

Blood Music Short Guide

Blood Music by Greg Bear

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Overview

"Are you stoned?" I asked.

He stood his head, then nodded once, very slowly. "Listening," he said.

"To what?"

"I don't know. Not sounds . . . exactly. Like music. The heart, all the blood vessels, friction of blood along the arteries, veins.

Activity. Music in the blood."

"Blood Music" is a tale warning about the dangers of genetic engineering that echoes the cautionary themes of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein: or The Modern Prometheus* (1818; see separate entry, Vol. 5). The novelette completely overturns the conventions of the Romantic protagonist as Vergil Ulam, the ostensible hero, defies his superiors, saves his experiment in intelligent "Medically Applicable Biochips," and by so doing leaves a fatal legacy of horror and misery to humanity. The "music in the blood" is the relentless activities of invaders of the human body that turn their creators into gigantic versions of themselves.

About the Author

Greg Bear was born in San Diego, California on August 20, 1951. He grew up in many different areas of the world because his father was a Navy man who served assignments in Japan and the Philippines, as well as postings to naval bases on the Gulf Coast, East Coast, and West Coast of the mainland United States. His childhood experiences in diverse lands may account for the sensitivity to different cultures displayed in his fiction. It is difficult for young children to make friends when moving about frequently, and Bear's passion for reading may have its origin in lonely hours when he was young. He is an eclectic reader of science, history, and fiction.

His ambition to be a writer seems to have begun early, perhaps when he was eight years old, and Bear was writing in hopes of publication by the time he was a teenager. This precocious feat was achieved at fifteen when he sold a short story to Famous Science Fiction. Despite his early good fortune Bear, like many young writers, found it difficult to publish other works; his second professional publication did not appear until he was in his early twenties, but he attracted critical attention as one of science fiction's most promising young talents.

In the years since he has retained the respect of critics with his taut narratives and imaginative settings.

To supplement his income as a novelist, Bear worked as a journalist, contributing to Southern California newspapers during the 1970s and early 1980s. Bear is widely admired by his science fiction peers, and he has served in various posts for the Science Fiction Writers of America, including president from 1988 to 1990. The Science Fiction Writers of America have given Bear three Nebula awards: for best 1983 novella, *Hardfought*; for best 1983 novelette, "Blood Music"; and for best 1986 short story, "Tangents". The World Science Fiction Convention has twice given Bear its annual Hugo award: for best 1984 novelette, "Blood Music" and for best 1987 short story, "Tangents."

In 1983 he married a second time to Astrid Anderson, daughter of science fiction author Poul Anderson, and they have a son Erik and a daughter Alexandra.



Characters

Blood Music's cast of important characters is small. Vergil Ulam launches the plot with his quest. He is thirtytwo years old and at the beginning of the novel overweight, bespectacled, troubled with health problems. He is a misfit at the Genetron lab and in society. He had been frustrated all his life, very gifted but never "good at gauging the consequences of his actions." Moreover, he is a flawed character ethically, having falsified university credentials to obtain his job. Yet he feels no guilt, believing that "the world was his personal puzzle," and "any riddlings and unravelings he could perform . . . were simply part of his nature." Vergil is somewhat the stock, "pure" scientist.

Minor characters offer perspective, illumine themes of alienation and power politics. Gerald T. Harrison, the Genetron boss who judges Vergil "very ambitious" but too wayward, cares less for research than he does for management. He represents the big-business system of control. Earlier the company had forced Vergil's lab partner Hazel Overton to destroy her sideline experiment because it was feminist and "socially controversial."

A notably more significant character is Dr. Edward Milligan, physician, Vergil's former college roommate. In the novel Edward functions as something of a stock character, the cautious man of science. He responds to the theme of change in the novel for he believes innovation is essential, but "everyone had the right to stay the same until they decided otherwise."

When noocyte-induced bodily changes strike Vergil, he goes to Edward for tests. At this point Vergil looks good, having lost weight and discarded his spectacles, but tests reveal skeletal and blood abnormalities, and more.

