

The Speckled Monster: Suggested Discussion Topics

Risk and Reward

• What made specific individuals—Zabdiel Boylston, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, the Princess of Wales, King George I—willing to risk inoculation in 1721—for their families, their cities and nations? What made others decide against it? Consider the following arguments:

- emotional and personal
- scientific
- religious
- political
- economic

• How do these issues relate to modern concerns about vaccination? (Consider the different institutions of national government, the medical community, the military, local government and "first responders", your family, yourself.)

• All vaccinations risk killing or harming some percentage of otherwise healthy people, in order to protect the majority. (Going without vaccination potentially allows a disease to kill many more people: but then the disease is the killer, not the medical personnel or governments handing out vaccine.)

- When is this risk bearable?
 - Who should get to decide?
 - Who, if anyone, should bear the blame when things go wrong?
- Helpful numbers for discussion:
- smallpox kills between 14% and 30% of its victims
 - inoculation with live smallpox virus – variolation – kills between 1% and 2% of patients
 - the modern vaccine kills from 1 to 2 in a million patients (.0001% and .0002%)
 - all these also leave some percentage of survivors brain-damaged, blind and/or scarred.

Fear

• Review the politicians' and doctors' reactions to Boston's smallpox epidemic of 1721. (See especially "The Beauty of the Sea," "Caging the Beast" and "An Infusion of Malignant Filth".)

- The major crisis was a sick and dying population. What else did Boston's rulers fear?
- How might the government have dealt with all these problems better?

- What might be similar issues and problems today?

Experiment

• In 1721, the British government tested smallpox inoculation on prisoners under sentence of death; it did so with the prisoners' consent, and in exchange for pardons. In researching cures and vaccines for various diseases, the U.S. government has in the past run tests on human subjects both with and without informed consent – or any consent at all.

- Were the Newgate experiments conscionable within the ethos of 18th-century Britain?

- Why, or why not? (See especially "The Castle of Misery," "Newgate," and "The King's Pardon".)

- Under what circumstances are experiments on human subjects conscionable today? Who should be asked – or allowed – to participate in such experiments? (If you answer "none" and "no one", how should scientists test the safety of new vaccines and medicines?)

Heroism

- What makes a medical hero?

- Was Zabdiel Boylston a hero? Specifically why, or why not?

- Was Lady Mary a hero?

- Charles Maitland?

- Caroline, Princess of Wales?

- Sir Hans Sloane?

- Under what circumstances might William Douglass have been a hero?

History and Story

- Think about the line dividing nonfiction from fiction:

- How important is it?

- How permeable is it? Where and how does history approach story? Where and how does story approach history?

- Where does this book fall? (It was contracted as "narrative nonfiction".)

- Consider a specific scene or chapter and its notes (recommended: "The Beauty of the Sea")

- Consider the book as a whole:

- What are the rewards of telling history as a story?

- What are the risks?