
THE FEVER OF 1721

The Epidemic that Revolutionized Medicine and American Politics

STEPHEN COSS

Simon & Schuster | March 8, 2016

PRAISE for THE FEVER OF 1721

“Coss's gem of colonial history immerses readers into 18th-century Boston and introduces a collection of fascinating people and intriguing circumstances. The author's masterly work intertwines Boston's smallpox epidemic with the development of *New England Courant* publisher James Franklin's radical press. . . . Unlike many other works on colonial America . . . Coss's focus on a specific location at a specific time fleshes out the complex and exciting scene in sharp detail, creating a historical account that is fascinating, informational, and pleasing to read.”

– *Library Journal*, starred review

“[An] intelligent and sweeping account of a crucial year in medical history...The upshot (no spoilers) is that, doubters notwithstanding, progress did win out, and those, among them John Adams and Benjamin Franklin, who believed in a future free from the tyranny of both a literal king and what was often called the king of diseases had reached a turning point. The people portrayed in this public health story, their struggles and interactions, feel at once intimate and urgent, thanks to Coss' lucid telling of this fascinating story.”

– *Booklist*

“A fascinating glimpse inside the Boston mindset of the era.”

– *Kirkus Reviews*

“*The Fever of 1721* is an all-American tale: a fire-and-brimstone minister, sensational media, hardball politics, a health panic. Stephen Coss depicts an uproarious colonial past not unlike our present.”

– **Richard Brookhiser, author of *Founders' Son: A Life of Abraham Lincoln***

“Stephen Coss has written an engrossing, original book about Boston a half century before the Revolution. It is a tale of medical drama, philosophical ferment, and journalistic beginnings—and it is a tale well worth reading!”

– **Jon Meacham, author of *Destiny and Power: The American Odyssey of George Herbert Walker Bush***

“*The Fever of 1721* skillfully reveals early Americans who challenged both the dominant political order and prevailing scientific ideas about disease. That rebelliousness—embodied in bold figures like Rev. Cotton Mather, Dr. Boylston, and the teenaged Ben Franklin—would lead directly to revolution before the century was out.”

– **David O. Stewart, author of *Madison's Gift* and *The Summer of 1787***

“Long before the American Revolution colonial Boston was a hotbed of social and political ferment, key factors that produced, in the face of lethal epidemic, the first public trial of general inoculation ever practiced in the western world. In this lively and engaging book, Stephen Coss brings to life the key players in that bold experiment—including Puritan icon Cotton Mather and Boston prodigy Ben Franklin—and unfolds in intimate detail their halting progress toward a genuine medical breakthrough. Closely observed, driven by quirks of character as well as fate, Coss delivers a story that illuminates the rambunctious soul of the budding new republic.”

– **Charles Rappleye, author of *Sons of Providence* and *Herbert Hoover in the White House***

THE FEVER OF 1721: The Epidemic That Revolutionized Medicine and American Politics by **Stephen Coss** (Simon & Schuster; March 8, 2016) tells the story of a fateful year when a combination of momentous events set in motion the inevitability of the American Revolution. Coss's vivid history illustrates how Boston's largest smallpox epidemic ignited a series of events—the controversial practice of inoculation, political uprising with Boston ousting its royal governor, and the first free press in the colonies—which changed American politics, medicine, and journalism forever.

Inoculation

In April 1721, smallpox arrived in Boston aboard the HMS Seahorse, a British warship returning from Barbados. Sickness had taken hold below deck and once the ship docked, seemingly healthy crewmates and visitors to the ship roamed the streets of Boston, unknowingly spreading the disease. One infected person turned into eight, and twelve months later when the fever finally ended, the final estimate was 6,000 stricken and 844 deceased—or roughly half the town's people taken ill and up to a tenth killed.

Reverend Cotton Mather, famous from Salem's witch trials, was prepared for the epidemic. Years earlier he had read an account of the practice of inoculation—making an incision in the flesh of an uninfected person and depositing a small amount of matter from a smallpox pustule in order to bring on a tempered version of the disease and build immunity. Mather had heard of the practice's success in Turkey and Africa—his own slave Onesimus bore a scar from inoculation in Africa. However, the only physician in Boston he could convince to attempt inoculation was Dr. Zabdiel Boylston, who was considered a second-tier surgeon. Boylston was moved by Mather's proposal, and on June 26, 1721, he began his inoculation experiments—the first in Western medicine.

