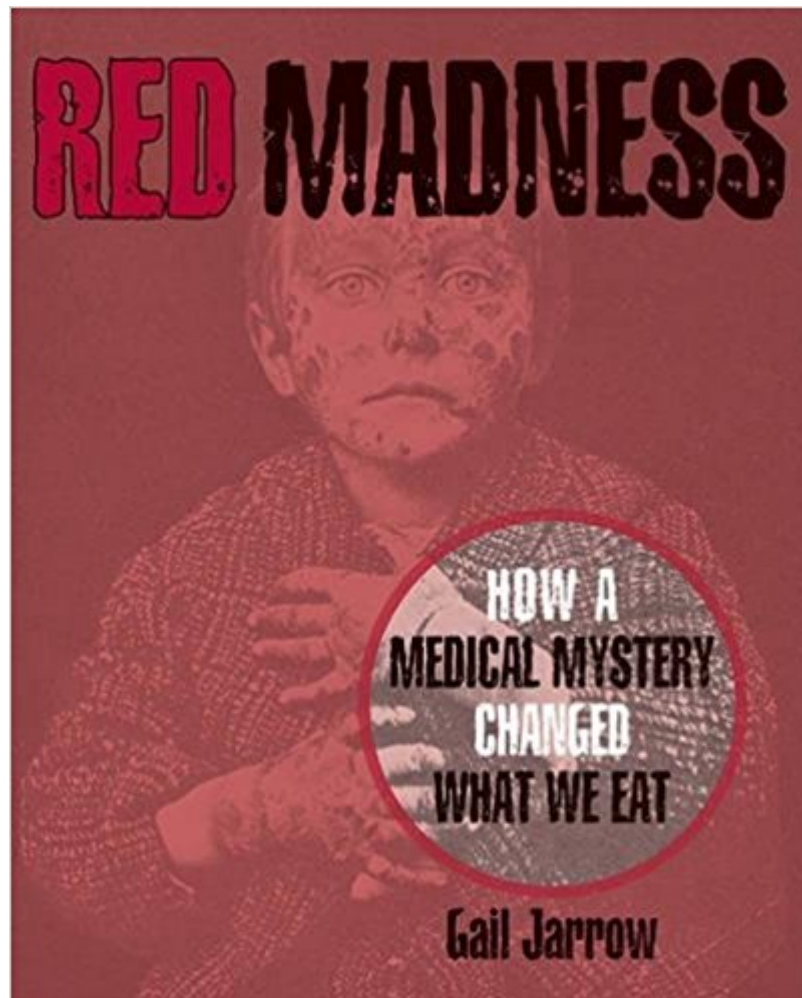




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# Red Madness: How A Medical Mystery Changed What We Eat



## Synopsis

A National Science Teachers Association, Best STEM Book One hundred years ago, a mysterious and alarming illness spread across America's South, striking tens of thousands of victims. No one knew what caused it or how to treat it. People were left weak, disfigured, insane, and in some cases, dead. Award-winning science and history writer Gail Jarrow tracks this disease, commonly known as pellagra, and highlights how doctors, scientists, and public health officials finally defeated it. Illustrated with 100 archival photographs, *Red Madness* includes stories about real-life pellagra victims and accounts of scientific investigations. It concludes with a glossary, timeline, further resources, author's note, bibliography, and index.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Gr 6 Up • This haunting insight into a little known epidemic from the early 20th century provides statistics, firsthand accounts, pictures, and an easy-to-follow narrative of the pellagra outbreak in the United States. The book details the baffling uprise of pellagra, a life-threatening disease characterized by weakness, rash, and insanity; the medical investigation that ensued; and the eventual changes that were made in America's diet to combat both this sickness and other maladies caused by nutritional deficiencies. This title is descriptive and well researched, with a striking bold-red color scheme. Though the images are graphic and potentially disturbing, they are not sensationalized, and enhance the narrative. This is an excellent addition to nonfiction collections in school and public libraries. [Ed note: See author Q&A, p. 16.] • Tammy Turner, Centennial

