

In Sickness and in Public Health

In year two of Covid-19, new titles examine high-stakes healthcare issues

BY LIZA MONROY



Here's a sobering thought: the Covid-19 pandemic has been with us long enough that the first books written on the subject have already moved to the backlist. By July 2020, Hachette had published science journalist Debora MacKenzie's *Covid-19: The Pandemic That Never Should Have Happened and How to Stop the Next One*; four months later, *Apollo's Arrow* by Nicholas A. Christakis (Little, Brown Spark), "a comprehensive and evidence-based rundown of the Covid-19 pandemic from December 2019 to August 2020," per *PW*'s review, followed. More recent releases include *The First Shots* by Brendan Borrell (Mariner), which *PW*, in its starred review, deemed "a powerful behind-the-scenes look at Operation Warp Speed, the effort to develop a Covid-19 vaccine in record time."

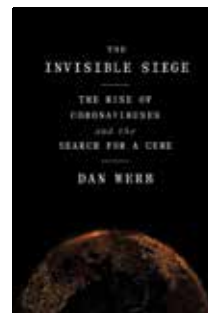
As the situation continues to evolve, so too does the breadth of coverage. Forthcoming books examine Covid-19 and its ramifications through memoir, historical perspective, poetry, and more.

Urgent care

The nightly applause for medical workers has long receded, but the challenges they face endure. In the debut memoir *The Emergency* (One World, Mar. 2022), ER doctor Thomas Fisher unpacks social injustices in the healthcare system, documenting

a year of the pandemic spent working in the emergency room of a hospital on Chicago's South Side. After spending a typical shift tending to "a jumble of sickness, violence, and Covid," Fisher writes, he returns to his local supermarket on the majority-white North Side, where "women in \$150 yoga pants load up on snacks." The only sign of Covid's existence is face coverings. "Straddling these two worlds makes me insane," he continues. "Is this grocery store real, or is what I've experienced and seen in the hospital real? Because they cannot both be real. Or can they?" (See "System Update," p. 27," for our q&a with Fisher.)

In *The Invisible Siege* (Crown, Mar. 2022), epidemiologist Dan Werb leads readers through efforts to defeat viral epidemics, covering Hong Kong's 1997 avian flu outbreak and MERS in Saudi Arabia, a tale that, much like Covid-19, occurs at "the intersection of politics and infectious disease," Werb writes. He also details the steps medical workers have had to take during the pandemic to protect patients as well as their own lives and those of their colleagues. "The room itself had become a battle zone," he reports of a pandemic-era ICU—"one where the risks of infection



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System Update

PW talks with Thomas Fisher

In *The Emergency* (One World, Mar. 2022), Fisher writes of his experiences working as an ER doctor on Chicago's South Side in 2020. He spoke with *PW* about structural inequalities in healthcare and the importance of equal access.

How does your South Side Chicago ER represent larger healthcare issues?

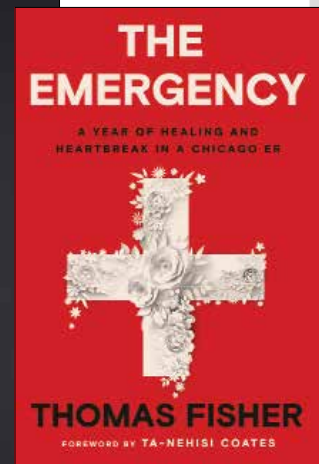
Americans only see suffering when it's in our family or when something's splashed on the front page of the news. Over 700,000 Americans have died from Covid. When there are hundreds of Chicago men shot and killed in a year, it's a statistic. But each one is a person, and each death means somebody is left behind to pick up the pieces. Sickness is not something that just gets packaged up and sent to a corner in the hospital to get managed. It happens every day, and it's something that everybody should pay attention to.

What led you to write this book?

Everywhere I've been, I've found wonderful people who've often been trapped by systems that predated them. How do we as a society address the problem? How do we take care of each other? Are we truly willing to recognize our shared humanity? A main impetus for writing this was to reveal to folks who are trapped in the system how they're trapped, because when you only see one small fraction of it, you don't get it.

How do we begin to remedy the systemic injustices you write about?

