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Review: A World of Sickness

The Spanish flu of 1918-19 infected 500 million people, killing between 50 and 100 million. Its cause was discovered only decades later. Edward Kosner reviews 'Pale Rider' by Laura Spinney.



Red Cross volunteers fighting against the Spanish flu in the United States in 1918. PHOTO: APIC/GETTY IMAGES

By *Edward Kosner*
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We live in an age of AIDS, SARS, bird and swine flu, Ebola, and Zika. Spurred by globalization and hyped by the internet, those plagues alarmed huge swaths of the world. Yet, aside from AIDS, none of these diseases has caused nearly as many deaths as feared. Bizarrely, the greatest killer of the past century is barely remembered today.

The Spanish flu began in the spring of 1918, infected 500 million people, and killed between 50 million and 100 million of them—more than both world wars and the Holocaust combined. Not since the bubonic plague of the mid-14th century—the Black Death—had such a fearsome pestilence devastated mankind.

Spanish-flu patients “would soon be having trouble breathing,” writes Laura Spinney in “Pale Rider,” her gripping account of the pandemic. “Two mahogany spots appeared over their cheekbones, and within a few hours that colour had flushed their faces from ear to ear.” Teeth fell out. Hair fell out. Delirium was common. Soon the doomed turned bluish. “Blue darkened to black. The black first appeared at the extremities—the hands and feet, including the nails—stole up the limbs and eventually infused the abdomen and torso. As long as you were conscious . . . you watched death enter at your fingertips and fill you up.”

At the beginning, everything about the pandemic was cloaked in mystery. Where had it originated? How did it spread? What microbe caused it? How could the not-yet-infected be protected? How could the disease be treated? Would it ever end? Ms. Spinney, a British science writer and novelist, deals with these questions with exemplary clarity and sure narrative skill.

At least one of the Spanish flu’s oddities can be resolved: Spain had little to do with it. King Alfonso XIII was one of the first to be stricken, in May 1918, and soon two-thirds of the population of Madrid fell ill. The disease had already broken out in America and in the World War I trenches in France. Learning of the scourge across the border, the French labeled it “the Spanish flu,” and, despite all evidence to the contrary, the name stuck.

