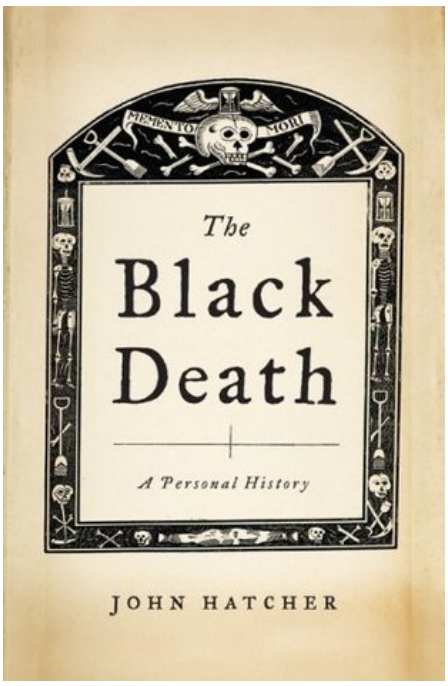

The Black Death: A Personal History

John Hatcher

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The Black Death: A Personal History John Hatcher
In this fresh approach to the history of the Black Death, world-renowned scholar John Hatcher re-creates everyday life in a mid-fourteenth century rural English village. By focusing on the experiences of ordinary villagers as they lived-and died-during the Black Death (1345-50), Hatcher vividly places the reader directly inside those tumultuous times and describes in fascinating detail the day-to-day existence of people struggling with the tragic effects of the plague. Dramatic scenes portray how contemporaries must have felt and thought about these momentous events: what they knew and didn't know about the horrors of the disease, what they believed about death and God's vengeance, and how they tried to make sense of it all despite frantic rumors, frightening tales, and fearful sermons.

The Black Death: A Personal History Details

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From Reader Review The Black Death: A Personal History for online ebook

Linda says

The Black Death, AKA the bubonic and/or pneumonic plague, has been characterized as the greatest disaster in human history, killing 50% of the population throughout the Middle East and Europe. While factual chronicles abound, Cambridge historian John Hatcher has now endeavored to bring his readers a more immediate sense of what it must have been like to experience the cataclysm first hand. Hatcher chose to focus on the English village of Walsham, which was struck by plague in 1349, describing what probably happened from the arrival of the earliest rumors that the pestilence was coming, to its aftermath in a world turned on its head. Part documentary study and part fiction, The Black Death recreates the event as seen through the eyes of the village priest, the two manorial landlords, and the peasants who had kept the manor running from "time out of mind."

With scrupulous attention to detail, Hatcher describes the fearsome months before the arrival of the pestilence, when villagers could scarcely credit the stories that filtered into Walsham about the dreadful disease. In the mind of the Church, which exerted enormous influence over the populace, God was punishing mankind for their sins, and there was no remedy but to beg God for forgiveness and deliverance. Itinerant preachers and quacks swept in, bringing with them preventatives, cures, and spiritual exhortation. What was puzzling to all was the question of why God would punish the innocent along with the guilty, and many experienced a severe crisis of faith, to which they responded in various ways. Their fears multiplied along with reports that the plague was coming nearer and nearer. When, finally, the first villagers took ill, death swept in with a vengeance, creating a cruel, hellish atmosphere that persisted for months. When the scourge finally ran its course, Walsham had lost half of its 1500 inhabitants. The final third of the book deals with its after-effects, as people struggled to pick up the threads of their lives in the face of overwhelming shortages of food and labor, and the breakdown of the practical traditions and rituals that served as the foundation of manorial life. In the turmoil can be seen the roots of the labor/management conflict that continues today.

Readers looking for a historical novel will not find it in The Black Death, which focuses upon fact at the expense of depth of character. Yet it goes a long way toward helping modern readers understand what life was like during that fearsome era. Included are 44 illustrations that are tied to specific portions of the text. Unfortunately, there is some textual redundancy, but that's a small price to pay for the accuracy with which the topic is covered. The Black Death succeeds in making real people of the victims of the plague, individuals whose deaths were horrendous and whose lives were changed forever.

Catherine says

The Black Death is, the author argues, a docudrama - not a history, nor a work of literature, but something between the two. (I suspect he had in mind a BBC reconstruction of the events of the time, the kind of thing that would show up on PBS.) As such it's hard to find an appropriate response. As literature it's too ponderous, too slow, and lacking in plot. As history it's pretty absorbing, although it's hard to put aside that we're reading made-up conversations, and the central figure is entirely imaginary. I'm not sure I buy the author's argument that it's impossible to write "real" history in a compelling way, either. But regardless, I

guess I enjoyed it all the same.

