



# **Fever Season: The Epidemic of 1878 That Almost Destroyed Memphis, and the People who Saved It**

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While the American South had grown to expect a yellow fever breakout almost annually, the 1878 epidemic was without question the worst ever. Moving up the Mississippi River in the late summer, in the span of just a few months the fever killed more than eighteen thousand people. The city of Memphis, Tennessee, was particularly hard hit: Of the approximately twenty thousand who didn't flee the city, seventeen thousand contracted the fever, and more than five thousand died—the equivalent of a million New Yorkers dying in an epidemic today. *Fever Season* chronicles the drama in Memphis from the outbreak in August until the disease ran its course in late October. The story that Jeanette Keith uncovered is a profound—and never more relevant—account of how a catastrophe inspired reactions both heroic and cowardly. Some ministers, politicians, and police fled their constituents, while prostitutes and the poor risked their lives to nurse the sick. Using the vivid, anguished accounts and diaries of those who chose to stay and those who were left behind, *Fever Season* depicts the events of that summer and fall. In its pages we meet people of great courage and compassion, many of whom died for having those virtues. We also learn how a disaster can shape the future of a city.

## **Fever Season: The Epidemic of 1878 That Almost Destroyed Memphis, and the People who Saved It Details**

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## From Reader Review Fever Season: The Epidemic of 1878 That Almost Destroyed Memphis, and the People who Saved It for online ebook

### Kristi Thielen says

Very good book that retells the dramatic story of this epidemic, but also provides something more: a thoughtful detail about the social attitude of 1878 Memphis residents concerning women and African-Americans and how it overlaid the story of the city's experience and aftermath.

It is sobering to learn how the tragedy drew the black and white communities together to the point that doctors and nurses of both races worked side by side - and volunteers who labored during the epidemic ate together at communal tables. It is even more sobering to learn how quickly the white community reinforced racist attitudes after the epidemic had passed, and then created a written and oral tradition about the tragedy which gave all credit for effort and heroism to white men.

The period of American history immediately following the Civil War is a heartbreaking one; under the auspices of reconstruction the south truly seemed to be taking steps toward political and social equality. What might the next 100 years have been like if the federal government had not lost the stomach to remain in the south and see this through?

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### Caitlin says

I was born in Memphis and lived there until I was midway through middle school. It's changed a lot since then, but I still consider it home and hold it close in my memories. I've gone back when I could - to eat barbecue and look at the river. The Mississippi River is at its widest point at Memphis and if you grew up with it you'll be spoiled forever for any other river - it's just that breathtaking, insinuating itself into your veins.

When I was in elementary school I was fortunate to be admitted to the first year of the Talented and Gifted program at my school (which is now an "optional school" with an emphasis on enriched learning and college prep). It was a lifesaver for me because it was so much more challenging and I got to do some really cool things. One of the projects I did was a slide presentation and written report (no PowerPoint back in those days) on the Yellow Fever epidemic described in this book. It was so amazing to realize that so many people could be felled by mosquitos, although I wasn't really surprised. Mosquitos were an ongoing problem in the city when I was a child and I can remember the trucks out spraying for them in the summer and the kids in school who become ill with mosquito-born disease. Mosquitos are very serious and scary little bugs.

I became very interested in parasites and infectious disease and their influence on evolution when I was in college and graduate school for biological anthropology and remain fascinated to this day. All this is leading up to my reason for getting this book. So far as I know there hasn't been a good modern book on the epidemic and I wanted to know more.

*Fever Season* tells a story of heroism and chicanery, of the beginnings of the breakdown of barriers between the races and the subsequent breakdown, and most of all of an event that changed the city itself forever in

ways that no one could have imagined. Ms. Keith's book is a fascinating and detailed account of the epidemic and the sociocultural and political context that informed how it was fought. You cannot wrap your brain around how many people died and how fast. In a chapter on the clergy who stayed you realize that almost all of them died and the ones that came to replace them died, too. Doctors, nurses, wealthy businessmen, poor whites and blacks - almost everybody died. The story is staggering, inspiring, poignant, maddening, and in many ways terrifying. You see, there still isn't a cure for yellow fever, and an outbreak today would spread and spread and kill and kill without serious (and probably unconstitutional) quarantine efforts.

