

The Woman with a Worm in Her Head: And Other True Stories of Infectious Disease

Pamela Nagami , F. González-Crussi (Foreword by)

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A normal, healthy woman becomes host to a pork tapeworm that is burrowing into her brain and disabling her motor abilities.

A handsome man contracts Chicken Pox and ends up looking like the victim of a third degree burn.

A vigorous young athlete is bitten by an insect and becomes a target for flesh-eating strep.

Even the most innocuous everyday activities such as eating a salad for lunch, getting bitten by an insect, and swimming in the sea bring human beings into contact with dangerous, often deadly microorganisms. In *The Woman with a Worm in Her Head*, Dr. Pamela Nagami reveals-through real-life cases-the sobering facts about some of the world's most horrific diseases: the warning signs, the consequences, treatments, and most compellingly, what it feels like to make medical and ethical decisions that can mean the difference between life and death.

Unfailingly precise, calmly instructive, and absolutely engrossing, *The Woman with the Worm in Her Head* offers both useful information and enjoyable reading.

The Woman with a Worm in Her Head: And Other True Stories of Infectious Disease Details


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From Reader Review **The Woman with a Worm in Her Head: And Other True Stories of Infectious Disease** for online ebook

Big H says

Interesting medical cases are presented in layman's terms in this book and are written in such a way as to make every case really "hit home." Each chapter is written to tell the medical details of each case, as well as how each case affected the author personally (i.e. how the case affected her time at home with her children). The author also provides symptoms of and helpful hints about how to avoid getting certain diseases/parasites.

Karen says

I went through this book very fast (didn't get around to writing the review though). It was fascinating. Nagami is an infectious disease doctor in Los Angeles and in this book, she writes about some of her cases. She writes well, drawing her readers into these patient's lives, and how the doctors desperately try to find treatment to save them. These are all cases of diseases that people mostly got here in the United States. Sometimes we think we are protected from infectious diseases in this country, and many of the ones in this book sound foreign to us, but they can happen given the right circumstances...and they can lead to death. Some of these infections happened after really dumb things like someone eating raw food in a foreign country on a dare, others get bacteria from a sore throat or a dental problem that lead to heart valve problems which can be deadly, another person managed in this day and age to get a tapeworm in her brain from uncooked pork (which is surprising considering all the antibiotics they pump into the animals now). Each of these stories are told with a lot of concern for the patients, whether they lived or died...which really made an impression on me of the kind of doctor that Nagami is. She said she learned to dampen her emotional involvement in patients to an extent, but she still cares about them and puts a lot of time and effort into them (more than most doctors do).

ONE of the best books of this type I've read in a long time...wish there had been more stories!

Cj says

First off, a disclaimer.

Do NOT read this book if you're a hypochondriac, otherwise you'll think you're developing all of the symptoms you're reading about.

I liked the different case studies the author wrote about, however, I was a bit put off by the flashbacks, as they ended up being kind of boring, and I swear in one chapter that there was a flashback inside a flashback where I felt like I was watching the movie "Inception"

Some of the jargon is on a technical level, but is more or less explained to the average reader.

All in all, I enjoyed the book, but could've done without the 'fluff/filler' material.

Brittany says

Definitely not for the faint of heart (or stomach) but a really good read if you're interested in infectious disease. I'm sure some of the treatments are no longer our first response/best practice since this was published almost two decades ago but I would definitely recommend if you've got an interest in the topic - Nagami's tone is sensitive and empathetic, and her care for her patients really shines through.

Eve says

“It started four days ago, on Monday. I felt a little tired...”

Andy, the person quoted above, didn't realize that on his business trip to Cote d'Ivoire the week before, he'd caught a pretty nasty virus—one that would cause him to narrowly escape death. Fortunately, he'd walked into the right hospital, and into the care of Dr. Pamela Nagami, a medical “Columbo” of her field—infectious diseases.

“Often I work like a detective, sifting through the evidence other doctors give me: the patients’ symptoms, their lab tests, where they went on vacation.” Through a series of medical short stories, Nagami relates some of her most perplexing cases, including the process of identifying and treating the diseases. She's very personable! Not only does she explain the incubation and attack mode cycles of parasites and viruses in layman's terms, but she also reminds the reader that doctors have lives and families away from the hospital, and it's the delicate balance of all these that made me appreciate how much doctors sacrifice for the greater good.

Nagami also included historical information about certain diseases and viruses, which was extremely helpful. These ranged from Valley Fever and The Flesh Eating Bacteria all the way to AIDS and Ebola. My absolute favorite story was “Tracking a Worm”. It made my skin crawl, but I loved it! ***“To track a worm, you have to find the place where the life cycle of the worm becomes part of the life cycle of the human host.”*** That we did! I felt like I was right there with her, ordering blood tests and poring over parasite reference books. I'm not exactly sure what this sub genre of books is called, but I feel like the marriage of suspense, mystery, science (and even horror), can be a pretty addictive combination. I can't wait to get started on her next book—*Bitten: True Medical Stories of Bites and Stings*.

Hillary says

I've mentioned before that I'm a huge fan of the medical case report genre. I do not believe it is solely my fandom that resulted in my rave review, however. This author truly has a way with words. I was honestly tearing up at several points as I read about her terribly sick patients and the feelings stirred up as she cared

for them. The scientist in me was gleeful at the vivid descriptions and plentiful background information on the various pathogens. I highly recommend this one!

Jennifer says

Ooooooh the book is scary, if you want to make an explanation for the tv series the living dead or any apocalypse origin story I am sure you can get ideas from this book. I enjoyed Nagami's writing and her stories were educational and entertaining.