I certainly learned a great deal, especially about the rituals of the medieval church and the theology that explained the plague of the 1340s as God's judgment of a sinful world. I gained some respect for the idea of paying homage to the seasons in the ways in which the clergy saw fit, and the internal logic of all the various chants and songs and masses and prayers. I also relished the upheaval that followed the plague, especially in terms of the adjustment of gender roles that had to take place. I *love* that women got to become skilled artisans and craftspeople, and were encouraged in this by clergy and lords, because there was no other choice. Weaker sex, I ask you.

But I would have preferred that we got to the death and dying quicker than we did, and that some of the dialogue could have been between parishioners, instead of just the higher ups. I guess I wanted it to be more like a novel - better chararcterization, more show not tell. Entertaining, but a bit weird.

Lobstergirl says

Be ye not fooled: this is a novel. That's what the author means by "a personal history." This Chairman of the History Faculty at Cambridge University (!) was so cowed by the lack of historical documentation on the plague in England that he felt compelled to create fictional characters and have them do fictional things (based on what contemporary rural denizens could have, might have done).

Each chapter covers a brief period of time in the 1340s, with the final chapter covering 1350, and is preceded by one or two pages of historical fact in italics. The problem with this melding of 10% fact and 90% fiction is that it doesn't work. Neither history nor fiction devotees will be left happy and satisfied. The fiction sections are dry and wooden and astoundingly repetitive. A brief example: On p. 191, a man named John Blakey, the steward to a landowner named Lady Rose, goes to the village of Walsham to try to bring some order to the chaos of her estate after many laborers have been stricken and killed by the plague. Blakey "is shocked to find conditions far worse" than they had expected. One paragraph later he sits "in shocked silence" as the hayward (the person in charge of fences and enclosures) tells him that tenants are no longer bothering to perform their farm labor for the Lady. On the next page he is "spluttering" and can hardly compose himself. On the next page he has been "shocked into silence." On the next page, still in conversation with the hayward, he sits "in stunned silence." On p. 243 he is yet again "stunned into silence" (again, by the hayward). A googlebooks search shows 22 results for "shocked" in the book and 26 for "silence," although those are certainly low estimates since not all pages of the book are searchable.

About half of England's rural population was killed by the Black Death (or as the author irritatingly puts it, multiple times, was "scythed"). One fictional character who escapes the Grim Reaper's scythe is a well-off landowner who, on the theory that foul but harmless vapors might counteract the foul and harmful vapors that spread pestilence, has all the manor privies emptied into a brass cooking pot, which he leans deeply into with a towel draped over his head, inhaling. This causes incessant diarrhea and vomiting, but spares his life. Then we have a character named Simon, who, drinking in a packed tavern, falls off his bench, screaming and pointing to a large swelling on his upper thigh. (The plague often produced giant boils in the armpit or groin area, called buboes.) The tavern customers "did indeed see a great lump in his crotch" and ran screaming from the tavern. Whereupon Simon chased after them chortling and "exposing his huge erect cock..."

No, even that could not make this tale interesting.

Susan says

This excellent book is a creative reconstruction of a village in crisis, from 1345 - 1350. The author chose the village of Walsham (now Walsham-le-Willows) in North West Suffolk, as it had good local records for him to plunder. Saying that, there are no diaries or any personal records and, so, the author does make the book more intimate by creative writing and creating characters - such as Master John, responsible for the villagers spiritual needs. However, where possible he uses real names, people and statistics.

The Black Death first made its fearful appearance in England in Weymouth, but the villagers begin to hear rumours about the plague long before. Travellers, sailors, merchants begin to bring tales of a terrible plague and the villagers are victims of heresay and rumour. They begin to make what preparations they can by taking religious pilgrimages and, urged by Master John, making confession. Master John reads aloud a letter from the bishop, in which it is said, "If the latest rumours are true, then the plague has already arrived in the Far South and West of England." Strangers are both feared, in case they bring plague, yet welcomed for news they might bring. The author also describes in great detail the ritual of Master John attending a death bed scene before the plague, which involved many people from the community, the dying persons family and the Church. If we contrast this with the hurried, impersonal confessions (for those lucky enough to receive them at all) for those suffering from plague, it shows how difficult it was for the society to cope with the sheer numbers of people ill and dying. For plague brought fear of infection and family members were often too scared to nurse or care for their dying relatives. Even if someone could be brought to administer the last rights, everyone was over stretched, exhausted and over whelmed, and often the dying person was too ill to make their confession, as the illness struck so quickly. In 1349 the plague struck Walsham, close to Easter Day. By late June, when it departed, the village population was cut in half. There were no tenant deaths reported in March and 103 reported in June. For a small community like Walsham, the number of people lost was devastating.

