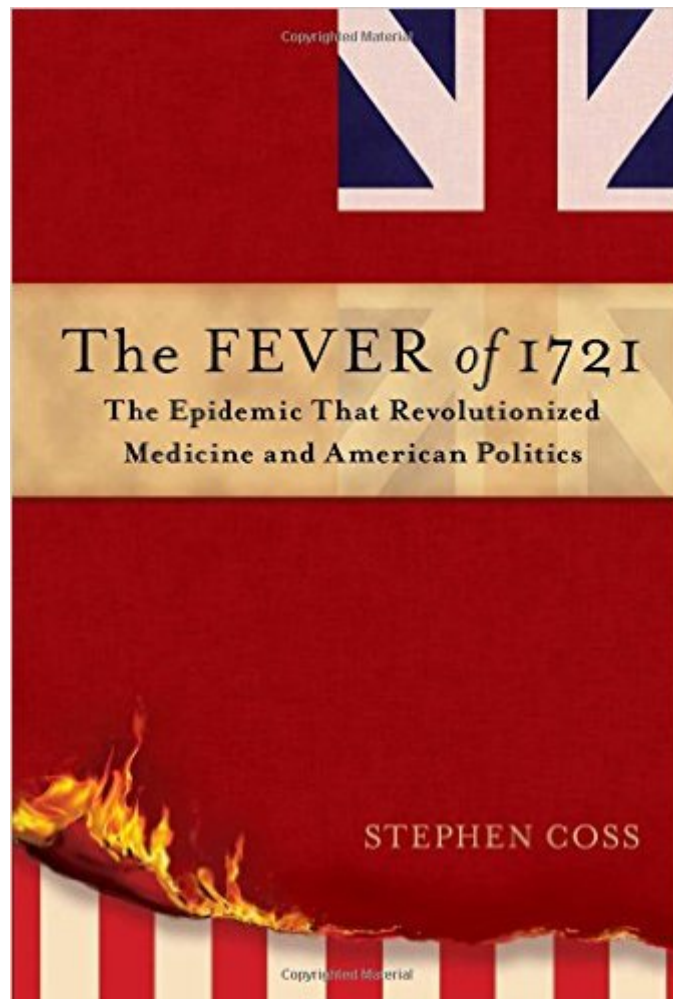


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# The Fever Of 1721: The Epidemic That Revolutionized Medicine And American Politics



## Synopsis

More than fifty years before the American Revolution, Boston was in revolt against the tyrannies of the Crown, Puritan Authority, and Superstition. This is the story of a fateful year that prefigured the events of 1776. In *The Fever of 1721*, Stephen Coss brings to life an amazing cast of characters in a year that changed the course of medical history, American journalism, and colonial revolution, including Cotton Mather, the great Puritan preacher, son of the president of Harvard College; Zabdiel Boylston, a doctor whose name is on one of Boston's grand avenues; James and his younger brother Benjamin Franklin; and Elisha Cooke and his protégé Samuel Adams. During the worst smallpox epidemic in Boston history Mather convinced Doctor Boylston to try a procedure that he believed would prevent death "by making an incision in the arm of a healthy person and implanting it with smallpox. Inoculation led to vaccination, one of the most profound medical discoveries in history. Public outrage forced Boylston into hiding, and Mather's house was firebombed. A political fever also raged. Elisha Cooke was challenging the Crown for control of the colony and finally forced Royal Governor Samuel Shute to flee Massachusetts. Samuel Adams and the Patriots would build on this to resist the British in the run-up to the American Revolution. And a bold young printer James Franklin (who was on the wrong side of the controversy on inoculation), launched America's first independent newspaper and landed in jail. His teenage brother and apprentice, Benjamin Franklin, however, learned his trade in James's shop and became a father of the Independence movement. One by one, the atmosphere in Boston in 1721 simmered and ultimately boiled over, leading to the full drama of the American Revolution.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