Fascinating, deeply researched, and well-written, Ms. Keith will hold your attention to the bitter end. The world will look different to you after you read this book whether or not you have a connection to Memphis. Try and keep the mosquito population down, y'all.

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### **April Helms says**

Keith recounts the 1878 Yellow Fever epidemic, which devastated Memphis. Indeed, it was almost the last straw for the beleaguered city, which was already mired in debt and disorganization before the outbreak. She goes into a bit of the history of the time, the impact of the Civil war, the reverberations of which were still being felt, the lack of knowledge about the disease, and the people who kept the city going. Keith does a commendable job not only with the history and facts, but with the people of the time. There are several people who figured prominently, and they are not whitewashed but presented for whom they were- complications, warts, strengths and all. The book also goes into the aftermath of the outbreak, and how it changed the city.

One interesting- and tragic note- brought up was the effect of Jim Crow after the outbreak. Black residents who were lauded for their efforts during the Yellow Fever epidemic were shunted aside and forgotten as "separate but equal" became the order of the day. I also found it ironic that the people who fled the epidemic- often because they were told to in an effort to reduce the impact, were treated like traitors when they did return. In the early days of the outbreak, people had been encouraged to leave to "reduce the human fuel" needed by the disease. While the reasoning was wrong the idea was probably the right one. Also, the slew of non-immune people who came to aid the suffering I have to wonder (hindsight being 20/20) if they merely swelled the ranks of the dead, doing more harm than good ultimately. In all, more than 5,000 people are estimated to have died. I recommend this for history buffs.

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### **Alison says**

"When those who lived through the epidemic tried to describe it, they talked about the sudden, eerie quiet . . . Half the population had fled upon the outbreak of the fever, but an estimated twenty thousand remained. You would think that that many people would produce noise sufficient to demonstrate their presence, but the voices we have from Memphis in the summer of 1878- mostly doctors, nurses, and journalists- agree that the city felt abandoned."

"From August to October 1878, the people of Memphis suffered through an experience unique in American history. Yellow fever is a viral hemorrhagic fever passed from human to human by mosquitoes. Although mild cases produce flu-like symptoms, at its worst yellow fever is comparable to Ebola. The virus strain that cause the 1878 epidemic was extremely virulent. The fever spread up the Mississippi Valley from New Orleans to Illinois and killed an estimated eighteen thousand people. But it was Memphis' plight that riveted national attention. At least two thirds of the people in Memphis contracted the fever, and about one quarter

died, more than five thousand in all."

From the beginning pages, *Fever Season* by Jeanette Keith is captivating, straightforward, and heartbreaking. Her narration of the yellow fever epidemic in Memphis, Tennessee in 1878 breathes life into the people caught in the midst of great suffering and death. It is stirring and tragic to simply scratch the surface of this horrifying disease, and how it struck dead many in Memphis. Keith does a masterful job weaving together different story lines to provide an insider's look at what it was like to be in Memphis when people were dying in droves.

Keith also speaks at some length about race and its divisions, the unease of the white population in being driven to interact with the African American population much more intimately than they are used to, and the effects of the epidemic on interracial interactions. This is especially pertinent since the yellow fever outbreak roughly coincided with the end of Reconstruction, and many of the major players in the city at the time were former members of the Confederacy.

A well-written book worth a read. I recommend it highly.

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### **Sarah says**

a bit heavy on the history for me but still a fascinating read

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### **Becky says**

Wait...

What just happened?

