

The Plague by Albert Camus recommended by James Heffernan

A program of the Center for the Book at the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities, the “VABooks!” column suggests books for Virginians to read in common. This month, Charlottesville resident James Heffernan—author of *Cultivating Picturacy* and Emeritus Professor of English at Dartmouth—recommends *The Plague* by Albert Camus. We hope that individuals, book groups, families, and neighbors will read and discuss VABooks! selections.



“Literature,” wrote Ezra Pound, “is news that stays news.”

First published sixty years ago in France, Albert Camus’s *The Plague* looks out of date, for it tells of a bubonic plague brought by ship-borne rats to an Algerian port city in the 1940s. Why should we care about bubonic plague? Isn’t that a medieval disease long since banished from the civilized world by the powers of medical science?

Ironically enough, that’s exactly what most of the city officials in the novel think too. In the middle of 20th century, they can’t believe in such a thing as a plague. They consider it “a mere bogey of the mind, a bad dream that will pass away.” But when it threatens to kill up to half the town’s population, officials close the town until the plague runs its course.

To grasp the full impact of Camus’s novel, we must recall that in the early 1940s, when he was writing it, the strongest nations in the world were fighting each other for the second time. Scarcely 20 years after the first war slaughtered more than 8,500,000 people, the second resumed the slaughter—just like a returning plague.

The novel does not mention World War II. But early on, the doctor who tells the story and plays a central role in it observes that plagues and wars take us equally by surprise, and both commonly last longer than we expect

them to. Sound familiar? We may not be able to imagine what it was like to read this novel in June of 1947, barely two years after war ended in Europe, but no one can read the doctor’s comparison now without feeling a jolt of recognition.

The plague of this novel raises the very same questions posed by war: what can we do to stop it, and how can we keep it from coming back? The novel answers in terms that have nothing to do with guns and tanks and bombs and everything to do with healing. Striving only to save lives by fighting disease, the doctor quietly perseveres. Far more by example than by precept, he teaches those around him to endure the plague as long as it lasts and never cease to struggle against it—no matter how many it kills.

In the end, the doctor says that he has recorded “what had to be done, and what assuredly would have to be done again in the never-ending fight against terror and its relentless onslaughts.” If these words make you feel one more jolt of recognition, you might carefully consider what the doctor says about waging the war against terror. “Despite their personal afflictions,” he says, it must be waged “by all who, while unable to be saints but refusing to bow down to pestilences, strive their utmost to be healers.”

And if you want to know what a healer is, read this book.