John Hatcher re-creates the people of the village extremely well. We feel their anticipation and fear, the horror of the plague finally coming to them and then the aftermath. For the plague changed England forever. People who had earlier been happy to take any work offered, now found that labour was in demand. They were unwilling to work for the same wages, or even to take over land and cottages left vacant. More more women than usual were left to inherit, as the men in their family died. The elite of the country were alarmed at the empowerment by the lower orders by the massive mortality rates. The King issued the 'Ordinance of Labourers', compelling the common people to work when required and trying to force them to accept the same wages and conditions as before the Black Death. In reality, those left were more concerned with their own lands, and those who had normally had a surplus of labour to choose from had to offer more wages and incentives than normal - if they could find anyone willing to work at all.

This is an excellent read and gives a very good representation of the experience of living in those times and what it meant for those left behind once the devastation passed. I enjoyed reading it very much and would recommend it highly.

Lucy Barnhouse says

I found this book both impressive and engaging. Hatcher (an eminent medieval historian) himself describes the genre of this unusual book as resembling a "docudrama," which is probably the best way of encapsulating it. It's likely to appeal to the interested layperson, but could also be useful for classroom use by history instructors. Hatcher uses the surviving records of an English village (reaching beyond it to nearby towns and manors, and, where relevant, to continental Europe.) He then reconstructs/imagines the experience of this community not only during the first outbreak of the Black Death, but during the years immediately preceding and following it. This enriches considerably its potential usefulness, in my view, as well as its interest. Hatcher, while inventing conversations and motives, keeps remarkably close to his documents, and explains how they survive and are used by historians. Impressively, Hatcher covers not only economy (prices and landholding,) and social status, but also how the plague affected governance, ecclesiastical administration, popular piety, and, not least, the roles of women in agricultural society. His protagonists include a cleric, members of the nobility and gentry, manor officials, a monk, and a diverse group of peasants, It's a meticulously crafted and a fascinating work.

Bettie? says

Godology seemed to have added terrible distress to those destined only to live another 24 hours

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Tanya says

I expected this book to be a grisly account of those suffering the disease - perhaps that appealed to me on some level. But that's not what it is at all (and perhaps that's why readers on this site haven't liked it more -- they wanted the macabre details).
The section of "The Black Death" dealing with the actual infection was brief. The majority of the book focused on the months leading up to the outbreak, as rumors of pestilence to the south reached Walsham (a small village in England) and the citizens were called to repentance, and the social turmoil that followed the decimation of the population. Hatcher sucked the very marrow out of Walsham's primary sources; though the fourteenth century overall is nearly undocumented, the local records for Walsham and its environs are strong. The Black Death is a somewhat overworked topic, yet Thatcher adds something new to the scholarship. Not only is his "personal history" approach unique, but it also provides a clearer understanding than anything I've read before of how the black plague loosened the bonds of feudalism and undermined the authority of the Catholic clergy.
Overall, though the book was different from what I expected, I found it engaging, and a very worthwhile read for anyone interested in social history.

Petra X says

The best of times and the worst of times is true in every generation often depending on how much money you have, or at least patronage from someone who does. But until the modern era it was always the worst of times when your locality got infected with the Black Death.

There was no knowledge of germs or rats as vectors for disease, it was all miasmas and punishment from the Christian God who at that time was conceived as vengeful and harsh. The later Christian God who is ever-loving and forgiving (but is just as much involved in war, death and torture) was as much a product of our

times as their god was of theirs. So preachers preached and people begged forgiveness.

But if the disease came calling on a member of your household, the entire house was walled up for 40 days. People were lucky if they had someone who bring and leave them food, or they had a vegetable garden they could sneak out to from a hole in the boarded-up house. It is estimated that many died of starvation and that was put down to plague.

Some villages suffered 80% mortality and in one week in London there were 7,000 deaths recorded. But the records are considered underestimates since the people maintaining the records often died themselves and there was no-one to take over. Many deaths went unrecorded with the bodies just thrown on to the death carts as they passed and thence into mass graves.

There was no help for rich or poor, not from gods or doctors. The disease was the scourge of Europe for over 400 years.

Compared to that, it seems like we are living in the best of times now.

