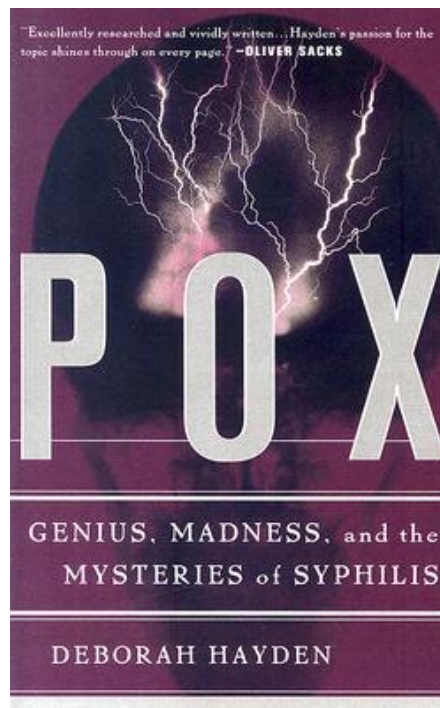




Pox: Genius, Madness, And The Mysteries Of Syphilis

Deborah Hayden

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From Beethoven to Oscar Wilde, from Van Gogh to Hitler, Deborah Hayden throws new light on the effects of syphilis on the lives and works of seminal figures from the fifteenth to the twentieth centuries. Writing with remarkable insight and narrative flair, Hayden argues that biographers and historians have vastly underestimated the influence of what Thomas Mann called "this exhilarating yet wasting disease." Shrouded in secrecy, syphilis was accompanied by wild euphoria and suicidal depression, megalomania and paranoia, profoundly affecting sufferers' worldview, their sexual behavior, and their art. Deeply informed and courageously argued, Pox has been heralded as a major contribution to our understanding of genius, madness, and creativity.

Pox: Genius, Madness, And The Mysteries Of Syphilis Details

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From Reader Review Pox: Genius, Madness, And The Mysteries Of Syphilis for online ebook

Eric Rasmussen says

This book features a terribly alluring thesis - many of the greatest artists, thinkers, and politicians of the past several hundred years found greatness because of late stage syphilis, which can cause the most divine of inspiration before plunging the victim into madness. The first part of the book details the history and biology of the disease, which I found very interesting. Then the rest presents individuals and makes a case for them having syphilis (all speculation, as great historical figures were as ready to discuss their venereal diseases as we are today). I would have found the book far more enjoyable with a more robust treatment of the subjects. Instead of acknowledging the potential victims historic contributions, or really introducing them at all, the author makes her case and moves on. This would a be a great resource if one was preparing a biography on any of these people. It does not stand alone very well, and heaven forbid you are not previously familiar with the lives of any of the people she discusses.

Seoda says

I found that this was quite an enjoyable read...At first I was a bit intimidated by the format...Introductory chapters followed up by a slew of biographical pieces...But it had me hooked till the end! One aspect of these accounts I found extremely disturbing was the cavalier spreading of the disease by some of its victims, particularly the celebrated authors. (The account of one luminary painting a false sore on his penis, showing his female companion, and then assaulting her comes to mind.)

Although I love to read about syphilis in a historical context, my daily work reminds me that it is still very much with us! I'm thankful I can tell patients that it can be treated with antibiotics, but at the same time, I have to wonder how many people are living with/dying from the effects of late stage disease, now that it is somewhat off the public radar?

Molly says

One of my all-time favorites, though the scholarship is a little old and the Hitler chapter is rather questionable. Nevertheless, a frequent re-read.

Karen says

This was a very interesting book. I'd been wanting to read this book for a while. I've been teaching about various Sexually Transmitted Diseases to premed and nursing students, and while I worked on HIV in a lab, my background on other STDs could use a little work. And I admit, I was curious about the disease's impact on all of these men and one woman. The entire book seemed a little off as far as which chapters should be where. I would have started with an explanation of the disease first, and then go into it's history. Hayden did the opposite, which really threw me off. Actually it was halfway through the book that the disease was explained, and there were many bits of information lacking concerning the etiology of the disease.

When the author got to the real concern of the book, which was the many people who are thought to have lived and died with this disease...it was more than obvious that the author did her research. She really backed herself up with enough letters and doctor's reports, etc. to make the case for these men having syphilis. It couldn't be that hard to find some DNA left of these guys to check for genetic changes in hair, skin, bedding, etc. to test. So this part of the book was interesting. I felt that most of the people the author was talking about, probably were syphilitics. I'm not sure she proved Beethoven though, and it isn't because I'm a Deaf person who loves his music.

It does explain an awful lot about Hitler (though it doesn't excuse it). So this book provides a lot more historical information as concerns these people, and it made me very sad for most of them. But like anything that is speculated about, you cannot say outright, that they had it.

Good book, but I think some editor should have rearranged the table of contents a bit...

