
PAPERBOUNDS

THE BLACK DEATH: Natural and Human Disaster in Medieval Europe. By Robert S. Gottfried. Free Press, 1985. 203 pp. \$8.95

It probably originated in the Gobi Desert during the late 1320s and was spread, east and west, by Mongol horsemen. From a Black Sea port, fleas and rats carrying the *Y. pestis* bacilli were transported, via Genoese merchant ships, to southern Italy. Between 1347 and 1351, the Black Death—a combination of bubonic, pneumonic, and septicaemic plague strains—ravaged Europe, reducing its population by 25 to 50 percent. Gottfried, a Rutgers historian, offers a succinct but thorough account of the disaster that hastened the decline of Europe's medieval order. The manorial economy, a fixed social system, scholastic philosophy, arcane medical practices, traditional attitudes toward life, death, time, and money—all were among the victims of the pestilence. Gottfried also looks at the plague's immediate, human effects. While some potential victims abandoned work and families to pursue their basest whims, others became models of piety. Touring groups of flagellants mortified themselves in a desperate attempt to "atone for the sins of the world." Some fanatics launched bloody anti-Semitic pogroms. The Black Death left Europe, in the words of a popular contemporary poem, "a world turned upside down."

FRANTZ FANON: A Biography. By Irene L. Gendzier. Grove, 1985. 300 pp. \$8.95

Born in Martinique in 1925 and trained as a psychiatrist in France, Frantz Fanon wrote perhaps his most famous book, *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), while working for Algerian independence during the late 1950s. "It is hardly surprising that [this book] has been the pretext for a facile praising or damning of the author,"

writes Gendzier, a Boston University historian. In it, Fanon, a black man, condoned violence as a legitimate means by which the colonized could achieve independence. Moreover, he contended that armed struggle would help the participants purge themselves of the humiliations of colonialism. Behind this argument, shows Gendzier, was Fanon's life-long effort to analyze the mentality of the oppressed, particularly those of dark skin. Though Fanon died (of leukemia) in 1961, his ideas, variously invoked, survived among Western intellectuals, Third World radicals, and American Black Power advocates during the 1960s and '70s.

MURASAKI SHIKIBU: Her Diary and Poetic Memoirs. A translation and study by Richard Bowring. Princeton, 1985. 290 pp. \$10.50

In 11th-century Japan, Murasaki penned what it is widely hailed as the world's first novel, *The Tale of Genji*. These translations of her personal diary and poetic memoirs provide insights into the mind of their witty, melancholic author as well as a vivid sense of the aristocratic court life of Heian Japan. The diary is particularly strong on personality quirks and fashions, musings about the status of women, political and literary gossip. Sei Shōnagon, author of *The Pillow Book*, is characterized as "dreadfully conceited. She . . . littered her writings with Chinese characters, but they left a great deal to be desired." Modest Murasaki, who hesitated "to reveal her learning in front of my women at home," would never dream of doing so at court. The running commentary by Bowring, a Cambridge Orientalist, is helpful, but many of Murasaki's poems stand gracefully on their own: *Be close, you say; / But the first thing I met / On getting close / Were your feelings / Thin as summer clothes.*