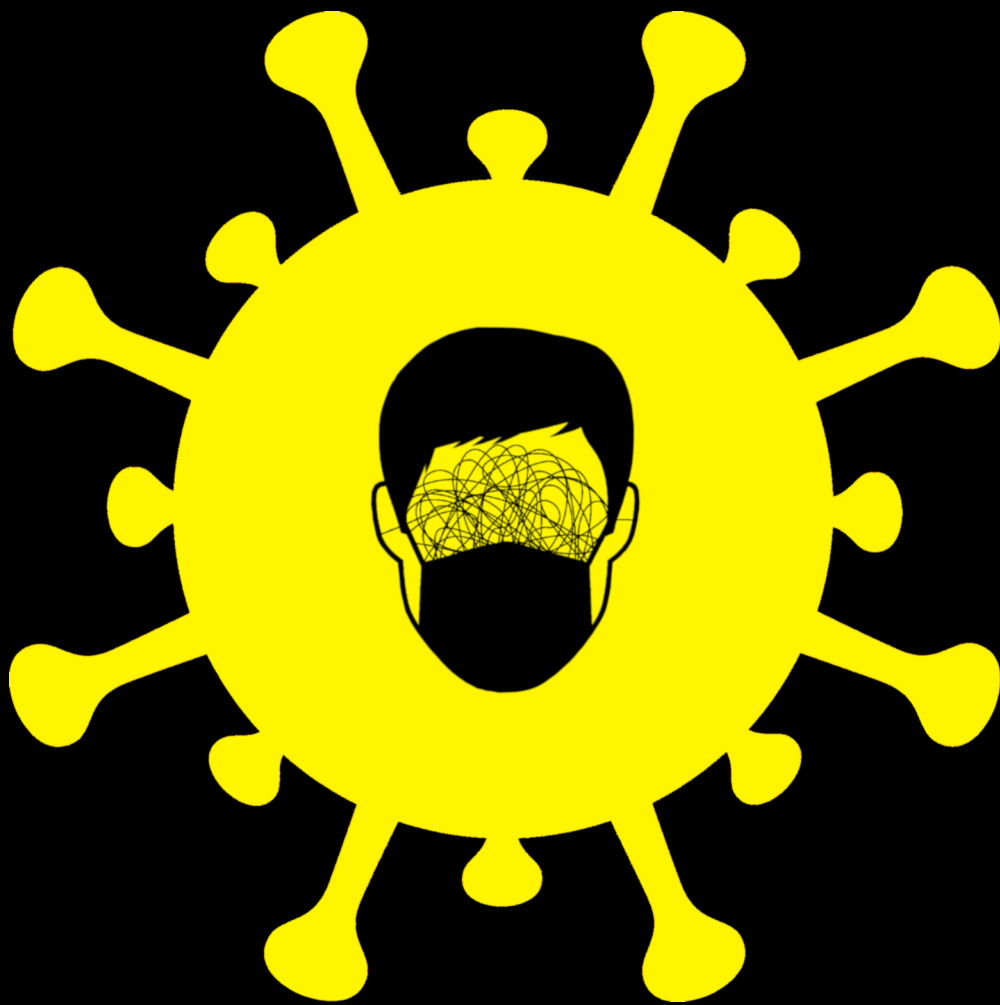


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Pandemic Perspectives: Reflections on a Post-Covid World



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Plague Fiction: Reading About Epidemics During Covid-19

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Abstract:

How do we use literature during the time- and space-altering experience of a pandemic? That is the central question posed by the research project Lockdown Reading. During 2020 and 2021, Lockdown Reading collected information about pandemic reading habits through surveys and interviews, resulting in a collection of 860 survey responses and 68 qualitative interviews. Building on Lockdown Reading's data collection, this paper presents one reading trend of 2020/2021: the interest in reading fiction about epidemics in general and Albert Camus' 1947 novel, *The Plague*, in particular. Unsurprisingly, *The Plague* is not the only piece of plague fiction that appears in Lockdown Reading's data. Novels such as José Saramago's *Blindness* (1995), Emma Donoghue's *The Pull of the Stars* (2020), Ling Ma's *Severance* (2018), Liam Brown's *Skin* (2019), and Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* (2015) are also frequently seen. But *The Plague* has appeared with a particular regularity in surveys, interviews, and in the press, exemplifying the idea that plague fiction is the ideal case-reading "for the moment". In this paper, I will explore some possible reasons for the novel's newfound popularity and present a reading of *The Plague* that takes readers' responses into account.

