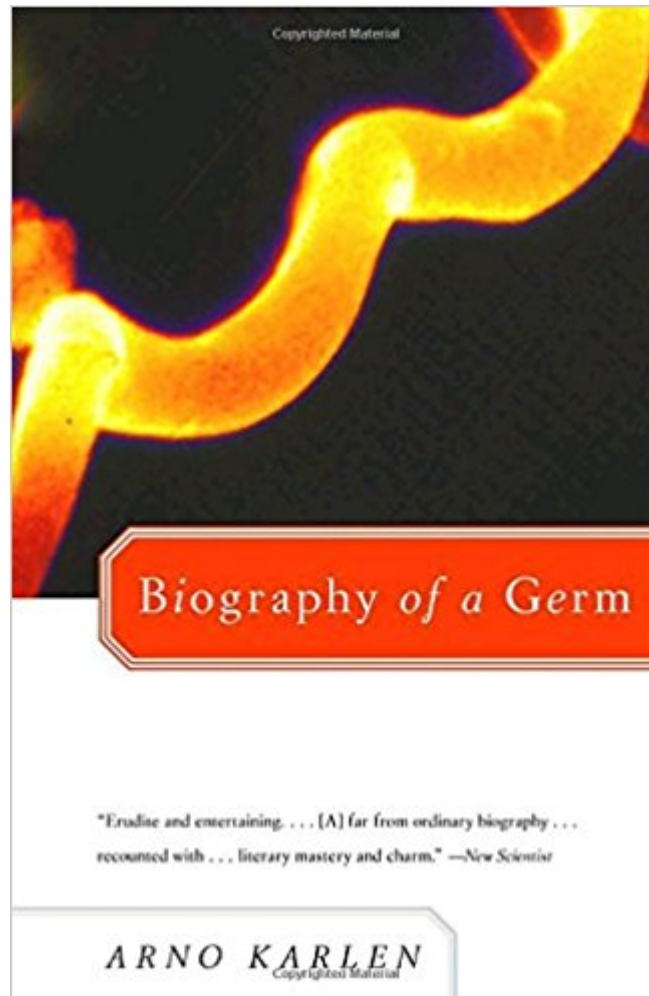




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# Biography Of A Germ



## Synopsis

Arno Karlen, author of *Man and Microbes*, focuses on a single bacterium in *Biography of a Germ*, giving us an intimate view of a life that has been shaped by and is in turn transforming our own. *Borrelia burgdorferi* is the germ that causes Lyme disease. In existence for some hundred million years, it was discovered only recently. Exploring its evolution, its daily existence, and its journey from ticks to mice to deer to humans, Karlen lucidly examines the life and world of this recently prominent germ. He also describes how it attacks the human body, and how by changing the environment, people are now much more likely to come into contact with it. Charming and thorough and smart, this book is a wonderfully written biography of your not so typical biographical subject.

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## Customer Reviews

The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein might say that if a microbe could talk, we couldn't understand it, but psychoanalyst and science writer Arno Karlen has done his best to listen and translate in *Biography of a Germ*. This lovely, funny, even endearing portrait of *Borrelia burgdorferi* (or Bb), the screwy bacterium that causes Lyme disease, would charm even a terminal mysophobe like Howard Hughes. Unfortunately, Karlen has to justify his topic at greater length than do most biographers, but his reasoning is nearly lyrical in its enthusiasm for the microscopic. Following the genealogy of the germ back to our common ancestor (gulp) and beyond, the author finds a freshness in what we too often see as dry taxonomy and genetics. From there, he watches Bb as it makes its way through the circulation superhighways of deer, ticks, and hikers, each a stop on its complex life cycle. We

elbowed our way into Bb's story comparatively recently, ironically hurting ourselves as we renewed our appreciation of and commitment to wilderness areas. As we destroyed, then created habitat for deer, we ended up inviting Bb to run amok in our bodies. Karlen captures the beauty and terror of this bizarre chain of events, providing new insights into our relationship with our environment. Much like its cousins that live harmlessly in our bloodstream, eyelashes, and guts, this tickborne germ will eventually evolve a truce with us to protect its reproduction. Unfortunately for current and future sufferers of Lyme disease, we're quite a few generations away from that happy time. While we're waiting, we can read *Biography of a Germ* to learn more about our new tenants and why we should care about them. --Rob Lightner --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

The germ is *Borrelia burgdorferi*, Bb for short, and causes Lyme disease in the people it infects: before it hits a human, Bb has to reside in three other animals--a mouse, a tick and a deer, in that order. This odd property, and the germ's wide distribution, means that Bb has been affected by changes in human land use--factories, clear-cuts, the growth of the suburbs and the environmental movement all had to happen for Lyme to become something Americans think about. And think about it we do: Bb is now so interesting that in 1997 scientists mapped its genome. All these facets make Bb the ideal candidate for what Karlen (*Man and Microbes*, etc.) claims is the first history of a pathogen written from that pathogen's perspective. Fascinating in their own right, Bb and its relatives also demonstrate larger patterns and questions in the study and history of microbes and molecular biology, of zoology and ecology, of medicine, public health policy and disease. In 22 brief chapters, Karlen lays out and answers some of those questions. He tells of Bb's sibling spirochetes, which cause syphilis and tropical diseases. He explains how ticks' adaptations let them parasitize "a chipmunk or a human," "a wren or a raccoon," and how Bb's adaptations let it jump between ticks and their hosts. Karlen has created a vigorous, compact account of Bb's life and times. And beyond the zoology and disease control, Karlen even offers a message: "Pathogens... are just trying to survive, and sometimes they must do so at other creatures' expense." The same could be said of humans." (June) Copyright 2000 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Required reading for high school students (9th, 10th grade). It adds a new dimension to their biology textbooks. It glues together many concepts learned over the years including prokaryotes, eukaryotes, organelles, cell membrane constitution, electronic microscope, Linnaeus tree, Gaia, etc. it is a short book and a great antidote for boring textbooks.