High School, Frisco, TX

Jarrow delves into the debilitating and oft-forgotten disease that became a public health crisis in the U.S. early in the twentieth century. Pellagra, an illness that causes a menacing red rash, gastrointestinal issues, and eventual delirium and death, was unheard of in America when cases began to surface in the South, especially in orphanages and sanitariums, in 1902. Scientists and physicians raced to find an explanation for its accelerated virulence, in the process exploring new ideas about germ theory, food safety, and cleanliness. It was not until a young epidemiologist named Joseph Goldberger began to analyze data regarding nutrition did people begin to understand the cause as being a simple vitamin deficiency. While the book's main subject is epidemiological, it is also a case study on innumerable social issues of the day, such as the industrialization of the American food supply, the rise of sensational journalism, and the treatment of the poor, the ill, and the elderly. A visually dramatic medical mystery, this is cross-curricular and of high interest. Grades 5-8. --Erin Anderson

I found the book to be quite fascinating. I'd heard of pellagra before but I didn't know any of the details. I had no idea that those who developed it had such severe symptoms leading for some to eventual death. And the solution was relatively simple and yet it took so long to find it. And when it was found it took even longer to convince some doctors that the solution was correct. Sigh. Human beings can be so stubborn sometimes! The author does a nice job of tracking the disease from its first recorded appearance in the U.S. to the changes made that pretty much eliminated the disease (at least in the U.S.). She makes the story more personal by sharing the experiences of individuals and the various results ranging from death to a yearly affliction. Some of the cures sounded worse than the disease, I mean, arsenic? strychnine? Thank goodness we've learned a lot since then. I have to say though that the photographs the author included in the book are particularly powerful. The nasty rash that the clearest symptom of the disease shines through clearly even in black and white photographs. A great read for those who enjoy real life mysteries and people who solve them.

This book was exactly what I wanted for the research I am completing for a project. It is written clearly and concisely, and it manages to make the science aspect more understandable and it is peppered with personal accounts throughout.

This was a very short book about a problem seen in the U.S. especially in the south in the late

1800's and early 1900's. This disease was pellegra. It usually occurred in people who ate predominantly corn products, so of course the first thing everyone thought was the corn (moldy) was responsible for disease, similar to how it was found out that mold on rye caused ergot and various mad dancing states... But in this book, the author talks about how taking away corn didn't seem to solve the problem. Then of course, those people looking into the reason for pellagra, noticed it mostly happened to poor farmers...so they figured it was cleanliness and some infectious organism like the plague. But in spite of all their looking, doctors and sociologists and epidemiologists, could not find anything that could pass pellagra from one person to another. And the doctors, like so many of them, did gross experiments on themselves and their friends, trying to infect themselves with pellagra. Didn't work. Luckily, a very astute epidemiologist working for the government started looking at not what was there in these people's diets, but what wasn't there in their diets. Like other diseases such as scurvy, many times what causes the problems are what we are missing. This continues today...so many people are getting so little Vitamin D that they are ending up with autoimmune problems such as fibromyalgia, which can be help by getting the right things in their diets. The book was interesting, but I objected to the formatting of the book. There were lots of pictures, maybe too many of them because they basically showed the same thing...people with red patches on their faces and hands and arms, with what looked like long red gloves on their arms. Then in between the text on how the cause of pellegra was found and what they did about it, the author kept putting little snippets about people who got pellagra, and either lived or died from it. After a while, it got very depressing to read all of these, and very repetitive. I got the information I wanted from the book...I think with a bit more input from a good editor, the book might have been better to read.

Not all readers enjoy nonfiction, but this is a cool way to hook them.

The stories of real people affected by this terrible disease were heart rending. The photographs included with the narrative were mesmerizing. Although the author tells an amazing story, her writing style is a bit pedestrian.

