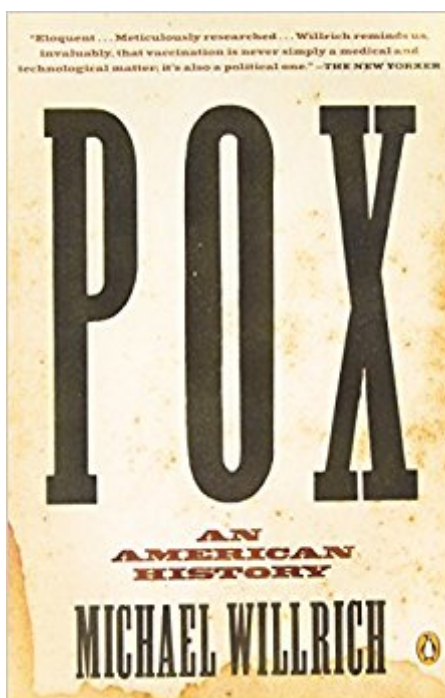


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# Pox: An American History (Penguin History Of American Life)



## Synopsis

The untold story of how America's progressive-era war on smallpox sparked one of the great civil liberties battles of the twentieth century. At the turn of the last century, a smallpox epidemic swept the United States from coast to coast. In this gripping account, award-winning historian Michael Willrich chronicles the government's fight against the outbreak and the ensuing clash of modern medicine, civil liberties, and state power. Pox introduces readers to memorable characters on both sides of the debate—from the doctors and club-wielding police charged with enforcing the law to vaccinate every citizen to the anti-vaccinationists, who stood up for their individual freedoms but were often dismissed as misguided cranks. Riveting and thoroughly researched, Pox delivers a masterful examination of progressive-era history that resonates powerfully today.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Today's controversies over vaccinations pale beside the pitched battles fought at the turn of the 20th century, to judge by this probing work. Historian Willrich (*City of Courts*) revisits the smallpox epidemic that ravaged the United States from 1898 to 1904 and sparked a showdown between the burgeoning Progressive-era regulatory regime and Americans fearful of the new Leviathan state and the specter of "state medicine." Anxious to stamp out the contagion, public health officials in the South quarantined African-Americans in detention camps if they were suspected of carrying the disease and vaccinated others at gunpoint; in New York "paramilitary vaccination squads" raided

immigrant tenements, forcibly inoculating residents and dragging infected children off to pesthouses; their coercive methods sparked occasional riots and lawsuits that helped remake constitutional law. Willrich sees merit on both sides: draconian public health measures saved thousands of lives, but resisters did have legitimate concerns about vaccine safety and side effects, racial targeting and bodily integrity. He does tend to romanticize anti-vaccine activists, whose movement he associates with feminism, free speech, and abolitionism, styling them as "libertarian radicals" engaging in "intimate acts of civil disobedience." Still, his lucid, well-written, empathetic study of a fascinating episode shows why the vaccine issue still pricks the American conscience. Photos. (Apr. 4) (c) Copyright PWxyz, LLC. All rights reserved. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

"Willrich's account of the early days of the American progressive movement couldn't be more instructive or timely...a worthy read." -"Booklist" (starred review) "Willrich melds meticulous research with elegant writing to create a richly- textured social history...at the charged intersection of science, politics, race, and culture...You'll never think the same way again about the now all-but-mechanical ritual of rolling up your shirtsleeve for a vaccine needle." -Hampton Sides, author of "Hellhound on His Trail" ..".In the highly skilled hands of Michael Willrich, hard cases make great history. We all have much to learn from this excellent book." -David Hackett Fischer, author of "Champlain's Dream" and "Washington's Crossing" "A fascinating, fast-paced story of America's last major smallpox epidemic...This is history at its best written by a master of his craft." -Michael J. Klarman, author of "From Jim Crow to Civil Rights" "Pox

This is a story of medical science and public health officials both battling fear, ignorance, stubbornness to new scientific advances and yet political and social engineering correctness of its day, all in the name of finding a way to treat and/or prevent smallpox more technically called variola. The expression MAY THE POX BE UPON YOU was considered one of the worse curses of earlier days and a play upon the title of this review. This is a 422 page book with 73 pages of cites, notes, and index, so is well researched and not casually written, yet it reads like a wonderful medical and social novel. The book opens with trying to pin down the beginning of the NYC smallpox outbreak at the turn of the 20th Century. It ascribes one of the early documented cases to Madeline Lyon a 12yo girl diagnosed on 11/27/1900 the Tuesday before Thanksgiving of that year. Over the centuries, smallpox was considered to be the deadliest contagious disease in the world with some 300 million deaths through the 20th century and an average mortality rate of 25-30%, but which could vary from a mere 10% to a staggering 60% depending on the strain involved. This struggle for

a prevention or cure also turned out to be one of the first and one of the most important struggles for civil liberties regarding the fight against mandatory vaccination for the good of the populace as a whole, similar to the feelings some have about childhood vaccines today. Around the turn of the 20th Century and even somewhat later the disease was thought to be brought on by outsiders and predominantly male Negroes. And it is true that Blacks and males suffered in disproportionate degrees, but it was due primarily to their proximate living conditions in labor camps of the day and not due to race or gender. Yet, as it typical, society always needs someone to blame. Even though Edward Jenner discovered a vaccine to prevent smallpox by using the cowpox virus [the word vaccine comes from the Latin word vaccina referring to bovines] it wasn't officially eradicated until 1980, with the last documented case of young Somali girl on 10/31/1977. Smallpox was the disease upon which the field of immunology was founded, and helped spur the discovery of two important medical developments; the first being freeze dried vaccines which allowed their potency to last much longer and the second being the bi-bifurcated needle which allowed 4X as many people to be vaccinated with the same amount of inoculant. The novel aspect of the story is well told in the discussion of various epidemic outbreaks and how the medical and political teams worked together and against each other with each trying to maintain their respective fiefdoms. It is a great read for any person interested in medical history and scientific sleuthing.

I had to read this book for a class and it was surprisingly interesting. Definitely puts the smallpox epidemic into the context of it's time.

Boring, very boring.

This book was recommended to me by a niece. It is an interesting read. Never realized that smallpox was so rampant in the United States. Recommend to anyone interested in this type of history.

This is about the conflicts in the history of immunization and it still goes on. The author did a great job with the research and writing.

This was required reading for my daughter's college course and I picked it up as it looked interesting. However, I found it very repetitive and detailed to a fault. The concept was very interesting but I think it could have been better said in about half the words used. I could only read a

little at a time before physically falling asleep. This book took forever to finish!! Great idea, but too wordy!

Hard to get through. Interesting but just wasn't easy to read. Not captivating. I lost it in a hotel. Wasn't too fussed about it. The cutter incident (polio vaccin) was 10 times better.

Excellent and fascinating book - well worth reading for a sense of how medicine has changed in the last hundred years

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