Keywords: COVID-19, Literature, Albert Camus, The Plague, Lockdown Reading

Introduction

How do we use literature during the time- and space-altering experience of a pandemic? That is the central question posed by the research project Lockdown Reading. A couple of months into life under the restrictions that followed the widespread outbreak of Covid-19 in Europe in spring 2020, a team of four literary critics from Denmark and the UK began a comparative study of what, how, and why readers in both countries have used fiction during the Covid-19 pandemic. During 2020 and 2021, Lockdown Reading collected information about pandemic reading habits through surveys and interviews, resulting in a collection of 860 survey responses and 68 qualitative interviews.

Building on Lockdown Reading's data collection, this paper presents one reading trend of 2020/2021: the interest in reading fiction about epidemics in general and Albert Camus' 1947 novel, *The Plague*,

in particular. The resurgence of this particular piece of plague fiction can be easily seen in sales figures. On 3 March 2020, Édistat – a company specialising in statistics on book sales – stated that the Folio version of the French original had experienced a rise in sales in the first eight weeks of 2020 (franceinfo 2020). In the UK, sales of the novel had soared by 1,000 percent in November 2020 (Blake 2020), while the Danish translation went up with 1,215 percent compared to the year before. Of course, the rise in sales numbers does not simply illustrate a one-way increase in readers' interest in this specific title. It is also indicative of publishing houses marketing specific titles in light of the pandemic, as well as a heightened interest in the novel by the press (e.g., Carroll 2020), all of which is itself affected by readers' demand for "timely" titles.

Looking at sales figures, library data, and press interest only tells part of the story of what has been read during the beginning of the global health crisis in 2020/2021. Even though this data will give a picture of what titles people buy or loan, it can only give an incomplete record of what they actually *read* – especially when lockdowns and restrictions have re-structured how people find themselves in time and space and made reading habits less predictable. Furthermore, sales numbers cannot tell us anything about readers' experiences with literature: did reading plague fiction cause fear, make them felt seen, or simply fail to deliver what they hoped? Book historian Leah Price recently wrote that "others' reading remains as hard to peer into as others' hearts" (2019: 50), but even if there is undeniable truth in that statement, Lockdown Reading has looked for answers to the questions of how we engage with literature during Covid-19.

Unsurprisingly, *The Plague* is not the only piece of plague fiction that appears in Lockdown Reading's data. Novels such as José Saramago's *Blindness* (1995), Emma Donoghue's *The Pull of the Stars* (2020), Ling Ma's *Severance* (2018), Liam Brown's *Skin* (2019), and Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* (2015) are also frequently seen. But *The Plague* has appeared with a particular regularity in surveys, interviews, and in the press, exemplifying the idea that plague fiction is the ideal case-reading "for the moment". In this paper, I will explore some possible reasons for the novel's newfound popularity and present a reading of *The Plague* that takes readers' responses into account.

Reading *The Plague* During Covid-19

The reason for the sudden popularity of *The Plague* is at first glance rather banal: its title. As the title suggests, Camus's novel is about an epidemic. At the same time, the novel is generally understood as a narrative representing not "just" the pathological phenomenon of a plague, but multiple plagues: fascism, the Vichy regime, antisemitism. It has been interpreted as such by thinkers and literary critics (Sartre 1964; Barthes 1955; Felman 1992) since it was published in the aftermath of the Second World War. These moral plagues might be what this book is *really* about. Yet there is no doubt that especially during the Covid-19 pandemic it has also been purchased, or taken down from bookshelves, and read more literally as what it appears to be: a chronicle about a plague outbreak in the Algerian town Oran during the 1940s.