A first step is to step back and recognize that we built it, so we can build something different. These are not inevitable decisions that have been bestowed upon us by God or nature. These are an accumulation of policy decisions. We can begin to accumulate different ones that center a shared humanity and dismantle the tiered healthcare system. Many developed nations have decided to figure out how to create a healthcare system that's a reflection of their



democratic policies and shared in common. We've gotten closer to that with Medicare and Medicaid in the '60s and some of the Affordable Care Act regulations in the early 2010s. As an ER doctor, I know that in order to solve some of the violence in the South Side there are large systemic issues we need to address, but that doesn't absolve me from today, from taking care of the person who's bleeding. We don't have to wait for government to come together and create a brand-new structure or for capitalism to become less pervasive. We can do most of that today. I would love to encourage that to happen.

Why did you intersperse epistolary sections to patients and colleagues in the narrative?

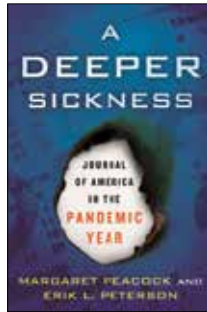
I credit [my editor] Chris Jackson. Early versions were much more wonky. He'd say, "You can't tackle everything. You need to narrow this down." And so one way is to address it to individuals. The opportunity to discuss American healthcare with patients is *never*. There are a ton of books out about how the payment systems work and how our healthcare system is structured but it's not really what a patient needs. It made the book much more honest and personal. And I hope my colleagues see themselves, not just here in Chicago but around the country. I hope that they feel that I've captured their triumphs and struggles, because we're all in this together. —L.M.

Healthcare & Public Health Books

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had reached the level of life and death. And like a soldier, Mark had to suit up, so that he wouldn't be an easy target for the enemy. Preparations began before he entered each patient's room."

A Deeper Sickness by historians Margaret Peacock and Erik L. Peterson (Beacon, Jan. 2022) reflects on the interconnected events of 2020, from the initial appearance of the virus through lockdowns, mask shortages, and the pandemic's intersection with the Black Lives Matter movement. "We followed America as eyewitnesses to the tumult of the entire year," the authors write. "Was there something in the character of the place, the bones of America, that made the layers



of tragedy that unfolded in 2020 practically unavoidable?" Presented in a journal format, the book depicts how the pandemic underscored social and economic inequalities at the core of American society.

CNN chief medical correspondent Sanjay Gupta, in the recent Simon & Schuster release *World War C*, offers case studies on the effects of the virus. He then shifts to present a course of action he terms "pandemic-PROOF"—plan ahead, rethink and rewire risk in your brain, optimize health, organize family, and fight for the future—aimed at helping readers prepare for future pandemics and answering the question, "What can I do to be ready?" says Gupta's

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MED SCHOOL

Titles from academic presses view healthcare and the pandemic through a scholarly lens.

DIGNITY FOR DEEPLY FORGETFUL PEOPLE

Stephen G. Post. Johns Hopkins Univ., May 2022

Post, director of the Center for Medical Humanities, Compassionate Care, and Bioethics at the Renaissance School of Medicine at Stony Brook University, focuses on communication and respect in this guide for caregivers of patients with dementia and Alzheimer's. "Deeply forgetful people express emotion and respond to kindness," he writes. "They respond to their environment with pleasure or fear; most carry on conversations of a sort; and they can be treated in a manner that diminishes the moments of terror that must accompany their sense of self-fragmentation."

THE INFO-DEMIC

Joel Simon and Rob Mahoney. Columbia Global Reports, Apr. 2022

The executive director and deputy executive director of the Committee to Protect Journalists investigate how pandemic-era censorship "obscures understanding of the disease and its origins, undermines public health, and opens the door to a broader assault on rights and liberties." They explain how the use of modern censorship techniques—confusion and manipulation as well as the restriction of information—helped the Trump White House and governments in authoritarian nations downplay and politicize the virus.

JUST HEALTH

Dayna Bowen Matthew. NYU, Feb. 2022

Matthew, dean and Harold H. Greene professor of law at the George Washington University Law School, begins her book on the health effects of structural racism on a personal note: her father died in his 40s and her mother in her 60s. "The facts of my family's story defy the myth that millions of other Black Americans share this all-too-familiar position because of a family breakdown or failure of personal responsibility," she writes. A chapter dedicated to solutions "outlines the most basic legal and policy reforms the nation needs if it is to dismantle the mechanisms supporting structural racism that prematurely ended my parents' lives."

PANDEMIC MEDICINE

Kathryn C. Iyata-Arens. Rienner, out now

DePaul University professor Iyata-Arens, whose fields of study include science and technology policy, explains how "prior to the rise of patent-centric intellectual property rights, novel discoveries had been shared in what can be called an innovation commons." The current global innovation system, she writes, leaves us vulnerable and ill-prepared for pandemics and other diseases that have risen to "epidemic levels," such as asthma, cancer, diabetes, and heart disease. —L.M.





