



# **Beating Back the Devil: On the Front Lines with the Disease Detectives of the Epidemic Intelligence Service**

*Maryn McKenna*

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IN THE WAR AGAINST DISEASES, THEY ARE THE SPECIAL FORCES. They always keep a bag packed. They seldom have more than twenty-four hours' notice before they are dispatched. The phone calls that tell them to head to the airport, sometimes in the middle of the night, may give them no more information than the country they are traveling to and the epidemic they will tackle when they get there.

The universal human instinct is to run from an outbreak of disease. These doctors run toward it.

They are the disease detective corps of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the federal agency that tracks and tries to prevent disease outbreaks and bioterrorist attacks around the world. They are formally called the Epidemic Intelligence Service (EIS) -- a group founded more than fifty years ago out of fear that the Korean War might bring the use of biological weapons -- and, like intelligence operatives in the traditional sense, they perform their work largely in anonymity. They are not household names, but over the years they were first to confront the outbreaks that became known as hantavirus, Ebola virus, and AIDS. Now they hunt down the deadly threats that dominate our headlines: West Nile virus, anthrax, and SARS.

In this riveting narrative, Maryn McKenna -- the only journalist ever given full access to the EIS in its fifty-three-year history -- follows the first class of disease detectives to come to the CDC after September 11, the first to confront not just naturally occurring outbreaks but the man-made threat of bioterrorism. They are talented researchers -- many with young families -- who trade two years of low pay and extremely long hours for the chance to be part of the group that has helped eradicate smallpox, push back polio, and solve the first major outbreaks of Legionnaires' disease, toxic shock syndrome, and "E. coli" O157.

Urgent, exhilarating, and compelling, "Beating Back the Devil" goes with the EIS as they try to stop epidemics -- before the epidemics stop us.

## **Beating Back the Devil: On the Front Lines with the Disease Detectives of the Epidemic Intelligence Service Details**

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Detectives of the Epidemic Intelligence Service Maryn McKenna**

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# From Reader Review Beating Back the Devil: On the Front Lines with the Disease Detectives of the Epidemic Intelligence Service for online ebook

## Paula says

I'm a little shocked that McKenna can take such fascinating subject matter and turn it into a book that's Sahara dry. If you are interested in the subject matter, a brief selective history of the CDC, like me, its 4 star subject matter, but its 2 star writing. I'd recommend reading the book if you're also fascinated, but be warned it reads like an EIS 101 text book... here are the salient facts you should memorize for the test...

My biggest pet peeve is there's too much detail about people that show up for two pages, then are never heard from again (so and so was married last week, so and so just had a baby, etc) and very little about people that are instrumental in the book.. Here's their CV and one personal nugget, the end. I feel like I just came to work in the mail room and am getting the office tour from a half-hearted HR lackey that can't be bothered with the new intern and isn't all that concerned about whether or not its obvious to me they'd rather be doing ANYTHING else besides showing me around. Its just badly done, all around.

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## Michael says

This is the sort of work I would be doing if I were ten times as ambitious, but just as cool.

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## ?Kimari? says

This is a well researched look inside the EIS. I am in disagreement over the *first* fatal bioterrorism attack on American soil. McKenna writes:

It is ten months since two hijacked planes brought down New York City's World Trade Center, and nine months since a set of mailed envelopes, loaded with finely milled anthrax, accomplished the first fatal bioterrorist attack in American history on American soil.

There were earlier fatal bioterrorism attacks in America. Smallpox was used as a bioweapon by British forces to subdue Native Americans during the French & Indian War (1754 - 1763). See Jeffrey Amherst and Smallpox Blankets and this New Scientist article, British used bioweapon in US war of independence.

According to Jonathan Tucker, former biodefence expert, the British also used smallpox against American troops during the American Revolutionary War (1775–1783). See Pox Americana: The Great Smallpox Epidemic of 1775-82 and the New Scientist article linked above.

