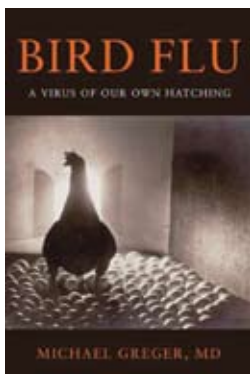


# Is Death Coming Home to Roost?

Book Review by Mark Hawthorne

*Bird Flu: A Virus of Our Own Hatching* by Michael Greger, MD (New York: Lantern Books, November, 2006). \$30 hardcover. 465 pages.



Some years ago while living on Crete and desperate for a good book to read, I bought the thickest paperback I could find: *The Stand* by Stephen King. King's most popular novel tells the apocalyptic tale of a rapidly mutating virus created by humans that wipes out billions of people and brings a halt to civilization. Reading in the comfort of my hostel each night, this chilling work of fiction was highly entertaining but, of course, completely outlandish. Or maybe not.

Just as much a page-turner as King's bestseller, Dr. Michael Greger's *Bird Flu: A Virus of Our Own Hatching* is more terrifying than anything a horror writer

nation—the right combination of mutations to spread not just in one elevator or building, but every building, everywhere, around the globe. One superflu virus. It's happened before, and experts predict it may soon happen again.”

Dr. Greger sets the stage for what could come by giving readers a grisly account of a previous avian influenza outbreak: the 1918 flu pandemic, in which 50 to 100 million humans perished. These were gruesome deaths, with blood oozing from eye sockets as the victim's lungs liquefied. Fatalities were so abundant that officials were unable to keep up with burying the corpses. It seems this was merely a sample of what's in store for humanity. “As devastating as the 1918 pandemic was,” Dr. Greger writes, “on average the mortality rate was less than five percent. The H5N1 strain of

travel has become more commonplace in the last 300 years, pandemics have developed a pattern, with a new one arriving about every 27.5 years. Dr. Greger observes that 39 years is the longest we've gone between pandemics, and the last one was the Hong Kong flu of 1968—39 years ago.

What *Bird Flu* does, then, is eloquently contextualize the subject, giving us a greater understanding of the virus' origins and our critical role in it. The director of Public Health and Animal Agriculture at the Humane Society of the United States, Dr. Greger examines bird flu from every angle, creating a meticulously researched work that traces how agricultural, scientific, environmental, political and economic forces have conspired to transform a virus that once threatened only waterfowl into a “highly pathogenic avian influenza” destined to lay waste to large segments of human population.

Among the stops on the author's bird flu reality tour is President George W. Bush's decision in April of 2006 to lift the ban on poultry products from China—a country well known for its recent outbreaks of avian influenza—possibly in return for China's agreement to drop its mad cow disease-related ban on U.S. beef imports. (One disease for another, perhaps? No trade deficit there.) Other troubling highlights include the world's inadequate hospital capacity and the inability to create a vaccine, or enough of it, to combat a virus that kills half its victims. In other words, we are as ill-prepared for avian flu today as we were in 1918. And, as Dr. Greger notes, not only is H5N1 worse than what our grandparents faced, but 21st century transportation means a virus can travel around the planet in 24 hours, not a year.

The book is also a sobering lesson in how many of our human ailments, from the common cold to AIDS, have come from our oppression of animals, especially the practice of breeding and raising them for food. (Dr. Greger notes that human influenza began with the domestication of ducks 4,500 years ago.) Yet authorities refuse to confront the obvious cause of this “virus of our own hatching,” preferring instead to devote their resources to containing the outbreak by culling chickens and turkeys and extolling the virtues of well-cooked meat.

Even without the looming pandemic, *Bird Flu* reminds us that eating animal flesh can be deadly. Dr. Greger writes: “For the same reason that people don't get Dutch Elm Disease or ever seem to come down with a really bad case of aphids, food products of animal origin are the source of most cases of food poisoning, with chicken the most common culprit.” He notes that although the USDA asserts that proper cooking methods kill all viruses, including bird flu, 76 million Americans still suffer food poisoning every year and an estimated 5,000 die from food-borne illness. The average American kitchen, it seems, has become a biohazard, with pathogenic bacteria found on food-preparation surfaces, sinks and utensils. Dr. Greger quotes flu expert Albert Osterhaus, who concluded that “the gastrointestinal tract of humans is a portal of entry for H5N1.”

*Bird Flu* is exceptionally well documented, with more than 3,000 references and input from the most respected names in the fields of communicable diseases and virus research. With so many insights from health experts, food industry representatives and medical journals, this is an excellent resource for animal advocates looking to cite the latest data. Moreover, in an effort to make this book as accessible as possible, Lantern Books has even posted the entire manuscript online at [birdflubook.com](http://birdflubook.com).

Although a global pandemic seems inevitable, Dr. Greger's landmark book suggests an obvious (some might say radical) solution: the elimination of intensive poultry production. Perhaps this is more wishful thinking, given the world's ever-growing appetite for cheap animal protein, but others in the scientific community are also supporting this recommendation, so we may at least see improvements in the way agribusiness operates. *Bird Flu: A Virus of Our Own Hatching* could herald dramatic changes in farming practices, finally driving decision-makers to critically examine not only how this virus came to be, but how we can curtail it and future diseases lurking within animal factories around the globe. ■

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could imagine, since it depicts a real-life doomsday scenario that seems poised to occur very soon; indeed, the new H5N1 strain of influenza, known as “bird flu,” has mutated into a form that can be transmitted by human contact, though not yet on a massive scale, meaning a mass outbreak is more a question of *when*, not *if*.

Whereas humans generally contract the disease by ingesting contaminated birds or being in frequent contact with them, bird flu could blanket the globe when the virus learns to jump from human to human. The author writes: “One day soon, experts fear, with more and more people becoming infected, the virus will finally figure out the combi-

bird flu virus now spreading like a plague across the world currently kills about 50 percent of its known human victims, on par with some strains of Ebola, making it potentially ten times as deadly as the worst plague in human history.” One reason, he explains, is the 1918 virus attacked only the lungs, whereas H5N1 shuts down *all* internal organs.

The media have given bird flu a lot of attention, but they do very little parsing of what it may entail. While many news sources have warned of impending catastrophe and economic collapse, conservative pundits maintain all the talk of a disaster is just perverse wishful thinking. What these skeptics seem to overlook is that as global