CARE PLANS

Even as Covid-19 continues to influence daily life, other healthcare concerns have remained, and been amplified. New and forthcoming releases address various aspects of medicine and public health.

BLACK HEALTH MATTERS

Richard W. Walker Jr. *Square One*, out now

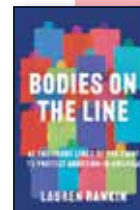
Retired physician Walker was, most recently, medical director of Concentra's Houston Medical Center Clinic. His book discusses health issues and illnesses that disproportionately affect the Black community, such as diabetes and obesity, focusing on environmental factors and preventative measures. Walker's purpose, he writes, is to "empower you, the reader, to take care of your own health and healthcare."



BODIES ON THE LINE

Lauren Rankin. *Counterpoint*, Apr. 2022

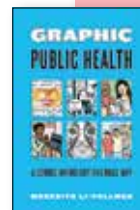
Rankin, a journalist who spent six years as an abortion clinic escort, shines a light on the latter role, which has been "a constant yet invisible presence since the beginning of legal abortion in this country," as she writes in an interview with her publisher. She shares her experiences along with those of other volunteers, as well as perspectives from providers, staff, and abortion rights experts, to round out this picture of contemporary abortion access issues.



GRAPHIC PUBLIC HEALTH

Meredith Li-Vollmer. *Penn State Univ.*, June 2022

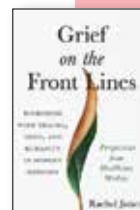
This installment of Penn State University Press's Graphic Medicine series, which conveys medical and health information through comics, covers a range of topics: lead poisoning, mental health issues, how climate change is affecting public health, and more. Li-Vollmer produced and compiled some of the comics in her role as a communications specialist for Seattle's public health department; other contributors include cartoonists Ellen Forney, Roberta Gregory, and David Lasky.



GRIEF ON THE FRONT LINES

Rachel Jones. *North Atlantic*, May 2022

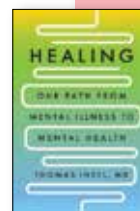
Journalist Jones, whose recent work has focused on death and dying, examines burnout, depression, and trauma among medical professionals, issues that long predate the pandemic and often go unaddressed. She shares the stories of health workers at the beginnings of their careers and of those with decades of experience, among them EMTs, hospice workers, nurses, and surgeons, explaining the emotional burden these professionals bear and offering resources to help them cope.



HEALING

Thomas Insel. *Penguin Press*, Feb. 2022

Mental health is not to be underestimated as a critical public health category, according to Insel, a psychiatrist and neuroscientist who served as the director of the National Institute of Mental Health from 2002–2015. Insel would like to see "the standards we expect for medical and surgical care to apply to the treatment of mental illness," he writes. The book examines systemic issues and stigmas in mental health care and the need to "build a system with long-term support and a true social safety net;" our starred review called it "as compassionate as it is comprehensive."



HOW THE OTHER HALF EATS

Priya Fielding-Singh. *Little, Brown Spark*, out now

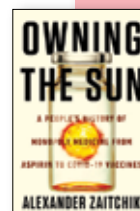
As a Stanford PhD student, Fielding-Singh set off to research how American families eat, interviewing 75 families and spending time with four at length. Her book draws on that work, exploring the question, "How can we, as a society, ensure that parents—all parents—have the means necessary to nourish their children?" *PW*'s starred review called this a "deeply empathetic" look into how class affects diet, resulting in "a devastating portrait of 'the scarcity, uncertainty, and anxiety that permeates so much of the American dietary experience.'"



OWNING THE SUN

Alexander Zaitchik. *Counterpoint*, Mar. 2022

Zaitchik, a journalist whose work has appeared in the *Nation*, the *New Republic*, and elsewhere, examines how the privatization of public science has led to the rise of medical monopolies. The pharmaceutical industry's "well-worn defense," he writes, "rests on the idea that monopoly riches are the only possible incentive and basis for medical innovation. This is simply false." (See "It Feels Wrong Because It Is Wrong," p. 34, for our q&a with Zaitchik.)



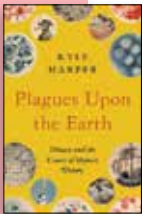
Healthcare & Public Health Books



PATIENT ZERO

Lydia Kang and Nate Pedersen. Workman, Nov.

