

Why did you write BLOOD WORK?

I decided to write BLOOD WORK on January 31, 2006 after listening—oddly enough—to George W. Bush’s State of the Union address. In it, Bush called for “legislation to prohibit the most egregious abuses of medical research [including] creating human-animal hybrids.” I was struck by the ways in which history seemed to be repeating itself. While questions of modern genomics go beyond the scope of this book and my own expertise as a professor, I thought it was fascinating that one of the most common procedures in medicine today—transfusion—had faced similar questioning, concern, and outrage.

I do believe that every era, particularly one deep in “Scientific Revolution” as we ourselves are, necessarily has to ask some time-worn questions. How far are we willing push the limits of science, and by extension, our understanding of what it means to be human? As someone who works in history, I’m not interested in staking an argument in one or the other camp. Instead, I’m fascinated how science and society talk to one another (or not) while trying to work through this thorniest of dilemmas.

What’s your favorite chapter in the book?

That one is easy. I loved writing chapter 9, “The Philosopher’s Stone,” because it captures everything that drew me to the seventeenth century as a graduate student and everything that mesmerizes me about the period still now. In the Renaissance and well into the Scientific Revolution, the boundaries between science and superstition were not at all clear. For as much as we laugh now at the idea of dog-headed men roaming the earth or of pig-faced women pining to get married, these were very real possibilities to the early-modern mind. The rush to explore new worlds that began in the Renaissance brought Europeans face-to-face with difference. Can you only imagine what they must have thought we they saw a giraffe for the first time? Or even a turkey? (Turkeys were late imports to Europe from the New World. In fact, in French, they’re still called *dinde*—from *coq d’Inde* [Chicken of India]). And, that’s not even to mention their interactions with new cultures and people, which of course brought tragic effects.

The history of blood transfusion is woven into all of this. When transfusion hit the medical stage, doctors chose animals for their donors both for philosophical reasons (animal blood was thought purer) and practical reasons (donors faced certain death). But that brought with it very real risks. Would humans start barking? Would dogs now talk? In other words, was science working to engineer the very mythical creatures that both fascinated and frightened early European culture? For some, the idea was not just terrifying, it was also sacrilege. And it needed to be stopped. Even if it took murder to do it.

So is BLOOD WORK fiction or non-fiction?

The truth is, as they say, stranger than fiction. And BLOOD WORK is entirely non-fiction. It’s the result of years of painstaking work in libraries and archives—London, Rome, Paris, Aix-en-Provence, New Haven, Philadelphia—to get the story straight. I still remember spending days trying to figure out what the Paris street lanterns were made of [large candles] and how much light they gave off [not a lot, but enough]. Now for someone working on events that happened in the streets of Paris in 1667, that is a critical question. Paris was the crime capitol of the world at the time. The Prime Minister Colbert appointed the city’s first police chief, Nicolas de la Reynie, to clean up the streets. One of the first things on his agenda was to light the Paris streets at night. (In fact, that’s why they call Paris the City of Light. It was the first major European city to install street lights.) Well, lighted streets can change everything! In the end, this bit of information didn’t get included in as much detail as I had research for in the book—but it was crucial to me as I tried to see, smell, and imagine Paris in the 1660s.