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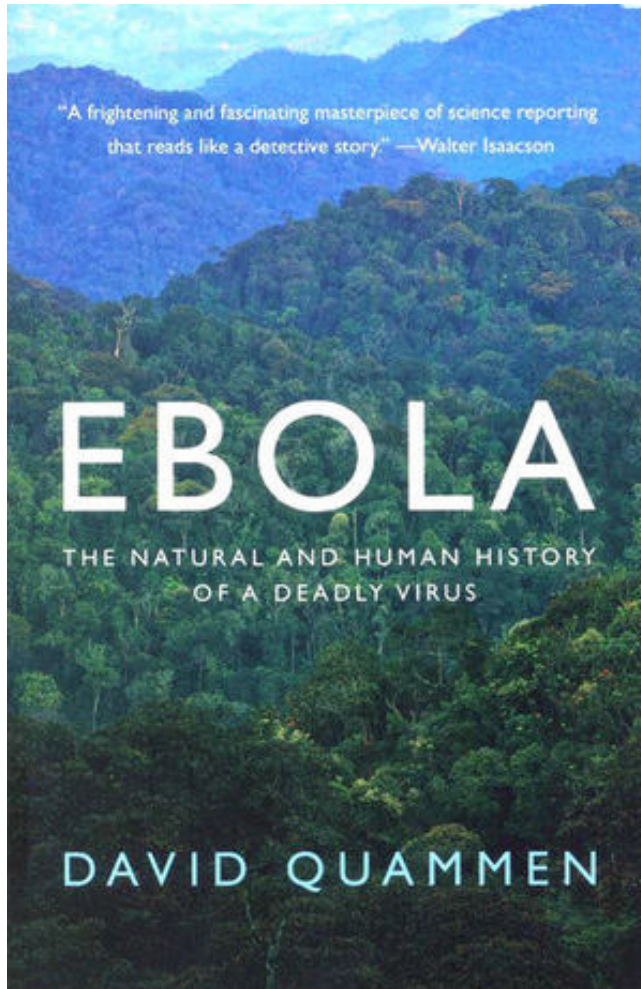
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DAILY NEWS

'Ebola' a dose of knowledge

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"Ebola: The Natural and Human History of a Deadly Virus," by David Quammen. New York: W. W. Norton & Co. 2014, 119 pages, \$13.95.



"Everything comes from somewhere, and strange new infectious diseases, emerging abruptly among humans, come mostly from nonhuman animals," David Quammen explains near the beginning of "Ebola: The Natural and Human History of a Deadly Virus," his most recent foray into the complicated world of forensic science. "Ebola virus disease has been mostly an African affliction (so far), and although it's unique, it is no anomaly.

"It just represents an especially dramatic version of a global phenomenon," he continues. "But an outbreak of Ebola is very different from the dire realities of politics and war: more ineffable, more spooky. It is impersonal. It is apolitical. It seems to kill like the 10th plague of Egypt in Exodus – the one inflicted by an angel of death."

As I have mentioned in previous reviews, when a particular subject piques my interest, I typically make a pilgrimage to our local Barnes & Noble Booksellers, my home away from home. Such was the case with Ebola. The more coverage the disease seemed to command on the cable channels supposedly devoted to "news,"

the more confused I became as to the reality of this emerging epidemic. Fortunately, Quammen's story was just what I needed to provide a realistic perspective on this still-developing narrative.

A feature I found especially appealing about the book was the lengths to which the author goes to provide a surprisingly complete history of how the virus emerged as a threat to humans and why it is so difficult to eradicate. Pathogens such as Ebola tend to be so resilient primarily because they can survive in nonhuman hosts. The main reason smallpox was eventually eradicated is because it can only live, under most circumstances, in the human body. On the other hand, scientists believe Ebola can "hide" in other animals (fruit bats seem to be the most likely culprit at the moment) and re-emerge in humans when conditions are more favorable. This explains the sporadic nature of outbreaks of the disease during the past four decades.

Reading “Ebola” was like reading a detective novel. The story begins in 1976 with the first recorded cases of Ebola deaths: “Two outbreaks occurred in Africa that year, independently but almost simultaneously: one in the north of Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo) and one in southwestern Sudan (in an area that today lies within the Republic of South Sudan.) The focal point of the Zaire outbreak was a small Catholic mission hospital in a village called Yambuku. In mid-September, a Zairian doctor there reported two dozen cases of a dramatic new illness – not the usual malarial fevers but something more grisly, more red, characterized by bloody vomiting, nosebleeds and bloody diarrhea. By the start of October, Yambuku Mission Hospital had closed, for the grim reason that most of its staff members were dead.”

Quammen is a versatile author who has written on a wide range of topics. His work has appeared in National Geographic, Harper’s, Esquire, The Atlantic, Rolling Stone and the New York Times. He has won numerous awards, including three National Magazine Awards and the Academy Award in Literature from the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. His portfolio includes both fiction and nonfiction; his most recent best-seller, “Spillover: Animal Infections and the Next Human Pandemic,” which explores how viruses can cross over from animals to humans, won the Science and Society Book Prize from the National Association of Science Writers in the United States and was a finalist for the Andrew Carnegie Medal for Excellence in Nonfiction.

To his credit, the author does an outstanding job of describing the essential nature of the disease. It does not take long to come to the conclusion that Ebola will be exceptionally difficult to contain on a permanent basis; our only real hope lies in the development of an effective and readily available vaccine, and the sooner the better.

“Ebola is difficult to study because of the character of the virus,” Quammen writes. “It strikes rarely, it progresses quickly through the course of the infection, it kills or it doesn’t kill within just a few days, it affects only dozens or hundreds of people in each outbreak, and those people generally live in remote areas, far from research hospitals and medical institutes. The outbreak exhausts itself locally, coming to a dead end, or is successfully staunched by intervention.”

Well, at least until recently.

Ebola consists of 21 relatively brief chapters sandwiched between an introduction and epilogue and includes a six-page selected bibliography. It is important to note that much of what has been condensed into the present effort first appeared in “Spillover,” although the sequel does contain a considerable amount of updated material not included in the parent volume. One of the author’s primary motivations was obviously to cash in on the widespread interest in the disease since the first cases were reported in the United States a few months ago.

“The West African epidemic of 2014 must be contained, and ended, and to do that will require radically more international commitment than has been offered so far,” Quammen cautions near the end of the book. “But when that epidemic has been stopped, Ebola virus will not be gone. It will only be hiding again. It will recede into its reservoir host, somewhere amid the forest, and await its next opportunity.”

So, if you want to know the truth that lies behind the headlines, I highly recommend picking up a copy of “Ebola.” When it comes to deadly diseases, knowledge really is power.

— Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.