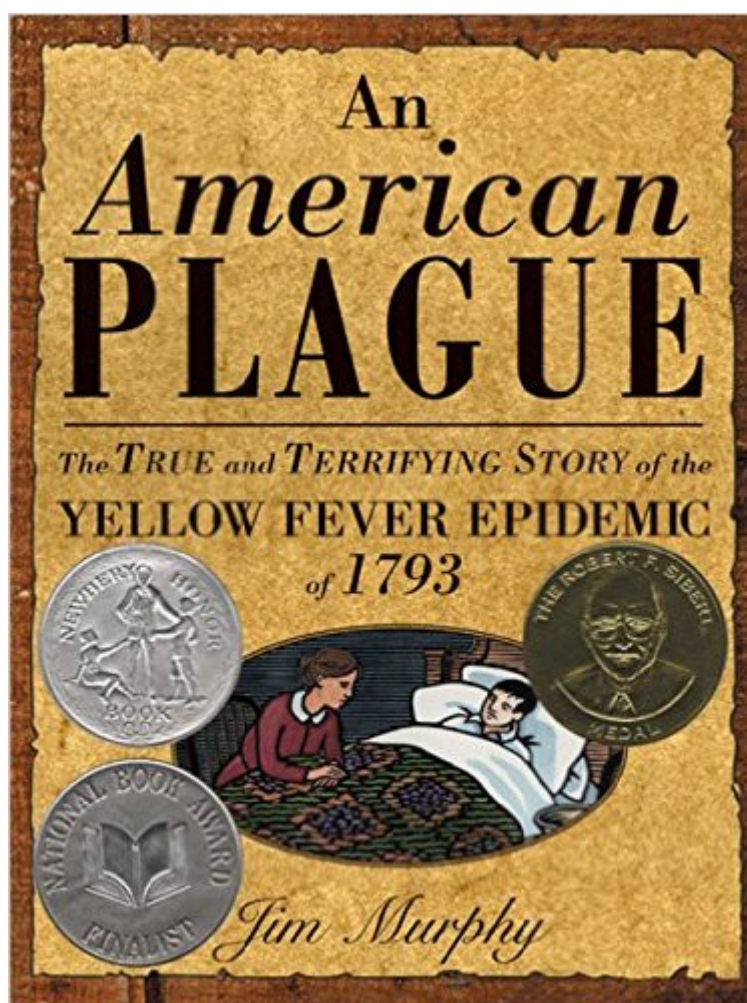


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An American Plague: The True And Terrifying Story Of The Yellow Fever Epidemic Of 1793 (Newbery Honor Book)



Synopsis

1793, Philadelphia. The nation's capital and the largest city in North America is devastated by an apparently incurable disease, cause unknown . . . In a powerful, dramatic narrative, critically acclaimed author Jim Murphy describes the illness known as yellow fever and the toll it took on the city's residents, relating the epidemic to the major social and political events of the day and to 18th-century medical beliefs and practices. Drawing on first-hand accounts, Murphy spotlights the heroic role of Philadelphia's free blacks in combating the disease, and the Constitutional crisis that President Washington faced when he was forced to leave the city--and all his papers--while escaping the deadly contagion. The search for the fever's causes and cure, not found for more than a century afterward, provides a suspenseful counterpoint to this riveting true story of a city under siege. An American Plague's numerous awards include a Sibert Medal, a Newbery Honor, and designation as a National Book Award Finalist. Thoroughly researched, generously illustrated with fascinating archival prints, and unflinching in its discussion of medical details, this book offers a glimpse into the conditions of American cities at the time of our nation's birth while drawing timely parallels to modern-day epidemics. Bibliography, map, index.

Book Information

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Age Range: 10 - 12 years

Grade Level: 5 - 7

Customer Reviews

It is an indisputable fact that disasters are a lot more fun to read about than they are to live through. Sure, we might enjoy flipping through a tale covering the potato famine or the crash of the Hindenburg, but would you really want to experience them first hand yourself? Not likely. Author Jim Murphy has always been particularly talented at writing about the disaster genre. His "The Great Fire" is one of the finest non-fiction glimpses into the devastating 1871 Chicago conflagration ever produced. To my mind, however, he seems to make his various projects particularly difficult for himself. The Great Chicago Fire did not have any photographs to include for interest, though it did contain copious newspaper illustrations and documents. Such is the case with Murphy's more recent creation, "An American Plague". Delving deeply into the Yellow Fever epidemic of the late 18th century, Murphy attempts the near impossible: Make colonial America interesting. Worse, make colonial America interesting to kids. And dang it if he doesn't pull it off. Framing the tale as a kind of mystery, Murphy starts slowly. He introduces us to some of the characters that would become important during the disease's height. As we read we find ourselves in the hot steamy smelly streets of Philadelphia. President Washington is having some difficulties with his Proclamation of Neutrality regarding the French. The Reverend J. Henry C. Helmuth is proclaiming that soon the city will be feeling God's displeasure due to Philly's rampant debauchery. And in a small boarding house on North Water Street, a French sailor has come down with a fever. The plague has begun. Murphy's excellent at picking up the pace in this story. Quickly, the situation escalates from a disease affecting only the poor to one touching a variety of different citizens. Quick as a wink Washington and his compatriots flee the city and hole up in different areas. Rich citizens, or those with family not in Philadelphia, get out lickety-split. Suddenly our focus concentrates on Doctor Benjamin Rush. Placing himself in constant peril, Rush works tirelessly to find a cure for the disease. Rich men like Stephen Girard and (gotta love the name) Israel Israel take on the jobs of ministering to the sick and poor. Most remarkably of all, however, are the members of the Free African Society. A group of freed blacks, this group is led by the formidable and eloquent Richard Allen and Absalom Jones. With little regard for their own safety, this group nurses the people of the town when no one else will. They take on the most disgusting cases and emerge as the real heroes of this tale. And anyone who thinks the Free African Society got so much as a whisper of thanks for their efforts, by the way, needs to study up on their history a little more. By the book's end Yellow Fever abates with the arrival of autumn. Though it would pop up periodically over the years, it wasn't until 1900 that the true culprit was discovered. Tiny mosquitoes were, and remain today to be, the carriers of the disease. The book ends with the chilling comment that despite years of research,