Boylston's first inoculations on his own son and his slaves were a success, and he began offering the procedure to anyone in good health who requested it. However, inoculation was not well received among the people of Boston, many of whom thought it akin to attempted murder, and both Boylston and Mather faced criticism and outrage over the practice. Boylston received numerous cease and desist orders, was called to town meetings where other physicians refuted the practice's success, and was even forced into hiding. Mather's house was firebombed. Both men stood by the practice, advocating its safety and success.

By the end of the epidemic, Boylston had inoculated 280 persons, with just six dying under inoculation, a 2.4 percent death rate compared to the 14 percent death rate of those who contracted smallpox naturally. Although inoculation's greatest success was in saving hundreds of lives and furthering medicine, it also helped pave the way to the American Revolution. The epidemic heightened political tension between the crown-appointed governor and the elected Massachusetts House and had a direct influence on America's first free press, both of which were essential in fanning the flames of rebellion and the fight for American independence.

Political Uprising

Smallpox was not the only fever gripping Boston in 1721; the members of the elected Massachusetts assembly were in the midst of an unprecedented political rebellion against the Crown-appointed governor Samuel Shute. Shute's appointment several years earlier had been ushered in by former Royal Governor Joseph Dudley, an early sign that his government would not be the fresh start that Boston's political factions were hoping for. At the end of 1722, Shute would be run out of town.

The leader of the political rebellion, the bane of the Crown's existence, was Elisha Cooke, Jr. Cooke was a physician turned politician who led the popular party and resisted the influence of royal officials in defense of the Massachusetts Charter. Cooke and Shute would butt heads throughout Shute's time as governor, starting with the disagreement over the Governor's salary. A loophole in the Massachusetts Charter left the governor's salary for the Massachusetts House to decide—but the House, of course, never passed the governor's requests for a fixed salary, instead paying him whenever and however much they wanted. This early argument signaled a change in how Boston's House would rebel against their Royal governor. Throughout Shute's tenure, the House obstructed nearly every royal prerogative Shute had

been ordered to implement, usurping the authority that England had clearly vested in its appointed governor. Cooke's political strategy was truly innovative; nothing like it had occurred in America before, and the younger generation—specifically a young Samuel Adams who would later adopt Cooke's politics as a leader of the American Revolution—took notice. These early acts of political rebellion set the stage for the American Revolution.

Freedom of the Press

The convergence of the inoculation controversy and political uprising yielded a remarkable byproduct: America's first independent newspaper. *The New-England Courant*, founded by James Franklin, leveraged the public's hunger for information about inoculation to develop the first independent press in the colonies. Coss writes, "Without Boylston's daring, James Franklin would never have launched the *New-England Courant*." In August 1721, Franklin published the first issue of the *Courant* reporting on the epidemic and inoculation controversy, political opinion, and satire—mocking the clergy, the government, and fanning the flames of revolt. Although the *Courant*, in its first few issues, decried Boylston and Mather's inoculations, it reported with more accuracy and honesty on the spreading smallpox epidemic when the other Boston newspapers did as the government wished and said nothing. Boston's other newspapers were "Published with Authority," which was printed on the masthead to signal their loyalty to the Crown. But Franklin's paper was not—he took the great risk of criticizing the government and clergy and was eventually jailed.

The printing house of *The New-England Courant* also created the crucial learning environment for James Franklin's younger brother, apprentice and future Founding Father, Benjamin. The intellectual stimulation of the printing house inspired Ben to begin his fabled self-education, and provided him with exposure to the early stages of American rebellion and independence.

Author Stephen Coss expertly weaves together these threads to recount a never-before-told story of one year in Boston when epidemic sparked a profound leap forward in medical science, serving as a catalyst for the invention of American journalism, and paving the way for the American Revolution. It is the story of a group of remarkable men and how their courage, daring, vision, and desperation in a time of crisis defined their destinies and ours. **THE FEVER OF 1721** is history story-telling at its best.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stephen Coss lives in Madison, WI. **THE FEVER OF 1721** is his first book, which he was inspired to write after receiving a "Fact a Day" calendar that mentioned Boylston's inoculation experiment.

