



The Great Mortality: An Intimate History of the Black Death, the Most Devastating Plague of All Time

By John Kelly

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La moria grandissima began its terrible journey across the European and Asian continents in 1347, leaving unimaginable devastation in its wake. Five years later, twenty-five million people were dead, felled by the scourge that would come to be called the Black Death. *The Great Mortality* is the extraordinary epic account of the worst natural disaster in European history -- a drama of courage, cowardice, misery, madness, and sacrifice that brilliantly illuminates humankind's darkest days when an old world ended and a new world was born.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

A book chronicling one of the worst human disasters in recorded history really has no business being entertaining. But John Kelly's *The Great Mortality* is a page-turner despite its grim subject matter and graphic detail. Credit Kelly's animated prose and uncanny ability to drop his reader smack in the middle of the 14th century, as a heretofore unknown menace stalks Eurasia from "from the China Sea to the sleepy fishing villages of coastal Portugal [producing] suffering and death on a scale that, even after two world wars and twenty-seven million AIDS deaths worldwide, remains astonishing." Take Kelly's vivid description of London in the fall of 1348: "A nighttime walk across Medieval London would probably take only twenty minutes or so, but traversing the daytime city was a different matter.... Imagine a shopping mall where everyone shouts, no one washes, front teeth are uncommon and the shopping music is provided by the slaughterhouse up the road." Yikes, and that's before just about everything with a pulse starts dying and piling up in the streets, reducing the population of Europe by anywhere from a third to 60 percent in a few short years. In addition to taking readers on a walking tour through plague-ravaged Europe, Kelly heaps on the ancillary information and every last bit of it is captivating. We get a thorough breakdown of the three types of plagues that prey on humans; a detailed account of how the plague traveled from nation to nation (initially by boat via flea-infested rats); how floods (and the appalling hygiene of medieval people) made Europe so susceptible to the disease; how the plague triggered a new social hierarchy favoring women and the proletariat but also sparked vicious anti-Semitism; and especially, how the plague forever changed the way people viewed the church. Engrossing, accessible, and brimming with first-hand accounts drawn from the Middle Ages, *The Great Mortality* illuminates and inspires. History just doesn't get better than that. --
Kim Hughes

From Publishers Weekly

The Black Death raced across Europe from the 1340s to the early 1350s, killing a third of the population. Drawing on recent research as well as firsthand accounts, veteran author Kelly (*Three on the Edge*, etc.) describes how infected rats, brought by Genoese trading ships returning from the East and docked in Sicily, carried fleas that spread the disease when they bit humans. Two types of plague seem to have predominated: bubonic plague, characterized by swollen lymph nodes and the bubo, a type of boil; and pneumonic plague, characterized by lung infection and spitting blood. Those stricken with plague died quickly. Survivors often attempted to flee, but the plague was so widespread that there was virtually no escape from infection. Kelly recounts the varied reactions to the plague. The citizens of Venice, for example, forged a civic response to the crisis, while Avignon fell apart. The author details the emergence of Flagellants, unruly gangs who believed the plague was a punishment from God and roamed the countryside flogging themselves as a penance. Rounding up and burning Jews, whom they blamed for the plague, the Flagellants also sparked widespread anti-Semitism. This is an excellent overview, accessible and engrossing.

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From [Booklist](#)

Starred Review Later called the Black Death, the mid-fourteenth-century plague epidemic was known as the Great Mortality by its European survivors. It killed 60 percent in many places, even more in self-contained communities, such as monasteries--in all, one-third of Europe's people. Western Europe is the primary focus of Kelly's compact history, which is "intimate" in that it highlights many particular persons' passages through the crucible years, 1348-49. Some of those are famous (e.g., Petrarch, Boccaccio), others long-forgotten figures weighty in their time (e.g., Bishop Ralph of Shrewsbury), a scandalous celebrity

(Queen Joanna of Naples and Sicily, whose prosecution, ultimately before the pope, for murdering her husband, a son of the king of Hungary, prefigured O. J. Simpson's as a meretricious diversion), and commoners like John Ronewyck, the reeve, or manager, of a large English farm, whose character Kelly extrapolates from business records. Kelly proceeds chronologically, beginning with the plague's prehistory in north central Asia and its spread through China before empire-building Mongols brought it west. He notes the ripeness for disaster of the overpopulated, resource-depleted, ecologically stressed late-medieval Europe on which the plague descended, and in the most riveting chapter considers the outbursts of anti-Jewish violence by plague-panicked Gentiles, which the church tried, seldom successfully, to stem, and in which modern, racist anti-Semitism was forged. This sweeping, viscerally exciting book contributes to a literature of perpetual fascination: the chronicles of pestilence. For more, see the adjacent Read-alikes column. *Ray Olson*

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Users Review

From reader reviews:

Ann Bland:

In this 21st one hundred year, people become competitive in each and every way. By being competitive right now, people have do something to make these people survives, being in the middle of the actual crowded place and notice simply by surrounding. One thing that oftentimes many people have underestimated this for a while is reading. Yep, by reading a publication your ability to survive enhance then having chance to stay than other is high. In your case who want to start reading some sort of book, we give you this kind of The Great Mortality: An Intimate History of the Black Death, the Most Devastating Plague of All Time book as beginning and daily reading reserve. Why, because this book is greater than just a book.

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