Edward wants Vergil hospitalized, but the stricken man refuses and toys with the notion of letting out his bath water to release noocytes throughout the city. It is then that Edward acts as "the last responsible individual" and electrocutes Vergil. He does it at scant advantage to himself, however, for he has already been invaded by noocytes.

At this point Dr. Michael Bernard, an expert in artificial intelligence and neurophysiology, emerges into prominence. As a fictional creation, Michael is remarkable, a blend of Vergil and Edward. He is interested in the situation, meets Vergil and contracts noocytes through a handshake. Knowing he has little time, Michael pilots his own plane to Germany and takes refuge in a friend's isolation lab. There he remains and observes the effects, which include ugly patterns on his skin and, like Vergil in his later stages, grotesque reshaping of the body.

In the later chapters Michael engages the reader as the interpreter of unfolding events in the world. Isolated, but aware of these through the media, he contributes commentary, including philosophical and thematic points.



Michael ponders the social dangers in scientific findings, including those of Pasteur and Salk, which perhaps saved murderers. As for himself, Michael relates to the "rational" and "noble" scientists. He also compares himself to Frankenstein, the fictional character who created a monster. "People were so afraid of the new, of change."

Philosophical considerations build, through the characters Michael and his visitor Sean Gogarty, a British professor of theoretical physics. Michael finds himself communicating with the noocytes on the topic of free will within a totalitarian group. "I'm afraid," he tells them, "you'll steal my soul from inside." Sean explains to Michael that change is inevitable, based upon the nature of reality. "There is nothing, Michael, but information." Eventually, Michael rejoices in the camaraderie as he is engulfed. He is at once individual and each member of his "research team." Michael now fears only that change is needed to accommodate so much freedom.

Major themes echo in lesser characters. Candice Rhine, who becomes Vergil's lover, breaks through Vergil's social ineptness. She specifically overcomes his long-standing reticence with women. He thinks of her in terms of a successful experiment; she is soon the unwary victim of his.

April Ulam, Vergil's mother, provides another perspective, that of parent and son. She is vital, enigmatic, and generally calm on learning of her son's noocytes. April raises points that would occur to many readers, bringing out some subtle themes. Alienated by the idea of "intelligent germs," she calls them nonsense. When Vergil declares their fascination and importance to him, April voices a popular opinion: "Not when I see the world in the shape it's in today, because of people with your intellectual inclinations." Lab people daily come up "with more and more doomsday."

April's reaction to the ongoing noocyte transformation of California is a metaphor for the acceptance of the inevitable. She willingly approaches the burgeoning mass to seek Vergil, accompanied by brothers John and Jerry Olafsen, blue-collar workers. In contrast to these types stands Suzy McKenzie, who declines to submit.

Mentally "slow," Suzy has a special chemistry and cannot be readily transformed, a fact the noocytes know. With all other New York City residents "absorbed," she struggles with isolation, but finally yields happily.

Setting

The setting for "Blood Music" is sketchy, apparently a common, undistinguished American city where the principal characters live in apartments, and this ordinariness of place may well be a deliberate authorial device to heighten the reader's identification with the horror inherent in the story. The acts with terrible consequences committed by Vergil occur in a community familiar to the novelette's audience; their homes, their apartments, and their streets could be the setting for the beginning of the end of humanity and its collective aspirations.



Social Concerns

In the hard science fiction novel *Blood Music*, Bear explores the far-reaching impact of biotechnological research gone awry. Vergil I. Ulam is a researcher in cutting-edge biochip technology, described as "the incorporation of protein molecular circuitry with silicon electronics." This work on genes is believed to have important medical applications. Vergil's scientific quest is outside the specific goals of his employer, who claims ethical and governmental restrictions on projects where there is a risk of creating new plagues.

Vergil is ordered to destroy his cultures, which consist of "autonomous organic computers," "the world's tiniest machines." They are engineered, altered microbes incorporated into white cells — lymphocytes — from his own blood.

