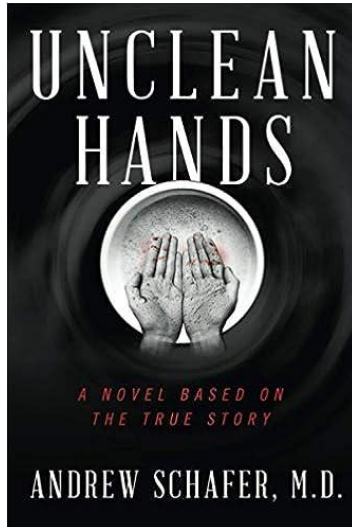


## ***Unclean Hands: From a Discovery That Would Forever Change Medicine to an Insane Asylum***

Andrew Schafer, MD Self-published, October 2020, 376 pages

**Reviewed by Michael D. Lockshin, MD (ΑΩΑ, Weill Cornell Medical College, 1979)**



*Unclean Hands*, by Andrew Schafer, is a stunning book (or three books, if you prefer).

The first is a fictionalized account of the life of Ignác Semmelweis, the brilliant, troubled, controversial, persecuted, and persecuting physician who discovered—before bacteria were known to cause disease—the origin and prevention of puerperal fever, an illness that, in mid-19th century Vienna, killed one of every three women in the obstetrical ward of a major teaching hospital. The author uses, as a literary device, well researched, documented, The Pharos/Autumn 2021 49 and footnoted historical Semmelweis facts with invented dialogue and circumstances. This brings to life a person whose name most of us know only through vague stories of his medical discovery or of the scandals that surrounded him throughout his life.

Semmelweis is fleshed out as a rotund Hungarian who is sloppy, gregarious, and offensively querulous at different times. In Schafer's telling, as in his life, Semmelweis is, and feels, out-of-place in pompous, formal, hierarchical Vienna. Schafer's anecdotes, fact or fiction, seem truento-life. There was a time when Semmelweis accepts the invitation of his famous mentor to accompany him and his wife to the opera at the Theater an der Wien, *The Magic Flute*, where during the Queen of the Night's high F aria Semmelweis appallingly falls asleep. Through anecdotes, he shows how Semmelweis abhorred when his colleagues wrongly assumed that he was Jewish.

There are tender narratives, such as the scene in which a thoughtful Semmelweis, wandering along the Danube in Pest, picks up, polishes, then throws away chestnuts he finds lying on the ground. With these lovely, personal touches the author describes a living man.

The second portion of the book places Semmelweis in a non-medical historical context of Vienna during the waning days of the Hapsburgs and the 1848 revolution, in which Semmelweis is peripherally involved. When Karl Marx speaks to an audience in a park (a true event) Semmelweis wanders by, is seen by his superiors, and accused of near treason (also true). Class- and ancestryconscious Viennese scorn Semmelweis' foreignness—he spoke German with a Hungarian accent, and Hungarian with a German accent. Meanwhile, the Hapsburgs crush the revolution, Austria is triumphant, and Buda and Pest, to which Semmelweis retreats, are in ignominious and physical defeat. German becomes the language of Semmelweis' university.

The visual depictions of 19th century Vienna, Buda, and Pest are especially nice, so much so that I periodically interrupted my reading in order to Google photographs of the sites. Schafer's eye is good. His detailed descriptions of Karlskirche, the obstetrical wards, the back streets of Vienna, and the Danube that separates Buda from Pest focus the eye and make these places real. This physical and political world is the one Semmelweis inhabits. The controversy about his hand-washing rules stays high, and professorships are awarded on the basis of personal connections and rivalries rather than skill.

Semmelweis demonstrates repeatedly that he can reduce puerperal fever mortality to less than one percent, but still cannot convince his colleagues that his theory of contamination is correct.

The third way to read this book is as a novel. Schafer presents a compelling story of the personal growth of a provocative man who successfully tests a brilliant hypothesis, but one that threatens the rectitude (and dignity) of his peers. It is a novel about Semmelweis' personal and emotional responses to his few acknowledged successes, and his many rejections. It is a story of the growth, then regression, of an unstable personality—from brilliant and ebullient to paranoid to withdrawn. It is a story of mental deterioration (thought to be psychosis but more likely dementia) that ends with an ignominious death in a home for the insane.

The novel's end is grim, but Schafer's epilogue and historical notes celebrate Semmelweis' post mortem resurrection following Pasteur's and Lister's demonstrations, two decades later, that bacteria cause disease. Particularly poignant, this resurrection is led by a now-penitent early, influential detractor of Semmelweis.

As a novel the book powerfully depicts the rise, fall, and rise again of a tormented man.

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