How many of you have heard of pellagra? Before reading Red Madness, I was unfamiliar with the disease. But reading it resolved a personal mystery for my husband's 85-year-old uncle. He finished the book and said, "Now I know what I had as a child." This disease which produces a horrible skin rash, leads to severe intestinal problems, causes neurological problems, and often leads to death,

no longer afflicts wide portions of our population--the way it did during the first half of the twentieth century. Pellagra has been eradicated from most developed countries because of the tireless work of one physician: Joseph Goldberger. *Red Madness* by award winning author Gail Jarrow, describes how this medical mystery was solved. Written with clear language accessible to readers from age ten through adult, Gail Jarrow chronicles the history, myths, and treatments associated with pellagra. Dr. Goldberger's tireless efforts to determine the primary cause of pellagra included hosting "filth parties." In gruesome detail, Gail describes how Goldberger tried infecting himself with pellagra in order to prove that it was not contagious or a result of infection. <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/ncl2004004556/PP/> "This Oklahoma sharecropper and his family pick cotton in 1916. The older two children--ages six and five--together picked twenty-five pounds of cotton a day. Goldberger tried to communicate his message about diet to farmers and mill workers, two groups that suffered from pellagra." (p.100) Since the disease appeared most often in poor households where diets were limited to 3-M's: meal (cornmeal baked into bread), meat (fatback, from the fatty layer on a pig's back) and molasses (syrup), Goldberger was convinced that pellagra was probably caused by a diet deficiency. But how could he prove that? Goldberger spent eleven years, traveling frequently in the South where the disease was most common, and performed experiment after experiment. In 1923 his efforts finally paid off. Experimenting with dogs who were experiencing pellagra symptoms, Goldberger fed them brewer's yeast (something missing from most pellagrins' diets). Quickly, the dogs recovered. In 1926 the Mississippi River flooded. 700,000 people lost their homes and 45-50,000 developed pellagra. The Red Cross took Goldberger's recommendation to add yeast to the impoverished people's diet. Within two months people were cured. After Goldberger died in 1928, other scientists continued searching for the vitamin that would prevent pellagra. Eventually, Conrad Elvehjem discovered that nicotinic acid (now known as niacin) was indeed, the pellagra-preventing vitamin. Ten years later bakers began adding niacin, along with other Vitamin B complex vitamins to bread. That was the beginning of the enriched bread we enjoy today. According to a recent *Writer's Digest* article, "Straight Up Nonfiction with a Twist," one way authors enhance text is by using sidebars for supplemental material. Gail and her team at Calkins Creek did an excellent job of interweaving newspaper headlines, facts, and photos such as this one into the body of the text. "Some doctors referred to the butterfly-shaped rash on the girls' neck as the Collar of Casal, named after the first doctor to write about pellagra." (p. 83) In addition, dozens of case histories of individuals whose lives were torn apart by the disease, are sprinkled throughout the book. In a recent *SCBWI, Bulletin* article, "What Teachers Want from Nonfiction Authors," Alexis O'Neill said that teachers wanted authors to share about their research

and writing process. Accordingly, I asked Gail a few questions about her process. Carol: What was it like for you to see the images of people afflicted with pellagra and pulling them together for this book? Gail: Part of me approached this topic in a clinical manner. I have a background in biology, and I was fascinated to learn how a vitamin deficiency could lead to such dramatic physical symptoms. But when I read the accounts of patients suffering written by their doctors, I felt upset knowing this disease was so easy to prevent. Even after pellagra's cause and cure were discovered and publicized, people continued to fall ill and die. Many victims lacked the resources to eat properly or didn't realize how diet affected their bodies. Tragically, other deaths occurred because some physicians refused to accept that pellagra was a diet deficiency disease. Carol: Was any part of this writing/publishing journey more difficult than another? Gail: The hardest part and this is always the case when I write a non-fiction book is locating and obtaining the primary documents. Those were key because secondary sources were contradictory about the early-20th-century understanding of pellagra, Joseph Goldberger and his research, and other details included in my book. Whenever possible, I go back to the original sources and do not necessarily trust what I read elsewhere. Too many times, I've found errors in the secondary sources. For more information on the nitty gritty behind writing this book, see the informative Author's Note at the end of the book and Gail's interview in the School Library Journal. Teachers, make sure you utilize the educational activities which Gail has assembled. With such a detailed analysis of the disease, what caused it, and the stigmas associated with the disease, Red Madness will be an excellent supplement to history, sociology, and science lesson plans. Read this book and maybe you'll discover answers to the mystery disease which left its mark on someone you know.

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