When management puts pressure on him, then fires him, Vergil irresponsibly injects himself with his cell culture in order to preserve it. Integral to this novel is the question of social responsibility on the part of the scientific community. Vergil's thinking cells — dubbed noocytes — go to work inside his body and brain, interacting to achieve their optimal, selfish good. The result is a transformed Vergil, with "improvements" now visible in his bones, muscles, skin. However, it is only a matter of time until he becomes malformed, hideous. Another appalling aspect emerges as the noocytes spread to other persons. Vergil's girlfriend, for example, turns into a living lump of flesh. Soon the cells threaten to spread through the city's water and sewer systems.

The cells seem to succeed by such strong cooperation that individual people are "absorbed" by the whole vast, expanding organism. Through the process Vergil calls "blood music," the strange, ugly growth covers California, then New York City and elsewhere.

The situation raises specific questions about science and society, but it has broader implications as well. "The hierarchy [of the noocytes] is absolute," but "they effectively have more freedom than we do." The novel implies that today's people are absorbed into societies where they suffer ruthless stifling of their individualities.



Social Sensitivity

"Blood Music" directly involves experimentation with dangerous microbes and indirectly involves the manipulating of genes, two aspects of advanced science that are very worrying to many people. These fears, though often dismissed as irrational, are in fact reasonable ones shared by some scientists. Certainly, people have good cause to be worried about microbes such as the smallpox virus escaping into the human population; some microbes have the potential to kill people by the millions. Proper security is important when people experiment with dangerous germs, and even very exacting standards of handling them may not be enough, given the error-fraught and mistakeprone nature of human beings.

A real-life example of this occurred at the English laboratory that houses a sample of the smallpox virus for possible study in the event that a similar virus someday attacks people. A lapse in security procedures resulted in the death of one laboratory nurse, possibly the death of another employee, and one other infection that resulted in recovery. The laboratory's director committed suicide, perhaps overwhelmed by the thought of what would have happened had those infected not been quickly isolated from other people. In "Blood Music," Vergil's defiance of his laboratory's rules is a very serious breach of ethics, and readers should note that his employers were not some stereotypical oppressors—too often found in science fiction for young people—but were enforcing rules that would have saved humanity if Vergil had followed them.

A more nettlesome issue is that of genetic experimentation. As of this writing, scientists have recently announced experiments to change the genes of people afflicted with genetic diseases, using genetically engineered viruses that substitute a healthy gene for the corrupted one in human cells.

Other researchers have used engineered microbes to flush out the AIDS virus from the cells it invades. These are promising avenues of research, and it would be cruel to insist that people afflicted with diseases go without treatments that could save their lives.

On the other hand, research to cure hereditary diseases often logically focuses on the fetus, and this is the area of scientific and medical study with the most potential for ethical abuse in the headlong pursuit of "results" by scientists, the companies that fund their work, and desperate people who need health problems treated.

Correcting a potentially fatal disorder in the womb may result in the birth of a healthy baby rather than one struggling for life. This raises the concern that people might want healthy fetuses changed, perhaps to suit fashion, resulting in look-alike, soundalike, think-alike children missing significant parts of their parents' genetic heritage. Such a possibility seems too close to Nazi nightmares of a genetically "pure" race, with everyone who does not fit the image of perfection wiped out of existence. These issues, unspoken in "Blood Music," are given life by Vergil's actions. Disregarding ethics, even fundamental morality, he breaks the rules for research, and unleashes his genetic machines on humanity, threatening all people with becoming motionless giant cells,

imprisoned by their own bodies. Bear touches on a very sensitive issue in modern science—a social issue that concerns many people outside of science—and gives it life, suggesting that an excess of self-confidence coupled with a self-righteous disregard for rules of conduct could be disastrous.

Techniques

Blood Music is constructed in sections, with frequent, skillful shifts of point of view, especially in the later part. After Vergil's departure, sections are devoted to people confronted by great changes. Young Suzy is baffled by her family's transformation, then wanders through a seemingly empty, eerie city. John and Jerry cope with the tragic loss of family. In addition, Bear employs the ingenious device of having Michael and the cells converse, with the cells' "talk" expressed partly in capital letters and boldface. The stock device of the genius/mad scientist character, often seen in science fiction, fits the imaginative plot. Suspense is sustained by balancing biological details, described in scientific language, with characterization and action rendered in more commonplace terms.

