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Magical Mushrooms, Mischievous Molds



Synopsis

Mushrooms magically spew forth from the earth in the hours that follow a summer rain. Fuzzy brown molds mischievously turn forgotten peaches to slime in the kitchen fruit bowl. And in thousands of other ways, members of the kingdom Fungi do their part to make life on Earth the miracle that it is. In this lively book, George Hudler leads us on a tour of an often-overlooked group of organisms, which differ radically from both animals and plants. Along the way the author stops to ponder the marvels of nature and the impact of mere microbes on the evolution of civilization. Nature's ultimate recyclers not only save us from drowning in a sea of organic waste, but also provide us with food, drink, and a wide array of valuable medicines and industrial chemicals. Some fungi make deadly poisons and psychedelic drugs that have interesting histories in and of themselves, and Hudler weaves tales of those into his scientific account of the nature of the fungi. The role of fungi in the Irish potato famine, in the Salem Witch Trials, in the philosophical writings of Greek scholars, and in the creation of ginger snaps are just a few of the many great moments in history to grace these pages. Hudler moves so easily from discussing human history to exploring scientific knowledge, all with a sense of humor and enthusiasm, that one can well understand why he is an award-winning teacher both at Cornell University as well as nationally. Few, for instance, who read his invitation to "get out of your chair and take a short walk" will ever again look without curiosity and admiration at the "rotten" part of the world around them. *Magical Mushrooms, Mischievous Molds* is full of information that will satisfy history buffs, science enthusiasts, and anyone interested in nature's miracles. Everyone in Hudler's audience will develop a new appreciation of the debt they owe to the molds for such common products as penicillin, wine, and bread.

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Customer Reviews

"Magical Mushrooms, Mischievous Molds" is a highly readable trip into the kingdom of what I used to think of as some of the most disgusting organisms on Earth--the fungus responsible for athlete's foot, for one ('Trichophyton rubrum'). The author, George W. Hudler is Professor of Plant Pathology at Cornell University where he offers a popular course that has the same name as this book. He also edits "Branching Out," a biweekly newsletter for tree care professionals in the northeastern United States. In fact some of the bleakest chapters in "Magical Mushrooms, Mischievous Molds" concern the majestic species of trees that used to shade the American landscape. "Under the spreading chestnut tree" is no more--done in by the fungus 'Cryphonectria parasitica.' Professor Hudler also includes a deservedly little-known poem by Robert Frost, "Evil Tendencies Cancel" whose subject is the chestnut blight. Dutch Elm disease, whose most common conidia (spores) resemble jelly beans on tiny black toothpicks has blighted our landscapes since World War I when it was first discovered in Holland. This fungus can actually be controlled as long as communities are willing to sustain a commitment--unfortunately the city where I live ran out of money and/or enthusiasm for preserving these lovely old trees, and I've been watching them die off one by one ever since we moved here twenty years ago. Grim anecdotes aside, this book is a lively mixture of scientific fact and an overview of how fungi have changed our lives. For instance, most of us were taught that Dr. Alexander Fleming discovered penicillin at St. Mary's Hospital in London in 1928. But Professor Hudler also relates that Joseph Lister, the father of antiseptic surgery used a penicillium mold extract to heal a young girl in Edinburgh in 1844.

The fungi are enormously important organisms in nearly every ecosystem, but their importance is rarely fully appreciated. Besides that, they are a fascinating life form, as mind bending as any creature from science fiction. This book is a very brief introduction to fungi. The topic itself is fascinating, so it is no problem that the writing is only a tad better than typical academic writing.

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