Baal Of says

I have a deep fascination with medicine, disease, parasites, and pretty much any related subject. In an alternate version of the world, I might have been a doctor of some sort, if I hadn't been diverted into computers in high school. This kind of book gives me a vicarious look into what that alternate life might have been like, and what a powerful glimpse. Nagami gives personal, detailed narratives around various cases, and I love every one of them. Even when she detoured into her personal life that didn't have anything directly to do with a case, it served to remind that the people working on these diseases are human, just like every one else. The descriptions of the cases are not softened in any way, so anyone sensitive to descriptions of pus, blood, necrotic flesh, etc. would be advised to stay away; I can't, apparently, get enough.

Taylor says

A collection of an Infectious Disease Specialist's stories and encounters over the past twenty years of her work in the field. Her descriptions of the illnesses and the progression thereof are brilliant and clinical. Sometimes, she gets a little overbearing in trying to afford something spiritual to the medical cases (i.e. A scene in her residency involving a fetus's hand and seeing 'the work of God', not exactly my bag.) I will never eat salad in a foreign country. Gah.

Barbara says

"The Woman with a Worm in her Head" is a clearly and elegantly written account of Dr Nagami's career as an infectious diseases specialist. Her stories of treatments and outcomes are as gripping and full of incident as good detective fiction (though infused with more humanity). But my general ignorance and too fleeting retention of the medical and scientific details had me taking a break half way through. When I took up the book from the beginning again, I was determined to keep alert and to Google frequently (including for recent developments). A couple of times I had a suprise encounter with one of Dr Namagi's disease adversaries in a news report or in my other reading.

In this way I found myself appreciating "The Woman with a Worm in her Head" in the way which, in the final paragraph, Dr Namagi says she had intended: "Through my story you've had an opportunity to observe from a safe distance some of the things I see and they way I see them. Hopefully, now if you haven't had chickenpox, you will get the vaccine, and if you live in cocci hot spots, you'll think twice before hiking in the

hills on a windy day. The maneaters are out there, but you don't have to let them in."

Karyl says

Please do not read this book if you are a hypochondriac in any way. If you don't, you'll believe you are dying from some crazy microbe or virus or worm every time you get sick.

I agree with other reviewers that this book is more of a memoir than a straight accounting of various potentially fatal diseases. But I felt that it added to the story, to see how doctors really are human too, though we expect so much from them. It also points out how falsely confident Americans tend to be regarding disease. Just because we live in a first world nation doesn't mean we can't contract some strange disease that could kill us in mere hours.

Not all of Dr Nagami's patients survive their illnesses. I found it interesting that she included these cases, which made her more human and accessible, versus being a superhero of healing. The chapter on AIDS was heart-breaking, to think about how many people we lost before we had any idea what it was we were dealing with.

I thoroughly enjoyed this book, as scary as as gross as it could be at times. Just make sure you have a strong stomach before you read this, and definitely don't decide to enjoy a snack at the same time.

Sonja Arlow says

When I finished reading this was left with the reminder that although I may not have a perfect body it is perfectly healthy. A blessing so easily overlooked until things go wrong.

This collection of infectious disease cases was a nice book to dip in and out of.

I liked this but didn't LOVE it. I think it's very difficult to strike the perfect balance between writing about medicine within the framework of an author's personal life. This one felt slightly off balance to me. Sometimes sharing too much personal trivia or at other times getting carried away with the desire to document every single action in a complicated medical case.

So though this was not a bad read I would rather recommend *Working Stiff: Two Years, 262 Bodies, and the Making of a Medical Examiner* or *The Real Doctor Will See You Shortly: A Physician's First Year* for readers interested in medical memoirs

Jennifer says

This was a great book to fully understand what an infectious disease doctor goes through at work from day to day. The book was helpful in sharing the symptoms of common bacterial and viral infections and the havoc

that these sometimes benign organisms (viruses are not technically organisms but work as one by using the host's DNA/RNA replication machinery) can wreak on the human body. I was unaware of the danger of not having had chicken pox as a child...that story was painful and scary. The job of an ID doctor reminds me of a detective and the author compares it the same way; you take into consideration the symptoms, life history of the person, and vitals and then decide which "critters" could be causing the problem.

Emily says

If you're at all inclined towards hypochondria or are squeamish about the thought of parasitic worms moving through a body, this is not the book for you. If you're not, it's a nice, lightweight overview of an infectious disease specialist's work.

I wish there had been more depth to the book -- I'd have liked to see more in detail about how the diseases affect the body biologically, and I wish she'd spent more time talking about the process used to diagnose the diseases and how similarly presenting diseases are ruled out.

I found the non-medical bits excessive. I'd have much rather had another patient case study than reading about how Nagami was preoccupied with a case so she forgot to kiss her daughter goodbye after dropping her off at daycare, so she turned right around and found her daughter frantically looking for her, but then they had a kiss and a cuddle and everything was alright. Seriously. That happens. Why does that matter?!? I was also a bit uncomfortable with the sections where she was talking about her own issues dealing with being a doctor -- it felt like things she needed to be saying to a therapist, not to me.

On the plus side, she had some interesting family stories, such as her great(?) grandmother who died shortly after giving birth because they didn't have the resources to treat her infection -- it was an interesting comparison of the treatment of the same disease across time.

All in all, not a good choice if you're into the science/biology side of things, but good if you want to know what an infectious disease specialist does, and how Nagami feels about her work and her children.

liz says

As a physician assistant with extensive experience treating patients with infectious diseases, I was excited to read this book. Unfortunately, Dr. N incorrectly called my profession "physician's assistant" and then went on to use extremely derogatory language to describe a patient with a history of substance abuse, I had to stop reading. This may be an amazing book with many jaw dropping stories of rarely seen diseases and Dr. Nagami may be a very skilled physician but I quickly realized her way of approaching patients and mine are very different.
