

MARC SHELL. *Polio and Its Aftermath: The Paralysis of Culture*. Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 2005. 336 pp., illus. \$35.

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Marc Shell, a professor of English and of comparative literature at Harvard, has assembled one of the most original histories of a disease, and especially of polio, that I have read. It is based not only on his personal experience as a “polio,” but more significantly upon a massive collection of published and unpublished polio narratives collected from across North America and beyond. Moreover, he has utilized a vast array of literary, artistic, and cinematic sources to illuminate the deep infiltration the polio experience made into the broader culture during the pre-Salk vaccine era.

This thirty-year period, from the mid-1920s through the mid-1950s, when polio epidemics became increasingly widespread across the industrialized world, was also a period when the electronic media—motion pictures, radio, and television—came into their own. Shell argues that polio influenced “the formation of these media as much as they influenced the perception of polio on the part of terrified people and nation-states” (p. 1). After the uncertainties of worsening epidemics and then the “total victory” declared with the arrival of the Salk vaccine on 12 April 1955, polio quickly became a forgotten disease.

The dramatic success of the Salk vaccine not only represented the iconic “conquest of polio,” but also heralded “a brave new world of universal health and safety” (p. 1), not only from polio but perhaps from all diseases. However, this “purely prophylactic approach to polio” (p. 2), as Shell stresses, deferred important studies into the science of what caused and still causes diseases like polio, as well as investigations into the broader social sciences of such diseases. Indeed, the long search to understand the nature of polio and the effects it had on the bodies of individual “polios” and on bodies politic abruptly ended in 1955. At the same time, the dramatic success of polio vaccines created a general assumption that similar victories were likely against other plagues. Such assumptions, as Shell notes, ignored the “historically idiosyncratic combination of public and private philanthropy that had supported American polio research and treatment” (p. 2).

Fundamentally, this “total victory” against polio left the many thousands of “polios” it affected all but forgotten, to struggle, often alone, with not only the original paralytic effects of the poliovirus, but also the increasingly debilitating physical and psychological challenges of post-polio syndrome. Shell’s use of the term “polios” reflects the fact that, unlike almost any other disease, those affected by polio can never really put it in the past; polio stays with them, long after the original period of infection, consciously or subconsciously shaping the rest of their lives.

Given this uniquely dichotomous historical situation, Shell’s primary goal is to unearth the highly variable personal narratives of a large number of polios, including his own, and analyze them within the context of the literary and visual arts produced during the polio epidemic era, highlighting the many direct and indirect references to polio and its effects. Shell next shifts to a detailed examination of how polio and the particular problems of paralysis were integrated into motion pictures. Cinematography was the most significant cultural development of the twentieth century, with its initial concern for “defining the problem of stasis (paralysis) in still photography and then making it kinetic in some way” (p. 11). Shell identifies some 150 movies with some reference to polio or paralysis, the major example of which is Alfred Hitchcock’s 1954 classic, *Rear Window*. For Shell, this movie carefully balances between being about polio and not about polio, which was “an avoidance that was also central to its time” (p. 12).

Shell’s book covers a lot of fertile ground in a unique and interesting way. His enthusiasm for his subject is infectious, although his enormous breadth of knowledge of the literary, visual, and cinematic culture of the period can be a bit overwhelming to the general reader. However, as a fellow polio historian, I certainly appreciated his original approach to the

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subject, particularly when much of the recent historiography of polio has been limited to retelling the familiar Salk vaccine story, with minimal attention given to the polios for whom the vaccine came too late.

doi:10.1093/jhmas/jrj030

Advance Access publication on December 22, 2005