This sort of "literal" reading of the novel involves what Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus have called "surface reading" (2009). Best and Marcus describe habits of reading that focus on "what is evident, perceptible, apprehensible in the texts; what is neither hidden nor hiding" (2009: 9). They advocate "surface reading" in this light as an alternative to the kinds of critical and "symptomatic reading" that have dominated the academy – most notably since Fredric Jameson's *The Political Unconscious* (1981) – which have led professional readers to adopt an "interpretive method that argues that the most interesting aspect of a text is what it represses" (Best & Marcus 2009: 3).

Reading *The Plague* in order to compare the Covid-19 pandemic to another epidemic – the plague – involves attending to the surface of the novel, "just reading" (Best and Marcus 2009: 12-13) rather

than reading the epidemic as an allegory, a symbol, or a symptom of what can be found between the lines. This is what readers in the Lockdown Reading project describe themselves as having done. In an interview, the reader Rebecca, a white professional from Northern England, told Lockdown Reading that reading *The Plague* in 2020 made her compare the different circumstances of an epidemic today with a plague outbreak during the 1940s. She says:

...it's just so similar to what's going on but maybe a bit more extreme, I think. Because obviously, that was written before technology so, you know, reading about people trying to get letters out to their loved ones and trying to get home to their loved ones and things like that. It did actually make me feel fortunate that we do have technology, that we don't have those issues of trying to connect with our families during this time. So, I think it did put things into perspective...

Rebecca's statement leads to a lot of questions about how *The Plague* is being used as a tool for putting the Covid-19 pandemic "into perspective". First of all, to point out the obvious: Covid-19 and the plague outbreak as presented in Camus's novel are very different illnesses. Secondly, there was no outbreak of plague in Algeria the 1940s: the outbreak is made up. But the fact that the novel cannot claim to be "based on a true story" – not on the surface anyway – does not stop Rebecca from using the novel to gain a perspective on her own situation during lockdowns and restrictions in 2020. The striking difference to her lies in the different stages of technological development during contrasting times of quarantine, not between the fictional outbreak in *The Plague* and the lived reality of her own pandemic experience.

"Learning From History"

When Rebecca reads *The Plague* as a historical account of living through an epidemic with effects similar to those of Covid-19, she is able to do so because of elements of the narrative that feels especially striking to the 2020/2021 reader, notably the descriptions of the altering of time and separation from friends and family when in quarantine (Camus 2020: 226, 53). This response to *The Plague* as a reflection of life during Covid-19 is just one example among many readers talking about their experience of reading plague fiction. What many of the plague fiction readers in Lockdown Reading's survey share is a turn to fictional pasts of epidemic themed novels to understand their own present. For example, the reader Carina, a Danish high school history teacher, expresses how literature contains important knowledge from former generations who have gone through similar trials:

...there's something that makes these books still talk to people today. And what is that? What can they provide us with? Of course, this appeal becomes extra strong when we find ourselves in a time when we think: 'Gosh, this is what they experienced during the Spanish Flu and the Plague.' So, in a way, it becomes clear that humans have something in common when something like this hit...

Likewise Nicola, a British historian at university in the UK, relates a very similar response to reading Emma Donoghue's *The Pull of the Stars*: "...there's something quite comforting about knowing that this is something that humans deal with, and have dealt with at regular intervals." Both readers find comfort in "learning from history" and identifying with the trials of people before them.

Carina and Nicola's reflections stress the idea of us having something in common with earlier generations living through periods of urgency and anxiety due to epidemics. In that view, the pandemic they are experiencing in real time is merely the latest version of a long series of epidemics that people have experienced and endured in the past. Although this idea of "learning from history"

