



Two-minute review

The Mosquito: A Human History of Our Deadliest Predator

Author: Timothy C. Winegard

Why you should read the book

Planning an exotic holiday? Maybe you will take mosquito-transmitted disease a bit more serious after reading this book.

In times of COVID-19, it is a good reminder that there are many other diseases in the world. And it is an even better reminder of just how deadly those illnesses can be.

Why you should not read the book

Treating mosquitos like an army commander (General Anopheles) is the sign of either storytelling gone rogue or malaria-induced lunacy.

Diseases have a huge impact on human history. But you do not need to be reminded of that fact after your recent COVID-19 lockdown.

Treating malaria as a military risk obscures its medical and social impact, which you deem more relevant.

What you should learn from the book

The main lesson of this book is not found in its content, but rather in how it conveys its message. Winegard's book relies heavily on military metaphors, almost becoming a regular military history. Sometimes such a narrative strategy creates a sense of urgency around medical issues (remember our "war" with COVID-19), but Winegard illustrates how quickly such metaphors become problematic. Mosquitos do not wage "offensive campaigns", nor do they commit "crimes against humanity". Europe was not "under siege from both mosquitos and Muslims". And humans do not have a global "defense budget" against insects, nor do we actively plan "counterattacks". Pretending that mosquitos have such agency just debases the pain and destruction caused by real human-on-human violence. Rather, Winegard should have reminded the reader that malaria and other diseases are a force of nature, while war is human choice.

Additionally, Winegard gives the mosquito way too much credit. These insects are not, as he states, "the ultimate agent[s] of historical change". Throughout the book he argues that mosquitos were by and large responsible for killing the dinosaurs; the 25 billion annual revenue of Starbucks; the cover of Hobbes' Leviathan; the economic woes of the global south; Apartheid; the demise of Classical Greece; the end of Classical Rome; the invention of gin-tonic; the union of England and Scotland; and, notably, the end of slavery in the US. Given such overstated cases, the book is actually a great reminder that no single cause is responsible for the entire trajectory of human history – it is never a good sign if an author assigns his topic of choice almost god-like qualities.

Does that mean that the book should be avoided? Not necessarily. The chapters on classical and medieval history are tedious and fail to detail the important role played by mosquito-transmitted diseases – the death of Alexander the Great exempted. But once Winegard is on more familiar ground, in particular when he writes about the colonial and military history of the United States, the book becomes quite interesting. His argument that mosquitoes “have been prolific battlefield burdens and killers” is here much more convincing and later chapters are backed by interesting general and personal stories. It is too easy to call this book visionary – any book about killer diseases becomes relevant in light of COVID-19 – but Winegard does stress a few points that were important during the recent corona-pandemic. Think of how medicine supplies were treated as highly valuable strategic goods; how new diseases interact with threats or fears of biological warfare; and how difficult it is to develop an effective treatment.

So despite the book’s many flaws, it serves as an excellent reminder that neither mosquitoes nor humans are all-powerful beings.

The best bit

The sections that discuss “the seasoning” – the necessary period of adaptation to malaria, yellow fever and other new world-diseases. In the middle part of the book, Winegard talks about the absolutely devastating mortality rates that accompanied this period, both among slaves and non-slaves. Mosquito-transmitted diseases killed swathes of people and affected countless colonial plans. The lure of the America’s becomes much more difficult to understand once you have seen Winegard’s figures; the dread of being transported there against your will, however, does become vividly imaginable.

The most remarkable quotes

"Ravenous mosquito swarms literally bleed young caribou to death at a bite rate of 9.000 per minute, or by way of comparison, they can drain half the blood from an adult human being in just under two hours." (*Add a bit of hypothetical horror and the mosquito becomes an even more formidable killer*)

"Walt Disney’s 1943 malaria prevention film, *The Winged Scourge*, with cameos by Snow White’s Seven Dwarfs, was a howling hit among troops." (*Creativity knows no bounds in times of crisis*)

"Yet, within the whirling, dizzying technologically twittering world around us, the humble mosquito reminds us that in many ways, we are not all that different from Lucy and our hominid ancestors."

The Mosquito: A Human History of Our Deadliest Predator by Timothy C. Winegard, The Text Publishing Company, 2019. Review by Dr. Bram De Ridder, KU Leuven.