It Might Just Kill You

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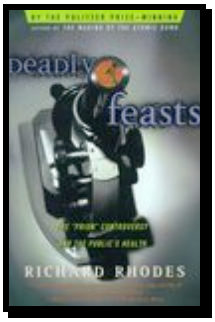

By Richard Rhodes
Simon & Schuster (May 22, 1998)

In recent years, many doctors and nutritionists have recommended that people eat less red meat in order to help prevent high cholesterol and heart disease. Yet very few people consider the fact that less beef might actually save them from a crippling and fatal brain disease called Kuru. Pulitzer Prize-winning author Richard Rhodes conducted extensive research to learn as much as possible about this disease and other diseases like it. In his book, *Deadly Feasts*, he follows the origins of these mysterious illnesses and goes so far as to explore the possibility of an epidemic in the near future.

Like any good story, *Deadly Feasts* engages the reader fro the very beginning. In fact, the very first paragraph gives a detailed description of a ceremony in which a group of women and children in an undeveloped part of New Guinea feast upon a deceased member of their community. Cannibalism is a reoccurring theme, appearing every so often to emphasize the disturbing nature of the book itself. It seems as though Rhodes wants his readers to feel uneasy about this concept, particularly when he extends it to include the eating of animals by other animals, including humans. Perhaps he is hopeful that in portraying these acts as cannibalistic, he will persuade readers to reconsider eating meat altogether. Or perhaps he is not that optimistic and is only drawing these similarities for dramatic effect. In any case, he gets the message across.

Often times, scientific novels are inaccessible to the everyday reader with no scientific background. Fortunately, *Deadly Feasts* is quite different; all terms and concepts that may seem foreign are explained in such a way that even the average Joe can understand their meaning. It is always advantageous when readers can easily grasp what an author is trying to communicate, for it is difficult to enjoy something that you do not understand. Furthermore, it is not solely a book containing scientific jargon; it is a story that unfolds right before the reader's eyes.

Rhodes takes the reader along a journey of discovery as a group of scientists and other professionals track a deadly new brain disease as it crosses species barriers and national borders. The disease first emerges in New Guinea, affecting the very same people that are depicted practicing cannibalistic acts at the beginning of the book. The disease, known as Kuru, has symptoms similar to those that are common in degenerative brain diseases such as Parkinson's disease, Alzheimer's Disease, and Multiple Sclerosis. However, the problem with this comparison is that none of these other diseases are thought to be infectious and thus cannot be spread from one person to another. On the other hand, Rhodes indicates that Kuru is clearly spreading and is doing so at epidemic proportions.

Rhodes then connects Kuru to a degenerative brain disease known as Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease (CJD) that is sporadically found in humans. Later, CJD was also associated with a similar disease found in sheep. Each one of these illnesses is unlike any that has been encountered in the past, but they are strikingly similar to one another. One scientist collectively referred to them as 'prion' diseases, for he believed they were caused by mutated *pro*teins and were *in*fectious. Years later, another disease appears in cows in Britain, afflicting entire herds of animals. The disease is given the name Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE) but is more commonly referred to as Mad Cow Disease.

Humans have eaten beef for centuries without a disease presenting the cow having been passed on to the human consumer. Unfortunately, Mad Cow Disease proves to be different. As Rhodes reveals to his readers, diseases like CJD and BSE are capable of overcoming the species barriers that keep most illnesses at bay. Thus, it is not long after the outbreak of BSE that humans begin dying from their own version of Mad Cow Disease which is referred to as new variant Creutzfeldt - Jakob disease.

A sense of impending doom escalates as the book progresses. Little comfort is found in the final chapter, in which Rhodes shares that the spread of Mad Cow Disease to humans in the form of new variant Creutzfeldt - Jakob disease may soon "amplify to epidemic scale." In both humans and animals, this disease is fatal, and there is currently no prospective treatment or cure. Moreover, the resulting death is not pretty—it is long and excruciating, leaving the victim incapable of controlling his or her own body. A victim can be infected without even knowing, and symptoms don't appear until years later. One expert predicts that by the year 2015 approximately 200,000 deaths a year may be a direct result of this infectious disease.

Essentially, the book is like any other mystery novel. Instead of detectives, however, there are scientists; instead of everything coming together at the end, may questions are left unanswered. Despite the extensive research into the so-called 'prion' diseases, there is still a great deal of speculation as to their causes.

Throughout the book, Rhodes gives detailed descriptions of the scientists and various other individuals who have made an impact upon the field of medicine that includes these diseases. For the most part, that which is said about the individuals is fairly

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objective and factual, as it should be in a book that is meant to give information and not opinions. Yet, there is an obvious bias in the representations of two of the leading doctors discussed in the book. The first, a man by the name of Carleton Gadjusek, is made out to be a genius and a humanitarian who is only interested in the welfare of his fellow human beings. On the other hand, another doctor, Stanley Prusiner, is portrayed as a fraud, stealing the ideas of his colleagues to pursue the fame and respect that can result from important scientific discoveries. It is certainly possible that Rhodes' accounts of these men are accurate; however, one must question if there is something more behind his partiality for Gadjusek. Both Gadjusek and Prusiner were awarded a Nobel Prize for their work, which would indicate that both have made important contributions to their fields of study. Why then is one made out to seem so good while the other is vilified? One has to wonder if the fact that Prusiner refused to give an interview for *Deadly Feasts* has something to do with the pejorative way he is represented by the author.

If nothing else, *Deadly Feasts* will surely make you think twice the next time you eat beef or any other form of meat for that matter; it might just kill you.

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