

The Kissing Bug: A True Story of a Family, an Insect, and a Nation's Neglect of a Deadly Disease

Daisy Hernández

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In *The Kissing Bug*, Daisy Hernández recounts watching her aunt die from a little known or understood disease. Years later, Hernández set out to learn more, and entered into a harrowing medical mystery.

Hernández's memories of her aunt depict a vibrant, independent woman who was undone by an illness that her doctors could not easily identify. That infectious disease was Chagas, and Hernández writes that there are more than 300,000 cases in the US's Latinx population alone, with six million cases total worldwide (most are in South America). She delivers such information in clear terms, but also with a sense of urgency, as when she covers how Chagas is transmitted: nocturnal insects bite at the lips and eyes of their sleeping victims, transferring parasites that colonize and devour human organs from the inside out, affecting the heart and sometimes the digestive system. Hernández describes seeing the thrashing parasites under a microscope; it's a bone-chilling scene.

Written with compassion, but also drawing on interviews and extensive research, the book strikes political and sociological notes, revealing ugly truths about how the medical system responds in different ways to well-off patients and high-profile disorders, electing to overlook less glamorous diseases that affect poorer, more vulnerable populations, where the afflicted are less likely to arouse compassion.

Hernández asserts that there are no easy answers when it comes to Chagas. Even her aunt—who was a teacher, had health insurance for much of the time she was ill, and got medical treatment from qualified doctors—was not cured, because she did not receive a timely diagnosis or treatment.

The Kissing Bug is the engrossing account of a family medical mystery that led to a compassionate investigation of an underattended disease.

SUSAN WAGGONER (May / June 2021)

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