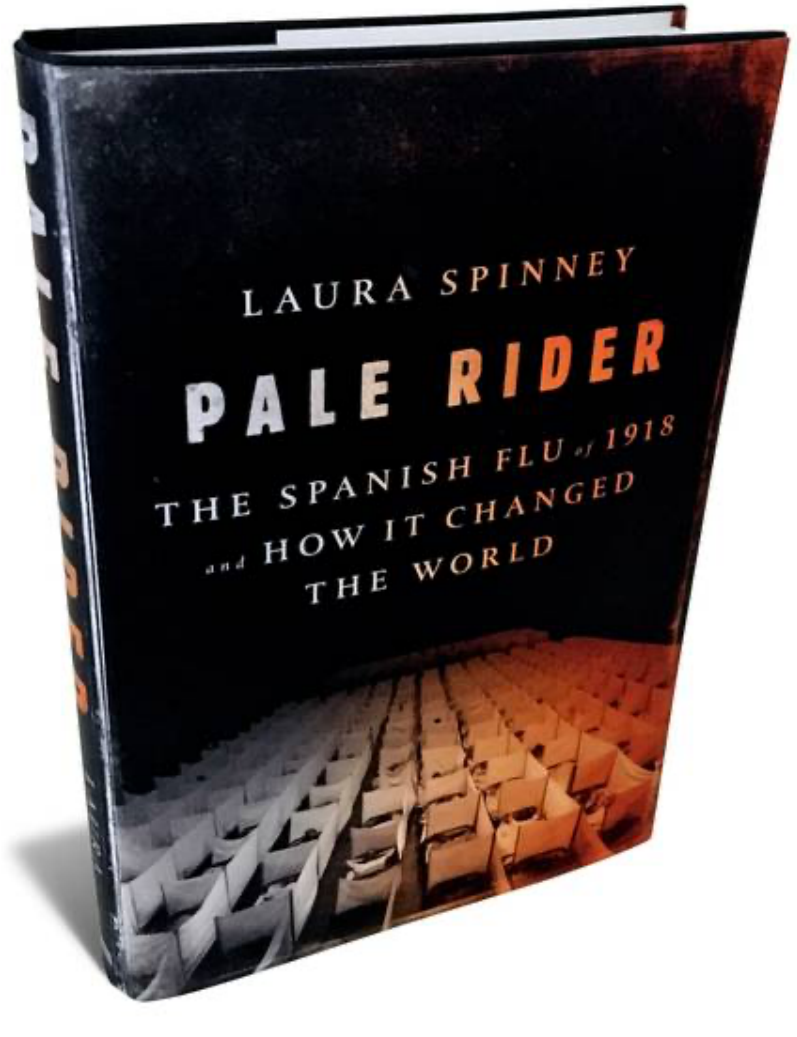


PHOTO: WSJ

PALE RIDER

By *Laura Spinney*
PublicAffairs, 332 pages, \$28

Ms. Spinney is at her best in trying to tease out the real origin of the pandemic. The first suspect was China, where pneumonic plague had erupted on the Manchurian border in 1910. The government, trying to curry favor with the Allies in World War I, had then sent tens of thousands of laborers, many infected, to dig trenches on the Western Front. Another theory put the initial outbreak at the British army’s mobilization base in Étaples in northern France. A third candidate was in the American heartland, at a U.S. Army staging base, Camp Funston in Kansas. The question is unsettled, but plainly the movement of troops in the Great War accelerated the flu’s spread.

The pandemic came in three stages—a relatively mild outbreak in the spring of 1918, a terrifyingly deadly wave that autumn and a lesser revival the next spring before it burned itself out. More American service members died of the flu than from fighting the war. It engulfed tiny Iceland and sprawling India; Ukraine, where it claimed a movie star named Vera Kholodnaya; and Brazil, where a British mail ship from West Africa delivered the seeds of

death to Rio de Janeiro. Few parts of the world, even the most remote, were spared.

The frantic search for the cause of the pandemic was nightmarish, too. A respected researcher persuaded himself and others that he had found the bacillus, and he persisted even though autopsies rarely turned up his pet suspect in the tissues of the dead. The microbe hunters couldn’t find their quarry because it slipped through the ultrafine strainers they tried to catch it with, and it was invisible to their microscopes. It was what the French bacteriologist Émile Roux called an “être de raison,” an organism whose existence could be deduced only from its effects. Eventually a virus—1/20th the size of a bacillus—was identified as the culprit. It was not actually seen until decades later with the invention of the electron microscope.

At first, doctors tried aspirin, mercury and other nostrums, often with side effects worse than many flu symptoms. Antibacterial interventions sometimes worked but gave false hope: They didn’t relieve the flu itself but rather the pneumonia many victims developed.

It wasn’t until the 1930s that most of the mysteries were solved. A lab ferret sneezed in the face of a British researcher, who developed a flu, establishing, Ms. Spinney writes, that an airborne virus could pass from animals to man. She goes on to deliver a masterly tutorial on the workings of the human immune system, the basis for the eventual development of vaccines against various strains of influenza.

Ms. Spinney ends her story with speculation about various unheralded consequences of the pandemic. She suggests that the trauma of the flu inspired later back-to-nature and faith-healing movements and that the outbreak, by indirectly triggering the British massacre at Amritsar in 1919, may have speeded India’s drive for independence. An attack of the flu, she suggests, brought on Woodrow Wilson’s 1919 stroke, which doomed his efforts to get the Senate to ratify the Treaty of Versailles and have the U.S. join the League of Nations—failures that were stepping stones to World War II.

She even traces President Donald Trump’s family fortune back two generations to the Spanish flu. After the pandemic, American insurance companies paid out nearly \$100 million—the equivalent of \$20 billion today—to the families of the dead. One victim was a German immigrant who left money to his widow and his son, Fred Trump, who would later sire Donald. They invested it in property, she writes, the foundation of Donald Trump’s real-estate empire.

