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# The Viral Storm: The Dawn Of A New Pandemic Age



## Synopsis

In The Viral Storm award-winning biologist Nathan Wolfe - known as 'the Indiana Jones of virus hunters' for his work in jungles and rain forests across the world - shows the threat of a global pandemic is greater than we have ever imagined. The Viral Storm examines how viruses like HIV, swine flu, and bird flu have almost wiped us out in the past - and may do so in the future. It explores why modern life makes us so vulnerable to global pandemics, and what new technologies can do to prevent them. Wolfe's provocative vision may leave you feeling distinctly uncomfortable - but it will reveal exactly what it is we are up against. Nathan Wolfe is the Lorry I. Lokey Visiting Professor in Human Biology at Stanford University and Director of Global Viral Forecasting, a pandemic early warning system which monitors the spillover of novel infectious agents from animals into humans. Wolfe has been published in or profiled by Nature, Science, The New York Times, The New Yorker, The Economist, Forbes and many others. Wolfe was the recipient of a Fulbright fellowship in 1997 and was awarded the National Institutes of Health (NIH) International Research Scientist Development Award in 1999 and the prestigious NIH Director's Pioneer Award in 2005. Reviews: 'An excellent piece of scientific gothic, rich in descriptions of the threat we face from emerging viruses' Nature 'Part autobiography, part warning ... enthralling' BBC Focus 'Quietly terrifying ... It's hard not to feel a bit feverish at times while reading' Boston Globe 'Wolfe has an important story to tell and as a virologist at the forefront of pandemic forecasting, he is the perfect person to tell it. He explains the science clearly and never stoops to sensationalism - the evidence of our increasing vulnerability to pandemics speaks for itself' Guardian 'The plague-ridden future imagined by this authoritative, measured, yet gripping book is extremely alarming' Sunday Times 'Nathan Wolfe is saving the world from near-inevitable pandemic ... a kick-ass book' Mary Roach, author of *Stiff* 'The world's most prominent virus hunter' New Yorker 'A good place to start preparing for what might come' New Humanist

## Book Information

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## **Customer Reviews**

Nathan Wolfe apparently had three goals in mind when writing this book 1) bring the foreboding problem of viruses into public awareness, 2) write a scientific memoir of his work with viruses much like Mark Moffett did with "Adventures Among Ants: A Global Safari with a Cast of Trillions" 3) bring awareness of his Global Viral Forecasting (GVF) organization and its work to the forefront. He succeeds on all three fronts. Most of us, even the physicians I know, are mostly ignorant of the current knowledge and threat of viruses. This scientific information is well laid out in an understandable, well written fashion. The information is fascinating. The science is made clear. The information on the rapid mutation and recombination of virus DNA and RNA is scary. Nathan has written of his contacts and co workers in the viral field, from Africa to Malaysia, to San Francisco. He is respectful and honors their work. These people are unsung heroes, many risking their lives collecting and working with highly risky viruses daily. Their history needs to be told. Global Viral Forecasting (GVF) and its mission of developing a means of early warning on pandemics is important. We were behind the curve with SARS. We are lucky with small pox being only found in humans, and cow pox so closely related as to be able to provide immunity to small pox. This book may serve to set the tone for more grants and funding finding its way to GVF. Scary is the information on big data in Chapters 9 and 10. With only cell phone megadata the epicenter of an earth quake in 2009 was found easily. With cell phone mega data and key word search the development of an influenza season was tracked. Wolfe's claims for the future of mega data, and his ease in discussing it and the accumulation of it by private companies like Google are a little foreboding. The Viral Storm is well written and reads well. The science is clearly presented. The

current state of the knowledge is well laid out with some warnings for future problems. I found it an excellent book, and am ordering a hardcopy for my library.

I know enough about my fascination with viruses to know, as a non-scientist, my curiosity about them has more to do with philosophy than medicine but that may well be yet another reason for biologists (for just one group) to be equally ensnared by their subject. The Virus, for its opportunism in the extreme (parasitical is too meager a description) and because its very nature is controversial (is it Life or isn't it? I agree with his footnote on the bottom of pg.8) can appear to be such a vast topic that no one author can be expected to resolve or ask or even comprehend all the questions. Wolfe, in his first 35 pages, does at least try - and it remains my favorite section of the book - his amazement with these microscopic life(?)forms is so engaging that if you didn't have a respect for them before you will have afterwards. And, if the next 300 or so pages that come after it were just "so-so" for me that is not the fault of Wolfe, he has a wide readership to appeal to and just because I am not particularly interested in bureaucracies, who got what grant to do what and where does not mean that these aren't valid sections for millions of others. But those first 35 pages, yes, they are heady indeed, Wolfe is delightful in both his recognition of just what makes these viruses so shocking and where we fit in their world (ie."our bodies are their habitats," p.27), and his conclusion in the first chapter, (Viral Planet) says it all: the viral world is the "new world," the last frontier of undiscovered life on our planet."Perhaps it is the Lewis Thomas phenomena, a flashpoint where scientist and non-scientist can co-exist in a mutual relationship of shared passion, be it horror or admiration, or both? There is much to admire in what a Virus is, or has been, or will be, and if I took nothing else away from Wolfe's book it is that "we" are (numerically) a speck of life within a planetary Viral soup. These life forms are so relentlessly efficient, competent and resourceful that even bacteria (which we tend to think of as quite accomplished all on their own) are covered in viruses! And it goes far beyond just the numbers, "we" are not as dominant as we like to think we are, and Wolfe's presentation of the Viral world inverted or turned inside out my naive and humanistic vanity that on this planet "we" are the masters. We survive because it suits the Virus to help or even make sure that we survive; even the health of the oceans and other aquatic regions are dependent upon viruses to reduce and recycle carbon by destroying bacteria there; as with carbon itself, without viruses "we" would not be here either. Aside from these initial pages I also found worthy discussions on bioterrorism and "bioerror" (see chap.8 Viral Rush) and the Gentle Virus (chap.11) which just reinforces my analogy that we are closer to being the non-thinking but accommodating host than they are haphazard non-cognitive scraps of DNA/RNA parasite! Give the

first 35 pages a good read, and be prepared to lose that sense of superiority over these titans of the microscopic world.

I had to order this book for a Geography class at my university that focused on geographical patterns of disease. Epidemiology is a fascinating subject, but it can be turned somewhat dry depending on who is teaching it. Luckily, Nathan Wolfe does an excellent job of both teaching and entertaining in *The Viral Storm*. The book follows a very logical progression, starting at a macro-evolutionary scale to examine how humans have historically increased their relationship with pathogens. Wolfe then goes on to explore different diseases, reflecting on what we can learn from them and how best to shape future disease-prevention. The book is consistent in providing engaging and relate-able examples. This ranks among my favorite school-assigned books that I have read, and would read it recreationally.

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