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# Polio: An American Story

By David M. Oshinsky

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Here David Oshinsky tells the gripping story of the polio terror and of the intense effort to find a cure, from the March of Dimes to the discovery of the Salk and Sabin vaccines--and beyond. Drawing on newly available papers of Jonas Salk, Albert Sabin and other key players, Oshinsky paints a suspenseful portrait of the race for the cure, weaving a dramatic tale centered on the furious rivalry between Salk and Sabin. He also tells the story of Isabel Morgan, perhaps the most talented of all polio researchers, who might have beaten Salk to the prize if she had not retired to raise a family.

Oshinsky offers an insightful look at the National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis, which was founded in the 1930s by FDR and Basil O'Connor, it revolutionized fundraising and the perception of disease in America. Oshinsky also shows how the polio experience revolutionized the way in which the government licensed and tested new drugs before allowing them on the market, and the way in which the legal system dealt with manufacturers' liability for unsafe products. Finally, and perhaps most tellingly, Oshinsky reveals that polio was never the raging epidemic portrayed by the media, but in truth a relatively uncommon disease. But in baby-booming America--increasingly suburban, family-oriented, and hygiene-obsessed--the specter of polio, like the specter of the atomic bomb, soon became a cloud of terror over daily life.

Both a gripping scientific suspense story and a provocative social and cultural history, *Polio* opens a fresh window onto postwar America.

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## **Polio: An American Story** By David M. Oshinsky Bibliography

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## Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

The key protagonists in historian Oshinsky's (Univ. of Texas, Austin) account of the bruising scientific race to create a vaccine are Jonas Salk, a proponent of a "killed-virus" vaccine, and Albert Sabin, who championed the "live-virus" vaccine. As revered as these men are in popular culture, Oshinsky records their contemporaries' less complimentary opinions (even Sabin's friends, for instance, describe him as "arrogant, egotistical and occasionally cruel"). Oshinsky (*A Conspiracy So Immense: The World of Joe McCarthy*, etc.) looks at social context, too, such as the impact of the March of Dimes campaign on public consciousness—and fear—of polio. Tying in the role polio victim FDR played in making the effort a national priority, the precursory scientific developments that aided Salk and Sabin's work, and the ethical dilemmas surrounding human testing, Oshinsky sometimes bogs down in details. But all in all, this is an edifying description of one of the most significant public health successes in U.S. history. 46 b&w photos not seen by PW. (Apr.)

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From School Library Journal

Adult/High School—This well-grounded account documents the quest for a polio vaccine. It reveals professional rivalries and clinical breakthroughs, describes a new era in approaches to public philanthropy, and re-creates the tenor of American culture during the 1940s and '50s, when every city, suburb, and rural community faced potential tragedy from annual outbreaks of the disease. The decades-long contentious relationship between doctors Albert Sabin and Jonas Salk provides the centerpiece of this story. Virologists were split into two main camps: those pursuing the development of an attenuated live-virus vaccine versus those focusing on a killed-virus vaccine, with adherents of the latter believing it would prove not only safer and more effective, but also quicker and cheaper to mass produce. Historical context is provided by detailing how Franklin D. Roosevelt raised public awareness, how his influence led to the emergence of the National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis and the March of Dimes, and the subsequent creation of the poster child concept as a way of creating grassroots fundraising. The writing dramatically captures both tensions and ethical dimensions inherent in moving from laboratory work with monkeys to human experimentation and, eventually, to implementation of a massive inoculation program reaching 1.3 million schoolchildren in the 1954 Salk vaccine trials. While this part of the story and the public adulation of Salk have been told elsewhere, Oshinsky amplifies the tale with data explaining why the Sabin oral vaccine became the one preeminently adopted internationally, and why the debate has continued. Sixteen pages of arresting black-and-white photographs are included.—Lynn Nutwell, Fairfax City Regional Library, VA

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From [Booklist](#)

\*Starred Review\* The success of the enormous 1954 field test of the killed-virus polio vaccine developed in the Pittsburgh laboratory of Jonas Salk made him iconically famous. At center stage in journalist Jeffrey Kluger's gripping *Splendid Solution* [BKL F 1 05], Salk is only chronologically central in historian Oshinsky's effort, which expands, as Kluger doesn't, on the half-century after Salk's achievement, in particular. Oshinsky shows first that polio was, even at its most prevalent, a relatively low-incidence disease and that the happenstance that it struck Franklin Roosevelt (or did it? Some question the diagnosis) was crucial to making it as dreaded as it was. Roosevelt was also crucial to setting the National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis going, with his aggressive law partner, Basil O'Connor, in charge. While Kluger emphasizes the foundation's good works, Oshinsky points up its inspired fund-raising and PR. During the final push to produce a vaccine, Oshinsky illuminates Salk's competitors more than Kluger, and after Salk's

triumph, he turns to Albert Sabin, whose live-virus vaccine became officially preferred before mass immunization with Salk's was finished. He confirms what Kluger skirted, that Sabin was a real SOB as well as a good scientist, but, unlike Kluger, he airs trenchant criticism of Salk, too. Further, he brings the story down to the recent reemergence of Salk's vaccine and the present, when the WHO hopes for polio's ultimate eradication in 2008. Narrative history doesn't get much better. *Ray Olson*

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## **Users Review**

### **From reader reviews:**

#### **Linda Pillar:**

Why don't make it to be your habit? Right now, try to prepare your time to do the important take action, like looking for your favorite guide and reading a e-book. Beside you can solve your long lasting problem; you can add your knowledge by the book entitled Polio: An American Story. Try to face the book Polio: An American Story as your good friend. It means that it can being your friend when you sense alone and beside associated with course make you smarter than ever. Yeah, it is very fortunated for you. The book makes you much more confidence because you can know every little thing by the book. So , let us make new experience in addition to knowledge with this book.

#### **Willie Blackburn:**

The book Polio: An American Story can give more knowledge and information about everything you want. So why must we leave a good thing like a book Polio: An American Story? Wide variety you have a different opinion about publication. But one aim which book can give many data for us. It is absolutely right. Right now, try to closer along with your book. Knowledge or details that you take for that, it is possible to give for each other; you can share all of these. Book Polio: An American Story has simple shape however you know: it has great and large function for you. You can seem the enormous world by open and read a book. So it is very wonderful.

#### **Fabian Luton:**

The book Polio: An American Story has a lot details on it. So when you read this book you can get a lot of help. The book was written by the very famous author. This articles author makes some research previous to write this book. This kind of book very easy to read you may get the point easily after reading this book.

#### **Jeremy Richards:**

Polio: An American Story can be one of your starter books that are good idea. Many of us recommend that straight away because this guide has good vocabulary which could increase your knowledge in vocabulary, easy to understand, bit entertaining but nonetheless delivering the information. The author giving his/her effort to place every word into joy arrangement in writing Polio: An American Story yet doesn't forget the main position, giving the reader the hottest as well as based confirm resource facts that maybe you can be certainly one of it. This great information can certainly drawn you into completely new stage of crucial

imagining.

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