Book Review: â€˜Elephants on Acid â€“ and Other Bizarre Experimentsâ€™

by Mark Sauer - CNS

"Elephants on Acid: And Other Bizarre Experiments" by Alex Boese; Harcourt/Harvest Books; 288 pages; $14.

Ever wonder if a dog's severed head could be grafted to another pooch's body and survive? How about whether artificial insemination could result in a human-chimpanzee hybrid? Do you think a gay man can be turned straight by stimulating the brain's sexual-pleasure center?

Of course you've never thought about such things; why would you? But somebody has.

These scientific curiosities and dozens of other truly weird experiments are chronicled in Alex Boese's astonishing and highly readable "Elephants on Acid: And Other Bizarre Experiments."

In deft and witty prose, Boese lays out the quests of a long, strange line of scientists - some legitimate, but many in league with Dr. Frankenstein.

Boese holds a master's degree in the history of science from University of California San Diego. He has put his fascination with oddities to good use in two previous books, "The Museum of Hoaxes" and "Hippo Eats Dwarf," in which he debunks urban myths and Internet and advertising hoaxes.

But the experiments in his new tome were quite real.

Many of the tests were harmless, if silly, seeking answers to questions like: Do the girls really get prettier at closing time? Why can't we tickle ourselves? Do elephants never forget? Is there a discernible difference between Coke and Pepsi?

But others, like the attempt to graft a penis onto a forearm, definitely fall into the category of "What the heck were they thinking?"

Among Boese's litany of the bizarre are the two-headed dogs of Dr. Demikhov.

Shocking news came out of the Soviet Union in 1954 when Vladimir Demikhov, a top Russian surgeon, grafted the head, shoulders and front legs of a puppy onto the neck of a mature German shepherd. The idea was to prove to the world the prowess of Soviet surgical techniques, with the ultimate goal being organ transplants.

The two-headed Soviet dogs - there were 20 such creatures in all - survived for a short time. But Demikhov failed to comprehend the severe problems of tissue rejection, Boese writes.

Not surprisingly, animals have played a large role in experiments over the years, and advocates for animal rights will no doubt find themselves disgusted by much of what Boese has assembled. The title experiment of the book is a case in point.

In 1962, two doctors at the University of Oklahoma School of Medicine and the director of Oklahoma City's Lincoln Park Zoo tried to determine LSD's effects on elephants, whose large brains are close in size to those of humans.

They choose Tusko, a 14-year-old male Indian elephant. Considering the animal's bulk and elephants' notorious resistance to drugs, the researchers injected it with about 3,000 times the level of a typical human dose of LSD. Tusko trumpeted loudly and began running about his pen. Then he lost motor function, toppled over and died.

But Tusko lived on in popular culture, inspiring articles and myths and even a rock band, Tusko Fatale, who memorialized the creature's fate in song. The pachyderm now anchors a delightful, if sometimes unsettling, book that is best read with an open mind and an empty stomach.

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