I read this book a few months ago for a book report I had to do in my Entomology class. I choose it at first just because it was the shortest in length out of the other book options, but when I actually got it in the mail and started reading it I loved it! I read it all in one day. Now I am not a science person by any means, I usually hate any subject science related, but this book is nothing like reading a textbook at all. The author does such a good job about making it very informative but yet simple. I never thought I would have liked reading about a germ as much as I did! I would definitely recommend this book to anyone who loves science, and even to those of you like me who don't.

It is amazing how a talented writer can take a patently boring topic and turn it into an arresting read. Arno Karlen uses historical anecdotes to transform his chronicle of the *Borrelia Burgdorferi*, the germ that causes Lyme's disease, into an interesting read.

Lot of info on Lyme disesa

"Biography of a Germ" is an engaging, sometimes even eloquent, history of *Borrelia burgdorferi* (Bb), the spirochete that causes Lyme disease. Its author, Arno Karlen, is a psychologist and science writer with an impressive ability to imbue his prose with the sense of wonder that inspired his lifelong fascination with microbes. This is not a biography in the sense of an account of the spirochete's life cycle and how it makes us sick. It is a biography of the species Bb and its place in "our shared ecological web", including how man-made changes in its environment and suburbanization have affected its viability and ultimately made the microbe dangerous to humans. Karlen begins with a good-humored defense of this attempt to write a biography of a non-human, then explains his choice of Bb as a subject. He discusses the evolution of bacteria 3.5 billion years ago to the present day before getting specific about Bb. Then we learn what it looks like (a helix 20-30 microns long), its methods of reproduction, and its journey through multiple hosts, occasionally ending up in humans. At that point, the discussion turns to the discovery of Lyme disease and theories on how and when Bb came to the US. I would have liked more detail on what it does in the human body, but it occurs to me that science may have a limited understanding of that. Nevertheless, "Biography of a Germ" is a very readable history of Bb in 25 short chapters.

The germ is the bacterium *Borrelia burgdorferi*, and it causes among other things Lyme disease. Karlen is a psychoanalyst by trade and a historian of microbiology by inclination. He fell in love with

the world of the very small when as a boy he was given a microscope. Karlen is also a fine prose stylist with a sharp sense of the ecological. In fact this book is really a kind of treatise on ecology, with a concentration on the environment of a bacterium. *Borrelia burgdorferi* is spread by ticks that bite small animals such as mice and squirrels and larger animals such as deer and sometimes humans. What Karlen accomplishes in this modest little book is to make vivid just what a "germ" is for a general readership. If you are in a fog about microbes and would like a painless, lively introduction, then this book may serve you very well. I always imagined that bacteria split about every twenty minutes. Here I learned that some bacteria do split every twenty minutes or so, but others take hours and some even longer. I was also fuzzy about just how it is that microbes cause disease. Do they "eat" human flesh or destroy our cells with toxins or hog our nutrients for themselves? Turns out that some do one thing and some do another. Karlen emphasizes that sometimes what they do is cause symptoms: fever, muscle aches, fatigue, inflammation, etc., which are actually the result of our immune system's aggressive response to the presence of something foreign. Sometimes this can get so out of hand that our immune system continues to attack our own cells even after the microbe is gone, as is suspected in rheumatoid arthritis and possibly fibromyalgia (p. 160). And sometimes microbes commandeer some part of our system in order to better spread themselves around by making us sneeze or cough (cold viruses) or by giving us diarrhea (cholera). There is a lot of other information in this little book, including such diverse facts as tumble weeds being native to southern Russia and not the western United States as I had always thought, or that the people of Lyme, Connecticut didn't appreciate having a disease named after their town. It is also interesting to know that microbes can "hide" in our bodies for years and then break out during times of overload or stress. Karlen digresses nicely in spots, giving his opinion on the Gaia concept (he likes the "original, narrower version" p. 63), and how he feels about the deer population in the U.S. (he thinks there are too many). This last is directly relevant since it is on the deer that the ticks that are the vectors for Lyme disease mate and are able to reproduce. He recalls some history (the cholera epidemics in London in the nineteenth century, Spanish flu in America, etc.) and literature (Defoe's *Journal of the Plague Year*; the anonymous *The Autobiography of a Flea*), and in a footnote (p. 29) cites a story by Isaac Babel about syphilis (a bacterium related to *Borrelia burgdorferi*) entitled "Guy de Maupassant." A story by Isaac Babel about Guy de Maupassant is like a movie by Stephen Spielberg about Stanley Kubrick! In summation, this is microbiology as literature, ecology as belles lettres seen in part from the perspective of a germ.

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