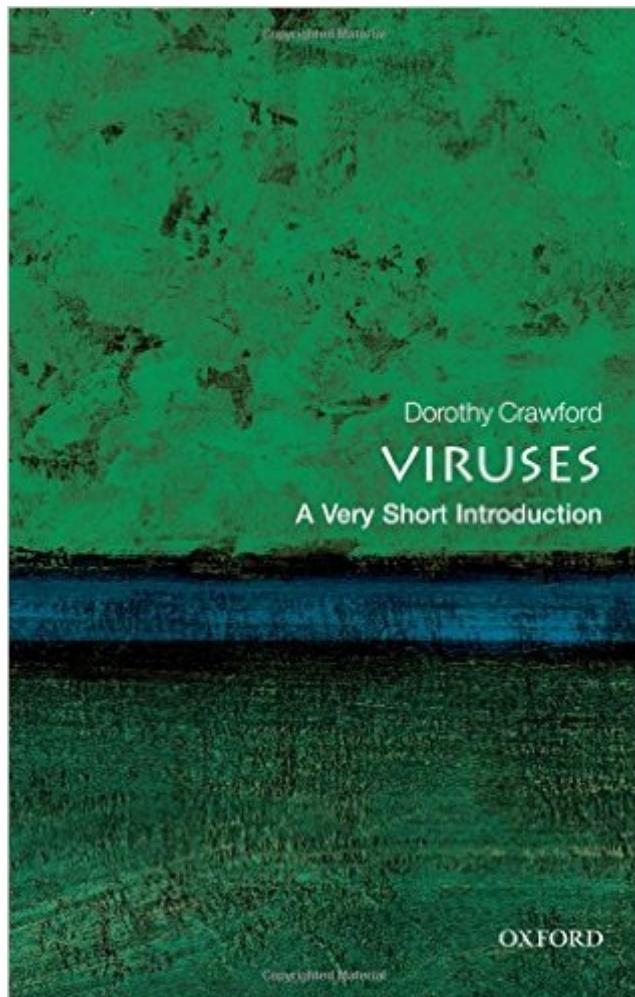


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Viruses: A Very Short Introduction



Synopsis

In recent years, the world has witnessed dramatic outbreaks of such dangerous viruses such as HIV, Hanta, swine flu, SARS, and Lassa fever. In this Very Short Introduction, eminent biologist and popular science writer Dorothy Crawford offers a fascinating portrait of these infinitesimally small but often highly dangerous creatures. Crawford first relates how viruses were discovered and she unravels the intricate structures of tiny parasites that are by far the most abundant life forms on the planet. Analyzing the threat of viral infections, Crawford recounts stories of renowned killer viruses such as Ebola and rabies as well as the less known bat-borne Nipah and Hendra viruses. She identifies wild animals as the source of the most recent pandemics, detailing the reasons behind the present increase in potentially fatal infections, and evaluating the evidence that suggests that long term viruses can eventually lead to cancer. Finally, Crawford looks to the future to ask whether we can ever live in harmony with viruses, and considers ways to prevent the emergence of new and devastating viruses.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This is my second 'Very Short Introduction' book, and I've found them to be both well-written and factual. Plus they're the perfect size to store in my purse for those long, boring sit-downs in the doctor's waiting room (not to mention the long boring lie-downs in the examination room). 'Viruses' started out with slight misstep--it placed Antonie van Leeuwenhoek in the 16th century--but as far as I could tell, the rest of the book is error-free. It is made up of a series of detective stories: the

discovery of disease-causing microbes that were able to pass through bacteria-trapping filters; the detection of emerging virus infections such as SARS; the discovery of viruses that cause tumors; and of course, the research on methods of preventing or ameliorating viral infections. The question as to whether viruses are alive always provokes a lively discussion. According to this author: "Because virus particles are inert, without the ability to generate energy or manufacture proteins independently, they are not generally regarded as living organisms." She is obviously on the side of viruses as non-living, able to reproduce only after hijacking a living cell's internal machinery. Different types of viruses are described and classified, one of the biggest differences being whether the virus has an RNA or a DNA genome. The RNA viruses tend to mutate much more quickly, including such infamous examples as measles and HIV. Only a very small number of viruses cause diseases in animals and plants. In the chapter "Viruses are everywhere" the author states: "It is now clear that viruses form a huge biomass of enormous variety and complexity in the environment, the whole being aptly termed the 'virosphere'...Microbes are by far the most abundant life form on Earth.

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