

BLOOD

AN EPIC HISTORY OF
MEDICINE AND COMMERCE

"RIVETING."
— NEW YORK TIMES

DOUGLAS STARR



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Powerfully involving narrative and incisive detail, clarity and inherent drama: *Blood* offers in abundance the qualities that define the best popular science writing. Here is the sweeping story of a substance that has been feared, revered, mythologized, and used in magic and medicine from earliest times--a substance that has become the center of a huge, secretive, and often dangerous worldwide commerce.

Winner of the *Los Angeles Times Book Prize*, *Blood* was described by judges as "a gripping page-turner, a significant contribution to the history of medicine and technology and a cautionary tale. Meticulously reported and exhaustively documented."

Blood: An Epic History of Medicine and Commerce Details

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Author : Douglas Starr

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From Reader Review Blood: An Epic History of Medicine and Commerce for online ebook

Sam says

I enjoyed Blood, and certainly have a much better understanding of the evolution of the the blood service industry.

But the book is a bit mis-leading..it seems to me the story book really want to tell is the story of the AIDS epidemic in the blood supply, and why so many people became infected after receiving blood, and blood products, well after the outbreak of the disease itself. However, the context of answering that question cannot be adequately explained without walking the reader back through our early understanding of blood. This context, though interesting, is but a lead-in to the real point of the book, and less a thorough background of 'all things blood'.

The writing itself was sometimes dry - I found myself wishing that the topic could have been written by a Malcolm Gladwell, or Bill Bryson - someone that could give it that extra signature to move the pages through.

It's a solid 2.5, but I'll grant it 3 for detail and research.

Christine Parker says

I have worked in hospital labs so this was a natural choice for me but it does work on several levels of interest.

Karin says

What began as a piece of research for work, became a riveting study of one the most critical pieces of humanity: human blood. Starr's book is a stunning look at superstitions, medicine, war, invention, illness, politics, money, greed, defeat, humility and change. The gripping tale had me hooked from chapter one and took me through a long and twisted history of the human race.

Starr breaks the book into three main areas: Blood Magic, Blood Wars and Blood Money. In each area he focuses on not just the uses of blood, but the overall perception of the product or gift, the underlying implications for its presence in our bodies and in medicine, our understanding and misunderstanding of its properties and how it helped shape the particular period of history being discussed.

Blood Magic goes back to the beginning of when we first see or hear of blood being used, primarily through the use of blood letting to relieve a variety of illnesses.

Doctors bled patients for every ailment imaginable. They bled for pneumonia, fevers, and back pain; for diseases of the liver and spleen; for rheumatism; for a nonspecific ailment known as 'going into a decline';

for headaches and melancholia, hypertension and apoplexy. They bled to heal bone fractures, to stop other wounds from bleeding and simply to maintain a bodily tone.

(pg. 17)

Starr tells us how George Washington, suffering from what doctors now consider strep throat, instructed his doctors to bleed him to relieve the pain and constriction. As part of his treatment, over the course of 13 hours, 7.5 pints of blood was let from his body (consider that most adults have 10-12 pints total in the body). This led to preterminal anemia, hypovolemia and hypotension. Washington (68) died the same day. Starr further discusses the transition of viewing blood as one of the four “humors” in our body carrying mystical powers, to a key component running throughout our body and being highly involved in our coronary, systemic, pulmonary and renal circulation systems. The concept and practice of transfusion became more common though blood typing had not yet taken place, which led to numerous deaths and complications.

Blood Wars talks about how blood was a key component in WWI and WWII and theorizes (very successfully) how the availability of blood and plasma helped the Allies win WWII. Starr discusses the rapid growth and understanding of blood during this period of time including the discovery of blood types (A, B, O), the discovery of the process of fractionation and being able to use the different components of blood (red blood cells, white blood cells, platelets and plasma) in a variety of applications and the discovery and use of citrate and other anticoagulants to store blood longer.

Lastly, Blood Money talks about the evolution of the Red Cross, independent non-profit blood banks affiliated with the American Association of Blood Banks (AABB), of which my current employer is associated, and for-profit blood banks and plasma centers. Starr talks about the evolution of illnesses like Hepatitis and eventually AIDS and the failings of the industry and countless governments to protect the blood and plasma supply and how we senselessly infected thousands of hemophiliacs and ordinary citizens through unsafe supply and transfusion procedures. He talks in detail about many of the profit plasma centers created in impoverished sections of cities where the poor and unhealthy are exploited for a few dollars a pint, while the plasma center turns a profit of many times over what they paid the donor. Only since the late 90s has sufficient, consistent testing been run on this product to ensure its safety for the general population.

