



Catching Breath: The Making and Unmaking of Tuberculosis

Kathryn Lougheed

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When our ancestors set off from the cradle of civilization on their journey toward populating the planet forty-thousand years ago, tuberculosis hitched a ride with us and has been with us ever since.

Mycobacterium tuberculosis, the organism responsible for TB, has learned through natural selection to be an almost perfect pathogen. The bacterium can enter into a latent state when a host's immune system is strong, only to come back to life when the immune system has become weakened. TB even has come up with clever ways to avoid being killed by antibiotics. Throw in the compounding problems of antibiotic resistance now found in every country worldwide, immune systems weakened by the HIV epidemic and the ravages of poverty, and it's no surprise that approximately one-third of the world's population is believed to be infected by TB. That's more than two billion people.

Former tuberculosis researcher Kathryn Lougheed traces the history of TB through the ages, from its time as an infection of hunter-gatherers to the first human villages, and how industrialization and urbanization helped TB become the monstrous disease it is today. She also looks at the latest research in fighting TB, shares interviews of doctors on the frontline treating it, and the personal experiences of people whose lives are threatened or decimated by the disease known as “the Robber of Youth.”

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