ABOUT THE BOOK

THE FEVER OF 1721

The Epidemic That Revolutionized Medicine and American Politics

By Stephen Coss

Simon & Schuster

Publication date: March 8, 2016

Price: \$28.00

ISBN: 9781476783086

E-book ISBN: 9781476783123

E-book price: \$14.99

Visit Simon & Schuster online at www.simonandschuster.com

Cast of Characters

In **THE FEVER OF 1721**, Coss offers insightful, multidimensional looks at the personalities of the men who revolutionized medicine, politics, and media. Among them:

Elisha Cooke, Jr. was a physician turned politician and member of the Massachusetts House who led the influential popular party, resisting royal influence and defending the Massachusetts Charter. Cooke was a master at political strategy. He was an expert organizer, getting people out to vote and expanding his base by turning Boston's drinking establishments into "political nodes" where political support could be nurtured with free drinks. In the decades leading up to the American Revolution, Cooke's political machine would grow and spin off new caucuses and related secret societies. As a young boy, future Founding Father **Samuel Adams, Jr.** was indoctrinated into Whig politics by Cooke, his father's colleague. Adams began his political career attempting to recreate the populist politics of Elisha Cooke's era, and later founded "The Sons of Liberty," the organization created to defend the rights of colonists. Elisha Cooke's influence was crucial in providing the infrastructure for the eventual Revolution against Great Britain.

Samuel Shute was appointed Royal Governor of Massachusetts in 1716, and would last in the role for six years before fleeing Boston at the end of 1722. His term was marked by disagreements with the Massachusetts assembly (and Elisha Cooke specifically). For the second half of 1721 Shute tried to exploit fear of smallpox to force the House into compliance with his agenda, and he famously mandated town meetings in the heart of the epidemic's grip, knowing many representatives would not attend. In 1722, after the epidemic's end, Shute's downfall would be failed negotiations and the start of war in the Indian territories. Boston's assembly pushed Shute to his very edge and escape was the only option. According to Coss, "Shute had two choices: remain in Boston until he was shot by a constituent or recalled to England by superiors; or he could return to London and with an alternative narrative, casting himself as an exemplary governor up against a treasonous mob. For a man who cared about his life, his reputation and his future prospects, that was the only real option."

James Franklin, the older brother of Benjamin Franklin, was a printer and published the first independent newspaper in America. The first issue of Franklin's *New-England Courant*, was printed in August 1721, in the heat of Boston's largest smallpox epidemic and the ongoing inoculation debate. Coss writes, "Without Boylston's daring, James Franklin would never have launched the *New-England Courant*." James had been looking for an opportunity to start a newspaper modeled on London's weekly publications—something witty, literate, provocative and ambitious (and ultimately, publishing such scandalous material would get Franklin jailed). Coss argues, "The *Courant* was the *Onion*, *Daily Show* and *Colbert Report* of its day. Indeed an argument can be made that American social and political satire began with James Franklin's newspaper, and that everything that followed, from Mark Twain to Will Rodgers to Matt Stone's and Trey Parker's *South Park*, is descended from it."

Benjamin Franklin, one of America's Founding Fathers, spent his formative teenage years working with his brother James at his printing press. Young Ben had been pulled out of school, and so his time at the printing press became instrumental to his self-education. It was there that he was given a front-row seat to the tumultuous events of Boston 1721. Coss argues that Ben's years as an apprentice defined him as an author, publisher, political philosopher, experimenter, and diplomat.

Cotton Mather was a Puritan minister famously known for his controversial role in Salem's witch trials. Aside from his spiritual leadership, he spent a great deal of time researching medicine. In 1721 when smallpox returned to Boston (he had lived through previous epidemics and seen its damage) he was prepared with a defense. Mather had read about the process of inoculation's success in Turkey and Africa

– his own slave Onesimus bore a scar from inoculation in Africa. However, due to Mather’s reputation it was no surprise that many of Boston’s esteemed physicians discredited his research. Dr. Zabdiel Boylston was the only physician Mather could compel to practice inoculation, and though they both faced public outrage (and even violence), the practice was ultimately successful. Without Mather’s prescient commitment to inoculation, Boylston would have never attempted the practice and the smallpox epidemic in Boston would have likely proceeded as all other epidemics had before.

