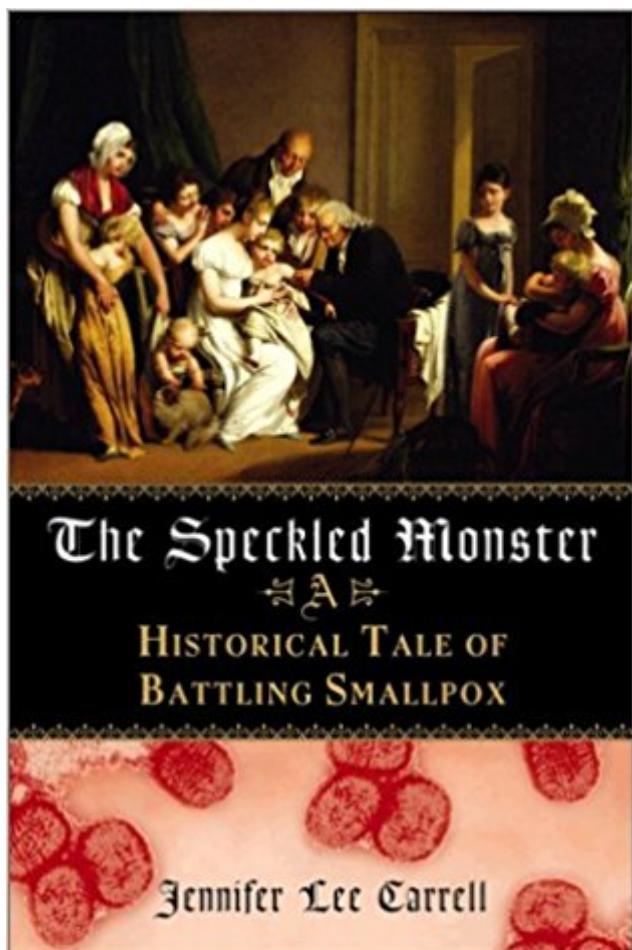


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# The Speckled Monster: A Historical Tale Of Battling The Smallpox Epidemic



## **Synopsis**

A timely book about history's first desperate efforts to conquer the spotted beast of smallpox. What is it like to be caught in the terror and chaos of a smallpox epidemic when you and those you love are unprotected? What is it like to get smallpox, or to watch your children battle the disease? The Speckled Monster tells the dramatic story-both historical and timely-of two parents who dared to fight back against the disease. After barely surviving the agony of smallpox themselves, they both flouted eighteenth-century European medical tradition by borrowing folk knowledge from African slaves and eastern women in frantic bids to protect their children. From their heroic struggles stem the modern science of immunology as well as the vaccinations that remain our only hope should the disease ever be unleashed again. Jennifer Lee Carrell transports readers back to the early eighteenth century to tell the tales of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu and Dr. Zabdiel Boylston: two iconoclastic figures who helped save the cities of London and Boston from the deadliest disease mankind has known.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

Long before vaccination for smallpox was developed in Europe in the 1790s, people in the Middle East, the Caucasus and Africa knew that small amounts of live smallpox virus injected under the skin would induce a mild form of the disease that rendered a person immune from full-blown smallpox. In her intriguing book, Carrell, a writer for Smithsonian magazine, switches between the stories of two courageous people in early 18th-century England and America who believed

passionately in this procedure, called variolation. While living in Turkey, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, herself disfigured by the disease, had her son inoculated. When she convinced her physician to inoculate her daughter during a smallpox epidemic in London in 1721, public opinion was vehemently against her but, after the procedure appeared to work, physicians persuaded King George I to let them experiment on prisoners who agreed to submit to variolation in return for pardons. In Boston, also ravaged by smallpox in 1721, Zabdiel Boylston, a physician who had survived the disease, learned of variolation from slaves and successfully inoculated his own children. The authorities ordered Boylston to stop the practice, and outraged citizens even tried to kill him, but he persisted, encouraged by a few believers, including the influential Puritan clergyman Cotton Mather. In Boston, as in London, most people who underwent the procedure didn't get full-blown cases of smallpox, and variolation was finally accepted as the only way to protect against the disease before vaccination with cowpox, a benign virus, was developed in the 1790s. Carrell's novelistic treatment of this story, which concludes with an account of the friendship that developed between Lady Mary and Boylston when he visited London in 1725, is engaging in spite of an overabundance of fabricated conversations and scenes that slow the action. Copyright 2003 Reed Business Information, Inc.