Taylor says

This could have been done better. In fact, I think a similar concept was applied when Barbara Tuchman wrote 'A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous Fourteenth Century'. She created a very cohesive narrative by selecting a relatively obscure figure out of history and tracing the events of the century as they had happened to him, on both a grand and a very personal level. The difference here is that her figure, Enguerrand de Coucy, was a very real person, as opposed to Hatcher's Master John, who is a work of invention.

The narrative in question, Hatcher's, can't seem to decide if a novel should be written or if a scholarly work is at hand, and it suffers from the indecision. As a scholarly work, the book is at fault for including so much fiction and for getting mired in descriptions of daily work and administrative tasks in a 14th century village as opposed to descriptions of the affliction and aftermath (which is, of course, why one opts to read the book). As a fictional piece, it lacks from any semblance of a storyline, developed characters, or any kind of investment or emotion on the character's part.

A better alternative would be to read John Kelly's 'The Great Mortality' for a nonfiction treatment of the subject, and perhaps Geraldine Brooks' 'Year of Wonders' for a fictional piece set during a later epidemic.

Sarah says

This is one of the very few books that I have not been able to finish. The combination of fiction and fact in this book was difficult to read and did not mesh well. I felt that the facts were incredibly interesting but the story was incredibly boring. This would have been much better off as a non-fiction piece.

Ciara says

although i found this book strangely compelling while i was reading it, i probably wouldn't ever want to give it a re-read. the author is a prolific historian who specializes in the middle ages, apparently, & has written a bunch of straightforward history books about the black plague & the economic development of europe in medieval times. he bills this book as a kind of "docudrama," focusing on the mid-sized english village of walsham during the years leading up to the black plague, the plague months, & the aftermath. he wanted to write about the way the plague impacted the everyday lives of serfs & villagers, but there's pretty much no verifiable historical evidence that would enable a historian to write that kind of personal account, since most toiling vollagers back then were illiterate & their literate counterparts were largely clergy & manor holders who were pretty unconcerned about the day-to-day affairs of regular people, so long as they were looking after their crops properly & paying attention in church. i guess the narrator of the story is supposed to be a member of the clergy recounting the events of the plague from a distance of a few years. the primary protaganist is the village priest, master john (self-insert?), a "good" priest who is devoted to his asceticism & obligation to care for the villagers' mortal souls. there is so much religion in this book, it blew my mind. i am a life-long atheist who actually wasn't allowed as a child to have anything to do with religion. i wasn't allowed to, say, watch "the flying nun," lest it convert me to catholicism. i wasn't allowed to stay the night at the houses of friends who might pray in front of me before bed. there is so much about religion that i just don't know or understand, & what's more, i kind of don't care. so reading a book with a priest as a main character totally blew my mind. there was this one part where, after the plague, a female villager who became wealthy through inherited land decides to go on a pilgrimage to rome. she is told that she can get a plenary indulgence because "the pope holds the keys to a vault wherein is stored the excess charitable goodwill accrued by jesus, the virgin mary, & all the saints & apostles during their lives, which was more than enough to secure their own salvations." i was like, are you fucking KIDDING ME? WHO COULD POSSIBLY BELIEVE THIS SHIT? like the pope can just open a door & be like, "yeah, here's a little salvation for you, & here's some for you, & yeah, you're all good on the hail marys now. have an awesome eternal salvation." it made me realize that even though i have always been fairly tolerant of religious folks (so long as they don't try to convert me), i have never actually consciously believed that any of them REALLY believed in god. i figured maybe their spirituality gave them a mooring for a moral compass, but surely they knew the god thing was totally bogus, right? when i expressed this sentiment to my quaker, meeting-attending, god-beliving-in boyfriend...man, he got really pissed. anyway, this is an okay book. there are probably far more interesting, less religion-obsessed books about the black plague though.

Becky says

What a great idea -- to create a "personal" history of one of the greatest disasters of human history -- the black plague of the Middle Ages. In this novel (well, it is labelled "docudrama")John Hatcher, historian, transports the reader into a real community, Walsham in North West Suffolk. Hatcher selects this village because it provided some of the best primary sources for the period. Each chapter has a preface describing the research conclusions and historical context. In order to shed light on daily life during this time and in this place, Hatcher tells his story through various individuals who actually lived during the time and through Master John, a fictional priest in charge of the spiritual well being of the community. The story does an excellent job of reflecting the social, economic, and religious conditions leading up to the swift and deadly plague; and, then reveals the dramatic changes post plague.

