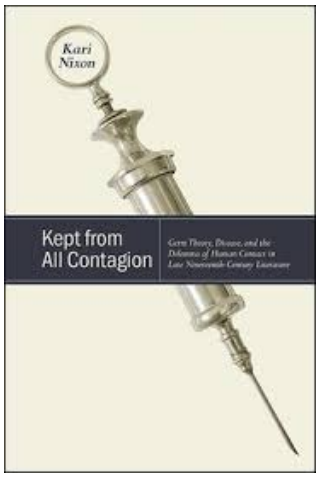
Book Review: Kept From All Contagion: Germ Theory, Disease, and the Dilemma of Human Contact in Late Nineteenth-Century Literature by Kari Nixon

In **Kept From All Contagion: Germ Theory, Disease, and the Dilemma of Human Contact in Late Nineteenth-Century Literature**, **Kari Nixon** *offers a new literary history exploring how late-nineteenth-century authors represented the conflict between the risk of contagion and vital social contact in a period which saw germ theory rise to public prominence. This is a skilled literary analysis for our time, writes* **Jodie Matthews**, *and is fascinating reading for anyone hoping to put the current COVID-19 pandemic in historical context.*

If you are interested in this book, you may like to read **an LSE RB interview** *with the author, Kari Nixon.*

***Kept From all Contagion: Germ Theory, Disease, and the Dilemma of Human Contact in Late Nineteenth-Century Literature*. Kari Nixon. SUNY Press. 2020**



Kept From All Contagion takes its title from Grant Allen's 1895 novella, *The Woman Who Did*, usually read for its association with the figure of the *fin-de-siècle* 'New Woman'. The idea of being 'kept from all contagion' stands in for author Kari Nixon's broader hypothesis that many authors of the late nineteenth century represented the conflict between the risk of contagion and vital social contact in ways that would have been immediately obvious to contemporaneous readers. This conflict is, of course, supremely legible in 2020.

In the period on which Nixon focuses, the theory that living microorganisms, spread from person to person, were the true cause of infectious disease was rapidly gaining in authority. This 'germ theory' displaced previous ideas such as miasma theory. As Nixon demonstrates, germ theory did not immediately and fundamentally alter medical responses to disease, but it did frame human contact in new, and often disturbing, ways.

In this book, Nixon achieves the difficult balance between a rigorous scholarly tone and engaging and always appropriate comparisons with contemporary culture. Those comparisons – with anti-vaxxers, or with Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale*, for instance – demonstrate the power of reading 'for today', as renowned literary critic J. Hillis Miller terms it, rather than the strictly historicist method of reading with a 'period mindset' that has sometimes beleaguered the academic monograph in this discipline.

That Nixon allows us to read literature of the nineteenth century *for today* is crucial for a book about contagion, when 'today' is defined by a global pandemic altering every facet of her readers' lives, one that the author could not have predicted as the manuscript was put to bed. It is impossible to read about disease and human contact, no matter the century, without seeking out the lessons, the hubris and the hope that find meaning now.

The contagion explored in this book includes plague, cholera, syphilis, tuberculosis, typhoid, puerperal fever and smallpox – a list that, even now, causes a shiver down the spine. Nixon's twenty-first-century point of comparison is Ebola, especially the 'Dallas Ebola Outbreak' of 2014.

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Nixon's book asks us to think about the politics and cultural effects of 'contaminated connectivity'. This is pushing at an open door in a world where there are mass demonstrations about wearing face masks. The more complicated idea to navigate at the moment, depending on one's COVID-19 outlook, is 'that to reject risk is to reject real connection with others'. Risk for a character in a nineteenth-century novel is one thing; I'm all for it – bring on the risk! Negotiating how much life to live during a real and present pandemic is quite another matter. Certainly, one's reaction to Nixon's conclusions will depend on precisely where and when one reads it. In full lockdown? The day that schools reopen? During a second or third wave? I hope that I will feel very differently about contaminated connectivity in a less urgently contaminated future. Ultimately, Nixon concludes that what she calls the '"messy" engagement with the biosocial amalgam of humanity is *not* about a *desire* for *disease*, but about a desire to engage with the human community that takes precedence over other, baser fears'. This certainly puts a different spin on the behaviour of those who contravene public health regulations, but also provokes a rethink of the ebb and flow of COVID-related anxiety.

There is one character from Nixon's nineteenth-century cast who very effectively embodies the risk/community conflict of his time (and, indeed, the risk/economy conflict that we face today). That is Dr. Stockmann from Ibsen's 1883 play, *An Enemy of the People*. Stockmann discovers what he believes to be typhoid-fever-causing bacteria in the water of a therapeutic spa – on which the economy of the town relies – and asserts that the baths must be closed indefinitely. He assumes he will be crowned a public health hero, but is instead hounded out of town by a mob shouting 'En folkefiende! En folkefiende!' – the 'enemy of the people' of the title.

Nixon considers the lasting interpretations of Stockmann which have been surprisingly kind to the character. He espouses, she writes, 'the isolationist imperatives of germ theory's insistence on quarantine and purity', but Stockmann also takes his certainty a step further than other commentators on public health. He asserts that an intellectual elite must rule 'the common herd'. He, and one or two other scientists, are the only ones who are capable of making decisions, the only people in the right. He presents himself as 'the sole savior of a society and the single source of progress and change'. Authoritarian as this is, we know now how many people look for a sole saviour of society, whether medical, economic or libertarian, in a public health emergency. Stockmann might equally find a group defending him as hounding him in the twenty-first century (he would certainly be trending on Twitter).

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Intriguingly, Stockmann's view that 'majority truths' are a 'moral scurvy' is put in line with some of the other texts Nixon discusses: for instance, in the way that constricting social norms around marriage and female sexual propriety are viewed as diseasing society. This is especially true of Thomas Hardy's *The Woodlanders* (1887) and *Jude the Obscure* (1896), as well as Ibsen's own *Ghosts* (English debut 1891). Questions of risk and contagion are, Nixon shows, at play in wider discussions of how we behave as individual decisionmakers in a connected society.

Kept From All Contagion is undoubtedly a skilled literary analysis for our time. Its timeliness may have been partly unwitting, but it is open to its heightened relevance because of the author's transhistorical approach to historical texts. The book certainly deserves a COVID-19 postscript in a later edition. Its audience may once have been primarily scholars in the field of medical humanities, and those in the humanities interested in transhistorical approaches. Now, however, it is fascinating reading for anyone hoping to put our current predicament in historical context. It lends profound insight into the anguished risk analyses of human contact we currently make every day.

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.

Image Credit: Tuberculin syringe, England, 1901-1940. Science Museum, London. Tuberculin is injected into the skin to see whether a person has been exposed to the bacteria that cause tuberculosis. (Wellcome Collection CC BY 4.0).

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