The severe epidemics of smallpox that swept through London and Boston in 1721 and 1722 caused scarring, blindness, and death. In Boston, almost 6000 people (out of a total population of 11,000) contracted smallpox, and more than 800 died. Doctors battled hopelessly against "the speckled monster" and applied the humoral therapies of bloodletting, blistering, and the so-called cool regimen, advocated by the distinguished English physician Thomas Sydenham. Into these geographically separate but similar scenes of chaotic misery stepped two unlikely heroes: Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, a highly intelligent, beautiful but pockmarked, English aristocrat, and Zabdiel Boylston, a locally trained colonial doctor. Lady Mary and Boylston promoted the new, exotic, and potentially dangerous practice of inoculation. (Figure) Inoculation was a folk practice that had been learned from Turkish women and African slaves, two groups generally deemed unreliable by both Europeans and colonial Americans. The practice involved taking a small amount of matter from a pustule of an infected person and inserting it into a scratch made in the skin of a healthy person. Usually a mild case developed and the infected person was thus protected for life from a severe case of natural smallpox. But the procedure was risky: contemporaries calculated that 1 of 91 persons infected in this manner died from the disease. Worse still, inoculated smallpox was contagious, something early inoculators soon discovered. But the horrible symptoms and the risks

of dying from natural smallpox led Lady Mary and Boylston, among others, to try inoculation. Their conviction that this new procedure was safe and efficacious was dramatically demonstrated by their courage in administering it first to their own children. Numerous historians have written about this momentous revolution in medical practice. Inoculation laid the groundwork for vaccination, immunology, and medical statistics. Carrell's book, *The Speckled Monster*, adds a new twist to the topic; it is a fictional account based on extensive historical research (the subtitle of the book is "a historical tale"). Her narrative begins slowly but quickly picks up the pace as it interweaves events on both sides of the Atlantic and suggests their mutual influence. It is unapologetically heroic: Lady Mary and Boylston triumphed despite the substantial odds and obstacles against them. Lady Mary took on the formidable London medical establishment, whereas Boylston contended with providential clerics and foreign-trained physicians (particularly the cantankerous Scot, William Douglass). Both were threatened with mob violence. In sweeping and dramatic strokes, Carrell paints the ostracism Boylston endured as he made his rounds through colonial Boston; in England, Lady Mary suffered public criticism for daring to put her children deliberately in harm's way. The advantage of historical fiction is that it allows the author to recreate private conversations and psychological motivations that are often unavailable to historical analysis. Carrell has done this well, vividly reconstructing the horrors of smallpox and the hostility that often attends innovation. Her descriptions of sights, sounds, and smells envelop the reader in a tangible and immediate past. That said, Carrell freely admits to fabricating events and dialogue for which there is no evidence -- the most extreme instance (but one befitting a heroic narrative) is the contrived meeting and friendship between her two heroes, Lady Mary and Boylston, in London. The result is an enjoyable tale, but the historical truth is buried in the endnotes. Andrea Rusnock, Ph.D. Copyright © 2004 Massachusetts Medical Society. All rights reserved. The New England Journal of Medicine is a registered trademark of the MMS.

This was a fascinating read. At first I thought "how am I going to get through this old English style language?" But very quickly I adapted to it. After all it IS English! The history of the inoculation for Smallpox is extremely interesting. It's hard to believe people were so resistant to something that could spare them misery and death, but that's the way it was, and I guess it might be that way today with another kind of disease. The writing is at times hard to understand. The author uses colons so frequently that I got lost among them. But nevertheless she tells a good story and gives one plenty of food for thought. I recommend it to lovers of historical fiction, although little of it was actually fiction. I would have given it five stars except for the writer's tendency to go on a bit much. Very

good just the same!

