

Book Review

Rabid: A Cultural History of the World's Most Diabolical Virus

Edited By : Bill Wasik and Monica Murphy

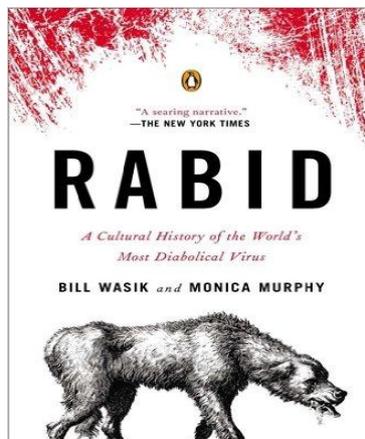
Viking Press : New York ; 2012.

ISBN - 9780670023738

Avinash De Sousa¹

¹Consultant Psychiatrist and Founder Trustee, Desousa Foundation, Mumbai.

E-mail – avinashdes888@gmail.com



This book is one of the first books that I have come across with a detailed description on ancient yet still rampant and devastating disorder like Rabies. Though modern medicine has progressed we have not yet found a cure for this disorder and the rabies virus is one of the deadliest viruses known to exist. The first four chapters are historical in nature and dedicated to the early history of rabies. The reader with little interest in anthropological tales and history of rabies may find the chapters boring but to those with an avid likeness for the history of medicine, the chapters are actually a treat. The images in the book are lovely but unfortunately leave the reader with only negative glimpses of the rabies virus and all the terror it causes or has caused over the years. The authors have done well to look in the archives for apt photographs that range from ancient manuscripts, paintings and modern photographs. The pace of the book in the initial chapters may get dull and sultry forcing readers to put down the book and even making them feel that there is nothing medical in it. There is digressing in many ways from the topic of rabies and often speaks about the paradox in the polar nature of the canine animal who can be man's best buddy and a ravenous terror as well. The book also describes the myths and legends surrounding rabies and how the illness has been pictured over the years.

The book becomes interesting after one crosses the first few chapters as the authors move on to describe the efforts of scientists in the genesis and production of the rabies vaccine. Pasteur's creation of the first known treatment of this invariably fatal disease is discussed in detail and lack of knowledge or availability of vaccinations led to many rabies cases throughout Europe and the United States in the 1800s. This was in turn due to pet dogs that people owned and were not vaccinated. The effects of rabies then came to be known and hydrophobia was witnessed in victims for the first time. The fear of hydrophobia increased public awareness of the disorder. The authors generously drive home the impact of Pasteur's work and give detailed accounts of how Pasteur's assistants collected saliva from a

rabid dog and aimed at isolating the virus. They faced a grave danger of contracting the disease while doing this and yet were undeterred in their task. This makes their work even more credulous.

The book also described the cultural horror that surrounds the disease as well as describing new avenues for rabies research. Rabies free status of the British Isles impacted public opinion when a tunnel needed to be constructed between England and France. Certain outbreaks of rabies in previously rabies free nations like Bali are described with great lucidity. The book also pays attention to how modern neuroscientists are using the rabies virus's propensity to invade nerves to deliver inhibitory RNA across the blood brain barrier. This may serve as respite and treatment in certain neurological conditions.

The book is well balanced as it described rabies thoroughly from a medical, cultural, historical, epidemiological, microbiological, viral and lay perspective. It explains certain concepts of immunology for the lay reader that even makes the concepts for clearer when medical students or doctors try to read the book. Rabies is a neglected disease and rarely described in hospitals and seminars. It is indeed an unsolved puzzle as 99% patients affected by the virus succumb to its atrocities. Rabies is a deadly scourge known to mankind since time immemorial. The disorder which when enters an animal turns the animal into a mad monster is equal frightful and what is more frightful is the fact that one bite of that animal can turn a human into an equally devastating monster. The book is infectious in nature for those that have the inkling to read about rabies. The book describes the journey across cultures and mankind of a fascinating virus and is an elegant scientific exploration of one of the most horrible ends a patient could get, while being composite yet erudite and more so eerily pleasurable to read.

The book may appeal to the common man, psychiatrists, infectious disease specialists, microbiologists, virologists, doctors and psychologists alike.

I will rate the book 4 out of 5

Acknowledgements – Nil.

Source of Funding – Nil

Conflict of Interest – Nil