Nancy says

I stumbled across this book looking for something else at the library. The premise was alluring. From the jacket blurb, it sounded like many creative famous men had syphilis and that it contributed to their genius. As it turned out, a lot of famous creative men *might* have had syphilis. Almost nobody owns up to having this awful venereal disease which exhibits a huge variety of symptoms as it progresses through the body. I did learn that it was real bummer of a disease before the advent of penicillin--horrible pain, paralysis, blindness, & insanity can really ruin your day. Treatment with mercury and arsenic made sufferers even more miserable. However, with much of the book being a summary of various biographers saying did-didn't-did for each man featured, I came away feeling like I'd mostly wasted my time.

Tina Dyer says

Really well-written, if a bit paranoia-inducing. "Pox" compares the biographies of a number of notable people--including Van Gogh, Abraham & Mary Todd Lincoln, Oscar Wilde--with the symptomology of syphilis in its three stages, to alarming effect. If, as posited here, syphilis was the "disease that dare not speak its name" and infected fully 25% of the European population in the 19th century, then it is entirely possible that our whole concept of the "artistic genius" is driven by the etiology of the disease.

Sally says

I could have told you Nietzsche and Hitler had something in common. And probably a few other world "leaders" too....

Donna says

I started to read this book before I had to be put on IV antibiotics for advanced Lyme and soon was unable to read anymore. In about April this year I finally was able to complete the book. I was amazed I had been able to recall all I had read before stopping. I found this book to be much more amusing and easy to read than I

thought it might be, as the author did an equally intriguing job explaining the history of the medical understanding of the disease and technical/medical side of this story as she did in telling the stories of those infected. I was surprised to learn of the current lack of medical research to find a reliable test (the Wasserman test is still the only test used and cannot detect most syphilis infections after the initial, early stage!). While reading about the detailed effects the spirochete has on every part of the body, I was eerily reminded that I too had a spirochetal infection. The remainder of the book gives amazingly detailed accounts of how the lives of some of the most famous people in history were in part driven by the effects of the disease as well as the impact of keeping their dreaded disease secret. I was amazed to find that Hitler was never proven to have been infected, but as the author lays out detail after detail, there is only one explanation for his "secret health problem." In fact, Hitler was claimed by a close college friend to have confessed that he contracted the disease from a Jewish prostitute in Vienna. He also was quoted to say that he had only one regret about his book *Mein Kampf*, and that was the devotion of an entire chapter to Syphilis, as that was more of a personal subject! It was then that I realized why Hitler used the term racial "hygiene" and his obsessed vendetta against innocent Jews, as well the fact that it was then thought that Syphilis was genetically transmitted. In fact, if it were not for dreaded Syphilis, we might never have heard of Hitler and his biowarfare experiments that included using ticks to transmit animal diseases to human victims, including the early form of what is now called Lyme disease. I think Hitler may have been trying to develop a sort of super syphilis bioweapon because of the use of a spirochete that until then only caused mild arthritis in a few victims.

I highly recommend this book to anyone struggling to beat Lyme disease and coinfections (more rightfully termed MSIDS) as well their supporters, as long as you are prepared to learn how damaging both spirochetes are, and the way they can change your life forever.

* Please forgive any typos and my now poor vocabulary and composition. I have been fighting Lyme, Bartonella and Babesia, as well as other vector-borne infections for over 30 years.

Laura Jean says

Well researched and written. It was almost a Who's Who of famous people with the pox. Interesting but I was more interested in the disease itself, which the first section covered well. . .

LillyBooks says

I have a soft spot for these medical/historical postulations, and I found this one quite enjoyable. It begins with a thorough discussion of the origins and history of syphilis, the various stages of the disease, and the attempted treatments in history. The last two-thirds of a book is a discussion of famous people who might have had (or even admitted they did have) syphilis and the course the illness took in their lives. Even though I enjoyed the book, I felt it became a bit repetitive by the end and only for the right reason: Hayden repeatedly references a list of criteria for supposing one had syphilis and organizes her argument in a very scientific manner to address each bullet point on the list. Again, the only proper thing to do. But, by necessity, it meant the format became monotonous. Additionally, I was disappointed that there was no real discussion that the tertiary stage of syphilis lead directly the "genius" of these persons, which is what was promised by the publisher's online blurb (the copy of the book I received at the library did not include this blurb).

Claudia says

Mostly Pox: etc left me curiously unsatisfied. It's not that I believe or disbelieve that various historical figures had syphilis (although I'm highly unconvinced by the Schumann chapter), it's the author's methods I have issues with. Syphilis is referred to throughout as the 'great imitator' and yet most of the time, other suggestions for what could be the cause of the symptoms shown in each "case" are not mentioned, never mind being discussed and shown to be unlikely. The one exception to this is the chapter about Hitler where the discussion about the symptoms he had that resembled Parkinson's disease is ended with "just because he had Parkinson's doesn't mean he didn't have syphilis." Which is a fair enough point, but when you're claiming all the symptoms are due to syphilis, it's a bit rich.

The symptoms are another problem. A list of them is in appendix A. Not only would I have preferred them earlier in the book, but they're so spectacularly vague and at the same time, wide-ranging. Do not give this book to a hypochondriac who has ever had sex because they will convince themselves they have syphilis.