So, funny thing happened as I was reading a story about Yellow Fever- it suddenly turned into a three chapter ending about Robert Church founding the Blues-based Memphis we all know and love today. The problem was that, he was totally absent from the part of the book about Yellow Fever. He was introduced in the beginning along with the other "cast" of characters that would lead us through their personal experiences during the Yellow Fever outbreak of 1878. ... And then the author states that we don't know what happened to Mr. Church during the Outbreak. He might have fled the city with the other refugees, he may have been out of town on business, or he may have stayed and protected his property. We really have no idea... what we do know is that afterwards he became a very rich man of color, unusual for his time. It's just so awkwardly tacked on to the end of this book, with incredibly loose tie-ins to the fever that it detracts from the overall story, which would have been more poignantly ended on the slow recovery of Memphis shortly after the fever.

It's called a thesis people. I am a firm believer that history books need them, maybe not spelled out like you're some college student, but you need to know what it is. Your readers should be able to figure it out. Without a guiding principle your book meanders and doesn't know where it should end.

For composition I would give this book a 2.5, it was going great until the end. For story telling it gets a 3.0, there was a good use of first-hand accounts and an effort to stay away from dramatization while accurately reflecting the horrors the volunteer nurses and doctors were seeing (finding decayed corpses in alleys where people just dropped from the fever and died alone, no one knowing they were there, children covered in flies

as black blood bubbled from their mouths) but frequently I wanted to know more and we would already be off on some other topic, a 4.5 for the extra effort illuminating the daring of minorities- woman and African Americans, the tensions between poor whites and others, Catholics and protestants, and so on. It was a good social history. In the end, it averages to a 3 for me. Everything was new information, and it was interesting, I just wish the story had felt more guided.

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### **Bonnie says**

I wanted to love this. In fact, I should have loved this. It's a fascinating topic with interesting stories and characters. But the plot was so disjointed, the characters and timeline so hard to follow, that I felt like I had yellow fever. But without the black vomit, thankfully. The author clearly did her research, but it just wasn't presented well.

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### **Rita Ciresi says**

Fascinating look at a major epidemic.

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### **Carolyn says**

An excellent telling of an important part of regional history that affected more than just the region. Jeanette Keith does a very good job of showing how public health, nursing, epidemiological, sociological, and racial issues were all impacted by this one summer from hell in Memphis. It also gives a good look at the impact of reconstruction and what came after reconstruction was declared "finished". A lot of information in a rather small book, but very well told.

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## **Don Creamer says**

I have a familial attachment to this story. My Great Grandfather was one who felt that it was better to protect his family than stay in what appeared to be the dying city of Memphis. Along with his in-laws he took his wife, children and a servant to Iuka, MS to weather out the storm. Unfortunately, when he returned to the city in November of 1878 he was fired from his position at the Post Office for abandoning his post. He was a veteran of the previous War, and was not afraid for himself. This led to a "conversation" between two of the city's newspapers ("The Public Ledger" and "The Avalanche") who took opposite sides in this situation. Ms. Keith clearly sides with those who stayed in the city and in a subtle way casts aspersions upon those who did not. Perhaps this comes from an over reliance upon the editor of "The Memphis Daily Appeal" (now the "Memphis Commercial Appeal") as a source.

Reading this has caused me to more deeply pursue what it was like in the city during that time, and I have located and read a number of first person accounts (primarily from The Appeal, but other newspapers and documents also.) The newspaper sources are online (<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>) and make fascinating reading.

While I believe this is a well written book, the author's comment's concerning Molly Caldwell Crosby's The American Plague in the introduction were unnecessary. This almost turned me away from the book. Excuse me that Ms Crosby doesn't have this author's eminent academic background.

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## **Ellen says**

This book is a compelling account of the Yellow Fever Epidemic in Memphis, Tennessee in 1878. The fever

which had struck several southern cities in the past was difficult to deal with. There were not any successful treatments. People survived it or they did not. All sorts of theories were thought of as to the cause, the dominant one in this book was sanitation although as we now know it was the mosquito and the popular use of cistern not fresh water that was the culprit. This books expands on race relations that at the time were not as strained as one might think in a southern city. The author points out that African Americans served as policeman, helpers and nurses when some white doctors and prominent people fled the city. This story is tragic in that babies died in their mother's arms, whole families died, homes were deserted, looters died of the fever while looting the abandoned homes.

