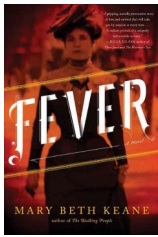


# Dispelling Dark Myths



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Did you ever hear the story of Typhoid Mary? as a child? I remember a gaggle of us neighborhoods kids scaring each other with stories of the woman whose myth lived long after she died. It's not a person we learned about in school, yet just the mention of her name culled up disease, darkness and death. That's one reason I was happy to come across this sympathetic portrait of an Irish-American woman who was much maligned by the press.

Not a biography, this fictional account relies on many true-to-life details to make its story highly believable. Young Mary Mallon emigrated from Ireland at age fifteen to stay with an aunt. She soon went to work and started as a laundress--hot dirty work that offered no hope of advancement. Being smart and clever, Mary noticed that the cooks were paid much more and had more freedom. She also liked the creative aspect of crafting fine meals for the wealthy of early 1900s New York City.

Mary got her big break as a substitute cook, and she turned one success into a career. By the time she was 17, she received an excellent summer gig in Oyster Bay, but unfortunately fever swept through the summer place leaving the baby she loved and several other members of the household dead.

A German socialist immigrant invited Mary to move in with him--he did not believe in marriage, and though he drank and had trouble keeping a job, Mary loved him. Before long a health engineer tracked Mary down, believing her to be the first healthy carrier of typhoid disease. His theory was that she inadvertently infected many of her employers and their families.

So one day, at a fairly new posting, he turned up with a handful of helpers and took Mary against her will to a hospital in New York. Before long, they shipped her to North Brother Island where they kept her in isolation from 1907-1910. At first, they refused to let her contact anyone. She lived in a small cottage alone on an island with many tubercular patients. Several times each day, nurses invaded her solitude to take specimens of her blood and urine. The only person truly kind to her was the gardener who would let her help him grow things and share conversations. The author presents Mary as an intelligent woman, insightful, stubborn, and willing to fight for her rights. She's painted against the backdrop of a misogynistic culture and a city teeming with immigrants, on the cusp of modernity. It's a historical page-turner that you will enjoy.

For a thrilling nonfiction account of a disease epidemic that will scare you and rush you to the flu shot clinic, read John Barry's *The Great Influenza: the epic story of the deadliest plague in history*.

Posted by Dory L. on December 3, 2013

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