The authors of *Quackery* look into the first known cases of various plagues, including typhus, leprosy, mad cow disease, and AIDS, telling the stories of each “patient zero,” whether human or animal. Sidebars examine related topics such as the politicization of plagues and vaccine development. Calling the book a “morbidly funny study of some of the world’s deadliest diseases,” *PW*’s starred review said that “readers will be swept away by this energetic and enlightening survey.”



PLAGUES UPON THE EARTH

Kyle Harper. Princeton Univ., out now

In 2017’s *The Fate of Rome*, Harper, a University of Oklahoma classics professor, examined the role viruses and pandemics played in the empire’s fall; *PW*’s review called it “lucidly argued.” His new book connects the dots from previous viral outbreaks to Covid-19. The current pandemic, he writes, “is part of a deep pattern described by the interplay of ecology and evolution. The combination of predictability and unpredictability, of structure and chance, of pattern and contingency, lies in the very nature of infectious disease.”



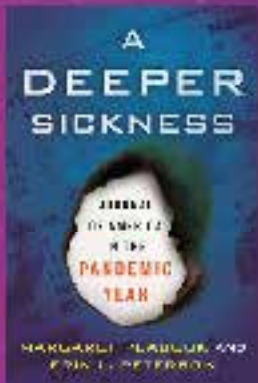
VACCINATED

Paul A. Offit. Harper, Feb. 2022

Originally published in 2008, this reissue includes a new foreword that expands the discussion to Covid-19 and “the birth of the genetic era of vaccination.” Offit, director of the Vaccine Education Center at the Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia, is the author of numerous other books, including the recently released *You Bet Your Life: From Blood Transfusions to Mass Vaccination, the Long, Risky History of Medical Innovations*, which *PW* called “as entertaining as it is informative.”

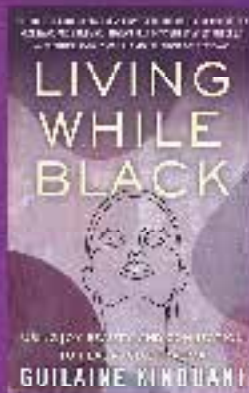
—L.M.

THE NONFICTION EVERYONE WILL BE TALKING ABOUT THIS WINTER



A harrowing chronicle by two leading historians, capturing in real time the events of a year marked by multiple devastations.

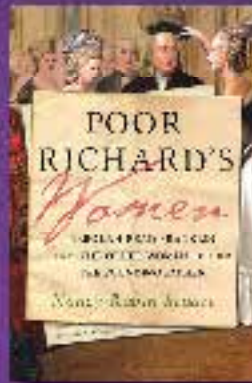
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—Crystal M. Fleming, sociologist and author of *Rise Up! How You Can Join the Fight Against White Supremacy*

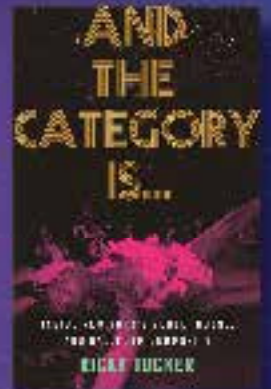
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—Kirkus Reviews

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—E. Patrick Johnson, author of *Honeypot: Black Southern Women Who Love Women*

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Healthcare & Public Health Books

"It Feels Wrong Because It Is Wrong"

PW talks with Alexander Zaitchik

In *Owning the Sun* (Counterpoint, Mar. 2022), journalist Zaitchik chronicles how the pharmaceutical industry transitioned from, he says, "ethical to post-ethical, allowing public resources to be cannibalized by giant private interest." He spoke with *PW* about how the system left the United States ill-prepared to fight the Covid-19 pandemic, and what better alternatives to the current system might be.

How did you become interested in the history of monopoly medicine?

I was writing about pricing scandals, contemporary prescription drug fights in Congress, and state-level fights over the cost of drugs breaking a Medicaid budget because companies charge monopoly prices. While taking deep dives into pharma five years ago, I occasionally came up against historical references. They were flashes of earlier paradigms that didn't line up with the world we know today. I realized the current system is very new.

How did the Covid-19 pandemic foreground patent issues in the pharmaceutical industry?

When the pandemic hit it was like suddenly being thrown into the last inning of game seven of the World Series. Does the world have a right to produce these medicines, or do these private companies have a legal and moral argument for monopolizing that knowledge? The AIDS crisis has its own chapter because it was the first pandemic post-WTO. With Covid, the same issues and actors were about to line up. We would have a vaccine, funded by public dollars, controlled by a private actor who would keep most of the world from the knowledge. Early in the pandemic there were signs it was going to be different. This was airborne, "nobody's safe until everybody's safe," so maybe they'd rein in the companies. There was this hanging moment of enormous possibility. The old script ended up taking over.

