

Bynum, Helen. *Spitting Blood: The History of Tuberculosis*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.

In her book extensively analyzing the history of tuberculosis, Helen Bynum, acclaimed medical historian, writes a concise history that vividly details the medical aspect of the epidemic and its effect in modern-day life. Published in 2012, *Spitting Blood: The History of Tuberculosis* outlines the spread of the tuberculosis epidemic from its origin in ancient Egypt, asserting that tuberculosis, popularly referred to as TB, is “far from over” (250). Tuberculosis persists as a killer in third world countries, and is the second most deadly disease next to HIV/AIDS.

However, because the conditions for tuberculosis do not occur in the twenty-first century in the west, the media neglects the topic and refers to the disease as “cured” (158). Bynum calls her audience to action to change the current perception of TB, using medical research to justify her claims regarding the disease. In her straightforward depiction of tuberculosis, Bynum utilizes a collection of secondary sources to establish her argument that pushes against the perception of tuberculosis as a cured contagion in the twenty-first century. Tuberculosis, she argues, continues as a threat to developing countries and persists as an issue that the western world overlooks.

Bynum begins the book by relating author George Orwell’s fight against tuberculosis, using him as a reference point for the rest of the book as a human connection to the medical jargon. Once the author establishes the human connection, she advances into the complicated medical standpoint of TB. Bynum dives into the mycobacterial history and evolution of tuberculosis, providing detailed accounts of the biological impact of the disease. At each point of her research, the author provides information regarding the biological, medical, and socio-cultural impact of the disease through its revolution. Starting from the bacterial origin of

the disease before civilization, Bynum reflects on the human medical experience of tuberculosis and its evolution since its creation.

Going back to the fifteenth century, the author first explores the definition of consumption and medicine in both ancient and early modern paradigms, describing the shift from the view of tuberculosis as a “curse of consumption” to a “disease of civilization” in the late nineteenth century (156). By the early twentieth century, TB was essentially eradicated in the western world with the development and prescriptions of antibiotics to fight off the disease, and the general belief in the west is that TB no longer presents a threat to society. Bynum stresses that tuberculosis has made a “frightening drug-resistant, HIV related comeback. . . worldwide” (244). She explains the biological perspectives of tuberculosis, citing medical facts and documents to support the presence of TB in the modern world. The conditions in the lower class and marginalized populations caused the disease to reemerge during the 1980s, and tuberculosis endures today as deadly disease. The author emphasizes the class implications of the disease, leading to the media neglect of the increasingly difficult-to-treat disease. The author uses secondary sources outlined in the book to support her call to action.

Bynum provides a broad array of medical secondary sources throughout a long period of time, detailing the symptoms and effects of tuberculosis. The author augments her choices of literature with suggestions for further reading on the topic, contributing further research into the study of medical history. Bynum cites medical studies and the scientists who studied tuberculosis, following the necessary progression of medicine. The medical discoveries of Rene Laennec, Robert Koch, Selman Waksman, among others, sets a timeline of the epidemic, leading to the virtual elimination of the disease during the early twentieth century. Within the nuanced

discussion of TB, Bynum uses the topic to make more general observations about the trends in medicine and disease throughout history, and how society responds to disease.

*Spitting Blood: The History of Tuberculosis at first* is difficult to engage due to the challenging medical vernacular used. However, if the reader focuses on the human aspect and uses the medical descriptions to amplify the experience of TB, the book proves informative and leaves the audience with questions that have no answers. Despite the Eurocentric view of the epidemic, Bynum's book exposes the history of disease and society, focusing on the medical aspect of tuberculosis. Her comprehensive history of the subject shows a deep understanding of the disease and its impact on the human experience. The organization of the book is crucial to its success, the introduction structured to humanize the subject and parallel scientific jargon, continuing throughout the book to keep the reader engaged. The author begins the book with a novelist, but ends it with a novel, *The Constant Gardener*, by John le Carre. Le Carre's book follows the fictional cure for tuberculosis, relating the disease's ability to evolve and adapt to drugs. Bynum inserts her distant relationship with tuberculosis, citing a brother-in-law's mother and a friend's uncle as suffering from tuberculosis. By recounting these experiences, combined with Le Carre's imaginary cure, Bynum circles back to humanizing the disease and bringing it to the present-day. Bynum ends her book with the ominous quote: ". . .all the other uncountable tuberculous pasts remain our potential futures" (268).

"I pledge that I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment."

- Signed: Elizabeth Anne Debes