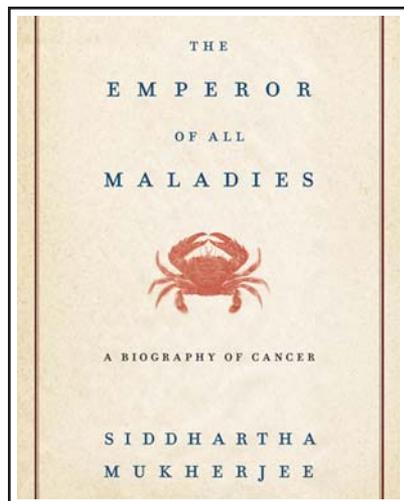


Book Review



ISBN: 13: 978-0-00-7428057-2
Pages-512 ₹ 499

Publishers: Harper Collins Publishers

The Emperor of All Maladies: A Biography of Cancer

Basking in reflected glory is not my favorite pastime, hence there was no great show of enthusiasm toward a book on cancer which ended up winning the Pulitzer prize for non-fiction. When I finally laid my fingers on a copy, I casually flipped the pages, read the prologue, went onto read the first chapter and got hooked to this unputdownable volume. The lucid language and a storyteller's style used to explain the evolution and principles of oncological management makes the book thoroughly enjoyable, the reader's profession notwithstanding.

The author traces the history of cancer to 2500 BC, where the Egyptian physician describes a condition like breast cancer which has no therapy. The earliest attempt at surgical removal of a breast lump was done on a Persian queen, chronicled by Herodotus around 440 BC. The author painstakingly records the gradual evolution of knowledge regarding the pathology and pathogenesis of cancer, of treatment strategies and newer discoveries leading to progress in therapeutics. Chronologically, he writes about Galen, Billroth, Lister, Halsted, Ehrlich, Sidney Farber and many scientists who worked tirelessly to understand this disease and find a possible cure. What distinguishes this book from the dry textbooks is that these scientists are described as real characters with agonies and ecstasies, not mere names to be remembered for a perfect answer. There is also a parallel thread involving patients suffering from the disease, their coping strategies, their war against the dreaded enemy. Being a cancer physician

Siddhartha Mukherjee

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and research scholar, the author has first hand experience in the field, which he depicts very realistically in the book. According to him, the book is also a 'coming of age' experience.

The development of science is influenced by socio-political milieu and this book shows how. When the words 'cancer' and 'breast' were unprintable, there was little enthusiasm in society and the illness was considered a curse for the victim and family. With active lobbying by socialists and wannabe politicians, state policies could be modulated and funds generated for research. The effect of market forces on research is deftly depicted too. But this book is not merely the history of cancer; it becomes a biography as Siddhartha Mukherjee tries to understand and explain what goes on inside a cancer cell, its surroundings and its strategies for survival—just like an attempt to understand the enemy. In the war against cancer, you can expect to win only if you know yourself and the enemy.

This book has a few limitations too. As acknowledged by the author, it does not include all types of cancer. The role of radiotherapy is largely ignored and the American influence overemphasized. Despite that, it is a must read for anyone dealing with oncology, formulating health policies or suffering from the dreaded disease. As a matter of fact, it may be recommended for inclusion in the curriculum.

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