The great influenza: the epic story of the deadliest plague in history is a great book. It is well conceived, well researched, and extremely well written. The appropriate audience goes beyond the interested physician, scientist, or medical student. The book will also appeal to history buffs, who will be fascinated by the dangerous mix of politics, war, and pestilence presented here. In the first third of the book, the word “influenza” rarely appears, because author John M. Barry is painting the landscape of science, medicine, and politics in the pre–World War I era. What comes to life in these pages is the sad state of US science and medicine at the time. For example, admission to US medical schools was dependent not on academic achievement, but rather on whether the applicant would pay the tuition. This changed with the Flexner Report, published in 1910 by Abraham Flexner, and with the establishment of such institutions as the Rockefeller Institute for Medical Research, ably led by Simon Flexner (brother of Abraham). As highlighted by Barry, the other major change leading to the modern era of American medicine was the founding of Johns Hopkins Medical School at the very end of the 19th century, with William Welch as the legendary force behind it. For anyone who has had the opportunity to interact with Johns Hopkins University, this introductory chapter in Barry’s book is mandatory reading.

The writing is facile and gripping at the same time, and the author does an extraordinarily good job of creating a fluent narrative from historical research. Even when Barry describes the replication of the influenza virus in the cell, the writing is easily comprehensible and convincing. He creates numerous wonderful images, such as likening the translation of a messenger RNA to reading Braille. When it comes to the actual influenza pandemic of 1918, Barry does a brilliant job. The facts of this extraordinary event are well presented and discussed. The reader is given the diverse data on the number of people who died during this pandemic; descriptions of those who did the analysis and the basis for arriving at the different numbers. It is not a question of if, but when we will be faced with another epidemic of this magnitude.

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Overall, this book is engrossing reading, with plenty of relevance for our own time, which is threatened by natural (and/or deliberately released) emerging pathogens. It is a question not of if, but of when we will be faced with another pandemic of this magnitude. On the last page of the book, Victor Vaughan is quoted on the 1918 influenza pandemic: “Civilization could have disappeared within a few more weeks.”