If you liked this book, you might also enjoy:

★ Virus Hunter: Thirty Years of Battling Hot Viruses - written by a virologist in the field

- ★ Level 4: Virus Hunters of the CDC - written by Epidemiologists in the field
  - ★ The Coming Plague: Newly Emerging Diseases - written by a journalist with a BS in Immunology, Garrett is currently the Senior Fellow for Global Health
  - ★ Panic in Level 4 - written by Preston, a journalist, facts are sometimes exaggerated
  - ★ The Demon in the Freezer - written by Preston, a journalist, facts are sometimes exaggerated
- 

### **Sallyavena says**

I picked this book because my husband was an EIS officer for the last 2 years. He loved his time as one and I wanted to read more about other's experience. The author probably picked the 2 busiest years the CDC has had in a long time. They dealt with 9/11, Anthrax and SARS on top of all of the normal stuff. It seems like those couple of years were pivotal when it came to the world and not only the USA getting it's act together to enable them to handle global public health threats. My husbands 2 years weren't nearly as exciting, although he did get to work on some interesting stuff and go to some very interesting places, it would have been crazier had the world not had it's act together. I think that is one thing that this book brings to light. It was an interesting read for me and is well written, but I don't know how interesting it would be for someone that didn't have a connection to EIS or had an interest in infectious disease.

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### **Brooke Evans says**

OK, now I'm not quite sure how any of us ever live past 35. This book was fascinating, terrifying, informative, etc. Pretty amazing to hear about the experiences of CDC officers and the projects they work on and how. It was a little bit difficult to keep track of all the different people mentioned and followed in the book, but I kind of just didn't worry about exactly who everyone was and tried to focus on the rest of what was going on.

Also, it was kinda mindblowing how many of these epidemics I remember, but not very strongly - many of the big outbreaks discussed in this book happened between my late teens and when I finished college. Obviously, I remember the anthrax thing with the postal system - anyone who lived through 9/11 likely remembers that one. I remember when everyone was talking about the bird flu. I remember hearing about West Nile and MRSA and SARS, and I remember knowing they were serious and knowing there were travel or blood donation restrictions and that kind of thing, but I never knew 90% of what this book describes about each one. The one I felt I knew the most about was listeria, which I really didn't know much beyond pregnancy restrictions associated with listeria - I knew it was foodborne and I knew which foods it travels in because they're the pregnancy restrictions, so the listeria chapter was kind of a "pregnancy restrictions extended version." I guess if the book had been written later, it would probably have had a chapter on zika, too. I felt awfully grateful that smallpox is gone, after hearing the descriptions of that. Yikes.

Anyway, I enjoyed this one and felt a lot more educated by the end.

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## **Maria says**

Diseases are fun! This book probably gave me the idea to want to become an epidemiologist. I read it during the summer while waiting for my dance class... It's always fun going from epidemics to ballet. Non-fiction books have a bad reputation of being boring. This book wasn't. It was almost like an anthology of different mysteries. True mysteries... with diseases!

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## **Jenny Brown says**

A very informative account of the work of the EIS division of the CDC. It describes several major health crises where the CDC stepped in and goes into illuminating detail about what its investigators do.

Most of these were epidemics that appeared in the press but you'll learn a lot more about them here.

The author also documents the way that the US Public Health Service was militarized by a Bush appointee in a way that makes no sense at all. The scientists were forced to wear uniforms at all times and were rejected from serving if they couldn't meet military physical fitness standards.

I don't know about you, but if an epidemic hit my region I'd want the smartest, not the fittest epidemiologists working on it. And ones who were independent thinkers, NOT people who feel more comfortable blending in with a crowd and following orders.

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## **John Wiswell says**

The true stories themselves are fascinating, following people connected to the Epidemic Intelligence Service, an organization founded some sixty years ago to combat biological warfare and disease epidemics. That means that for decades they have been deployed to deal with small pox, SARS, and a mysterious immune disorder striking gay men that became the nightmare of HIV/AIDS. They were in charge during the post-9/11 anthrax scare, and were deployed on desperate missions to fight primitive diseases in third world countries. Every anecdote-driven chapter is worth reading for its information, though McKenna does the book few favors with a dry, highly procedural writing style that turns life-threatening situations dull. In particular her style of providing unhelpful miniature biographies of many people who rapidly become faceless casts in epidemics slows things down, and she has a habit of throwing a paragraph of false information at you only to dispel it in the next that seriously grates. The writing itself is well worth overcoming, though, to learn about an amazing service most readers will never have heard of before.