Literary Qualities

"Blood Music" is structured as the reminiscences of one narrator, which allows him to foreshadow events he has already experienced and to shift back and forth through time as it suits him. Nonetheless, he is a limited narrator. He cannot read thoughts, nor can he definitively know events he did not witness; he can only speculate, offer opinion instead of fact, and rely on hearsay for much of his narrative.

Given the subject matter of "Blood Music," full of science and technological hardware, the reminiscence structure offers a humanizing tone, one that scales down the lofty idea of MABs healing people in its grandest sense to its effects on individual people. This turns the arcane subject matter into something that can be seen as affecting ordinary people, making complicated concepts and mind-boggling situations accessible to an audience of nonscientists.

Themes

Vergil's work is integral to his identity. To destroy the cultures would spell the death of Vergil's dream to belong to society's mainstream, create "billions of capable cellular computers," then found his own laboratory and company. Tests show the cells to be very intelligent — each as intelligent as a mouse, with potential for becoming as intelligent as a rhesus monkey. The novel's themes of personal identity and alienation involve all of humankind as well, since Vergil's "selfish" genes overwhelm him and spread beyond his body.

A related theme of social structure arises as other characters observe and speculate. What happens to individuality in an all-consuming group? Bear extrapolates here on the basis of information theory, largely through another "infected" character, Dr. Michael Bernard. "Was the noosphere a rigid hierarchy, lacking in dissent or even comment?" Michael asks. The engulfing cells prompt his comment on the theme of rebirth: "I have no past. I am cut loose and there is really nowhere to go but where they wish to take me."

Questions of human identity and the nature of reality are resolved as the situation evolves toward a single consciousness, a single vast, bizarre life form taking over a continent: "Textures and forms hitherto unknown to biologists, to geologists, cover the cities and suburbs, even the wildernesses of North America." The novel rejects the possibility of humankind's spiritual transcendence and provides a wholly materialistic depiction of reality: "pipeline-like structures can be seen flowing into Chicago from all directions. In some areas the pipelines open up into broad canals and we can actually see the rapid flow of a viscous green fluid." But despite highly imaginative descriptions of horror, Bear does not present an overall dismal view. Michael decides he loves being "an integral part, in turn loved and necessary."

He lives in a Thought Universe: "The blood is a highway, a symphony of information, instruction."

Adaptations

Blood Music is available on audiocassette, read by George Guidall and published by Recorded Books in 1991. (The short story "Blood Music" is available in a collection of stories by various authors titled Best of Science Fiction and Fantasy published in 1991 by Dove Audio.) A radio play was broadcast by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. A Bear interview indicates that director-producer Louis John Carlino has written a screenplay.



Key Questions

Because of its topical focus on the biotechnological altering of human life, *Blood Music* should generate intriguing discussions. The novel incorporates a disturbing question typically found in Bear's fiction: What may humankind's destiny be? Bear has said that humankind now can control evolution toward its own ends. A good line to pursue is whether readers believe a materialistic future is inevitable, as *Blood Music* suggests. Discussion groups may benefit from comparing the novel's culmination to that of Clarke's *Childhood's End*.

Bear's fiction generally lends itself to discussion about technologically based change. The question arises of how individuals and societies can best respond. Groups interested in both philosophical questions and in scientific and technological issues are sure to find Bear's works stimulating.

1. Discuss Vergil's opinion of himself and his work in contrast to Genetron's position. Who is right?

2. Do you agree with the Frenchwoman who accosts Michael toward the end with the question: "Will it never end? Disaster and death, scientists — responsible, you are all responsible!" What do you think the scientist's role in society should be? Take into account the various ethical considerations the novel presents, including Michael's frustration at being unable to use aborted embryos in his research.

Should the public be allowed to exert control?

