

An Outbreak of Books

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Review of 3 books covering the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic: Michael Lewis, *The Premonition*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2021; Yasmeen Abutaleb and Damian Paletta, *Nightmare Scenario*. New York: HarperCollins, Inc., 2021; Andy Slavitt, *Preventable*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2021. [*PR Health Sci J* 2023;42(2):183-184]

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As a worldwide event in its third year, the COVID-19 pandemic has been the focus of a number of books. Because the topic has literally affected everyone, it has also attracted a wide range of authors. The latter include scientists and health practitioners, newspaper reporters, and political commentators. Two years after the first cases of the disease were discovered, there were at least two dozen English-language books on COVID: its precursors, its origin and spread, how it was and was not addressed, political issues associated with the condition and its control, and lessons learned from the pandemic experience. Because these were written before the pandemic ended, they are very much timebound. This review will therefore focus on three of the earlier contributions to the literature, when the disease was considered novel, and the topic raised a number of issues.

One of the first books to emerge was *The Premonition*, by Michael Lewis, a best-selling author who has covered a wide range of current topics. As the title suggests, this work can be considered a 'prequel' to the current COVID-19 pandemic: it focuses on events prior to and in the early days of the Wuhan outbreak, before the condition was seen as a possible worldwide threat. As early as 2005, however, President George W. Bush had taken a special interest in pandemic preparedness. Having read John Barry's *The Great Influenza: The Story of the Deadliest Pandemic in History*, the president, concerned that the United States did not have a strategy to handle a similar threat, got Congress to approve \$7.1 billion to spend on a comprehensive pandemic strategy. Those who had been involved in this effort were still active when COVID-19 first became news, and had the know-how to confront similar threats. However, they no longer had a president who was concerned with a possible deadly virus reaching the country. Others tried to step into the breach.

Even as official agencies were minimizing the importance and lethality of COVID-19, a group of epidemiologically-attuned professionals was closely monitoring it from different vantage points and agencies. Calling themselves the "Wolverines," they flagged the warning signs, shared information with each other, and modelled possible pathways of the disease. In this account, Lewis refers to their task as 'redneck epidemiology' because it was based on hunches and back-of-the-envelope calculations as well as statistical models based on different scenarios. These agreed on the potential lethality of the virus and its worldwide

impact as well as on the strategies for controlling it. Data from the 1918 pandemic showed that the earlier the lockdown, the greater its efficacy in averting deaths. This, however, was not a politically popular option. As a result, the restrictions that were imposed were too late, too uneven, and too lax.

The Premonition also covers other more recent outbreaks of swine flu and tuberculosis, when public health experts also mobilized, and some protective measures were taken. Nevertheless, those efforts also exposed system failures: in Lewis's words, "competing narratives" and conflicting goals led to partial measures and different strategies. Health officials were pitted against politicians, the latter usually having the last word. As a prelude to what would come later, *The Premonition* therefore sets the stage for what would happen over the next year.

The events of 2020 are vividly captured in two other books, both of which emphasize the systemic failures of the Trump administration in addressing the outbreak. *Nightmare Scenario*, by Yasmeen Abutaleb and Damian Paletta, is practically a day-by-day account of the political response to COVID-19 between January 2020 and that year's election. As reporters covering health and the economy for the *Washington Post*, the authors witnessed the downplaying of the imminent threat, and chronicled the tension between the president and those responsible for monitoring the growing numbers of COVID-19 cases. Each chapter begins with the number of cases and deaths, so the political events are described against a backdrop of an increasingly virulent disease. And, because events were unfolding during an election year, political considerations were part of all decisions, distorting factual information for partisan reasons. In addition to providing a comprehensive narrative, *Nightmare Scenario* includes photographs of press conferences and other meetings. These complement the story, as key decision-makers who were muzzled are nevertheless seen expressing dissent or disdain through their body language: a hand to the forehead, pursed lips, or a raised eyebrow were thus as eloquent as a contradictory statement.

A third book, *Preventable*, by Andy Slavitt, also describes the political tensions that derailed any attempt at containing the COVID-19 outbreak in the United States. Slavitt, a health care advisor with extensive experience in both the federal government and the private sector, was part of President Biden's COVID-19 response team. The book's subtitle succinctly

announces its main thrust: “The inside story of how leadership failures, politics, and selfishness doomed the U.S. coronavirus response.” Covering the period between November 2019 and November 2020, the book chronicles events as seen by a former member of the Obama administration who covered the outbreak for different mass media and had a popular podcast aimed at providing practical information for the public at large.

Slavitt takes particular aim at Trump’s appointees and inner circle, some of whom blatantly pushed against scientific expertise when this conflicted with the values and beliefs of the president’s political base. *Preventable* thus documents the many times when political considerations eclipsed facts, taking a serious toll in terms of lives lost. The book also underlines inadequate decision-making, ‘yes-men’ undermining the increasingly worrisome data, and peddlers of miraculous cures touting their ‘cures.’

As a topic that covers life and death, health and wealth, etiology and ideology, the COVID-19 pandemic has been an unusually rich source of inspiration for writers of all types. The

three books reviewed are but a sample of the evolving literature, which can be expected to grow exponentially in the coming months. Scholars of many disciplines will find them fascinating and thought-provoking. More urgently, they should inform future decision-making in health policy and in disease control and prevention.

Resumen

Este artículo reseña 3 libros: Michael Lewis, *The Premonition*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2021; Yasmine Abutaleb and Damian Paletta, *Nightmare Scenario*. New York: HarperCollins, Inc., 2021; Andy Slavitt, *Preventable*. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2021.

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