



Poisons: From Hemlock to Botox to the Killer Bean of Calabar

Peter Macinnis

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In the tradition of *Salt and Stiff*, a wide-ranging and provocative look-teeming with little-known facts and engaging stories-at a subject of the direst interest. Poisons permeate our world. They are in the environment, the workplace, the home. They are in food, our favorite whiskey, medicine, well water. They have been used to cure disease as well as to incapacitate and kill. They smooth wrinkles, block pain, stimulate, and enhance athletic ability. In this entertaining and fact-filled book, science writer Peter Macinnis considers poisons in all their aspects. He recounts stories of the celebrated poisoners in history and literature, from Nero to Thomas Wainwright, and from the death of Socrates to Hamlet and Peter Pan. He discusses the sources of various poisons-from cyanide to strychnine, from Botox to ricin and Sarin gas-as well as their detection. Then he analyzes the science of their action in the body and their uses in medicine, cosmetics, war, and terrorism. With wit and precision, he weighs such questions as: Was Lincoln's volatility caused by mercury poisoning? Was Jack the Ripper an arsenic eater? Can wallpaper kill? For anyone who has ever wondered and been afraid to ask, here is a rich miscellany for your secret questions about toxins.

Poisons: From Hemlock to Botox to the Killer Bean of Calabar Details

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From Reader Review Poisons: From Hemlock to Botox to the Killer Bean of Calabar for online ebook

Fishface says

This was kind of a slog at times, between the author's detours into chemical formulae that mean nothing to me and the itty-bitty, pale-gray typeface. It was worth it because of the interesting stories about every kind of poison. The author even reframes many infections as poisonous, even as he does the more conventional thing by pointing out that in the right dose, even mercury and arsenic are medicinal rather than deadly. The book takes you all over the world -- Africa, China, Lapland -- and rethinks a lot of common wisdom, asking whether the Black Plague was really a global outbreak of ergot poisoning and pointing out that the French were using poison gas in the Great War before the Germans. I would have enjoyed it much more with a page magnifier.

Karla Winick-Ford says

Interesting research for some writing. Nothing too complex to read and understand but it's not an easy read. Factual and informative

Ryan says

I found this book to be interesting, though the content was not quite what I expected after reading a summary about it. It covers the lengthy history of poisons and how they've been used, but the book never really delved into the more in-depth information relating to how they act on the body. Basically, I was hoping for a more scientific perspective of poisons rather than a historical record of their use. It was still an interesting read though.

Peter Macinnis says

I wrote it, so I shall remain neutral.

Emily says

I'm used to reading pop-science books by Mary Roach, and Poisons was a disappointment in comparison. The chapter themes are too broad for substantive exploration, and the author uses choppy historical vignettes in attempt to cover a vast historical swath of poisonings. There is also excessive focus on the chemical names of poisons and an absence of explanation for non-scientist readers. Finally, I was not a fan of the author's political interjections, which were inappropriate rather than funny.

Zenith says

I really wanted to like this book, but it's all over the place. Its lack of good structure made me wonder what its point was.. sure it's a collection of facts, historical anecdotes and a bit of chemistry, but it's not worth the time spent reading it.

M. A. P. says

This book wasn't quite what I expected it to be after I had read its summary. The back cover blurb gave the impression I'd be learning the physiological consequences of different types of poisons, how the poison need to get into your system to be fatal or potentially so (as some poisons will kill only if injected, while oral consumption would do you no disservice whatsoever), and, indeed, how these poisons could be detected.

In the end, Macinnis seemed to be more into providing a general overview of the historical use of poisons. Of course, I had very little prior knowledge of any of that before reading the book, which also meant I wasn't terribly disappointed in the book. If anything, this may have been a rather decent introduction to the entire matter.

What I was looking for, were poisons found in nature (as I have a very specific reason for finding interest in the subject of fatally venomous things; I am a DM, and one of my players wants her RP character to be knowledgeable of poisons - and she knows I'd rather go for accuracy). Unfortunately there was very little to be learnt on that front. While he does speak of poisonous snakes, fish, microbes, plants, very few are mentioned by name, the information regarding the venoms they carry being very technical in nature. All these chemical terms that barely get broken down into layman's words. As such, the information Macinnis presents seems to assume a little too much of his readership. By all means, do not assume your readers to be lacking in intelligence! But do not assume them to be chemists either.

However, I found myself particularly fond of the sections telling of how poisons have been used (or abused) on a societal and political level. Very interesting, not so much for the poisons themselves, but - most of all - what such actions reveal of the human condition.

Not a coherent book by any means, but quite the interesting introduction to the subject in bits and pieces nonetheless.

Theresa says

The Half-Priced bookstore guy had promised that this book was "really great" and I listened to him. Fortunately, I only paid \$4.99 for it, so I wasn't too disappointed when, after finishing it, I found I had learned not much more than I knew before starting it -- namely, that things like cyanide, arsenic, hemlock, lead, mercury, pesticides, nicotine, -- if consumed in sufficient quantities -- will kill you. I was hoping to learn exactly HOW it is (physiologically speaking) that various poisons kill you, not because I'm planning anything nefarious, but simply because I was curious. But the book doesn't really focus on the "HOW" and most of its contents are neatly summed up in Wikipedia's "History of Poisons" page. Give this book a pass. It's just regurgitated facts.

Andrew Buckel says

Ok

Just ok. Boot great writing on subject rather drawn out and booring regarding the scope of subject matter available. That's all

James Oden says

Not sure exactly when I read this book but I found it on my shelves recently and remembered it was a fun read. However the most interesting part of the book was the looks I got while reading it in public.

Oliviaolivia says

Boring, unorganized, and crap writing

richard mueller says**Poison and its effect on man and environment.**

One of those books which are of interest to those who enjoy having a bit of knowledge on many subjects. Not filled with charts and statistics. Simple short stories of posions that have shaped our lives. Easy read, not so dry that it's difficult to get thru. Wetted my interest enough as to where i will probably follow up with more detailed reading.

Christine Rothrock says

"As we've seen, we are prepared to poison the world, so long as there is a profit to be made" that quote pretty much sums up human nature. This book was alright, the book was interesting but didn't really go into the poisons they way I would of liked. I would give 3.5 starts if I could.

Michelle Luplow says

bought this book because of my interest in the public health sciences. I could be slightly mentally challenged when it comes to reading comprehension and this book proved difficult to comprehend.

Maybe it's because the author is from Australia, and so communication and writing styles are different than in the U.S., but it was hard to follow, especially through the first 3/4 of the book. To me it felt like a stream

of consciousness essay that entwined and wove and snagged all these ideas together.

I recognized where he was trying to use humor, and sometimes it made me chuckle, but overall, it's not a book I would keep. I'm slightly more informed on poisons - both the good and the bad, but the book definitely didn't live up to my expectations.

Bryan Alkire says

Well written history
