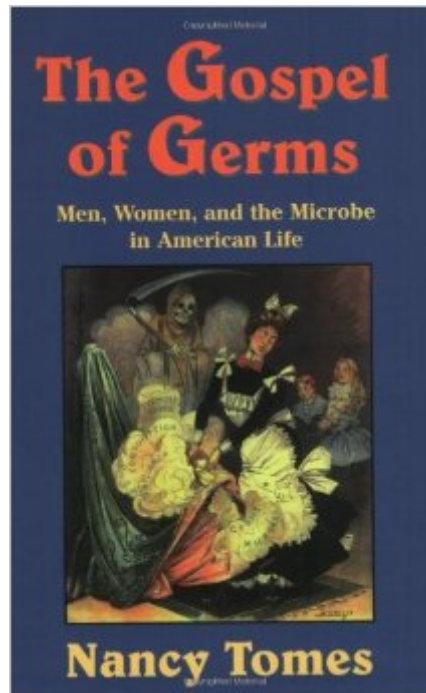


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# The Gospel Of Germs: Men, Women, And The Microbe In American Life



## Synopsis

AIDS. Ebola. "Killer microbes." All around us the alarms are going off, warning of the danger of new, deadly diseases. And yet, as Nancy Tomes reminds us in her absorbing book, this is really nothing new. A remarkable work of medical and cultural history, *The Gospel of Germs* takes us back to the first great "germ panic" in American history, which peaked in the early 1900s, to explore the origins of our modern disease consciousness. Little more than a hundred years ago, ordinary Americans had no idea that many deadly ailments were the work of microorganisms, let alone that their own behavior spread such diseases. *The Gospel of Germs* shows how the revolutionary findings of late nineteenth-century bacteriology made their way from the laboratory to the lavatory and kitchen, with public health reformers spreading the word and women taking up the battle on the domestic front. Drawing on a wealth of advice books, patent applications, advertisements, and oral histories, Tomes traces the new awareness of the microbe as it radiated outward from middle-class homes into the world of American business and crossed the lines of class, gender, ethnicity, and race. Just as we take some of the weapons in this germ war for granted--fixtures as familiar as the white porcelain toilet, the window screen, the refrigerator, and the vacuum cleaner--so we rarely think of the drastic measures deployed against disease in the dangerous old days before antibiotics. But, as Tomes notes, many of the hygiene rules first popularized in those days remain the foundation of infectious disease control today. Her work offers a timely look into the history of our long-standing obsession with germs, its impact on twentieth-century culture and society, and its troubling new relevance to our own lives.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

The author takes this history down an unusual path. It's not a medical history nearly so much as a sociological history. She covers the necessary medical discoveries in passing, but it's more important to her how Americans received these new discoveries, how we understood and adapted to them, and how we used and misused them. I found it quite fascinating and it covers aspects of our history (like the adoption of bathrooms and toilets!) that I had never seen before. By the way, for people interested in this type of medical/sociological history, *The Great Influenza* is incredibly good. I can't imagine how a period so devastating and important in our history gets glossed over to the point of vanishing.

The only thing I wish this book had was a mention of BeChamps, the rival of Pasteur, who Louis PASTEUR conceded to on his death bed, saying ...germs (microbes are not everything...the terrain, the place where you are healthwise, restwise, immunity wise, genetic constitution-wise is everything), aside from that, who doesn't like to see the evolution of houses, homes, food prep and all vis - a - vis germs. After all, the french accuse the americans of only two things....the fear of communists and the fear of germs.

The notion of germs spreading disease acquired currency in the late 19th century. Public-health efforts focused on better plumbing, to avoid fecal contamination of water supplies, and general cleanliness. I was amused to read that toilets were designed to flush thoroughly, something I envy given the current fad for low-flow "green" toilets that often require repeated flushing. Changes promoted to promote cleanliness included shortening women's skirts, shaving off facial hair and reducing the clutter of Victorian-era interior design. I'd thought they'd been mere matters of fashion. A cleaner house could be achieved by the middle and upper classes, but the unintended effect was to make the housewife feel guilty if, despite all her scrubbing, a family member still got sick. The poor performed many services for the middle and upper classes, but in their own unhygienic dwellings. Improving the lot of the working poor, to reduce their rates of contagious illness, was presented, in the early 20th century, as a way to protect the health of the middle and upper classes. It's good for the modern reader to be reminded of the scourge of tuberculosis, a very common disease at the time.

Excellent service! I haven't read all of the book yet . I will be buying more of her works. We have the same name and many of her interests!b

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