

[Review of the book *Franz Kafka, the Jewish Patient*]

Social History of Medicine

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person's civil liberties. Mary Mallon's case also illustrates the connections between science and culture and how the values of American public health during the early twentieth century interacted with scientific activity in the form of the new science of bacteriology—the typhoid bacillus was first isolated in 1884. 'Science' was applied to Mary Mallon through public health policies in a way that revealed the American public's desire to be healthy and to be protected from those who might harm them. This attitude was also reflected in policies concerning immigrants, but it conflicted with values of individual liberty and the constitution. Under what circumstances is it justifiable to deprive people of their liberty? How do we balance the two values of health and liberty when they come into conflict and what might be at risk in the balancing? Was Mary Mallon sacrificed for the public good? Her lawyer organized her court hearing round the question of whether or not the health department had a legal right to banish a healthy person to a lifetime of isolation. Much public opinion was hostile to the idea of her freedom and this hostility was increased by her low class and immigrant status at a time when it was popular to champion native-born, middle-class behaviour. For instance, George Soper, the civil engineer who investigated the typhoid outbreak, laced his reports with derogatory remarks about Mary Mallon's appearance, gait and 'masculine' mind, none of which was relevant to the problem of her infectivity. Many people, including some bacteriologists and physicians, regarded her as expendable in the cause of public health. The media demonized her, especially after she was discovered working as a cook when she had promised not to do so.

Leavitt also discusses the forms in which Mary Mallon's life continued to have significance after her death. What is her enduring meaning to our society? Paradoxically, Leavitt found that recent retellings have humanized Mary Mallon but also make explicit connections between her and some of our current fears about AIDS, drug-resistant tuberculosis and 'microbes into infinity'. The phrase *Typhoid Mary* has become a metaphor for contamination and the transmission of harm and death. The problems posed by her are prominent in our own society not only in relation to infection but also, for example, to those who are persistently violent, to some killers who have 'served their term' and to paedophiles.

This book is so enjoyable and thoughtful that I would recommend it not only for serious study but also to those with quite different interests and for holiday reading.

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Sander Gilman, *Franz Kafka, the Jewish Patient*, New York and London: Routledge, 1995. Pp. x + 328. £14.99. ISBN 0-415-91391-8.

Franz Kafka, the great luminary of literary high modernism, discovered in 1917 that he had contracted pulmonary tuberculosis. He died from that disease in 1925. In the course of his lengthy treatment, his health became the major trope in his correspondence and his stories, which were larded with references to disease, bodies, and vitality. As Sander Gilman argues in this densely-reasoned book, however, Kafka was a 'patient' long before his symptoms of tuberculosis appeared; that is, he was an apt candidate for thinking about himself as a marginal man with an uncertain and contested identity. He was a German-speaking and writing Jew in a culture that was overwhelmingly Czech and increasingly anti-Semitic. He was also an assimilated Jew in an ancient European Jewish culture whose identity was under siege by newly-migrated eastern European Jews, and by a tidal wave of anti-Semitic images that accompanied and caricatured them.

Gilman has isolated a host of passages in Kafka's work that reveal the play of these cultural forces. They take the form of Kafka's anxieties about his identity, his physical vigour, even the survival of the Jews as a people. But above all, Gilman argues, Kafka's concerns about himself as an urban, assimilated German Jew in a slavic sea expressed themselves in the materiality of images and fears about his body, in particular his health and his appearance. As

Gilman shows, Kafka took a keen interest in all the medical, demographic, and sociological information of his day that bore on Jews, Germans, and Slavs. But he seems to have made no more effort to distinguish fact from fiction than did the great mass of his contemporaries. The myths about the ritual murder of Christian children by bloodthirsty Jews and the serious debates in medical anthropology about the degree of susceptibility of Jews to certain diseases were all grist for his literary imagination, which he used in well-known stories like *The Castle*, *The Burrow*, *The Metamorphosis*, and numerous others.

This book is difficult to categorize. Literary criticism, general cultural history, Jewish history, and medical history all figure importantly. Medical historians will learn most from the ample proof Gilman offers that by the 1890s Europeans and Americans had learned to think about ethnicity, religion, and culture in the material images and discourse of biology and medicine. In particular, he offers abundant evidence that the male Jewish body was confronted by bio-medical images that represented it as racially particular, effeminate, and 'naturally' disposed to disease. Gilman gives us great chunks of this amazing discourse and then tries to show how it is reflected, distorted, or resisted in Kafka's writings and in the work of some of his literary contemporaries. To this reader the literary interpretations are always stimulating, but they are not always convincing; however by reminding us of the work of popular writers like Hans Blüher, Julius Tandler, Ferdinand Hueppe and other little-known authors on health and race, Gilman does us a great service. Their work was devoured by Kafka and most serious thinkers of the day, discussed, and oftentimes accepted as fact.

Gilman demonstrates, for instance, that it was believed there was not only a 'typical' Jewish physiognomy, but also a Jewish body (particularly the thorax for the male), a Jewish gait, manner of speaking, and so on. Kafka ruminates on all these images in his stories, accepting some, resisting others. Despite the discovery by Robert Koch in 1882 of the tuberculosis bacillus, medical authorities continued to hold well into the 1930s to the belief that there was a 'typical' predisposing anatomy and metabolism to the disease modelled on the old stereotype of the narrow-chested, gracile, and intellectually-lively individual which, as it happens, aptly described Franz Kafka. Finally, Gilman traces the vicissitudes of the argument about Jewish susceptibility to the disease and finds that although Jews did in fact die less frequently of the disease, at least before the First World War, it was none the less possible to believe, on the evidence of race and anatomy, in their greater predisposition to it, as Kafka's own ruminations clearly show.

This book is not an easy read, but it will reward the patient student with innumerable nuggets of information and some bravura interpretations that amplify our knowledge of what it meant to be a Jew in early twentieth-century central Europe. Judging from the hyper-sensitive and anguished reflections of one great figure on his work and life as a Jew, there may never have been a time and place where issues of identity were more suffused with the bio-medical concepts of pathology and norm, and where there seemed to be so much at stake, for individuals and ethnic groups, in clarifying them.

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J. A. van Belzen, *Zorg voor de Ziel: Een selectie uit de verslagen van het Theologisch-Psychiatrisch Gezelschap 1945–1953*, Rotterdam: Erasmus Publishing, 1995. Pp. 319. Np. ISBN 90-5235-082-5.

In 1945, a clergyman of the Utrecht Baptist Church, J. J. G. Wuite (1900–70), and the renowned Dutch psychiatrist Professor H. C. Rümke (1893–1967) founded the Theological-Psychiatric Society. Its members would until 1953, when it gradually died out, assemble to discuss topics with which psychiatry as well as theology had difficulties. In this book *Zorg voor de Ziel*, Dr van Belzen unearths the existence of this society, provides a broad historical framework and offers a selection of the Society's reports.