In 1721 Boston was a village of 11,000. It was the capital of the British colony of Massachusetts, and the leading politicians were already demonstrating an independent streak regarding rule from far-off London. It was a period and locale of American history that I knew very little of. Stephen Coss has provided a well-researched and readable history that tied together three major historical spheres: the political, the media and medicine. The central event in Coss's account is the smallpox epidemic that struck Boston in 1721. One fourth of the population contracted the disease, and almost 10% of the population died. Smallpox, now eradicated, had been a major scourge of mankind, killing at least 300 million people in the 20th century, far more deaths than that caused by all the many wars of that bloody century, including both World Wars. In the 17th and 18th century, towns like Boston were struck by a smallpox epidemic ever 12 years or so. Ben Franklin is famously on the American C-note, once flew a kite in an electrical storm, wrote an almanac, and was an ambassador to France. I didn't know much more than that which was provided in high school. And then there was Cotton Mather, a preacher, most infamously associated with the Salem witch trials. These two individuals played significant roles during the epidemic. And in surprising ways, as the author explains. It was Doctor Zabdiel Boylston who started inoculations against smallpox during the epidemic, which were overwhelmingly successful in protecting the person from contracting the disease the natural way, which had a many fold higher mortality rate. The author explains that Boylston first commenced the procedure due to his understanding that this was a method that had been successfully used in Africa, as well as the Middle East, and perhaps even China. The surprising part: Mather was in favor of the procedure; Franklin, and the paper, *New England Courant*, that he was an apprentice to, and which his older brother, James, started and owned, was adamantly opposed. Hubris. The ancient Greeks got it right: how so very often it is the dominant factor in a human drama. Dr. William Douglass, who considered himself the only real physician in Boston (since he was the only one with a medical degree; the others, including Boylston, learned their trade *OT*, and were hence dubbed *practitioners* by him) was adamantly opposed to the procedure, and helped whip up political opposition to it, and used Franklin's *New England Courant* to that purpose. Religious rivalry also played a significant part in the drama, with the Puritans, of which Mather was a leading preacher, on the side of Boylston, and the Church of England opposed. In addition to the medical aspects of the fight against smallpox, Coss does a good job of presenting

the nascent struggles regarding freedom of the press. No surprise, the government only likes good things said about it; youthful rebels like James Franklin felt otherwise, and actively promoted controversy which, as the author indicates, certainly helps circulation. The teenage Ben also demonstrated surprising talents in the helping circulation effort. And on that separate, but intertwined vector, Coss examines the political dramas, mainly between the appointed British governor, Samuel Shute, and the local legislative body, led by Elisa Cook, who would be an inspiration for Samuel Adams, a key figure in the American Revolution, half a century later. Wars and epidemics. Sometimes they are intertwined, sometimes completely separate. Admittedly, the following is a most subjective guess: there must be 100 books written about war for every one written about epidemics. Yet the 1918 flu pandemic killed far more people than all the combatants who died in the First World War, and, as indicated above, smallpox killed far, far more people than all the wars of the 20th century. And thus, Coss's book is important, for illuminating an aspect of American history, including its medical history that is not extensively covered elsewhere. The only aspect I found lacking was that he did not provide a reasonable explanation why inoculation with a live smallpox virus actually worked in providing immunization against smallpox contracted the natural way; intuitively one would suspect, like Dr. Douglass, that it would simply be a faster way of spreading the disease and killing people. Nonetheless, overall, an excellent read: 5-stars.

I was expecting this book to be a history focused on disease and medicine, perhaps in the tradition of Howard Simpson's *Invisible Armies: The Impact of Disease on American History*. I was curious about Coss' background, as he didn't seem to have a background in history or in medicine, so far as I could tell. What little I could glean suggested that his background was mostly in journalism, and before long, this book began to reflect this focus. As it turns out, the epidemic is forced to share the stage with several co-stars: the struggle between the Puritans & Anglicans, colonists & royal officialdom, and pro- and anti-inoculation movements. Lurking at the back of the stage is James Franklin (and little brother Benjamin) and his fledgling newspaper, the *New England Courant*. It doesn't take long for Franklin and his little paper to barge to the front and take over the narrative. With about 100 pages remaining in the book, the epidemic is done and dusted. That should give the reader an idea of where Coss' focus is, as he continues on his way, and before you know it, it's 1762 and James Franklin's widow Ann has taken charge of the *Newport Mercury* in Rhode Island. What does this have to do with smallpox in Boston? Not a whole lot. Interestingly, James Franklin & his paper were squarely on the wrong side of the inoculation fight, but Coss

seems to regard Franklin as more of a hero than Dr. Zabdiel Boylston or Cotton Mather, both inoculation advocates. When discussing Mather and his agenda, Coss seems barely able at times to conceal his contempt of a man who, in all fairness, has a pretty tarnished legacy. But Coss seems to suspect Mather's motives at every turn. By contrast, James Franklin seems to get a pass most of the time. It is an interesting book, but the title is more than a bit misleading. There is plenty of disease and dying, rough-and-tumble politics, and sectarian hijinks, but the newspaper is definitely the star.

The *handle* of this book is the first American smallpox epidemic in which a physician (Zabdiel Boylston) tried the radical procedure of inoculation. At the time smallpox inoculation was considered by many to be extremely dangerous, but Boylston saved hundreds of people. Its local proponents included Cotton Mather, now turned from witch trials to Enlightenment thinking. Its opponents included printer James Franklin and his younger brother Benjamin, who used the inoculation controversy to launch a newspaper that included daring criticism of British rule. Author Stephen Goss sets the inoculation debate in its wider context and discusses how it sowed the seeds of the American Revolution. This book is both well researched and readable. Five stars.

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