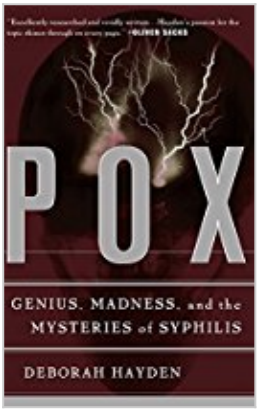

Pox: Genius, Madness, And The Mysteries Of Syphilis

By Deborah Hayden

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From Beethoven to Oscar Wilde, from Van Gogh to Hitler, Deborah Hayden throws new light on the effects of syphilis on the lives and works of seminal figures from the fifteenth to the twentieth centuries.Writing with remarkable insight and narrative flair, Hayden argues that biographers and historians have vastly underestimated the influence of what Thomas Mann called "this exhilarating yet wasting disease." Shrouded in secrecy, syphilis was accompanied by wild euphoria and suicidal depression, megalomania and paranoia, profoundly affecting sufferers' worldview, their sexual behavior, and their art. Deeply informed and courageously argued, Pox has been heralded as a major contribution to our understanding of genius, madness, and creativity.

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Pox: Genius, Madness, And The Mysteries Of Syphilis By Deborah Hayden Bibliography

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly
Were Abraham and Mary Lincoln's well-known health problems symptoms of syphilis? Was Adolf Hitler's final descent into madness due to an early syphilitic infection acquired from a prostitute? Did James Joyce make hidden allusions to his own infection in works like Ulysses? According to Hayden, a California-based scholar and marketing executive, scholars and medical professionals have too often overlooked the evidence of "pox," or syphilis-often called the "Great Imitator" because its symptoms mimic those of many other diseases-in the biographies of historical figures. Few would argue that some of Hayden's subjects, like Flaubert and Karen Blixen (subject of the movie Out of Africa), suffered from the disease. Her arguments for others, like the Lincolns and Beethoven, are sure to provoke debate. Hayden pulls together fascinating medical histories for figures like President Lincoln and Hitler, but with Mary Lincoln in particular her background documentation seems spotty. She overlooks Mary's vigorous, and very sane, campaign to be released from the mental institution that her son Robert had her committed to. Hayden suffers from an unfortunate tendency to romanticize the final stages of syphilis: she claims repeatedly that artists attain some sort of mystical breakthrough in their art when they're on the verge of paralytic collapse, an assertion straight out of Thomas Mann and other early 20th-century writers. The sprawling chapter on Hitler is the climax of the book but suffers from poor organization and loose writing. Readers will be divided on whether or not they are convinced by Hayden's arguments, but with the reemergence of syphilis in many urban populations, the subject is sure to attract attention.

From The New England Journal of Medicine
Deborah Hayden's Pox: Genius, Madness, and the Mysteries of Syphilis is the biography of an infection that has fascinated and frustrated clinicians for more than half a millennium. The book is a repository of all that had been forgotten about a sinister bacterium and the disease that was its legacy. It is also a compendium of what Hayden refers to as the "veiled revelation" of syphilis that can be found in the intimate details of the lives of famous people if one searches with sufficient determination and vigor. Most of all, the book provides fodder for the imagination. Envision a book, written by the owner of a direct-marketing firm, about the history, microbiology, pathogenesis, clinical manifestations, diagnosis, and treatment of one of humankind's most enigmatic disorders. The author has no formal medical training but has gleaned sufficient expertise in syphilology from lavishly illustrated 19th-century and early-20th-century medical books "written in language remarkably accessible to the layperson" to qualify her to lecture clinicians and peer-reviewed medical journals about what she calls "faulty assumptions about a disease no longer familiar in clinical practice." Imagine that same authority examining the case histories of scores of illustrious personalities through "the selective lens of a possible diagnosis of syphilis" and, time and again, finding evidence of the one disease she knows in depth. Imagine a concept that Hayden calls "creative euphoria," whereby "the syphilitic was often rewarded, in a kind of Faustian bargain for enduring the pain and despair, by . . . electrified, joyous energy when grandiosity led to new vision." Beethoven had it. Guy de Maupassant did too. In fact, Hayden says that "Maupassant's literary leap from mediocrity in 1876 to the supreme mastery of the short story in 1880 might have been the result of a tremendous stimulation of the brain cells" by what biographer Robert Sherard refers to as "myriads of spiral-shaped germs darting to and fro." Because Vincent van Gogh committed suicide, says Hayden, we do not know whether he experienced "the ecstasy and the misery of the stage that precedes paresis when he painted with such intensity in the last months of his life." One must wonder whether Michelangelo's agony and ecstasy represent another example of creative euphoria. Friedrich Nietzsche's syphilis has yet to be confirmed under "the selective lens of presumptive diagnosis," says Hayden. However,