Dr. Zabdiel Boylston was a Boston surgeon. During the 1721 epidemic, Cotton Mather convinced Boylston to attempt inoculation—making an incision in the flesh of an uninfected person and depositing a small amount of matter from a smallpox pustule in order to bring on a tempered version of the disease and build immunity. The public was outraged over the controversial practice, but Boylston continued on. By the end of the epidemic, Boylston had inoculated 280 persons, with just six of them dying under inoculation. A few years after the epidemic Boylston was finally recognized for his efforts in London as the first full-time American physician elected a “Fellow of the Royal Society.”

A conversation with Stephen Coss

Q: This one year in American history has rarely been discussed. What inspired you to write about Boston in 1721?

In 1994 I received a “Fact-A-Day” desk calendar as a Christmas stocking stuffer, and one of the facts concerned Doctor Zabdiel Boylston’s daring inoculation experiment during the 1721 Boston smallpox epidemic. I had never heard of Boylston (except as a street in Boston) or the inoculation experiment, but I was intrigued. At the time I was working in advertising, writing and producing TV commercials and writing screenplays in my spare time. I recognized the dramatic potential of the story and did enough research to write a screenplay about it. For a number of reasons, that screenplay got shoved in a drawer, where it sat for more than decade. In late 2006, I casually mentioned the screenplay to a friend who had just published his first book. He suggested the story might be suited for a book-length treatment. I jumped back into the research and discovered that there was even more to the story of 1721 than Boylston’s inoculations. The year also marked a beginning both for what would become the American revolutionary movement and for the evolution of a free press in America. Last but not least, I came to see that the year had a profoundly formative influence on one of our greatest Founding Fathers, Benjamin Franklin, who was a teenaged apprentice in his brother’s Boston printing house. There were a few books that dealt with Boylston’s inoculation experiment and the resulting controversy. But no other book discussed the political and journalistic controversies that were afflicting Boston concurrently, making 1721 a year that changed both medical history and American history.

Q: You argue that Boston 1721 was actually the first drama of the American Revolution. Why was this year – over fifty years before the events of 1776 – crucial to American independence?

Prior to 1721 there had been friction between the American colonies and England and even, in a few instances, outright rebellion against royal governors who were seen as tyrannical. (Indeed, Massachusetts had expelled its royal governor in 1689 for that very reason.) But those small rebellions had always been qualified by assurances on the part of the Americans that they weren’t rebelling against English authority—only against governors who overstepped the authority granted them by Parliament and the king. What happened in Boston in 1721 was very different, and marked a turning point in the relationship between England and its American subjects. Now, instead of an angry mob pushed to drastic action by the outrageous behavior of a malevolent royal governor, the elected Massachusetts House of Representatives launched an organized and sustained political rebellion against both governor Samuel Shute (who was ill-tempered, inflexible, and undiplomatic, but no tyrant) and the British authority he represented. The House obstructed nearly every royal prerogative Shute had been ordered to implement. Moreover, it began usurping authority that England had clearly vested in its appointed governor. Nothing like it had occurred in America. In London it was seen by many as an attempt by Massachusetts to gain independence from England.

This newfound political power had been made possible by the advent of a new kind of political strategy and infrastructure. The idea was to build widespread popular support for the elected government and against British control. The mechanism utilized to build that power base would become known as the Boston Caucus. The man behind all of it was a charismatic politician named Elisha Cooke, who by 1721 had become the most hated American in London. Cooke’s Caucus would live on for the next five decades, evolving into several causes and The Sons of Liberty. In a very literal sense he showed the way to the Patriots, especially Samuel Adams, who took control of the Caucus following the Stamp Act rebellion of 1765. That he became the new Cooke was no accident, since his father, Samuel Adams Sr., had been Elisha Cooke’s right-hand man. In short, then, 1721 gave Americans a new paradigm for resisting English rule. In my opinion it was where the road to the American Revolution began.

