



Breathing Space: How Allergies Shape Our Lives and Landscapes

By Gregg Mitman

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Allergy is the sixth leading cause of chronic illness in the United States. More than fifty million Americans suffer from allergies, and they spend an estimated \$18 billion coping with them. Yet despite advances in biomedicine and enormous investment in research over the past fifty years, the burden of allergic disease continues to grow. Why have we failed to reverse this trend?

Breathing Space offers an intimate portrait of how allergic disease has shaped American culture, landscape, and life. Drawing on environmental, medical, and cultural history and the life stories of people, plants, and insects, Mitman traces how America's changing environment from the late 1800s to the present day has led to the epidemic growth of allergic disease. We have seen a never-ending stream of solutions to combat allergies, from hay fever resorts, herbicides, and air-conditioned homes to numerous potions and pills. But, as Mitman shows, despite the quest for a magic bullet, none of the attempted solutions has succeeded. Until we address how our changing environment—physical, biological, social, and economic—has helped to create America's allergic landscape, that hoped-for success will continue to elude us.

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Breathing Space: How Allergies Shape Our Lives and Landscapes By Gregg Mitman Bibliography

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Mitman and his son Keefe are members of the "tribe" of allergy medication users whose expenditures fuel a \$5-billion industry. Studying both the history and business of allergies, Mitman—a historian of science at the University of Wisconsin, Madison—traces hay fever from its first (erroneous) identification as an ailment of the wealthy in the 19th century up to the modern, booming antihistamine market. Since seasonal allergies were first identified, misconceptions have shaped their treatment. Early sufferers escaped to hay fever resorts in areas where their sinuses mysteriously cleared. Believing that the communion with nature had led to the reprieve, many escaped to country homesteads landscaped with the very plants whose pollen causes hay fever. As Mitman demonstrates, the story of hay fever is also the story of the development of nature tourism, urban planning and the postwar pharmaceutical boom. As Mitman demonstrates, Americans seeking relief have changed where they live, what they build their homes with, what they buy, what activities they participate in and even the chemistry of their own bodies—but still all you hear every spring is sneezes. In clear and detailed prose, Mitman offers a wide-ranging history of this ongoing struggle that's as much about 20th century American consumerism as it is about allergies. Illustrations.

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From [Booklist](#)

Mitman directs steely, twentieth-century insight at popular misapprehensions, past and present, of the causes and cures of allergies, hay fever and asthma, in particular. He notes that in the latter nineteenth century, Americans considered hay fever a curse exclusive to white, upper-class males. They knew this because these "hay feverites" were the only persons who took lengthy, annual "hay fever holidays" at tony resorts in the White Mountains and on Mackinac Island. It was later recognized that allergies afflict poor, nonwhite populations with equal and sometimes greater ferocity. When asthma sufferers sought the healthy climate of Tucson, they imported Bermuda grass, evergreens, and sumac trees, to say nothing of industrial pollution and traffic congestion. Not surprisingly, allergy symptoms reprised. Chemical warfare brought its own problems when hay fever proliferated despite widespread, government-mandated herbicidal assaults on ragweed, and chemicals used to deliver breath-saving drugs were proven to be damaging to the ecology. Full of the wisdom of lessons learned as well as of noted authorities, Mitman's thoughtful presentation is nothing to sneeze at. Chavez, Donna

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Review

"This is a pioneering text."—Robert Fisher, University of Connecticut
(Robert Fisher)

"Mitman has a knack for identifying subjects that link the cultural and scientific. He presents asthma as a kind of indicator or sampling device for ideas about nature and society. Intriguing."—Charles E. Rosenberg, Harvard University
(Charles E. Rosenberg)

"This nuanced exploration of allergy and asthma elegantly combines environmental history, history of science, and history of medicine. Mitman charts important new territory."—John Harley Warner, Yale University School of Medicine

(John Harley Warner)

“This book makes a strikingly original contribution to social, environmental, and medical history. Mitman challenges Americans to rethink environmental, medical, and public health policies.”—Gerald Markowitz, CUNY

(Gerald Markowitz)

“Gregg Mitman’s *Breathing Space* offers a critically important analysis of the emergence of allergies as strikingly common and increasingly serious health maladies. But it does much more: by systematically linking environmental and medical history, Mitman offers a powerful argument against biomedical reductionism. In this pathbreaking book, he vividly shows how our bodies, our environment, and our health are indivisible.”—Allan M. Brandt, Kass Professor of the History of Medicine, Harvard University

(Allan M. Brandt)

"Mitman's book is very well organized and provides a provocative and interesting read on the links between environment and health. . . . Mitman weaves an important history that demonstrates the pivotal role of place in understanding and preventing allergies. . . . [A] must read . . ."—Kathi Wilson, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers and The Professional Geographer*

(Kathi Wilson *Annals of the Association of American Geographers and The Professional Geographer*)

Winner of the 2012 William H. Welch Medal given by the American Association for the History of Medicine

(William H. Welch Medal Recipient *American Association for the History of Medicine*)

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Jill Barks:

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As people who live in typically the modest era should be change about what going on or details even knowledge to make all of them keep up with the era which is always change and make progress. Some of you maybe will update themselves by examining books. It is a good choice for you but the problems coming to an individual is you don't know what one you should start with. This *Breathing Space: How Allergies Shape Our Lives and Landscapes* is our recommendation to cause you to keep up with the world. Why, because this book serves what you want and want in this era.

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