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## **Wealththeow says**

This is a book about the Epidemic Intelligence Service, the "disease detective corps" of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. For three weeks, Ph.D.s, nurses, doctors, veterinarians, dentists, and even lawyers are trained in epidemiology and public health. They are put through a rigorous class schedule, frightening simulations, and even yanked out of classes to deal with disease outbreaks. Once they are fully trained, they spend two years working where-ever they are needed. Their work is multi-pronged: they go

door-to-door, interviewing every contact of an infected person; they use molecular biology to pin down which cases of a disease are involved in an outbreak; they reassure the public. Sometimes they are assigned to work in a state, coordinating and investigating. But with only days or even hours notice, members of the EIS fly into war-torn countries to work with refugees, into politically charged anthrax investigations, to Listeria outbreaks afflicting a trailer park. They must be prepared for any situation.

This is a very exciting book! McKenna splits the chapters between the culture and training of the EIS (they have to wear full military uniform every Wednesday, for instance), and their investigation of disease outbreaks. Both are fascinating, but hampered because McKenna insists on writing a full paragraph about the family and professional life of every person mentioned, no matter how tangential. A better book would have focused on a few people, or cut out the sentences about their build and how many children they have.

I highly recommend this book to anyone interested in public health.

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### **Aparna says**

Good summary of previous outbreak investigations conducted by EIS officers. I learned a lot. However, it was written in quite a sensational nature. I don't think that public health work is ever quite as flashy!

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### **Presley Dunkel says**

I will admit, at the start of this book it had trouble grabbing my attention but that quickly changed. Once I got to "polio" I couldn't stop reading. From the training methods the CDC put their EIS members through to the everlasting threat of Terrorism, this book is a great read. Especially if you are trying to learn more about different strains of diseases (which was my reasoning for reading this book), or if you want a book that gives you a different perspective on civilizations around the world and how they deal with diseases. Overall I give "Beating Back the Devil: On The Front Lines with the Diseases Detectives of the Epidemic Intelligence Service" by Maryn McKenna a 4/5 stars. My reasoning for the 4 is because it was indeed a great book but the fact that it wasn't always able to drag my attention right off the bat just kept it away from that fifth star.

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### **Jodie says**

Eye-opening and informative.

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### **Kathy Chumley says**

This is a fascinating look at the work done by the CDC's disease detectives.

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### **Hunter says**

Absolutely incredible book.

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## **Petra Eggs says**

For two days I have done very little except read this book. I thought it was going to be dry, but interesting talking objectively of the work of the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and various other government organisations dealing with mass outbreaks of disease and germ warfare. But I was wrong! It was anything but dry. A fabulous read. Travel, adventure, humour, mystery, plot twists, interesting characters, it really had it all.

The best of the mystery stories was when four babies died of listeria, a gut disease that can take up to four weeks to show. The CDC had to track down how the babies caught it which involved finding the victims of the present infection typing this particular listeria so it could be differentiated from other outbreaks.

The next step was interviewing a massive number of people, both those who had it and a control group.. Then their fridges had to be gone through, stores and delis where they bought items that could be infected had to be inspected, the managers and buyers interviewed and this was in several different states.

Once the source had been narrowed down to pre-cooked, sliced turkey, the source had to be identified through interviews with the vendors and thence to the turkey meat manufacturers. They reacted really well recalling all possibly infected turkey at a great financial loss to themselves. It made me wonder if there isn't insurance for this kind of event.

Eventually, the source of infection was closed down and there were no more cases. The plot twist? The four babies who had died and started the investigation had not had this particular listeria at all!

The book ranged from 9/11 through anthrax, SARS, polio, tuberculosis, pneumonia, AIDS and more not just in the US, but Africa, South America and Asia. An interesting fact I learned was that although it is known that smallpox has been kept alive in both legal labs and in those who might wreak germ warfare on the world, only people who might have contact with it are vaccinated. This is because although there were very few major reactions to the vaccine - a sore arm and slight fever being common and only lasting a few days (I had them) - about 7 or 8 children per million vaccinations would die from complications. Now there was so little need for the vaccine, it's use was abandoned.

The book is a fantastic, fast-paced read. There is sparing use of adjectives and descriptions but there is the occasional lyrical sentence which points up the excellent writing that has no need of padding. Recommended to all who enjoy non-fiction and like engrossing books that require them to stop what they are doing and read!

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