from a historical or epidemiological perspective, is that there are so many other suspect rats from so many other ships arriving in San Francisco that it is impossible to prove. The plague pandemic had been spreading out of China since 1894. The United States public health service, then known as the Marine Hospital Service, had taken over San Francisco's quarantine inspection in 1897 in anticipation of the plague's arrival and had been on the lookout for three years when the first case in the city was confirmed. Kinyoun certainly never officially claimed that the *Australia* was the source of San Francisco's plague. From an academic standpoint, other researchers who have read Kinyoun's letter decided that his suspicion was unsubstantiated and would have to remain an interesting historical footnote. Chase and her publisher decided that it was tasty to be able to say that they had found that source of San Francisco's epidemic, and it makes good reading to be sure. Quibbles aside, *The Barbary Plague* is peerless in its presentation of this amazing story. For history buffs and academics, Chase's book sets the benchmark for telling the story of San Francisco's brush with the Black Death.

This book reports on a part of history that might interest a very small group of San Francisco buffs. Ms. Chase did a thorough job of researching, providing interesting details on the leading persons, setting the scenes, her writing was excellent - I was more than satisfied to add this book to my

collection of San Francisco history.

A concise description of an early challenge for the fledgling Public Health Service. Balances the many influences nicely. Hard to stand out in Plague lit but I enjoyed it. Rank it as informative as *The Ghost Map for Cholera* and *Pox Americana for Smallpox*.

I have lived in San Francisco since 1964 and I never learned of this nine-year battle with the plague until now. Ms. Chase does a great job of making it clear and easy to read and learn about. She also makes it clear that politics and public health can be a disaster when greedy money mongers have too much influence over decisions and media. I hope she finds another reason to publish again.

A true story, well researched, exciting, suspenseful, and perhaps a glimpse of what could happen again. Maybe we won't be so lucky next time. Lets hope we still have a few heroes to save us again!

I loved the historical details of these events chronicled in a very interesting story! The struggles, challenges, and relentless efforts of these medical ground-breakers should be celebrated and appreciated. Marilyn Chase has us do just that! Loved it!

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