Q. Smallpox was not the only fever in Boston in 1721. Elisha Cooke was also challenging the Crown for control of the colony. How did the very real fever and fear of disease in Boston fuel the political fever?

A health crisis like a burgeoning epidemic magnifies societal tensions of all kinds, especially in the political realm. (Look at the political reaction to just a handful of Ebola cases in the U.S. in 2014.) By the time the smallpox outbreak began in Boston, tensions between the Cooke-led House of Representatives and Royal Governor Shute were already extremely high. The growing epidemic made both sides even testier. The House defied the royal governor outright; Governor Shute was furious, resentful, and desperate to regain control of the colony lest he find himself recalled to London to answer for his failure to tame the impertinent Americans. Indeed he was so frustrated and desperate that he decided to use the threat of smallpox contagion as leverage against the defiant House. As royal governor, he had the power to convene and dismiss the legislature more or less at will. In November 1721, at the very height of the

epidemic, Shute called the House into session in an area rife with smallpox cases. He claimed he wanted only a brief session to handle the colony's most pressing business. But when the House refused to capitulate to his demands, he extended the session, effectively holding the representatives hostage in an attempt to coerce their cooperation. When the inevitable finally happened—a House member contracted smallpox and died—anger against the governor increased exponentially, not only in the House, but among rank-and-file Bostonians and people throughout the colony as well. Shute's gambit had failed. And his administration was doomed.

Q. You argue that *The New-England Courant* was a precursor to today's satirical outlets like *The Onion* or *The Daily Show*. What about this publication was so innovative and incendiary?

American newspapers before *The New-England Courant* were little more than mouthpieces for the government. Boston papers seldom printed anything government officials or the powerful Puritan clergy might consider unfavorable or controversial. In fact, the *Courant's* predecessors courted government favor and boasted in their mastheads that they were "Published by Authority." They were also very boring. In August 1721 the first issue of the *Courant* appeared without the words "Published by Authority" and immediately began mocking the Puritan clergy. In the months and years that followed, the newspaper continued satirizing religious figures, government officials, and Harvard College. It also poked fun at Boston's sanctimonious self-image, and at sacrosanct institutions like marriage. It expressed scandalous ideas about religion, love, sex, drinking, and political corruption, often by employing humor, irony and sarcasm. Nothing quite like it had existed in America previously. It was so incendiary that its publisher, James Franklin, was thrown in jail. America's long tradition of political and social satire starts with the *Courant*, and you can follow its influence up through Twain and Will Rogers to *The Onion*, *The Daily Show*, and other contemporary shows offering a humorous but biting perspective on politics and society's sacred cows. A lot of the *Courant's* satire still rings true today. In fact, if you took some of the material James Franklin published and updated the language and a reference or two, it would be right at home in *The Onion* or on *The Daily Show*.

Q: One of the topics at the heart of this book is the role and responsibility of the media. Despite being the first independent newspaper in the colonies, did *The Courant* truly have the public's interest at heart?

The New-England Courant was the first American newspaper to espouse journalistic objectivity long before it became a standard, and to exercise press freedom and explicitly call for that freedom in its pages. I think we would all agree that the *Courant* had the public's interest at heart, but on some issues the *Courant* was conspicuously partisan. Nominally, at least, the paper was founded to oppose inoculation, which it continued to do quite un-objectively for its first several issues. I believe that the *Courant's* publisher and editor, James Franklin, used the inoculation controversy opportunistically, as a springboard for the launch of his newspaper, which he had been anxious to start for several years. He seems to have jumped on the anti-inoculation bandwagon because that's what readers wanted to read and his partners in the venture wanted to promote. (He also distrusted Cotton Mather, inoculation's chief proponent.) Like the many Boston physicians who opposed inoculation, James probably believed early on that his anti-inoculation stance was in the public's interest. As it turned out, he was wrong. To his credit, he ended the paper's anti-inoculation screed after its third issue. Later on, after inoculation had proven itself in Boston, he dutifully printed news of another successful inoculation experiment underway in England. Overall, I would say that he was a champion of the people's right to know. For example, he printed updates on the severity of the smallpox epidemic (very bad news) when the other Boston newspapers did as the government wished and said nothing. He tried to walk a line between telling the truth in the public interest and creating a newspaper people would buy. In that respect his challenge wasn't all that different from the one newspapers and television networks face today.