The book was eye-opening, educational and often times heart rending. I've been so ignorant regarding much of our history related to blood and the tragic epidemic of AIDS that is stampeding mercilessly throughout our world. This book helped give me a microscopic, scientific, but human glance into the larger picture and to understand different angles of this multi-dimensional topic. I highly recommend this book to anyone who wants to read a fascinating tale of our history. I hope to one day make this required reading for my kids (*a few curse words are used in the stories told of a couple of the AIDS victims who were unwittingly transfused with the virus either through blood transfusion or through the injection of Factor VIII for treatment of hemophilia). I'll leave you with a couple of the critics' comments of this book.

“Starr’s lively history...courses with greed, altruism, and woefully vivid details.” Entertainment Weekly

“Meticulously researched, elegantly told.” Newsday

“Starr writes like a wildly enthusiastic high school biology teacher who arrives each day bristling with excitement, leaping about before the chalkboard, cracking jokes, and zealously banging his fist on his desk. Even the most indifferent brats pay attention, and so too will readers. ...Starr has created what amounts to a history of the human race perceived through the filter of blood as a medical product.” Village Voice Literary Supplement

“A vivid account.” The Economist

“Blood should be included in all first- and second-year medical curricula.” Scientific American

“This is first-class science writing, with a striking message.” Publishers Weekly

David Bernstein says

Although now becoming dated, this book is outstanding. Great read and mostly fair to all.

Kim says

As a veterinary clinical pathology resident (aka, "blood nerd"), I found this book fascinating. The first section, which discusses the history of blood and how it evolved to be used in medicine, gave me great insight and appreciation for those pioneers, despite how sometimes disturbing their experiments were. Learning how transfusion evolved, how blood groups and cross-matching developed, and how they learned about the various components of blood was incredible to learn. Although it's difficult to imagine a time without transfusion medicine and fractionation, it's amazing to note that these are relatively recent developments. The book then continues into blood's role in WWII, and the differences between the Allies and the Nazis and their use of blood and blood products. The second section of the book focuses on how blood banking developed, primarily in the United States; I will say this section did drag for me, as it involved a lot of politics and infighting, but it also laid the groundwork for the horrific Hepatitis B/C and HIV/AIDS epidemics that broke in the 1970's and 1980's and how the blood supply became contaminated. It's easy to look back now and judge a lot of these organizations made in the 1960's and 1970's, given what we know now about blood-borne diseases, but I had to remember that this was how we learned about this. The most horrific section of the book discusses these epidemics, focusing primarily on HIV - I wanted to scream at the companies and doctors and CEOs that, even once they learned that their products were the source of the infections, they buried their heads in the sand and then proceeded to continue to sell their products. Even once they were banned in the US, they then went on to sell them internationally. I recommend this book not only to fellow "blood nerds" like myself, but to anyone who complains about the "invasiveness" of the questionnaire that is asked of the donor prior to blood collection. How quickly people forget.

Maria says

Second only to water, blood is the most precious liquid on our planet. In my line of work, I am routinely splattered by it, and its presence signifies disease and infection. I am still fascinated by blood, though, as are millions of people. Blood has long been a mystery to humans and continues to intrigue and repel us, as evidenced by the endless popularity of vampire-themed books and movies and the all too real horror of the AIDS crisis.

Douglas Starr's incredible work delves into the history of blood and the doctors who worked tirelessly to demystify the misconceptions of blood and put it to good use. Well into the 1980's, though, blood continued to elude even the brightest minds. The tragedy of hemophiliacs, hepatitis and AIDS continues to scar thousands of people worldwide and proves how precious a resource blood is, and how deadly a weapon it

can be.

Caroline says

I have been putting off writing this review for almost a month, but I recently gave blood for the first time since reading it, and doing so just reaffirmed how great this book was.

Blood is divided up into three parts. The first discusses the mysticism surrounding blood, particularly in the Middle Ages. It discusses the history of blood-letting and the beginning of transfusions, including those from animal-to-human and human-to-human. This section was interesting, but standard fare.

The second section was some of the most fascinating, gripping non-fiction I have ever read. It detailed rise of the blood industry during the two world wars, from the use of plasma on beaches in the Pacific to Dr. Janet Vaughan's creation of blood banks in England before the Blitz. I had never heard of most of the people or stories that this section discussed, but they came across as the absolute best humanity had to offer. The bravery involved in driving through a pitch-black London in the middle of a German bombing to deliver blood to hospitals is staggering, as is that of Dr. Frederico Duran-Jorda, who transported blood to hospitals in the midst of fighting on the front-lines of the Spanish Civil War. All of it was just incredible. The explanation of the science and medical research behind it all was also extremely accessible and well written. Bottom line, my main thought on finishing this section of the book was that there needed to be a movie made about it, stat.