Many doctors and nurses who chose to stay died because of their selfless devotion. Medical and material help did come and there are some fascinating accounts of people giving in spite of society's prejudice, such as a brothel madame who opened her house to any one needing care and in so doing earned her wings and paid with her life. She was laid to rest with the doctors who perished and any sins she had were seemingly erased by her selfless call to duty.

A Jewish store owner and his temple group helped every person regardless of religion, status or race. They provided doctors, nurses, beds, food-- all to save a city they loved. Baptist ministers, Catholic nuns, agnostic nurses all worked very hard and some gave the fullest measure of devotion to save Memphis.

In some ways, this was a rare moment in time in the post-civil war south when people of all races, religions and status did all they could to fight a deadly epidemic. The results of this epidemic were far reaching and still effect Memphis today. Fever season is a powerful testament to the fact that epidemics show every person the height of human goodness and the deep cellar of human greed and self interest. An excellent book!

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### **Cornmaven says**

An interesting but tedious account of the 1878 yellow fever epidemic in Memphis. I enjoyed the cast of characters, and the element of race relations that ebbed and flowed before during and after the epidemic. Keith's contrast of Memphis before and after regarding the economic opportunities for black Americans was intriguing.

But, I never felt like I was there during the epidemic. There was something missing in the delivery to create the tension necessary to transport the reader to the time and place and make him/her feel that it is happening all over again. Erik Larsen knows how to do it, as do many others. Perhaps it was the nature of the primary source documents available. Perhaps it was the endless quotations Keith used, which come naturally to her as a PhD historian. I found myself skimming the last few chapters, and in the end this was a struggle for me to read all the way through. I was glad I did, for the historical significance, but I wish it had been a more exciting ride, especially because of the subject matter. I wanted to feel for Memphis the way I feel for victims of any natural or man made catastrophe. But it just didn't rise to that level for me.

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### **Wealththeow says**

Mosquitoes transmit a virus that causes Yellow Fever. The virus originates in tropical climes, and is believed to have come to America from ships carrying slaves from Africa. After a few mild days, the disease can cause headache, nausea, and fever. Some victims recover and have lifelong immunity, but in ~15% of cases the fever returns, the heart, liver, and kidneys fail, and delirium sets in. The skin of victims turns dark yellow

(hence Yellow Fever, also called "Bronze John"), they start hemorrhaging internally, and then may vomit blood so coagulated that it looks like black coffee grounds. Only a few people who vomit black survive, and their convalescence is slow.

In 1878, a long summer, a virulent viral strain, and a lack of understanding of how Yellow Fever is transmitted conspired to create a particularly terrible epidemic. The fever spread up the Mississippi Valley from New Orleans up to Illinois, killing ~18,000 people. Memphis was particularly hard-hit, due to geography and because corruption had left it without a modern water infrastructure. Instead, city dwellers stored their water close to their homes in barrels and cisterns, perfect for a *Ae. aegypti* mosquito infestation. And because Americans didn't realize mosquitoes transmit Yellow Fever until Walter Reed et al proved it in 1901, the doctors and nurses in 1870s Memphis could not effectively prevent the epidemic from spreading. They advised the uninfected populace to leave Memphis (due to quarantines in other areas, the refugees ended up in camps), provided what little medical care they could, and spent much of their time begging the rest of the US for food and charity and passing what supplies they had out. By the time cold weather hit and ended the epidemic, two-thirds of Memphis had contracted the fever, and more than a quarter of those had died.

Keith draws together personal journals and letters, newspaper articles, mortality reports, and city documents to create a multi-faceted portrait of the 1878 epidemic in Memphis.

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### **gabrielle says**

Worth toting the hardback version along on a trip.

Well-written, engaging, and a pretty fast read considering all the material covered.

Also reminded me of how ignorant I am of much of my country's history.

More reviews at the other entry for this book:

<https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/1...>

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