is in itself sympathetic – and to be expected from professional historians – the context of the literary fiction that Carina and Nicola are taking these lessons from complicates the possibility for such comparison. Camus' *Plague*, after all, is a fictional account of a pandemic, not a historical one. Nevertheless, Nicola finds that fiction is “more immersive” than reading historical accounts: “I guess you get more kinds of empathy [for the characters], even though they are not real. [...] It's more immersive when you're in a story...” Interestingly, Nicola also points out that even though another piece of historical fiction - Donoghue's *The Pull of the Stars* - is “built on a true story” of the flu pandemic as experienced at a maternity ward in Dublin in 1918, the development of its characters is still shaped by literary devices. This speaks to the claims that history has on fiction and vice versa: Nicola, the reader and the historian, offers the insight that understanding the past as well as the present must always involve storytelling. The importance of literary devices in the creation of the characters and their epidemic experience of course also applies to a work of literary fiction like Camus' *The Plague* - even if the epidemic is read, through allegory, as a historical account of fascism in France.

Read allegorically or on the surface, historical narratives like *The Plague* clearly continue to shape their readers' understanding of the present through fictional renditions of the past. As such, *The Plague* raises questions of how fictional narratives engage with historical events of the past and the present, and how fiction and history relate to each other in general. As has been argued by others, there exists an intricate relationship between writing fiction and history. The literary critic Frank Kermode even believed it to be commonplace that “the writing of history involves the use of regulative fictions” (1967: 43), and the effects of devices of narrative history in this work of realist literary fiction, for instance its chronological plotline, have been identified by readers like Nicola and Rebecca. The subsequent analysis of *The Plague* will build from these observations to develop a reading of the work as an example of literary fiction drawing on historical writing.

The Fictional Historian

A primary way *The Plague* appeals to its readers as a “historical” text is through the construction of its narrator. In the first chapter of *The Plague*, the narrator presents himself as an eyewitness to the events that he is going to relive for his reader through the text. Taking this homodiegetic stand, the narrator positions himself thoroughly at the centre of the narrative. Using this literary device, *The Plague* installs itself in the plague fiction canon. Considering Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722), which Camus quotes in the epigraph of *The Plague*, Jennifer Cooke writes in *Legacies of Plague*:

...due to its eyewitness narrator, *A Journal of the Plague Year* is a more effective tool for expressing the horror and extent of plague, and thus more likely to influence the spiritual life of its readers than a straightforward repetition of the well-worn ‘warning to beware’ formula (2009: 26).

Following Cooke, the eyewitness narrator plays an important part in making fiction more “immersive” than historical documents without a clear narrative voice: identification with the narrator makes it easier to convey the intimate experience of an epidemic. But the eyewitness narrator in *The Plague* is different from most of his counterparts in that he deliberately conceals his own identity for most of the narrative, building, as he says, on “a considerable number of testimonies” (Camus 2020: 7) in order to present the scenario of the plague outbreak from different angles. This concealment of the eyewitness narrator creates the sense of an authorial narrator, a voice that floats from character to character and from one part of town to another in the quest for an objective account of the plague outbreak in Oran. At various times, the narrator presents himself as a “chronicler” and a “historian” (Camus 2020: 7) while the narrative is referred to as a “chronicle” (Camus 2020: 232). These ways of referring to the narrative and the narrator fortifies the reader's impression of the novel as a rendering

of actual events presented in chronological order, an “ordering procedure” (White 1987: 34) known from countless historical accounts. The novel’s use of the figure of the historian is deepened when the narrator describes his mission as that of the “chronicler”:

His task is merely to say: ‘This happened’, when he knows that it did indeed happen, that it affected the life of a whole society and that there are consequently thousands of witnesses who will weigh up in their hearts the truth of what he is saying (Camus 2020: 7).

By his own account, the eyewitness narrator functions as a trustworthy source of information about what happened during the plague in Oran. In order to secure this “common” truth and to be able to speak for all, he does not think it fit to name himself before the end of the novel. Being “invisible” allows him to appear objective, to represent the whole city and its trials without colouring it with his own feelings and beliefs (Camus 2020: 232). It follows that for most of *The Plague*, the novel – despite its eyewitness narrator – appears to be written in the third person.

This way of representing a fictional plague outbreak makes visible the entangled relationship between history writing and fiction. When the narrator claims he will “act as a historian” (Camus 2020: 7), the novel draws both on the credibility of the eyewitness account and on the chronicler’s (seemingly) objective piecing together of history in order to cement its authenticity.

