Our instructor, Dr. Ted Blaisdell (better known as Dr. Ted), became famous for singing “Disease!” at the top of his lungs to call students to class from across the quad. When our class first assembled in the classroom, which was in the college’s student health center, Dr. Ted explained the course in a way that summed it up perfectly: “If you expect this to be a science course you will be disappointed, and if you expect it to be a history course you will also be disappointed.” Over three weeks, we examined diseases from both cultural and biological perspectives—making it an interdisciplinary course that disappointed no one.

Literary Disease Detectives
We began by learning the basics of infectious diseases, from DNA and RNA to how they were transmitted and affected different parts of the body. The first disease we studied was the Plague of Athens, which scourged Greece during the Peloponnesian War. Although the disease that caused the plague has not been definitively identified, we tried to determine what it might have been.
by interpreting the signs and symptoms as described in historical works such as Thucydides’ *History of the Peloponnesian War*. Thucydides describes symptoms such as “violent heats in the head, and redness and inflammation in the eyes . . . throat and tongue,” and extreme thirst that made people throw themselves in the city’s fountains, where they would drown. Then we looked at the social effects of the disease: who was blamed for the plague (the scapegoats), the laws enacted in its wake, and how society dealt with the deceased (whether by burial or burning, for example). Looking at the plague from all these different angles was fascinating.

We used a similar method to explore other epidemics ranging from the Black Death in the Middle Ages to the more recent swine flu outbreak. For example, we read Louise Erdrich’s novel *The Birchbark House* to learn about a smallpox epidemic that affected Native Americans on Lake Superior during the U.S. westward expansion.

**Digging Deep**

Sometimes the class would go off on what seemed to be tangents, but which ended up being surprisingly relevant. These tangents included the music video for Colbie Callait’s “Try” and a scene from *Mary Poppins*. At first while we were watching them, I wondered how they could possibly relate to the study of disease, but gradually the themes came together like a puzzle. The music video, showing women with and without their hair and makeup done, showcased the double standards between men and women, while the *Mary Poppins* scene made us aware of sexism as an inherent bias. Both the video and the movie scene made us aware of our culture’s intrinsic misogyny—and led to a discussion of how these unspoken but deeply ingräined biases could lead people to label other people scapegoats for the spread of a disease. In the end, we learned that semiotics (the study of signs and symbols) and studies of pop culture can help us understand how diseases spread and how societies respond to them.

In the last week of the course, we were split into pairs to conduct research about a disease and then present what we learned to the class. My partner and I researched influenza, a very common virus that, I was surprised to learn, had its first pandemic in 1918. We concluded our presentation with a remixed version of the viral video “Actual Cannibal Shia Labeouf.” These presentations gave us a chance not only to look closely at the disease we studied ourselves, but to learn from our peers, whose presentations covered everything from cholera to typhoid fever.

Our instructor made the learning experience fun and entertaining despite the difficult (and sometimes gross) subject matter. For instance, our tests were graded in dead rats. However, we did have to put a lot of work into learning about the diseases: If you wanted to get anywhere above two dead rats (five was the maximum), you definitely had to study. I struggled at first with my limited knowledge of eukaryotes and prokaryotes, but with the help of my peers, I was usually able to pull a few more dead rats out of my pocket.

I’m glad I chose this course. It was the perfect mix of history, which I already loved, and science, which I became much more comfortable with. I learned a lot in three weeks—including, perhaps most importantly, how to correctly wash my hands.

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