The other problem is that a lot of the symptoms resemble those of heavy metal poisoning, particularly mercury poisoning. Now quite obviously, being poisoned by mercury doesn't rule out having syphilis, especially given that mercury was used as a treatment for syphilis, but it was also used as a treatment for a great many other things.

One of the other aims of the book was to examine how on-going syphilis, or more particularly the parts from secondary syphilis onwards, affected the work of the various "patients". I have never really appreciated the idea of focusing on one aspect of an artist's life and using it to explain *everything* they've ever done and I found this book had the same problem as most works in this vein. It takes the attitude that this one thing explains all the great masterworks (and excuses the drivel) but never mentions the average. If having syphilis was so much on the minds of Oscar Wilde and James Joyce that it was their *idée fixe* when they wrote the Picture of Dorian Gray and Ulysses, then why was it not on their minds when they wrote other things?

Hayden does something quite clever by interleaving the "known cases" where the sufferer has made admission of their disease with the "suspected" cases. I recognise a good rhetorical trick when I see one, because it enables you to go, 'see how x had the same symptoms as y, and we know x had syphilis, so y **must** have had it too' without quite being so blunt about it.

I've left the Hitler chapter till last for a reason. One, no matter how well researched the rest of it is, you get a distinct feeling that the author was working up to that chapter, it being 54 pages, when the next longest (about Oscar Wilde) is 29 pages. Now there's perfectly good and sound reasons to stop after the Hitler chapter, because the book is mostly chronologically ordered, and after 1945 penicillin became available as a treatment for syphilis, reducing the number of people affected in total and almost entirely preventing tertiary syphilis from developing. Two, I can't actually compete with the criticism that Hayden, to her credit, includes in her book, which says it is unfair, "to put the whole weight of the holocaust on the frail shoulders of that poor woman of the streets if she ever existed." (Pox pp 257, which gives a reference to Ron Rosenbaum 'Explaining Hitler' pp 197) Because it does seem to be a rather simple-minded attempt to explain Hitler's hatred of Jews so that it makes sense, rather than being a product of the times. Because obviously, if there was a reason, it can't happen again, right?! Three, she quite often cites David Irving, without mentioning his lies on some other World War 2 related issues. We're talking about a man who was described by a high court judge as someone who "for his own ideological reasons persistently and deliberately misrepresented and manipulated historical evidence." (Mr. Justice Charles Gray, Irving v Penguin Books Limited, Deborah E. Lipstadt) I'm just going to suggest that, if possible, you find someone else to cite.

So yeah, I may have had issues with that chapter too.

In short, it's a lovingly crafted, well-written book, with excellent sourcing and footnoting, with the exception of David Irving, but I feel it's rather too hasty to make its cases without providing a bedrock in some of the "maybe" cases.

Fraser Sherman says

Meh. This discusses the history of syphilis in the early chapters, but two thirds of the book is biographies of various people who had syphilis or might have had syphilis, and details of their symptoms. That just didn't grab me (quite aside from the question of whether Hayden's right about any of them or not).

Andrew Tollemache says

For starters, this not a book you want to be seen prominently reading at Starbuck's or maybe you do?

Hayden's book sets out to argue that many of the famous genius madmen (and women) of the 19th century were actually suffering from decade(s) long bouts with syphilis. Although a number of people profiled have been alleged pox carriers for years, Hayden argues that by reading through their extensive collections of letters and testimonies of friends any number of figures like Beethoven, Flaubert, van Gogh, Oscar Wilde, Mary and Abraham Lincoln, Nietzsche and Adolph Hitler. A pattern emerges of risky sexual behavior in life, noted early infections and chancres, veiled references to their plague, hidden sin and vexing burden. Their middle years were a never ending procession of unusual ailments like depression, joint pain, intestinal issues and fits of both sleeplessness and too much sleep. Most of them finished out their final years with escalating bouts of madness.

A big take away from the book is how rampant the pox was and how rapidly it spread across Eurasia after it showed up in 1493. For years historians and epidemiologists have debated the origin of the plague, but these days the consensus is that Columbus's men brought it back from the New World. Chris Columbus is an early suspected victim judging by his own biography.

Louise (A Strong Belief in Wicker) says

I haven't read the whole book, but loved the very interesting chapter on Oscar Wilde. Full of rich detail, it's fascinating to ponder if Oscar really did have syphilis. And is The Picture of Dorian Grey a parable for living with the knowledge that you have a dreaded disease? Intriguing. However I do think some of her arguments are a little far fetched. I'd be interested in reading the rest of the book at some stage. I've now read the chapter on Flaubert, which is again very interesting. Flaubert left the world with some wonderfully descriptive letters about his exploits and his syphilis. It seems odd then that Hayden quotes from a work of fiction (Julian Barnes' wonderful Flaubert's Parrot) to shore up some of her arguments.

James Castle says

Bad writing! Confusing and circular, with abrupt changes in tone - the prose in this book is a model of how *not* to write non-fiction.

In terms of the content, much of it is in conspiracy-theory territory: someone wrote that, forty years before, someone heard that someone might have slept with someone who might have had syphilis...and so on.