Q. What was the public mindset and why were the people of Boston so afraid and outraged over the practice of inoculation, especially when the results of the practice were overwhelmingly successful?

We tend to think of early 18th century New Englanders as superstitious and closed-minded, and it's easy for us to look back on the opposition to inoculation smugly. But what inoculation's advocates were proposing was completely counterintuitive. Inoculation meant taking smallpox pus from the sores of someone sick with the disease and implanting it in an incision made in the arm of someone who had never had the disease. It seemed insane and tantamount to attempted murder—which is how some people described it. It didn't help that the evidence for its safety and efficacy came from two sources seen as dubious—the minister Cotton Mather, who had never lived down his role in the Salem witch hysteria, and his black slave Onesimus, who claimed to have undergone inoculation as a young boy in Africa. One of the first inoculation patients, the son of the doctor who conducted the experiment, became quite ill. Although he recovered and other patients came through the procedure smoothly, this "close call" amped up the outrage. As more inoculations were performed successfully, people began arguing that the

immunity produced was only temporary, and that inoculation was artificially spreading smallpox further than it might otherwise spread. The most influential argument came from Doctor William Douglass, who hated Boylston and had a vested interest in stopping his experiment. Douglass claimed that inoculation could somehow “cause” the plague, another dreaded and deadly disease that in 1721 was ravaging France and seemed poised to make the leap to America. Underlying all of these objections was the question of God’s will. Many Boston Puritans firmly believed that God visited plagues and natural disasters on the people as punishment for their sinfulness. If smallpox was God’s punishment, was it right to try to mitigate its devastation?

Q. Dr. Zabdiel Boylston was the first to implement the life-saving practice of inoculation in Western medicine. Why do you think Boylston and his impressive contribution to medicine is relatively little-known?

I think Boylston’s relative anonymity is mostly due to the fame accorded to Edward Jenner for “discovering” vaccination about 80 years after the Boston experiment. Vaccination was inoculation but with cowpox instead of smallpox. Cowpox vaccination produced a milder reaction than inoculation but an equally good immunity to smallpox. It was safer and it wasn’t contagious (whereas a person who had been inoculated with actual smallpox could transmit the infection to another person). Vaccination improved inoculation; and it was vaccination that made it possible to eradicate smallpox by the late 20th century. So we tend to forget Boylston and Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, who pushed England’s royal family to approve an inoculation experiment at about the same time Boylston was conducting his experiment in Boston. But without Boylston and Montagu, we might not have had Jenner.

Q. Young Benjamin Franklin appears in the book as a printer’s apprentice to his older brother James. Why was this moment in time important to Benjamin Franklin’s development and his future role as a Founding Father?

I like to say that all Benjamin Franklin really needed to know he learned in 1721. Before Ben Franklin became a printer’s apprentice to his brother James in 1718 he was thoroughly demoralized. The previous two years had seen him yanked out of school and set to work in his father’s candle making and soap boiling shop. Ben hated it and fantasized about running away to sea. When he was sent from the tallow shop to his brother’s new printing house (in a deal that unfairly favored James), he immediately took to his new surroundings. There were books everywhere; just as important, there were his brother’s “ingenious” friends, who debated politics and social issues and who, in 1721, became the *New-England Courant’s* clever and funny correspondents. The intellectual stimulation of the printing house brought Ben alive again, inspiring him to begin his fabled self-education, which included teaching himself how to write in the simple but powerful style that would make him famous. The newspaper James founded in 1721 gave him an opportunity to put his newfound writing talent to work, as Silence Dogood.