the books about syphilis that Hayden relied on to write Pox tell us, she says, "that the last expressions of sanity before paretic dementia sets in can be characterized by mystical vision, messianic prophecy, grandiose self-definition, clarity of expression, and extreme disinhibition, while all the time maintaining exquisite precision of form." Could one ask for a better description of Nietzsche's later works? Oscar Wilde seems to have been denied the benefit of syphilitic euphoria, most likely, Hayden says, because it was "effectively doused by a liter of brandy a day." But not Karen Blixen, who wrote Seven Gothic Tales, Winter's Tales, and Out of Africa under the pseudonym Isak Dinesen. Syphilis, she maintained, sold her soul to the devil for the ability to tell stories. Now imagine a pale, fragile bacterium that can dictate why great people do what they do, thereby determining the course of world events. That bacterium may have caused Flaubert to become a writer instead of a lawyer and Hitler to accelerate his war effort beyond reason at the end, for fear that his heart might at any moment balloon with a fatal luetic aneurysm. Finally, imagine a book dedicated to bringing syphilis in from the wings of biography, a book in which evidence obtained from fourthhand accounts, legend, and works of fiction is piled so high on the side of the great pox that even a negative Wassermann test cannot tip the balance in favor of some other disorder. Imagine how difficult it must be to diagnose in a patient a disease other than the "Great Imitator" if it is the only disease you know. For if your foremost assets as a self-made syphilologist are zeal, passion, and persistence in the pursuit of an illness that defies diagnosis at every stage, you are bound to find syphilis wherever you look: in Baudelaire, Schubert, Schumann, Joyce, Columbus, Daudet, Poe, Gaugin, Churchill (Randolph), Al Capone, Ivan the Terrible, Manet, Idi Amin, Darwin, Donizetti, Dostoyevsky, Lenin, Meriwether Lewis, Mozart, Robert Mugabe, Napoleon, Paganini, Rabelais, Stalin, Tolstoy, and Woodrow Wilson. You will see it in any idiosyncracy -- Mary Todd Lincoln's shopping compulsion and Honest Abe's melancholia and hypochondriasis -- and in any poor, departed soul whose death has generated even a hint of diagnostic confusion. If you can imagine those things, then you have an idea of what awaits you in Pox: Genius, Madness, and the Mysteries of Syphilis. Exotic flowers of speculation bloom luxuriantly here. If Oscar Wilde was correct when he said that "history is merely gossip," then Pox is history at its best. *Philip A. Mackowiak, M.D.*

From Booklist
More than 500 years after the great European-American encounter, scholars still debate whether syphilis was America's thank-you to Europe, especially for Christopher Columbus. Hayden presents an exhaustively researched case for syphilis taking its maiden voyage to Europe "aboard" Columbus' crew. Thus launched, pox, as it was called, so took Europe by storm that by the nineteenth century, according to some estimates, more than 15 percent of European men were infected. Of the wide variety of "cures," many, including mercury, were arguably worse than the disease. Until penicillin in the late 1940s, none actually cured it. After a tour through syphilis' grisly history, Hayden presents case studies of various nineteenth- and twentieth-century luminaries rumored to have been syphilitic. The well-documented accounts allow readers to draw their own conclusions about men as diverse as Beethoven, Flaubert, Lincoln, and Hitler. There aren't many books about syphilis, and aside from those about the Tuskegee syphilis experiment, few are more interesting. An if-you-read-one-book-about kind of book. *Donna Chavez*

Users Review

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What do you regarding book? It is not important with you? Or just adding material when you want something to explain what your own problem? How about your time? Or are you busy person? If you don't

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Donna Davis:

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