This book began as an undergraduate lecture course at Yale University. Its original purpose was to respond to concerns at the time about emerging diseases such as severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), avian flu, and Ebola that were not met within the established courses on offer to undergraduates at Yale. Specialist classes for scientists in the graduate school and for medical students at the School of Medicine dealt, of course, with these diseases from scientific and public health perspectives. Their purpose, however, was not to consider epidemics in their societal context and in their relationship to politics, the arts, and historical change. More broadly, it also became apparent that the study of the history and impact of epidemic diseases was an underdeveloped subject in the undergraduate curriculum of US universities in general. The course, therefore, was my attempt to meet what seemed a significant need for the discussion, from an interdisciplinary perspective, of the ways that infectious diseases have played a substantial role in shaping human societies and continue to pose a threat to their survival.

In transforming the course into a book, I have maintained many of the original intentions underlying the class but with the intention of reaching a wider but similar audience. The goal, in other words, is not to reach specialists in the relevant fields, but rather to encourage discussion among general readers and students with an interest in the history of epidemic diseases and a concern about our preparedness as a society to meet new microbial challenges.

That goal shapes the way in which the book is organized and written. As in the original lectures, my aim here is to preserve the accessibility of the material by not assuming prior knowledge of history or epidemiology. I have attempted to provide a self-contained discussion of the subject matter for anyone concerned with the issues the book considers. The book could serve as reading material within the context of a college course for students interested in the intersection of the humanities and the sciences. For that reason I have explained the relevant scientific terminology, provided a bibliography of additional readings for those interested and for those who wish to explore the sources of the opinions expressed, and limited the scholarly apparatus of the
notes to indicate the sources only for direct quotations. My primary aim is not to furnish an original contribution to the subject but rather to place existing knowledge in a broad context of interpretation.

On the other hand, this book is not a textbook. I do not attempt here to provide a comprehensive synthesis of the material in the field but rather to focus selectively on major issues and on those epidemics that have had the deepest and most lasting impact on society. Furthermore, unlike a textbook, this book includes chapters that are primarily based on original source materials, particularly where I felt that my views differed from the conventional wisdom or where it seemed useful to fill gaps in the existing literature. The various chapters convey what is, I hope, the informed view of a single scholar who conducts research in the field and has had the good fortune of having the opportunity to learn from the comments and questions of those interested and thoughtful general readers who are Yale’s undergraduates.