While I learned a lot and was drawn into the period, I found the literary quality lacking. The warmth,the

ability to identify with characters, the personal drama which makes history vivid didn't match the historical details which became repetitious.

Daniela says

It's historical fiction, so... where's the fiction? Sure, there are made-up characters but judging by the historical facts presented at the beginning of each chapter, there really wasn't much fiction going on. Plus, the fact that the peak of the Black Death was skimmed over while giving so much attention to its effects in the upcoming years kinda bothered me. Yes, it is an important part of history and brought many changes to the land and way of living, but I picked up thia book to know how people lived day-to-day through the plague which is not something you can talk lightly about. But, that's just me, I guess I wanted more drama and less economy and religious processions.
The writing is terrible, this book is so dense it took me almost two months to complete... and it'd not even that long, so go figure... the cold historical facts and the illustrations were the best of this book, by far. There was so much filler... and it was so poorly written. It truly is a shame, because it's very obvious that the author has plenty of knowledge of this era, but it's just impossible to read.

Ailsa says

As a literature student, my academic interests have recently tended towards contemporary fiction and particularly what gets called "historiographical metafiction": fictional works that blur the line between history and fiction, and ultimately force the question of how all of what we "know" about the past is constructed.

So I was intrigued to find a history book, by a well-respected historian, that seems to be participating in similar kinds of modes as some of the ficitonal works I've been studying.

In *The Black Death* John Hatcher sets out to give us an "insider's view" of the devastating plague that swept through Europe in the mid-fourteenth century. He does this by focusing on one small Sussex village, and recounting the events as they unfold. But, although the records for Walsham and the surrounding area are particularly good, Hatcher is upfront about the things they couldn't tell him: how exactly individuals behaved in the face of the crisis, what they felt, said and did, or even the name of the parish priest. So, in order to get his reader "inside" the history of the times he decides to make (presumably extremely well) educated guesses and narrate from the position of a clergyman writing several decades after the events of the book, whilst he, the objective historian, opens each chapter with an italicised introduction, which gives context, explanation etc.

So this isn't going to be a book for the historical purists out there, but I found Hatcher's attempts very compelling. The balance between historical fact and narrative drama is competently handled and I sped through reading this in a day: for me, even though I knew what would happen (i.e: the plague would arrive in Britain, a lot of people would die) I nevertheless found this a page-turner. Which is surely a testament to Hatcher's writing style and presentation of events. Hatcher also builds a picture of the late medieval world without being overtly expository. Telling details abound to build up a picture of life for every day people - although I would be interested to know if this struck readers without a prior familiarity with the period. He also transformed actual historical figures (the lords and ladies of the local manners, for example) into

compelling characters, reading human motivations into the dry court rolls.

My only real criticism of this book is that it refused to play with the uncertainty of its genre: Hatcher seemed ultimately concerned with writing history, at finding a greater "truth" through his unorthodox method, which appeared to me to be essentially futile. The ambiguity could have been exploited much more fully (as in with the narrator - who was he? why would he be writing this account) but perhaps that's just my literature student background betraying me.

Overall, a very enjoyable read, and much more entertaining than many history books you might read on this subjet.

Ruth says

I quite enjoyed this history of the Black Death as seen through the eyes of those who lived at the time.

It's written quite differently, with a very strong dose of historical facts which are linked together with some educated guesses, and it works very well. It gives an incredibly intimate impression of what it was like to live through the pestilence. My favorite aspect of this was probably what it was like while people were waiting for the disease to arrive - to start with, they assumed they wouldn't be affected (only non-Christians were being punished), but then Avignon was struck (where the Pope was) and France and London, and you could tell it was getting closer and closer. The feeling of impending doom was something I'd never really thought about before, because I'd never really tried to visualize it through the eyes of people at the time.

This book also neatly emphasizes how quickly the plague tore through England - 2-3 months and it was gone (although it did recur a few times, between the 1350s and 1660s, it was never as virulent). The book also neatly hints at the incredible upheaval Society experienced over the next few centuries, and how it wasn't so much a matter of the evil lords wanting to shove the nasty peasants back into their boxes, but it was a matter of a whole society trying to adjust to a very, very new reality, which isn't clear and is difficult to navigate, whilst at the same time, trying to cope with guilt for surviving and trying to rationalize why God inflicted the plague in the first place. Were their little sins not little at all? Why did children, who really had no major sins, die, but those who were serious sinners survive?

I wouldn't suggest that people with absolutely no basic knowledge of the black death read this one. It assumes a basic familiarity, but makes a really nice alternate perspective.

3 stars. I liked it.
