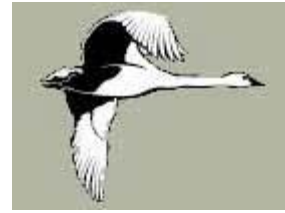


The Trumpeter (2001)

A World Out Of Balance

Trudy Frisk



TRUDY FRISK is a wilderness wanderer, supporter of the deep ecology movement and co-founder of the Sisters of the Mist Circle.

Review Of:

The Coming Plague: Newly Emerging Diseases in a World Out Of Balance, Laurie Garrett. Farrar, Strauss and Giroux. 1994.

“That humanity had grossly underestimated the microbes was no longer, as the world approached the twenty-first century a matter of doubt. The microbes were winning.”

We who concentrate on the charismatic mega-fauna lament that humans have put an end to evolution. Quite the contrary; as Laurie Garrett reminds us, evolution is proceeding apace, accelerated by human hubris. True, the evolution is that of bacteria, microbes and viruses. But anyone who reads *The Coming Plague* must conclude that these will affect our societies deeply.

The Coming Plague is interdisciplinary and will be a valuable source document in many fields. Garrett knows how bacteria and viruses mutate. She relates those mutations and their consequences to human actions in the natural world.

In writing the book, Garrett has drawn on her own extensive experience in Africa, as well as research from around the world. The result is a thoroughly researched, well documented, extensively foot-noted record of the rapid emergence and dissemination of such life-threatening diseases as Ebola, AIDS, Hanta, Lassa, Toxic shock syndrome and Legionnaires. Her writing is so clear and concise that what will be an interesting chapter to a knowledgeable biologist will also be intelligible to a lay person, so well does she explain the concepts of recombinant DNA, genetic mutation and diseases jumping species.

Garrett focuses on disease. However, unlike most disease specialists, she searches for the environmental and ecological vectors. She weaves the emerging plagues into their surrounding cultural, ecological, and social conditions. She recognizes the critical roles played by human over-population, pollution, toxic agriculture, global destruction of habitat and species and naive trust in antibiotics. Economic imperialism, women's subordinate status, rapid transport and war, have all influenced the grim picture now evolving.

Garrett puts diseases in a global perspective, located in historical context. She tracks epidemics through history, including data from contemporary authors. She recounts the course of modern health care, from certain optimism that antibiotics could cure and technology eradicate most diseases, to the current global village where Ebola is only a plane ride from an African town to New York City.

The Coming Plague is an unbiased report of the sequence of events in the AIDS, Hanta, Ebola and other epidemics. This step-by-step resume is fascinating, since she includes

insights into key scientists, bureaucrats and politicians. The reader is left with unabashed admiration for scientists who, with few supplies, no forwarning of the diseases they might find, still less how to treat them, ventured into unfamiliar territories and cultures, and, who in some cases, died.

However, this book is more than a tribute to dedicated scientists; it is an astounding expose of the political manoeuvring surrounding international aid. As one disgruntled scientist muttered, “The politicians are worse by far than the viruses.”

The result is a depressing list of mega-projects whose impact worsened conditions for humans but vastly improved the situation for microbes; of religious and tribal disputes manipulated by the super powers, of obscene amounts of money squandered on military forces with the consequent disruption of stable populations and ecosystems. Disease moved in to take advantage of large pools of starving people.

Garrett neither judges nor condemns; she reports. *The Coming Plague* is very clear on how the intravenous drug culture and sexual promiscuity have amplified the speed of disease.

She lists the ecological effects of well meant programs; spraying to eradicate malaria-carrying mosquitoes resulted in the *Leishmania donovani* carrying sand fly moving into the vacant niche. Some of the book’s most fascinating passages have to do with genetic mutation and the transfer of disease from animals to humans. One such example is the mild snowshoe hare virus which in 1992 caused encephalitis in more than 100,000 people in northern Russia.

“It’s almost an axiom,” warns immunologist Sir MacFarlane Burnet, “that an action for short-term human benefits will, sooner or later, bring long-term ecological or social problems which demand unacceptable effort and expense for their solution. Nature has always seemed to be working for a climax state, a provisionally stable ecosystem, reached by natural forces, and, when we attempt to remold any such ecosystem, we must remember that Nature is working against us.”¹

Garrett is clear about the consequences of unbridled human numbers. “The extraordinary, rapid growth of the *Homo sapiens* population, coupled with its voracious demand for planetary dominance and resource consumption has put every measurable biological and chemical system on Earth in a state of imbalance.”² In 1994, “with nearly 6 billion humans crowded onto a planet that had been occupied by fewer than 1.5 billion a century earlier, something had to give. That ‘something’ was Nature.”³

Viruses are infinitely more adaptable than humans. After reading Laurie Garrett’s assessment of the havoc humans have wreaked on natural systems and Nature’s response, one can only conclude that natural selection is indeed, in full operation at the apex of the food chain!

Endnotes

1. p. 213.

2. p. 550.

3. p. 550.

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