



The Family That Couldn't Sleep: A Medical Mystery

By D.T. Max

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For two hundred years a noble Venetian family has suffered from an inherited disease that strikes their members in middle age, stealing their sleep, eating holes in their brains, and ending their lives in a matter of months. In Papua New Guinea, a primitive tribe is nearly obliterated by a sickness whose chief symptom is uncontrollable laughter. Across Europe, millions of sheep rub their fleeces raw before collapsing. In England, cows attack their owners in the milking parlors, while in the American West, thousands of deer starve to death in fields full of grass.

What these strange conditions—including fatal familial insomnia, kuru, scrapie, and mad cow disease—share is their cause: prions. Prions are ordinary proteins that sometimes go wrong, resulting in neurological illnesses that are always fatal. Even more mysterious and frightening, prions are almost impossible to destroy because they are not alive and have no DNA—and the diseases they bring are now spreading around the world.

In *The Family That Couldn't Sleep*, essayist and journalist D. T. Max tells the spellbinding story of the prion's hidden past and deadly future. Through exclusive interviews and original archival research, Max explains this story's connection to human greed and ambition—from the Prussian chemist Justus von Liebig, who made cattle meatier by feeding them the flesh of other cows, to New Guinean natives whose custom of eating the brains of the dead nearly wiped them out. The biologists who have investigated these afflictions are just as extraordinary—for example, Daniel Carleton Gajdusek, a self-described “pedagogic pedophilic pediatrician” who cracked kuru and won the Nobel Prize, and another Nobel winner, Stanley Prusiner, a driven, feared self-promoter who identified the key protein that revolutionized prion study.

With remarkable precision, grace, and sympathy, Max—who himself suffers from an inherited neurological illness—explores maladies that have tormented humanity for centuries and gives reason to hope that someday cures will be found. And he eloquently demonstrates that in our relationship to nature and these ailments, we have been our own worst enemy.

Advance praise

“*The Family that Couldn’t Sleep* is a riveting detective story that plumbs one of the deepest mysteries of biology. The story takes the reader from the torments of an Italian family cursed with sleeplessness to the mad cows of England (and, now, America), following an unlikely trail of misfolded proteins. D. T. Max unfolds his absorbing narrative with rare grace and makes the science sing.”

–Michael Pollan, author of *The Omnivore’s Dilemma* and *The Botany of Desire*

“Much has been written about prions and Mad Cow Disease—nearly all of it is worthless. Thankfully, from the world of journalism comes D.T. Max to set things right. Throw all those other “Mad Cow” books in the trash: This is the book to read about prions—or whatever you want to call them. It’s a riveting tale, told by someone with a very special understanding, derived in part from his own strange ailment. Find a cozy spot, clear your schedule and dive in.”

– Laurie Garrett, author of *Betrayal of Trust* and *The Coming Plague*

“D. T. Max deftly unfolds the mysterious prion in all its villainous guises. Although scientists do not fully understand these proteins—how they replicate and wreak such havoc in their victims’ brains—*The Family That Couldn’t Sleep* reveals their historical, cultural, and scientific place in our world. Prepare to be enlightened, entertained, and frightened.”

–Katrina Firlik, MD, author of *Another Day in the Frontal Lobe*

“A great book. D.T. Max has drawn the curtain on a cabinet of folly and malady that will stagger your imagination.”

– Philip Weiss, author of *American Taboo*

“D.T. Max has combined the enthralling medical anthropology of Oliver Sacks with the gothic horror of Stephen King to produce a medical detective story that is as intelligent as it is spooky. The villain of *The Family That Couldn’t Sleep* is the prion, a tiny little protein that causes some of the most terrifying, brain-mangling, creepy diseases known to man. Always fascinating—how could it not be, given that its characters include cannibals, mad cows, madder sheep, a Nobel prize-winning pedophile, and, most poignantly, an Italian family cursed by fatal insomnia?—Max’s book is also a gripping account of scientific discovery, and a heartfelt meditation on what it means to be cursed with an incurable, and brutal, illness.” – David Plotz, author of *The Genius Factory*

From the Hardcover edition.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

An engaging nonfiction "medical mystery" starts with the strange case of an Italian family whose members, upon reaching a certain age, succumb to a sort of sleeping disorder that causes not only insomnia but certain death. The cause of this disease is determined to be prions—infectious agents derived from proteins, not viruses—so Max explores other prion diseases, such as mad cow disease and kuru, and delves into the history of prion research as a way of unraveling the mysteries behind the disease that's been plaguing the titular family for generations. Gardner lets the material do most of the heavy lifting by narrating in a plain, unadorned style that keeps his own contributions to the narrative minimal, the auditory equivalent of transparent prose. The pacing and fascinating subject matter keep the listener fully engaged throughout, resulting in an audiobook that will certainly be no cure for insomnia. In fact, it might even warrant an advisory warning: side effects may include sleepless nights, caused by a strong desire to get to the next chapter.

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From [The New Yorker](#)

Beginning with the story of an Italian clan whose members die of a mysterious inability to sleep, Max traces science's tortuous path toward understanding prion diseases—a category that includes scrapie in sheep, B.S.E. in cows, and kuru, a disease spread by cannibalism which decimated one New Guinean tribe. Victims of fatal familial insomnia lose control of neuromuscular function, existing in a merciless limbo between sleep and wakefulness until they die of exhaustion. For a half century, prion diseases have baffled scientists, because the transmission of illness by proteins, which are non-living, was considered impossible. Max, who suffers from a distantly related neuromuscular disease, narrates recent advances in prion science with engaging clarity. But, as he reflects ruefully, "the neurologist can diagnose you but he can't cure you."

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From [Bookmarks Magazine](#)

Framed by the story of one genetically cursed Italian family, *The Family That Couldn't Sleep* is a true medical mystery. D. T. Max, who conducted investigative research and interviews, has written a gripping, spooky, educational, and readable book with vast historical and geographic sweep, from 18th-century Italy and England to 1950s New Guinea. Its strong point is the dual focus on the Italian family's genetic legacy and the scientific discovery of prion diseases. The book wanders when it strays from these subjects, and Max milks too much sympathy for his Italians. Yet if Max stresses that scientists still have a long way to go to alleviate the threat of prions to humans, he also gives reason for hope.

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Users Review

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Jamie Lundquist:

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