

EXCERPTS TO WRITE ABOUT

Fatal Fever: Tracking Down Typhoid Mary

by Gail Jarrow

- **Directions:** Read the lead to the book and think about what the author's argument is. What is the author's purpose? What is her perspective? Highlight where you find clues to those questions and annotate your thinking.

The Lead: Hidden

"I am an innocent human being."

—Mary Mallon

Early on a damp March morning in 1907, Mary Mallon answered the knock at the servants' entrance of a New York brownstone house. She took one look at the visitors and lunged at them with her sharp fork. As they flinched, she ran toward the kitchen.

Mary knew why they were there. A few weeks earlier, a well-dressed man with a mustache had shown up, accusing her of outrageous and horrible things. Later, he followed her. Cornered her at her friend's home. Acted as though he had the right to stick her with a needle and steal her blood.

Yesterday, a woman in a tailored suit and stiff collar had come to the kitchen. She claimed to have the authority to do exactly that . . . and more. The woman refused to take Mary's "no" for an answer. Now she was back with the police.

Mary was sure that this time, if they caught her, they wouldn't let her go. She should have disappeared when she had the chance. They had no right to threaten her or touch her body. Even if she was only a cook, Mary wasn't going to let them do it.

Picking up her skirts, she fled past the kitchen and down the hall.

Where could she hide? Mary headed for the backdoor. Frantically, she scanned the snow-covered yard for a hiding place, but she saw nothing. Policemen were looking for her inside the house and out on the street. She was trapped.

A high wooden fence separated the backyard from the house next door. If she could just get over that fence and into the neighbor's yard. . . .

A wooden chair pushed up against the fence would do the trick.

Thank Almighty God she had friends who would help. Would say that they had no idea where she'd gone. Would point out a small outside closet under the neighbor's front steps. Would pile some ash cans against its closed door after she climbed in.

Mary shut the door behind her and crouched down.

She didn't know it, but she wasn't alone in that cramped, cold closet. Deep inside her body, billions of deadly microorganisms were hiding, too. . . .

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The fates of three people collided at that New York City brownstone. The three had been born within four years of each other and had taken different paths to reach the middle of their lives. In late winter 1907, those lives changed forever.

For George Albert Soper, determined to establish his reputation, the event would add another triumph to boost his career.

For Sara Josephine Baker, attempting to make her mark in a male-dominated and often corrupt city government, it would bolster her efforts to gain respect and responsibility.

For Mary Mallon, struggling to support herself in an adopted country, her encounters with both of them would lead to a notoriety that has lasted for more than a century. The world would remember who she was long after it had forgotten the other two.

These three people were brought together by a dreaded scourge that left behind shattered dreams, broken hearts, and painful death.

TYPHOID FEVER.

- ▶ **Now that you've finish the lead, write what you think the author's argument or claims are.**

- ▶ **Read the end of the story and see whether the author provides evidence to support the claim. Highlight evidence and annotate your thinking.**

The Rest of the Story: Typhoid in the Twenty-First Century

"Typhoid fever can be prevented."

—Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

In the United States, the public health battle against typhoid fever was a success. Water filtration, chlorination, and improved sewage disposal greatly reduced the number of victims. In 1900, about 31 of every 100,000 Americans died of typhoid fever. By 1940, the rate had dropped to only 1 out of 100,000.

Today, death from typhoid is rare. . . .

About 80 percent of these people caught the bacteria during a trip outside the country. Most had been to India, Bangladesh, or Pakistan, where the vast majority of the world's cases occur. Parts of sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, and south and east Asia also have high typhoid rates, particularly in urban slums.

Typhoid spreads easily where human waste contaminates drinking water and food. As many as 2.5 billion people worldwide live without basic sanitation, with a billion of them routinely defecating on open ground. Nearly 800 million have no access to clean water. In these areas, people tend to wash their hands less often and without the soap that helps remove bacteria. . . .

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Hope for the Future

Scientists are studying the DNA sequence of *Salmonella typhi*'s genome to find weaknesses that they can use to fight typhoid fever. Clues may lead to better diagnostic tests, antibiotics, treatments, and vaccines.

Other researchers are trying to understand how typhoid bacteria remain in a carrier's body without causing symptoms. The work is challenging because *Salmonella typhi* doesn't cause disease in other animals, and certain experiments on humans would be unethical.

Projects in developing countries are aimed at protecting the water supply from contamination and purifying it by chlorination. Unfortunately, in many parts of the world, these sanitation improvements could take years to achieve.

Someday, research and public health efforts may succeed in eradicating typhoid fever. When that happens, *Salmonella typhi* will no longer inflict pain and suffering on communities the way it did in Ithaca more than a hundred years ago. And no one will ever become a "Typhoid Mary" again.

- **Write about reading:** What was the author's argument or claim? What evidence was provided? Evaluate whether the evidence was relevant and supported the claim.

Note: Gail Jarrow opens her account of a woman infected with typhoid fever with a narrative writing style that makes it all read like a novel. It's a dramatic opening because Jarrow doesn't lay all her cards on the table. She deliberately withholds details so that we wonder: Is this woman a criminal? Why are the police involved? Why is she resisting the demands of the people knocking at her door? At the end of this opening, Jarrow fully unfurls her subject matter: Typhoid Mary. Notice the way Jarrow also establishes *who* she is writing about but declares that her subject has been notorious for more than a century: "The world would remember who she was long after it had forgotten the other two." This is an effective technique for an opening because it almost corners the reader into reading on by establishing that if you don't know this story—you should.