The last part of the book detailed the rise of the blood services complex and how its practices in the late 20th century ultimately led to an AIDS-tainted blood supply that infected thousands of hemophiliacs and others who required blood transfusions. While the previous section showed some of humanity's best, this one showed some of its worst. I felt sick to my stomach while reading most of this section, as I learned about the greed and willful ignorance that led to countless patient deaths from contact with tainted blood. Over 75% of the world's hemophiliacs died from AIDS due to contaminated clotting factors. The numbers are staggering and almost incomprehensible. Additionally, I also found fascinating the discussion of different nations' varying attitudes toward blood and how this attitude affected its handling of the AIDS crisis. It also gave me a new understanding and appreciation of the current screening procedures that are now in place when one goes to donate blood.

I have thought about this book almost daily since I read it. An incredibly eye-opening read.

Ro_runner says

Very interesting & surprisingly "readable." I highly recommend this book for health care providers, blood product donors & recipients, & anyone interested in blood products or the blood banking industry.

b bb bbbb bbbbbbbb says

I didn't expect it to be such a page turner. An interesting, engaging (euro-centric) history of blood transfusion. The narrative becomes progressively tragic as it approaches the modern hepatitis and AIDS

epidemics, and how industry and government handled them.

Anna says

Blood is about the history of transfusion medicine and is geared more towards people with a background in medicine or immunohematology (blood bank). I found the beginning half of the book where the author discusses the early history of transfusion medicine to be fascinating. The second half of the book was a bit slow and boring in my opinion. It talks about the policy and politics of transfusion medicine in recent history particularly concerning HIV.

Shannen says

This book was very informative and interesting but it seemed focused primarily on transfusions. While that is fascinating and it provides a nice overview of the development of this process, I wanted more. I was really invested in the early chapters where they talked about managing the physical aspects of transfusions (from better equipment to blood typing and the chemistry to store blood and keep it from clotting) and started to lose interest in the middle when it went on and on about plasma products. It picked up again at the end a bit more (and all that plasma product talk became more relevant) when it went into the spread of hepatitis and AIDS.

What I would have liked to see was more about blood itself and not just its byproducts and use in transfusions, but information about how it became so widely used to test so many things in the body and when they started using these tests, how that fit in with the overall history we were being given. We're given a little info on testing related to AIDS and hepatitis but not to other diseases that can be determined by a blood test or other levels of things in the blood that can tell us about our health. Likewise we are told about the evolution of transfusion equipment but not about basic phlebotomy practices (switching from syringes to the evacuated tube system for example). I'd also like to read about the use of blood in forensics; how viable the samples they get are and how much they can learn from them. But the book focuses singularly on transfusions and blood products as if this is all we've ever done with blood, without even a passing mention to other branches of development.

Natalie Pavlis says

Exactly what I was looking for!!! Working for Canadian Blood Services, I have been curious about the history of blood collection and transfusion. This book is well researched and written and gave me an insight into how and why we do the things we do to collect blood. Invaluable resource!!

Aurélien Thomas says

Sure, 'Blood' is not for the squeamish as some passages can be very graphic! Plus, very detailed, it is at times quite technical from a medical perspective and, therefore, maybe a bit hard to follow.

Having said that, here's a broad and enticing book. Not only because it's a very good scientific look into an

interesting topic but, also and especially, because dealing with the fascinating, curious, shocking, and at times frankly weird, history behind blood transfusions, Davis Starr offers an engaging questioning of how we deal with blood as a resource. Is it only a natural human tissue or, does its use makes it a product to be submitted to the same trade laws as any other goods? The debate, extremely relevant considering the health and safety factors attached to it (see the appalling account of how the AIDS epidemic unfolded) is haunting the whole book and yet, looking at different views in different countries (USA, Japan, France...) the answer is not as straightforward as it seems...

History, science, ethics... 'Blood' has it all and, even if daunting at times, it is an engrossing read about one of our most valuable resource. Interesting and engaging.

Jennifer says

This book chronicles the blood industry through the first transfusions leading up to the commerce of blood through donations and the Red Cross. The book details the spread of AIDS through tainted blood which pretty much wiped out the entire hemophiliac population that were dependent on these donations and the corrective actions that followed. A very interesting and informative read.

Reddy Katzy says

THIS IS ONE OF MY ABSOLUTE FAV BOOKS EVER !!!!!!!!