This kind of framing of a fictional narrative has a long literary history; just think of the editors’ forewords to epistolary novels, claiming that the letters were written by real people and discovered in a drawer before their publication. These “editors” – like the one ensuring the reader the authenticity of the scandalous letters in Pierre Choderlos de Laclos’s *Dangerous liaisons* (1782) – were of course no other than the author himself weaving the fabric of fiction. Defoe, who wrote the 1722 novel *A Journal of the Plague Year* from which Camus draws for his plague fiction, was an early master of this kind of confusion of fiction and journalism. *A Journal of the Plague Year* appears in this grey zone of Defoe’s own making, purporting to be an eyewitness account of the Great Plague of London in 1665 although it was written by Defoe, himself just five years old in 1665, in the years before its publication. In the same vein, by claiming to be a historian and building his narrative on testimonies, Camus’ narrator perpetuates this sense that he is leaning, not on imagination, but on documentation and proof.

This framing of the narrative as historical encourages responses like Rebecca’s, who mirrored her own Covid-19 experience directly with the experiences of the fictional figures in *The Plague*. If a plague, as Cooke argues, is “an unknown force, a mysterious power of death, [that] creates a void which fiction and narratives fill”, then the readers that I have quoted – motivated by the “unknown force” of the Covid-19 pandemic – sought to fill the “void” of uncertainty and anxiety by comparing their own situation with that of fictional characters’ experiences of imagined pandemics of the past (2009: 32). This comparison is made possible, even compelling, by the novel invoking the narrator-as-historian, a literary device that bridges the gap between the historical event of Covid-19 and the fictional plague outbreak in Camus’s novel.

Without disregarding arguments for the compelling style and form of Camus’ writing itself, I argue that the narrative claiming to be “historical” makes it possible for readers like Rebecca to compare their own immediate experiences in the year of 2020 to those of fictional characters. The novel’s presentation of itself as historical renders it accessible in such terms to the reader coming to terms with the Covid-19 pandemic within which she finds herself.

The Past-Future of *The Plague*

Literature drawing its marks of credibility from historiography or claiming to be “based on a true story,” is as common as history writing that leans on strong fictional (or even literary) elements. But history and fiction seem to have become particularly interwoven to many reading plague fiction during Covid-19. Whilst readers mentioned so far have used plague fiction to seek out knowledge of past generations that helps them understand their own experiences in the present, other readers have used fiction as a way of coming to terms with Covid-19 itself as a historical event to be reflected upon in the future. In these cases, literature lends structure to the experience of time even when it is not being directly read as historical.

In *The Sense of an Ending*, Kermode argues that humans use narrative to give structure to the idea of eternity: we have “a need in the moment of existence to belong, to be related to a beginning and to an end” (1967: 4). In order to come to terms with the briefness of human life, we install ourselves in the middle of an expansive storyline. Literature, in Kermode’s account, has long been a favoured method of achieving this, a place where humans have imagined the End and the Beginning since Antiquity (1967: 7).

Applying Kermode’s idea of narrative to readers’ experience of reading *The Plague* during Covid-19 provides an explanation of how the narrative structure of the novel offers a way to come to terms with living in and with a pandemic. While giving the reader the possibility to compare her experience to that of the characters, plague fiction also allows the reader to place herself within a timeframe that stretches into the future as well as into the past. Consider the reflections of the reader Fran:

...what happens today will be the history that people read about, in the same way as what I’m reading now was contemporary at the point of reading. It’s not now, so what’s happening to us now, although it feels we’re consumed by it and it feels very awful, it will pass. I think literature helps with that.

Reading plague fiction lets this reader experience herself as being at the centre of history rather than at the fringes of it. In short, literature makes it easier to see beyond the trials of 2020/2021 to a future anterior. By telling the story of a plague outbreak that was experienced in the past, the narrator of *The Plague* makes it possible to imagine a time when we will look back at Covid-19, and the deathrates and lockdowns of 2020, as both history and a story to be told.

Competing interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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