

Excerpt from Chapter 1: The Secret of the Yellow Death by Suzanne Jurmain

1. Summer 1899
2. The young man didn't feel well. First, there was the chill: an icy, bone-freezing chill in the middle of a warm summer evening. Then there was the terrible crushing headache. His back hurt. His stomach twisted with pain. And then he was hot, boiling hot, with a fever that hovered around 104 degrees. His skin turned yellow. The whites of his eyes looked like lemons. Nauseated, he gagged and threw up again and again, spewing streams of vomit black with digested clots of blood across the pillow. Sometimes he cried out or babbled in delirium. Violent spasms jolted his body. It took two grown men to hold him in his bed as a nurse wiped away the drops of blood that trickled from his nose and mouth. Nights and mornings passed. Then, five days after that first freezing chill, the young man died: another victim of a terrible disease called yellow fever.



*A yellow fever patient in a Cuban hospital
around 1900*

3. Doctors didn't know what caused it. They couldn't cure it. But they knew that yellow fever was a killer. For centuries the disease had swept through parts of the Americas and Africa, leaving behind a trail of loss and misery. It turned cities into ghost towns and left the local graveyards filled with corpses. In New Orleans, Dr. Kennedy took sick and collapsed while he was tending patients. In Philadelphia, Dr. Hodge's little girl caught the fever, turned yellow, and died in two short days. And when the sickness killed the Memphis snack shop woman Kate Bionda, she left behind her husband and two small children. The fever struck the rich. It struck the poor. It killed the humble, and it humbled the important. Jefferson Davis, president of the Confederate States of America during the U.S. Civil War, lost his son to yellow fever. George Clymer, who'd signed the Declaration of Independence, watched helplessly as the sickness struck his wife and family. And every single year the illness took its toll. In 1793, 4,044 people in Philadelphia died during a plague of yellow fever. New Orleans counted 8,101 yellow

fever deaths in 1853. And when the disease hit Memphis, Tennessee, in 1878, 17,000 citizens sickened in a single month. Stores closed. Work stopped. Thousands fled, and those who remained wandered through a nightmare city—where sick children huddled next to dying parents and hungry dogs roamed the silent streets searching for their lost dead masters.

4. “Yellow fever [is] . . . an enemy which imperils life and cripples commerce and industry,” Surgeon General John Woodworth told the U.S. Congress in 1879. And he was right. In one single century—between 1800 and 1900—the disease sickened approximately 500,000 U.S. citizens and killed about 100,000.