

## Harriet Washington's Comments on **DREAD**

Pressed for time and haunted by deadlines, I confess that I meant to give *Dread: How Fear and Fantasy Have Fueled Epidemics from the Black Death to Avian Flu* a quick evaluative skim and put off reading and commenting on it until later. But I was quickly enchanted, and the next thing I knew, I was disappointed to have reached its end. I was disappointed because I had learned a great deal and wanted more, but I am also grateful because from Hippocrates' empiricism to the *Illiad's* "burning wind/of plague" to "Death in Venice" to *Angels in America, 28 Days Later* and beyond, this incisive excavation of the subterranean meaning of epidemic illness is intoxicatingly brilliant, poetic, and simply gripping.

Yet it is more than an academic and literary feast: *Dread* is an insightful education in how art and science inform each other in a cultural synergy that even today— one might argue especially today—keeps us from discerning what is medicine and what is myth. We modern Westerners like to think that we, unlike many in the developing world, have drawn the primitive xenophobia out of our medical analysis, but it is not all the way out: Philip Alcabes reminds us that we still promulgate narratives that ascribe epidemic illness to exotic others, to the "improvident habits" of the poor, and to conspiracies of the godless.

With facts, visionary arguments and literary seduction, Alcabes powerfully persuades that our understanding of the mass infectious disease springs largely from our psyches rather than our labs. But he does much more, tracing our slow and frequently backsliding evolution from gods, through mystic humours to climate, physical aberrations, xenophobia and pathogens as the roots of our epidemics— and our fears, which he shows to be invested with the inexorable lyricism of myth. The word "genius" has been debased by frequent use, but this is a work of undeniable genius in the most exalted sense. What Stephen Jay Gould did for natural history, Philip Alcabes has done for public health.

--Harriet A. Washington, January 2009