

*The Great Influenza* by John M. Barry

Reading about a worldwide pandemic while experiencing a worldwide pandemic may seem a bit much. But I found this nonfiction history of the so-called “Spanish” Flu of 1918 fascinating as well as quite meaningful. The pandemic that hit the United States during the height of the First World War claimed its victims with chilling speed: some succumbed within hours of collapsing, in apparent good health in the morning and a corpse by nightfall. The victims were most often young people, what we would call twenty and thirty-somethings. Medicine was still a very basic science, and doctors were at a loss to treat the strange list of symptoms.

Then again, that 1918 Influenza was also caused by a virus, though not the COVID-19 virus. It surged through the densely-packed army camps and raged in city tenements, and over a period of several years, it mutated. If those who fell so very sick recovered, they often suffered after-effects for years and even lifelong. The virus would seem to go away, claiming less victims after several weeks or a month or two – and then come roaring back several seasons later, even deadlier. Governments around the world often reacted by censoring the news accounts, in order not to damage morale at the warfront. If they even did anything, officials were slow to take action. Barry has filled his book with glimpses of individuals caught up in battling an invisible killer. Probably few of us know much about the “First” Pandemic, but this book gives a window on what it was like. I recommend it.