“Pale Rider” is a cautionary tale about human vulnerability and ingenuity in the face of peril. Today’s anxiety about Zika and Ebola is in part a proxy for dread of biowarfare waged by terrorists or rogue states, which could make the Spanish-flu pandemic look quaintly benign by comparison.

Mr. Kosner is the author of “It’s News to Me,” a memoir of his career as editor of Newsweek, New York, Esquire and the New York Daily News.

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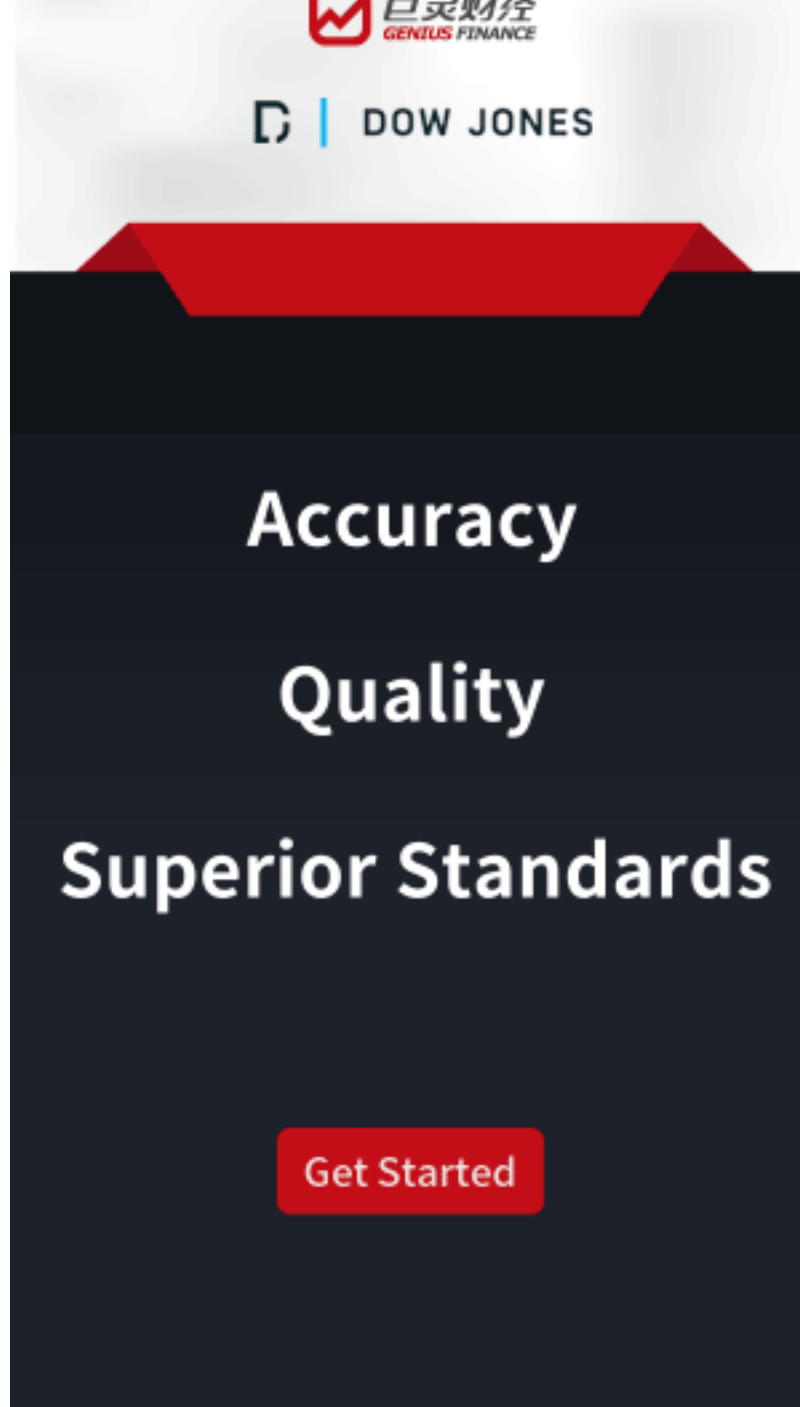
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