
I found Belgium and both the professional and the personal meaning of my search."

Ironically, Fox's quest for the essence of Belgian identity took place during years when profound internal changes threatened to dissolve the social and cultural glue that has held this "artificial state" intact. Belgium's internationalized postwar economy, the fading memory of its wartime experience, and the loss of its colonies are all working to erode a once-strong sense of national solidarity. In sensible, bourgeois Belgium, one now enters an Alice in Wonderland world where everything happens in double. Each town has separate shops for Flemish and Walloon customers; a street postbox has two slots, one for letters in French, the other for those in Flemish; and activists in Flanders are even pushing for a separate system of social security. The beloved country Fox examined threatened to disintegrate under her very microscope. History kindly intervened, however, to provide her study with a happy ending. The unexpected death of King Baudoin on July 31, 1993, provoked an outpouring of mourning that transcended particularistic loyalties, suggesting that all Belgians were a national family once again. The question, though, remains: *Après Baudoin, le déluge?*

Science & Technology

THE HOT ZONE. By Richard Preston.
Random House. 300 pp. \$23

THE COMING PLAGUE: Newly Emerging Diseases in a World Out of Balance. By Laurie Garrett. Farrar, Straus. 750 pp. \$25

In 1993, Stephen King spooked American television audiences with *The Stand*—an eerie, seemingly implausible story about a deadly virus that quickly annihilates most of the human species. A year later, King described the nonfictional *Hot Zone* as "one of the most horrifying things I've ever read." The central drama in *The Hot Zone* occurs in a "monkey house" in Reston, Virginia (19 miles from Washington, D.C.), where animals imported for scientific experimentation are routinely quarantined. In 1989, before scientists at the "monkey house" realized that the extremely lethal Ebola virus was killing



hundreds of monkeys, some humans became infected. Fortunately, life is not (or not always) a Stephen King movie, and this strain proved to be the single variety of Ebola that does not harm humans. *The Hot Zone*, written by *New Yorker* contributor Preston, has topped the best-seller lists and inspired the movie, *Outbreak*. Yet even critics who dismiss it as simply a nonfiction thriller acknowledge that it has drawn widespread attention to the "newly emerging" viruses and bacteria that are changing our very understanding of the modern world.

Plagues and pandemics were, quite simply, not supposed to happen in the hygienic late 20th century. During the early 1960s, scientists proclaimed that they had all but won the war against infectious diseases. Research biologists tended to focus on what was happening under their microscopes and ignored what was changing in their own human world. In *The Coming Plague*, medical journalist Garrett connects Ebola and other diseases such as AIDS, Lassa fever, and the "flesh-eating" streptococcus bacteria that killed Muppet creator Jim Henson to the larger political, social, and ecological landscape

that promotes their spread. Late-20th-century humankind, she argues, lives in a habitat unlike that of any of our ancestors. Air travel allows viruses from Africa (such as HIV) to "jump" to other continents in a matter of hours. In Third World cities, malnutrition combines with wretched sanitation to turn urban citizens into human petri dishes. And the destruction of ecosystems affects not only tropical rain forests but even Connecticut, where deforestation, by driving tick-bearing feral animals into the suburbs, has greatly increased the incidence of Lyme disease.

At midcentury, during the heyday of medical infallibility, one lone dissenter wrote, "Everybody knows that pestilences have a way of recurring in the world." The dissenting voice was Albert Camus's, in his novel *The Plague* (1948). Almost 50 years later, many people now wonder how close the world is to the "coming plague"—say, an airborne version of HIV. No one, including Garrett, can say, but she presents a frightening scenario of world health professionals ill prepared to identify and control diseases that nimbly spread, evolve, and become resistant to drugs. Garrett reminds her readers how the early reluctance of governments to grapple quickly with AIDS contributed to its rapid spread. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control has recently created a model "emerging infections program"; still, Garrett wonders whether what any one country does can enable it to "stave off or survive the next plague." During the 1960s, people such as Marshall McLuhan predicted that the world would soon be one big village. For viruses, at least, the prediction has come true.

AN ANTHROPOLOGIST ON MARS:

Seven Paradoxical Tales. By *Oliver Sacks*. Knopf. 315 pp. \$24

Ask not what disease the person has, but rather what person the disease has. By following this maxim (learned from his parents), neurologist Sacks has brought a degree of humanity to patients otherwise regarded as freaks and dismissed by his colleagues as hopeless. In *Awak-*

enings (1983) and *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* (1985), Sacks, not content with describing neurological illnesses, vividly evokes the personal experience of living within their effects. Sacks has described himself as a neuro-anthropologist but actually more resembles a physician making house calls at the far border of human experience.

Sacks calls his case studies or tales "paradoxical" because the patients he describes have succeeded not in spite but almost because of extraordinary dysfunctions. He describes an artist who, having lost his color vision in a car accident, now paints striking works in black and white through a heightened sense of their contrast. A surgeon with Tourette's syndrome—characterized by oddly pitched vocal outbursts and arms flinging abruptly—manages, while operating, to control all manifestations of the disease. An autistic zoologist finds that autism permits her insight into animal behavior, but around human actions she is perplexed enough to feel like "an anthropologist on Mars." Despite the neurological malfunctions that caused their conditions, Sacks writes, these people have adapted into "alternate states of being, other forms of life, no less human for being different."

The "anthropologist on Mars," though, more aptly applies to Sacks himself. Ever since Arthur Rimbaud attempted to "systematically disorder the senses," literature has endeavored to resee the common world in new and strange ways. To this end, Franz Kafka often wrote in the guise of an animal—a mouse or gorilla or dog; Francis Ponge (and numerous other writers) invented fictitious countries where familiar practices and psychology were turned inside-out. Sacks outdoes such fictional contrivances, however, when he recreates the inner world of an idiot savant who sees ordinary objects as numbers or that of an alcoholic, suffering from a complete inability to remember, who lives in a hellish, endless present. In Oliver Sacks, science seems to have fulfilled literature's old dream—to show that life is not only stranger than we imagine but even stranger than we *can* imagine.