The combined biographies of a male physician in Boston and a female aristocrat in London result in an exciting race against death by smallpox. Carrell's substantial work (500+ pages) of fictionalized history, obviously well-researched, is readable and informative. Many of the names we know from the American Colonial period turn up in the narrative of medical daring and desperation. That alone is worth the price of the download, a bit more than you would pay for sheer fiction these days. The humble Zabdiel Boylston contrasts nicely with the audacious Lady Mary Wortle, member of royal society at a time when the king was stubborn and the influence of Sir Hans Sloane, whose collections inspired the founding of the British Museum, was at its zenith. Both hero and heroine are persecuted for believing in inoculation, a risky means of addressing the horrible "plague" of the 18th century. The fact that they each learned about the technique of inserting matter from diseased patients' sores under the skin of as yet unaffected citizens is particularly interesting because Boylston learned about it from his African slaves, and Lady Mary learned from her observations in exotic Turkey, the culture of which she embraced. Ostracized by the medical "experts" and demonized by frightened contemporaries, they prevailed in promoting a folk remedy as the most efficient means of protecting the population. In London, it took experimenting with prisoners before the aristocracy were won over. In Boston, the motivation was mainly to survive. Carrell has Boylston meeting Lady Mary in London, a fact not substantiated, but interesting to give the account an aura of romance. On a Kindle, it is a long read. The notes take up the last 20% of the space. In sum, it is more history than science, but this approach to further understanding of medical practice is painless.

*Mauve: How One Man Invented a Color That Changed the World*

I've read this book before and it was so good I had to own it! I can't wait to read it again! It's a easy to read story (personalized by characters that you follow throughout the book) on how the small pox vaccine was discovered. It's not dry or boring. Jennifer Lee Carrell does an amazing job of telling the story in a way that keeps your attention and the pages turning! Such a great read for anyone who enjoys reading books about medical conditions.

Absolutely one of my favorite medical histories. The story reads almost like a novel, but is historically factual based on real events surrounding the discovery of small pox inoculation in the West. Many footnotes document the original sources. It's a book I like to reread periodically and give as a gift to my friend who enjoy this genre.

Just the title had me hooked. This is a well-written history of small pox, and the surprising origins of inoculation and vaccination. It's been a while since I've read this, but I found the book really worthwhile when I was researching smallpox for a book I was writing. Plus, it's a real good read.

This is a fictionalized account of smallpox in England and in Boston in the early 18th century. While many people are familiar with the story of Jenner and vaccination against smallpox using the cowpox virus, fewer people are aware of the process of variolation, which used small amount of smallpox to give the recipients a milder case which protected them from the disease. This was practiced in Africa, Turkey and the far east and was "rediscovered" and brought into practice by two brave people, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, a survivor of this terrible disease. and Zabdiel Boylston, a doctor in Boston. Each took much risk to spearhead the use of this practice, and in some ways, suffered for their beliefs. The author has done an enormous amount of research into smallpox and the history of variolation and does a nice job of building a full story about each side rather than just a recitation of the facts.

Great story that is well told(I'm sure with some literary license).As an MD myself ,it was wonderful to see the medical world as it really existed in the early 1700's and how they struggled with this killer disease from a very personal level.Lots of personal/medical and political intrigue.

I found this book to be informative and engaging from the beginning. I had to keep asking myself if it was fiction or not, and in many instances the writing just pulled me into the scenery. I enjoyed the archaic letters and the use of documentation to add verisimilitude to the story. Whether all the events occurred as written here is immaterial to enjoying the text, because we'll never know and what remains is that they could have happened more or less along the lines of Dr. Carrell's story. Some scenes were particularly riveting - especially after Boylston is ordered to cease the inoculations and his family is endangered. Equally catching is the tense and tight prose that follows Lady Mary on her secret missions to fight smallpox. This book seems to cross the boundaries between fiction and creative non-fiction, but to me it was very satisfying and difficult to put down.

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