James made Benjamin an excellent printer, taught him how to succeed in business against long odds (skills Ben would employ when starting his own business in Philadelphia), and imbued him with his foundational beliefs about political liberty and freedom of the press. By observing James’ bitter feuds with Cotton Mather and the Massachusetts government, Ben also learned a hard lesson about the futility of confrontation. His strategy of good-natured persuasion—the talent that made him America’s essential diplomat—dates back to 1721. His front-row seat for that year’s inoculation controversy also helped spark his fascination with science and medicine and gave him a model in Dr. Boylston, a man of humble background who by courage, conviction and intelligence earned membership in the world’s most esteemed scientific organization. The Ben Franklin who left Boston in 1723 for New York and ultimately Philadelphia was far different from the boy who had come into the printing house five years earlier. Although he would continue to learn and grow, his essential character, interests and beliefs were set for the rest of his long and fantastically consequential life.

Q. Your book offers a wide cast of characters, from well-known figures like Cotton Mather to Samuel Adams, to lesser-known revolutionaries like James Franklin or Dr. Zabdiel Boylston. Which figures were your favorite to research and write about?

I found all of these people compelling and admirable. What I admired in Boylston, Mather, Elisha Cooke and James Franklin was courage. Each, in his own way, risked greatly in order to act on his convictions. The two characters I got to know most intimately were Cotton Mather and James Franklin, largely because they wrote and published so much during this period. Reading Mather’s diary was fascinating; you see the struggle between the two sides of his personality—the highly educated, rational, compassionate man who wants to “do good” for his people, and the bitter, power-hungry and occasionally regressive and craven man whose egomania and insecurity had been his undoing at Salem. The character I felt the most sympathy for was James Franklin. All that most people know about him is by way of the unflattering and dismissive treatment he gets from his famous brother in the *Autobiography*. I think we might give him more credit today if not for the fact that his little brother was a genius and resentful about how James treated him as an apprentice. In truth, Ben owed a lot to James; and the record

shows that he took a lot of what James did and he ran with it, making it his own. James was a true innovator and far ahead of his time politically. And you have to admire the gumption of a guy who would criticize the government knowing he would probably get thrown in jail—and who, after spending time in jail, went right back to criticizing the government.

Q: Your research for this book utilizes many primary sources—where did you find them, and did any one source prove most informative?

I was very fortunate in that the many extant newspapers from this era—not only James Franklin’s *New-England Courant*, but also the other Boston papers, the *Boston News-Letter* and the *Boston Gazette*, have been digitized—hundreds of newspaper issues in 1721 and the years immediately preceding and following that year. I also accessed court records from Massachusetts; the governmental correspondence between Massachusetts and London has been collected and published, as have the journals of the Massachusetts House of Representatives, Cotton Mather’s diary, the diary of judge Samuel Sewall, who also plays a role in the story, and the letters of Benjamin Franklin, who made a few references to this early period in his life in some late letters. I visited Boston and the Massachusetts Historical Society, where I examined actual surviving copies of the *Courant*. And I went to Newport, Rhode Island to research James Franklin’s life after he left Boston, and to see the press that he and Benjamin used to print the *Courant*, which is housed in a museum there. Among the primary materials the diaries and the newspapers were extremely valuable because they offered glimpses of the quotidian—what the weather was like, what people were selling, what they were doing in their leisure time, what they were gossiping about, etc. Those details helped bring the narrative alive.

Q: You are a first-time historian and this is your first book. What was most challenging to you in reconstructing this period and these characters for your readers?

This is a book about medical history, American political history, and the history of the press. It’s also a biographical study of Cotton Mather, James and Benjamin Franklin, Zabdiel Boylston, and Elisha Cooke. So the scope of the book is fairly wide. Since I hadn’t had the advantage of studying any of those subjects in depth prior to beginning the book I needed to do an enormous amount of foundational research in order to understand the contexts of the events I was writing about and how events that transpired over a few years’ time fit into the larger lives of my characters. What was the history of medicine leading up to the inoculation trial in 1721? What was the state of relations between the American colonies and England—and how did that relationship evolve in the decades after the showdown between Cooke and Royal Governor Shute? What was Mather’s actual role at Salem and what happened in the thirty years between that event and the inoculation trial? How did what Ben Franklin learned in 1721 benefit him later in life? Gaining the perspective to write the book meant researching both broadly and deeply; it was a huge and sometimes daunting undertaking, but it was crucial and I loved it.