

Pass It On®...

Anatomy of a Bestseller.

How “Gray’s Anatomy,” a book of drawings featuring blood vessels, muscles, the nervous system and other squeamish things, came to be one of the world’s most widely read books.

Seeing the inner workings of a hand, or the nervous system surrounding the spleen, doesn’t seem appealing to most people. However, “Gray’s Anatomy,” the corpus of medical students and artists for over 100 years, has the staying power of the world’s greatest novels.

It was created at a time when dissecting cadavers, or dead bodies, became legal in London. In 1832, the Anatomy Act allowed the dissection of bodies for educational use. Rather than relying on grave robbing, as artists and doctors often did before then, the bodies of unclaimed prisoners, vagrants and those who died without kin in workhouses became cadavers in the halls of medical schools.

Ten years after the Act was passed, Henry Gray entered St. George’s University as a medical student. He was 15 years old and probably lied about his age. He’s described as handsome, intelligent, a bit egotistical and a dandy, meaning someone who pays a lot of attention to his appearance. The school’s social life would certainly have been a draw for young Henry — but his ambition was to make contributions to the field of medicine.

He studied rigorously and received prizes in surgery. In 1852, he was made governor of the hospital while still in his twenties. Then, unsatisfied with the emerging textbooks of his day, Gray set out to create work that was clear in description and illustrative detail. A text that could be understood by early students, yet so artfully constructed as to become the human body bible.

Henry Vandyke Carter was a medical student when Gray met him. The two collaborated on a book about the “use of the human spleen.” (Must have been fascinating reading!) After this semi-successful first publication, they turned their attention to the medical opus: “Anatomy. Descriptive and Surgical,” later to be shortened to “Gray’s Anatomy.” The detailed volume was received with mixed reviews among the stuffy

London medical aristocrats, but it survived to another printing three years later in 1861.

The manual was received well among fledgling medical students and soon became a staple among textbooks. The illustrations were beautifully crafted woodcuts, skin unfolding like pages of a book and cleanly drawn muscles stretching taut. It became the mechanic’s manual for the body, enabling thousands of students to gain knowledge through visualization and preparing them for the greatest century of medical advancement in history.

Henry Gray was passionate about improving the way anatomy was taught and about the details that would deliver that progress. His life was dedicated solely to medicine until the age of 31, when he was ready to share it with someone else. He got engaged, but in treating his fiancée’s nephew, who had smallpox, he too contracted the disease. Henry’s case was confluent, meaning the sores migrated until they formed a sheet covering his whole body. When he died, all his belongings were burned, as was custom with a smallpox patient. But what he left behind is a masterful teaching tool that is still in print today.

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