What would be a better way forward?

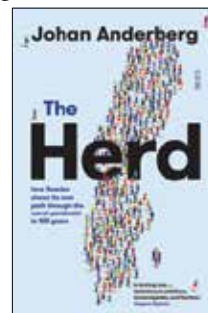
You could have a White House saying, "The NIH contributed most of the money for this mRNA platform. We're going to train technicians around the world to make this stuff." Because if you can scale it up quickly, so can they. If you want to be a contractor

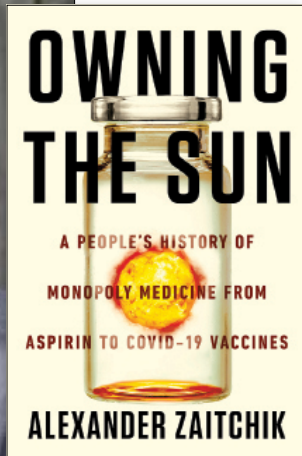
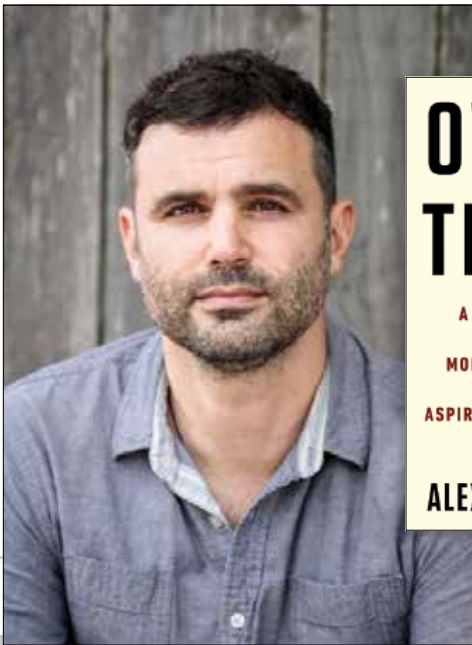
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editor, S&S v-p and editorial director Priscilla Painton. *PW*'s review noted that the book is "realistic but never doom-and-gloom," and "lands as a refreshing look forward."

International perspective

Unlike much of the United States and Europe, Sweden was a Covid outlier in eschewing lockdowns and social distancing measures, aiming instead for a controversial herd-immunity strategy. Journalist Johan Anderberg explores his nation's choices and their consequences in *The Herd* (Scribe, May 2022), translated from the Swedish by Alice E. Olsson. When Covid-19 first appeared, Anderberg writes, Sweden's state virologist thought of it as "just another little outbreak the Chinese could handle."





and make a little profit, you're welcome to, but your company isn't going to mint new billionaires like Moderna did. Another possibility is a unified Global South that asserts itself the way it did for a while in the postwar decades of the 1950s through the '70s, when they demanded the right to use the tech of wealthy countries as a matter of justice.

How do you hope readers respond to the information in your book?

We should go back to reacquainting ourselves with the novelty and weirdness of this system. We should allow ourselves to understand that it feels wrong because it is wrong, and it wasn't long ago that everybody knew that. Unless you can imagine it being different, it's going to be hard to get involved to change it. I storified that history so people could see we'd once had a more wise and humane understanding of how medicine should be treated as a public good, a global knowledge commons that nobody has a right to obstruct or own. The idea that you can make a medicine and say, "This is mine, and you can't make it even though it costs 20 cents to make, and your people are going to die for my right to monopolize it," would have been a dystopian idea to an American scientist into the mid-century. —L.M.

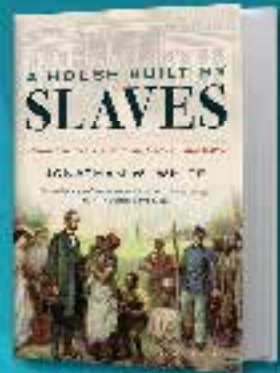
Anderberg tracks the evolution of the Swedish response, from spring 2020 until the end of that year, when "the government finally decided to dismantle the Public Health Agency's strategy," shutting down nightclubs and banning alcohol sales after 10 p.m. For many, it was already too late. "Swedes had been allowed to live freer," he concludes. "And more had died because of it."

