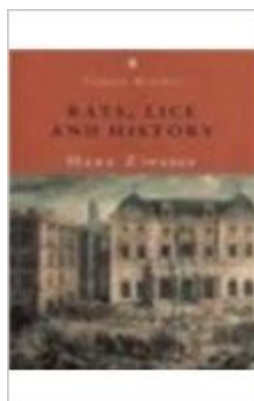


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Rats, Lice And History (Penguin Classic History)



Book Information

Series: Penguin Classic History

Paperback: 320 pages

Publisher: PENGUIN BOOKS LTD; New Ed edition (2000)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0141390301

ISBN-13: 978-0141390307

Product Dimensions: 5.3 x 0.9 x 8.5 inches

Shipping Weight: 12 ounces

Average Customer Review: 4.3 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (34 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #7,493,255 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #64 in [Books > Health, Fitness & Dieting > Children's Health > Lice](#) #31265 in [Books > Medical Books > Medicine > Internal Medicine > Pathology > Diseases](#) #591471 in [Books > Science & Math](#)

Customer Reviews

The copy of "Rats, Lice, and History" that I own was published in 1963, and this was the 33rd time it had been reissued since first appearing in 1934. I can't imagine Dr. Zinsser's grumpily discursive, masterfully written, and ultimately profound biography of typhus fever ever going completely out of print. Stylistically the only work I can compare it to is Gibbon's "Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire". Where Gibbon occasionally dipped his pen in vinegar and excoriated the Christians, Zinsser dips his pen in hydrochloric acid and savages all of the quaint human customs that have kept Typhus alive and thriving. He shows much more affectionate sympathy for the louse than he does for the General or the Politician. Witness: "The louse shares with us the misfortune of being prey to the typhus virus. If lice can dread, the nightmare of their lives is the fear of some day inhabiting an infected rat or human being. For the host may survive; but the ill-starred louse that sticks his haustellum through an infected skin, and imbibes the loathsome virus with his nourishment, is doomed beyond succor. In eight days he sickens, in ten days he is 'in extremis', on the eleventh or twelfth his tiny body turns red with blood extravasated from his bowel, and he gives up his little ghost." In the interests of research, Zinsser carried pill boxes of lice under his socks for weeks at a time before taking "advantage of them for scientific purposes." He is not able to tear himself away from these little creatures and address the true subject of his biography, i.e. the typhus virus, until Chapter 12!

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