Hats Off, Gentlemen!

My Personal Review:
The Plague is easily one of the best ten novels ever written, far surpassing even the erstwhile classic The Stranger. Whereas we examine an uncommonly cold-hearted man in a normal world in the pages of The Stranger, in this novel it is a harsh outside world which closes in on a group of fascinating characters. It is in this much more developed context that Camus most remarkable notions of humanity, life, and existence can be fleshed out and communicated more effectively. The lessons of good, normal lives in a world gone mad are much more instructive and meaningful than the observations in The Stranger of a man gone mad in a normal world.

A word to the wise: when large numbers of rats come out of the woodwork and commence dying nasty, bloody deaths in the streets and houses, something is definitely wrong. In the port city of Oran, the population ignores the signs of danger and only grudgingly admits that an epidemic, a form of the bubonic plague to be exact, has taken root in their city. The protagonist, Dr. Rieux, is a doctor who finally helps convince the authorities to take extreme measures in the interest of public safety and to eventually quarantine the entire town. Over the course of the novel, we get to observe the manner in which Dr. Rieux, his companions, and prominent men of the community react to the worsening plague and its social consequences. Dr. Rieux has just sent his unhealthy wife off to a sanitarium before the plague breaks out, and he must suffer her absence alongside the stresses of working 20+ hours a day trying to save peoples lives while accomplishing little more than watching them die horrible deaths. Dr. Rieux attempts to make sense of everything is a basic pulse of the story; an atheist, he cannot find happiness but goes on day after day fighting the disease with all his might because that is what he as a doctor is supposed to do. His friend Tarrou supplies much of the knowledge we glean about the reactions of society as a whole as month after month of isolation continues in the face of deaths greedy fingers. His journal records small but important facts about all manner of men, yet he himself cannot
be said to find ultimate peace. We first encounter M. Cottard after he has hanged himself and been saved before death. A criminal type yet not a bad man, his initial worries over inquiries into his suicide attempt fade away as the plagues grip on Oran tightens. He emerges from a self-imposed exile to actually become a communicating member of society; he alone seems to enjoy the plague because it makes everyone else like him, forced to live each day with the fear of a brooding, horrible fate. Then there is M. Grande, one of my favorite characters in all of literature. A simple civil service employee, he devotes himself to volunteer work computing plague statistics and the like while still continuing his fervent efforts at writing a novel. Grandes wife left him years earlier because he got too wrapped up in his work and lost the words to communicate his love for her; he began writing a novel in an attempt to find those words. With great devotion and commitment he works on his writing, determined to produce a perfectly crafted novel, one where each word is meaningful and necessary for the story—in short, one that will inspire the future publisher to introduce it to his publishing house cohorts with the phrase, Hats off, gentlemen. After untold months of dedicated effort, Grande has yet to get the first sentence to sound exactly right; he engages all of his efforts into perfecting this one sentence, sure that the rest of the novel will fall into place after it is perfected.

These main characters are all fascinating character studies. Not all of them live to see the plagues end, but each of them struggles to find meaning in his own experience—e.g., one character continues living because that is what is required of human beings, to go on fighting for life in a meaningless world; another character seeks to become a saint of sorts by helping his fellow man fight the pestilence. The overriding message I was left with at the end is that life is worth living despite the arbitrary cruelties of an unforgiving world because there is more good in man than there is evil. I found that the book delivered in fact a rather darkly uplifting celebration of the human spirit; ones loved ones give life its meaning in a hostile world. The Plague succeeds in ways The Stranger never could because the characters in this novel are utterly human and represent diverse aspects of the lives of each of us.

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