Scribe publisher Henry Rosenbloom, who acquired the title and is editing the translation, says the book delivers American readers "an inside view of the personalities of Sweden's health authorities, how they thought, and why they acted as they did at the height of the pandemic."

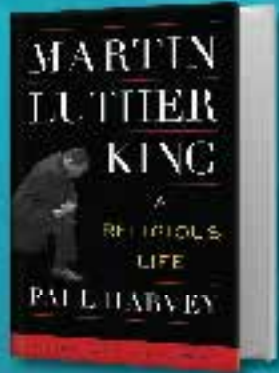
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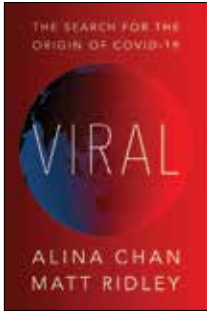


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Viral (Harper, Nov.), by Canadian molecular biologist Alina Chan and British science journalist Matt Ridley, arose out of the pair's op-eds for the *Wall Street Journal* and their research into Covid-19's beginnings. Ranging over bats, pangolins, and the unintentional microbiology laboratory release of the H1N1 virus in 1977, the authors tackle the complex mystery of the pan-

demic's origins from several angles. Topics of discussion include a 2012 medical thesis on six miners admitted to a hospital in Kunming, China, with a SARS-related coronavirus infection most likely stemming from bat guano in their mine, and how journalists' attempts to investigate the site were thwarted. While the authors draw no conclusions as to Covid's origin story, Chan says, "We've been meticulously following and contributing to the search and wanted to make sure that the story is told," in order to mitigate future outbreaks.

Through lines

In March 2021, the Wick Poetry Center at Kent State University and the University of Arizona Poetry Center

launched the Global Vaccine Poem project, a "global community poem," according to the project's website, inviting any contributor to "promote Covid-19 vaccination through the imaginative language of poetry." The forthcoming *Dear Vaccine* (Kent State Univ., Apr. 2022), edited by Naomi Shihab Nye, David Hassler, and Tyler Meier, draws on the more than 2,000 submissions from 118 different countries and is divided into thematic sections, among them "The Clinic," "Grief," "Nostalgia," and "Envisioning the Future."

Poems launch from the title phrase, capturing, with brevity, the hope the vaccine provides along with grief over pandemic losses. One contributor, Hailey Schlegel, writes, "Dear vaccine, I wish you existed one week earlier/ so that you could pierce my grandma's thin skin/ I hope people take you seriously/ I have a life to live/ the next stage of my life without her/ but possible because of you."

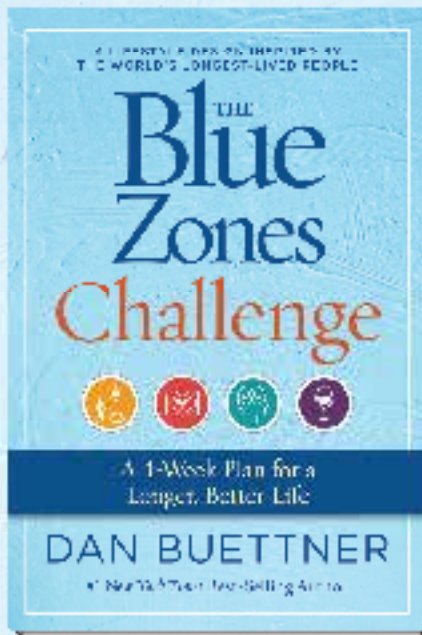


The Quarantine Atlas by Laura Bliss and Bloomberg CityLab (Black Dog & Leventhal, Apr. 2022) is similarly global in scope, depicting, through illustrations and storytelling, how the pandemic changed lives across the planet. "As stay-at-home orders swept the globe, so did dramatic shifts in indoor living," Bliss writes. "Some took comfort in a slower pace. Others chafed against containment. Worlds shrank to four walls as the virus raged outside."

Nabilla Nur Anisah, a contributor from West Java, Indonesia, sums up the experience of "getting used to getting everything done by the click of an app," and learning "to juggle being an employee while also being the center of attention for my toddler." Lisa Rose Drury of Ontario, Canada, writes, "My world has shrunk, which has made me feel a lot more limited, but in some ways I notice things I've always ignored." Similarly, many titles discussed here allow readers to better understand not only the pandemic, but also the already present intersections of social justice and health care it has illuminated. ■

Liza Monroy's books include the essay collection Seeing as Your Shoes Are Soon to Be on Fire (Soft Skull).

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