"there is still no cure for yellow fever". As Duane Gubler, a director at the Centers for Disease Control notes, yellow fever is, "a modern-day time bomb. We're just sitting here waiting for it to happen". The end! Having successfully turned this book into a tale of true terror (fun!), Murphy had to accompany his words with arresting visual images. If someone were to offer you your weight in gold if you could come up with five interesting images from 1793, I doubt you'd have much success. Murphy, however, is cunning. He begins his chapters with newspaper selections as they were printed during the height of the fever. He draws upon paintings of the major players (not, interestingly enough, easy ones like Washington). He even goes so far as to cull prints from other plagues and diseases (like England's Black Plague of 1664) to give the reader some kind of an idea of what the streets of Philadelphia must have resembled. From early American advertisements (personally my favorite print in the whole book) to political cartoons where Uncle Sam condemns Amos Quito (put the words together) for crimes against humanity, Murphy bends over backwards trying to fill his book with visually engaging scenes and visions. Be sure to read the book's acknowledgements and note about the illustrations for further fascinating information. If you have a teen that needs to read a non-fiction book from a colonial time period, this book's your best bet. Honestly, it makes a time period interesting that has forever been buried in dull repeated facts. Oh, it's still going to bore certain people. No doubt. I mean, books of this nature are bound to enthrall only types of kids. But for those who stick with it and read it through, it's an eye opening look at a disease that could wipe us out as easily today as it did back then. And if that doesn't run a finger down your spine, I don't know what will.

This dramatic account of the Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1793 is riveting. It is packed with historical facts and presents the horror of the disease, the implications for the city of Philadelphia and neighboring areas, and the reaction of both the townspeople as well as those in power with vivid detail. Politicians, the medical community, common people, orphans, the poor are all brought to life before our eyes and we feel their pain, we share their misery, and we gain insight into what life was like for them during this terrifying time. Author Jim Murphy chronologically follows the beginning of this epidemic, making us feel as if we were actual witnesses to this American Plague, using quotes from those who were there, newspaper clippings, period engravings and portraits. Additionally, we are shown true acts of courage and selfless behavior as Mr. Murphy tells us of great men and woman who risked their lives to help their fellow people, and some who ultimately sacrificed their lives. He also unravels the controversies, particularly among the medical community in regards to the reaction to the disease and discusses bloodletting, ingesting poisons, bathing in vinegar,

purging air with gunpowder, inhaling black pepper as well as other practiced modes of treatment. Some people may find the descriptions of the disease and the progression of the illness horrifying, but it is truth nonetheless, Yellow fever is nothing short of horrific. I believe this fascinating book is truly deserving of the many awards it has earned. This very visual and brilliantly written book is a great tool for you to use in teaching this part of our nation's history to your children.

Murphy tells a captivating story about Philadelphia's yellow fever epidemic of 1793 in this young adult tome. First, he provides a compelling narrative of the epidemic itself, replete with first-hand accounts of witnesses. Then, he tells us something of what happened in Philadelphia after this particular epidemic, illuminating the important impacts this event had on such diverse aspects of life as a public water system and whether the U.S. President can call Congress outside of the capital city. He goes on to explain the unfortunately major role of yellow fever as a U.S. killer for over a century. We then learn how scientists eventually discovered the cause (mosquitos carrying the virus) and a vaccine. Murphy's inclusion of relevant details adds to the evocative account of the tragedy itself. For example, we feel the irony when - in the midst of doctors and quacks expounding a range of potential ways to avoid the fever - an unknown author submits a letter to a newspaper suggesting that city residents kill the mosquitoes hatching in their yards. The remedy is not heeded. Likewise, in the midst of the panic that the epidemic created, a meteorite actually lands in the middle of the city, adding to the apocalyptic frenzy. This book is an excellent introduction to the importance of public health issues in U.S. and world history. I sent a copy as a gift to a young friend with a taste for history today. (Special note on the audio version narrated by Pat Bottino: he sounds too much like sportscaster Howard Cosell for my taste, with every sentence delivered as a sharp staccato.)

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