3. How effective has Bear been in depicting the "blood music" which constitutes the novel's central subject? Do you fully understand the process of the change?

4. Compare the characters of Michael, Suzy, John and Jerry as they cope with noocytes. How do their responses differ?

5. Discuss the character Sean Gogarty. What is he saying about the nature of the universe?

6. The noocytes almost become characters in their own right, as they converse with individuals. What do they convey? What especially do they say about their social order and the nature of individuality and dissent?

7. *Blood Music* was originally a short story which focused on the interaction between Vergil and Edward and ended with Edward's body changing, due to noocytes. Was Bear effective in developing the story into a novel?



8. At one point the noocytes transmit the message "We do not understand God," but Michael is driven to prayer in his state of "unholy fear." Is there really any religious aspect to this novel?

9. In *Blood Music*, do the science elements unduly overshadow the characters?



Topics for Discussion

1. Are you satisfied by the ending? What would you change?
2. Edward says, "There is only so much change anyone can stand: innovation, yes, but slow application. Don't force. Everyone has the right to stay the same until they decide otherwise." Do you agree with this? To what extent is it true? To what extent is it false? Is it desirable to slow change?
3. Does Vergil appear heroic when he defies his boss and saves his experiment by injecting it into himself. How does he appear when it turns out that his defiance had catastrophic effects.
4. Are all rules oppressive? If Vergil had followed the rules, what would have happened?
5. Why would the intelligent microbes make their hosts look like cells?
6. Why does Edward not go to legal authorities once he knows that Vergil has injected himself with MABs? Why not tell Genetron?
7. How much of a co-conspirator is Edward?
8. By the end of "Blood Music," is there any way to stop the spread of the MABs?
9. Why did Vergil not foresee what would happen to him? How could he have programmed his MABs so that they would not transform him?
10. In what kind of cosmos do the events of "Blood Music" take place? Is there a God in the novelette's cosmos?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. The science of building small machines includes not only biochips but tiny machines often called nanobots. How close are engineers to building tiny machines that can be used in the human body? What uses for the machines are predicted? What are the dangers? Do any of the dangers resemble what happens in "Blood Music"?
2. "Blood Music" shares with many other works of fiction the Frankenstein theme, an idea derived from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein: or The Modern Prometheus*. What is the "Frankenstein theme"? How does "Blood Music" resemble Shelley's novel?
3. What other fiction, motion pictures, or television shows have depicted a body being taken over by microbes that eventually start spreading to the rest of the world? How do they compare to "Blood Music"?
4. Some research laboratories deal with very dangerous microbes. There are, for instance, two laboratories (in England and Japan) that store samples of the smallpox virus, one of the deadliest diseases ever to afflict humanity. What are the precautions such laboratories take to prevent deadly microbes from escaping? How are workers at such laboratories protected? Does Vergil's work place have any of these precautions?
5. What is the use of MABS that have already been developed?
6. What do scientists hope to achieve by changing genes? What has been accomplished so far?
7. What are the ethics of genetic research? When it comes to ethics where do researchers disagree?
8. There are many genetic engineering companies in the world, most redesigning foods. For instance, the tomatoes shipped to grocery stores are likely to have been genetically engineered so that they are more resistant to diseases in the field and bruising whilst in transit. The company in California that developed this new tomato has had its stock value soar. What other projects are genetic engineering companies up to? How many have shares traded on the stock market? How profitable are they?
9. Write a short story or essay explaining how the MABs are discovered after the end of "Blood Music" (their destruction is not the only possibility).
10. What are the smallest microchips being made? What technologies are involved? How may logic circuits be made even smaller?

Literary Precedents

Blood Music and the short story from which it was developed were considered innovative, so much so that Bear's writing reputation received a distinct boost. At the same time, the novel falls within literary tradition. The plot echoes, distantly, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* of 1818. *Blood Music* follows great names in hard science fiction such as Robert A. Heinlein, Arthur C. Clarke, Theodore Sturgeon, James Blish. The novel's answer to the question of "whither humankind" is often compared to Clarke's resolution in *Childhood's End* of 1953. It must be noted, however, that Clarke's path and overall perspective differ markedly from Bear's. Clarke poses a religious rather than a material transcendence.

