



The Knife Man: Blood, Body Snatching, and the Birth of Modern Surgery

By Wendy Moore

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When Robert Louis Stevenson wrote his gothic horror story of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, he based the house of the genial doctor-turned-fiend on the home of John Hunter. The choice was understandable, for Hunter was both widely acclaimed and greatly feared.

From humble origins, John Hunter rose to become the most famous anatomist and surgeon of the eighteenth century. In an age when operations were crude, extremely painful, and often fatal, he rejected medieval traditions to forge a revolution in surgery founded on pioneering scientific experiments. Using the knowledge he gained from countless human dissections, Hunter worked to improve medical care for both the poorest and the best-known figures of the era—including Sir Joshua Reynolds and the young Lord Byron.

An insatiable student of all life-forms, Hunter was also an expert naturalist. He kept exotic creatures in his country menagerie and dissected the first animals brought back by Captain Cook from Australia. Ultimately his research led him to expound highly controversial views on the age of the earth, as well as equally heretical beliefs on the origins of life more than sixty years before Darwin published his famous theory.

Although a central figure of the Enlightenment, Hunter's tireless quest for human corpses immersed him deep in the sinister world of body snatching. He paid exorbitant sums for stolen cadavers and even plotted successfully to steal the body of Charles Byrne, famous in his day as the "Irish giant."

In *The Knife Man*, Wendy Moore unveils John Hunter's murky and macabre world—a world characterized by public hangings, secret expeditions to dank churchyards, and gruesome human dissections in pungent attic rooms. This is a fascinating portrait of a remarkable pioneer and his determined struggle to haul surgery out of the realms of meaningless superstitious ritual and into the dawn of modern medicine.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Brilliant anatomist, foul-mouthed and well met, avid empiricist and grave robber, John Hunter cut an astonishing figure in Georgian England. Born in Scotland in 1728, he followed his brother, a renowned physician, to London and into the intellectually grasping, fiercely competitive world of professional medicine. With ample servings of 18th-century filth and gore, Moore offers a vivid look at this remarkable period in science history, when many of the most impressive advances were made by relentless iconoclasts like Hunter. In an age when ancient notions of bodily humors still smothered medical thinking, Hunter challenged orthodoxy whenever facts were absent—which was usually the case. A prodigious experimenter—to the point of obsession—he dissected thousands of corpses and countless animals (many of them living) in his effort to define the nature of the human body. Yet he was also an early adherent of medical minimalism, shunning bloodletting by default and advocating physical therapy over invasive surgeries. This is a deftly written and informative tale that will please readers of science history, period buffs and everyone in between. (*Oct. 1*)

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From [Booklist](#)

Sometimes watershed achievements in science and medicine, such the Salk polio vaccine, are lastingly linked to a name, and sometimes not. Moore depicts John Hunter as a man to whom modern surgeons are hugely indebted, yet few outside of medicine have heard of him. The eighteenth-century English surgeon made his mark--though some of his contemporaries likely would have preferred the word *scar*--by departing radically from accepted surgical procedures of the day. In an era when practitioners relied upon the centuries-old knowledge of the second-century Greek physician Galen, Hunter was a revolutionary who "believed all surgery should be governed by scientific principles, which were based on reasoning, observation, and experimentation." Without setting tradition aside and dissecting and experimenting on human cadavers and live animals, which garnered Hunter much contempt from colleagues and neighbors alike, he would never have accomplished his goals. Moore's telling of his story is detailed and often grisly but engrossing throughout. *Donna Chavez*

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Review

Praise for *the Knife Man*:

"The surgeon John Hunter (1728–93) is not a well-known name outside specialist circles, although that scandalous situation should be corrected by Wendy Moore's marvelous biography." —*The Times Higher*

"Definitely not for the squeamish, Moore's visceral portrait of this complex and brilliant man offers a wonderful insight into sickness, suffering, and surgery in the 18th century." —*The Guardian (UK)*

"Moore's feel for pace and narrative is impeccable. Her book contains just the right amount of background scenery to bring Hunter alive without swamping him.... She is, at last, the biographer Hunter deserves." —*The Independent*

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Lauren Allison:

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Tamela Campbell:

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Kathe Waller:

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