



Genius Belabored: Childbed Fever and the Tragic Life of Ignaz Semmelweis

Theodore G. Obenchain

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In *Genius Belabored: Childbed Fever and the Tragic Life of Ignaz Semmelweis*, Theodore G. Obenchain traces the life story of a nineteenth-century Hungarian obstetrician who was shunned and marginalized by the medical establishment for advancing a far-sighted but unorthodox solution to the appalling mortality rates that plagued new mothers of the day.

In engrossing detail, Obenchain recreates for readers the sights, smells, and activities within a hospital of that day. In an era before the acceptance of modern germ science, physicians saw little need for cleanliness or hygiene. As a consequence, antiseptic measures were lax and rudimentary. Especially vulnerable to contamination were new mothers, who frequently contracted and died from childbed fever (puerperal fever). *Genius Belabored* follows Semmelweis's awakening to the insight that many of these deaths could be avoided with basic antiseptic measures like hand washing.

The medical establishment, intellectually unprepared for Semmelweis's prescient hypothesis, rejected it for a number of reasons. It was unorthodox and went against the lingering Christian tradition that the dangers of childbirth were inherent to the lives of women. Complicating matters, colleagues did not consider Semmelweis an easy physician to work with. His peers described him as strange and eccentric. Obenchain offers an empathetic and insightful argument that Semmelweis suffered from bipolar disorder and illuminates how his colleagues, however dedicated to empirical science they might have been, misjudged Semmelweis's methods based upon ignorance and their emotional discomfort with him.

In *Genius Belabored*, Obenchain identifies Semmelweis's rightful place in the pantheon of scientists and physicians whose discoveries have saved the lives of millions. Obenchain's biography of Semmelweis offers unique insights into the practice of medicine and the mindsets of physicians working in the premodern era. This fascinating study offers much of interest to general readers as well as those interested in germ theory, the history of medicine and obstetrics, or anyone wishing to better understand the trajectory of modern medicine.

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