In an interview Bear states that he is uncertain about the precedents for his idea of a Thought Universe, but finds it hinted at in Alfred Bester's *The Stars My Destination* (1957), William Hjortsberg's *Gray Matters* (1971), and certain John Varley stories. Bear particularly mentions Varley's "Overdrawn at the Memory Bank" (1976), which poses the idea of a computer containing the human spirit. The movie *Tron* (1982) was an influence, along with William Gibson's novel *Neuromancer* (1984), which disseminated the idea of cyberspace.

Blood Music's focus on the self and an individual's ability to shape his world has some kinship with Heinlein's thought. Heinlein's 1973 novel *Time Enough for Love* explores the individual consciousness, although with an elderly hero. Sturgeon wrote stories focused on the inner life of characters and used the theme of humankind's evolution into a higher consciousness.

Bear's depiction of tiny intelligent beings draws from a tradition of microscopic science fiction, which includes Sturgeon's "Microcosmic God." This tradition also includes James Blish's "Surface Tension," which depicts tiny, genetically engineered human descendants who reside in a mud puddle on another planet. In honor of Vergil I. Ulam's own fascination with the very small, Bear named the character as an anagram, with debt to Jonathan Swift: "I am Gulliver."

For Further Reference

Clute, John. "Bear, Greg." In *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*. Edited by John Clute and Peter Nicholls, et al. New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1995, pp. 99-100. An overview of Bear's career, emphasizing the relationship of his writings to the period in which they were written, mostly in the 1980s.

Easton, Tom. *Analog Science Fiction & Fact* 118 (July-August 1998): 227. He admires *Dinosaur Summer*.

Perlberg, Marilyn A. "Greg Bear."

Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction. Edited by Kirk H. Beetz.

Osprey, FL: Beacham Publishing, 1996, pp. 114-117. Perlberg summarizes Bear's life, career, and critical reception, and she provides a heavily annotated bibliography of resources for learning about Bear.

Related Titles

"Blood Music" is part of the Frankenstein tradition in literature. While staying in the home of Lord Byron in Switzerland in the early 1800s, Mary Shelley had a dream that she shared with Byron and other guests during a parlor game in which each person told a scary story. Inspired by a dream in which a monstrous being pulled aside her bed curtains and looked at her while she slept, Shelley created a story of a frightful being who had been brought to life in a scientific experiment. This story became the novel *Frankenstein: or The Modern Prometheus*.

The subtitle refers to the Greek Titan who stole fire from the heavens and brought it to Earth for the use of all humanity against the wishes of the chief god Zeus. In Shelley's tale, Dr.

Frankenstein is symbolically equated with Prometheus because he usurps God's power to create life.

Frankenstein has exerted a profound effect on subsequent literature, and in the realm of science fiction its deepest theme that science oversteps its bounds when it takes on the powers of the Almighty without concern for the consequences has been worked and reworked countless times. In "Blood Music," the narrator Edward points out that scientist Vergil Ulam, the analogue of Dr. Frankenstein, was "the last person I would have called insightful and wise about large issues."

Like Shelley's scientist, he becomes so caught up in his experiment that he forges ahead without thinking about consequences to his actions. Dr. Frankenstein tries to put an end to his monster at the novel's close when he is seen struggling with his creation on an ice floe. Vergil, by contrast, is too much of a fool to realize that he needs to undo what he has done. Shelley closes her novel with a Romantic ending in which the ignoble Frankenstein finally sacrifices himself to do what is right, but the conclusion of Bear's novelette is a Postmodern one in which a seemingly unstoppable scourge unleashed by one scientist's arrogant lack of judgment threatens all humanity. Dr. Frankenstein eventually takes responsibility for what he has done, after many people have suffered because of his monster, but "Blood Music" implies that responsibility does not matter once the line between science and playing God has been crossed. Vergil is not even alive to see the horrors his creation has caused, and little can be done to put an end to his monsters.



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