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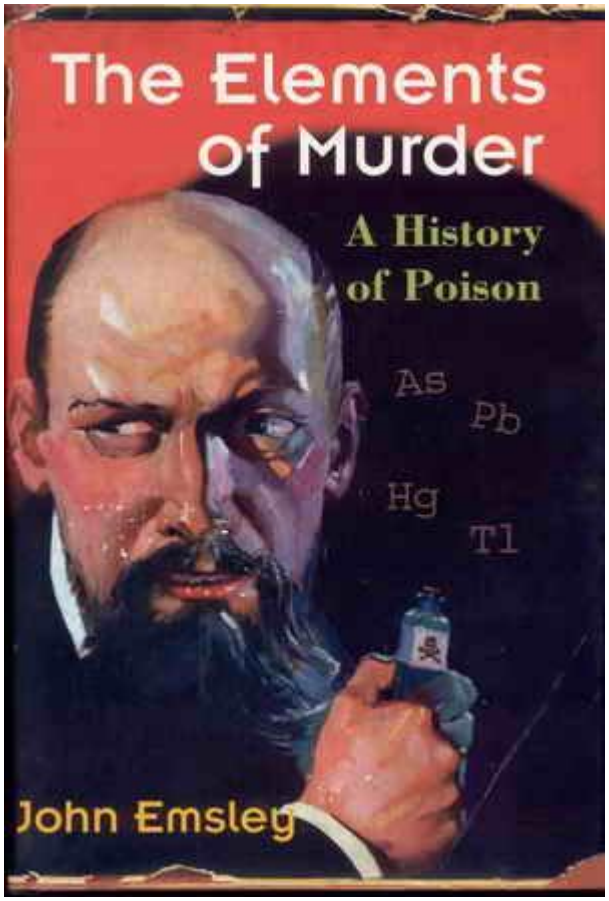

The Elements of Murder - A History of Poison *by* John Emsley. Hardcover, 6" x 9". Oxford University Press, 198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016 U.S.A., . Publication Date 2005. xiv + 421 pages, ISBN 0-19-280599-1. Price $30.00, £18.99

Official site of this book: http://www.oup.com/us/catalog/general/subject/Chemistry/?view=usa&ci=0192805991

Personal website of John Emsley: http://www.ch.cam.ac.uk/staff/je.html

Listen to an interview with John Emsley: http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4769877

Write an Email to John Emsley: JohnEmsley38@aol.com

Please the linked page (page002ex) to read excerpts from this book.

Please the linked page (page002 quiz) to solve an interesting quiz based on this book.

Please the linked page (emsley) to read an exclusive interview with the author John

Emsley conducted by the editor-in-chief of this journal.

Who doesn't love a good poison story? Agatha Christie's immense popularity partially lies in our insatiable thirst for these stories. Poison has a strange, fascinating, mysterious aura around it, which the likes of gun, dagger or a blunt rod do not have. It's the stealth, the secrecy, the diabolically elaborate planning, which makes killing by poison so attractive, so romantic, so appealing to popular imagination. One does not need to come in full public view to kill a person by poison. He can do so sitting right at his home making it is so easy to escape detection. There was a time when poisoners were so sure of the state's inability to catch them, that they poisoned one another with impunity. In 1740, the celebrated English novelist Henry Fielding (1707-1754), is reputed to have wept and appealed to scientists to make poison visible in some way so poisoners could be caught. He was told there was no way to do this.

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Borgias, a notorious Spanish family living in Italy, were the most feared poisoners during the Renaissance. So feared were they, that a number of anecdotal stories were being bandied about them. It was said that they had a special ring with a tiny poisoned spike. Anyone shaking hands with them, would be clandestinely punctured and killed. One member of this family Cesare Borgia (1476-1507) is reputed to have killed hundreds of his enemies with arsenic.

So dreaded was arsenic during these times, that it became variously known as the "king of poisons", "the poison of poisons" and "*le poudre de succession*" (inheritance powder). Arsenic was bought by ladies ostensibly to kill rats; the rat in most cases used to be the husband! The period between 15th till 18th century can rightfully be called "The age of arsenic", because poisoning with arsenic was very rife during this period. Other poisons were undoubtedly being used too but to a much lesser extent. This period may also be referred to as "The age of indiscriminate poisoning". People were poisoning their enemies seemingly for very trivial reasons, simply because they knew they could get away with it easily.

Click here to read Excerpts from this book.

By the 16th century, Italian women had become adept at poisoning. It is said that they even prepared poisons for sleeping persons. These women did not hesitate to poison even their husbands. Toffana was one such lady who was popular in Naples for creating the perfect poison called Aqua Toffana or Aquettaa-di-Napoli which was a tasteless, colorless and odorless liquid. Six drops were enough to kill a person in a few hours. The Italians were so popular as poisoners that the British coined words like 'italianated' or 'italianation' for secret poisonings.

...I leafed through the pages of this book and after just an hour or so, I came to the conclusion that I had a bestseller in my hands. Classic it indeed is, albeit modern. Emsley tries an entirely different approach from Thorwald - an earlier master storyteller of poisons. While Thorwald tries to trace the history of poison chronologically, illustrating them with great cases, Emsley delves on individual poisons and explores the history of poison through each of them...

The French were not lagging far behind in the world of poisons. The raving beauty of Marie Madeleine D'Aubray - also variously known as Marquise de Brinvilliers or Madame de Brinvilliers - (July 22, 1630 - July 16, 1676) overtook all suspicions of her brute poisoning which she practiced on

patients in hospitals she often visited on the pretext of charity. She was finally guillotined in 1676 when she had taken several lives including that of her husband, father, two brothers and one sister, besides lovers and onlookers who stood in her way.

Back in late 1970s, when I was doing my post graduation in Forensic Medicine and Toxicology from the All India Institute of Medical Sciences, New Delhi, once I was idling through the toxicology book section of our library and I came across "The Proof of Poison" by Jürgen Thorwald. I got that book issued, read that book in one go, and immediately decided a better book on poisons could not be written. It was so full of facts and information and was written in such an engaging style.

Indeed I did not get to read a better book on toxicology (written for a layman) - till one fine day I received "The Elements of Murder - A History of Poison" by John Emsley. The book shows on its cover jacket, a middle aged person holding a bottle of poison in his hands, peering diabolically over his shoulders to see what effect it has had on his enemy. The book appeared torn at the edges which dismayed me a little, but later I realized it was just the jacket design - a very interesting ploy to catch the attention of the reader. One tends to feel one has an old classic treatise on poisons - tattered at the edges - in his hands. I leafed through the pages and after just an hour or so, I came to the conclusion that I had a bestseller in my hands. Classic it indeed is, albeit modern.

Emsley tries an entirely different approach than Thorwald. While Thorwald tries to trace the history of poison chronologically, illustrating them with great cases, Emsley delves on individual poisons and explores the history of poison through each of them. Another interesting approach that he has tried is to deal with just elemental poisons. He would for instance not tell you anything about succinylcholine, or parathion or even cyanide, because these are not elements. But don't lose heart. You will get to read stories on cyanide and other common poisons in umpteens of other poison books available in the market. You would however not get to read good stories about, say lead or nickel, or cadmium in any book. It is Emsley's book that will give you umpteens of good stories about not one or two but 17 elements!

Click here to solve an interesting quiz based on this book.

I would like to divide Emsley's book broadly in two parts (although I must hasten to add, he has not done so himself). Part one deals with five elements in fairly great detail. These are mercury, arsenic, antimony, lead and thallium. Each of these elements has been dealt with very extensively. Rightly so, because these elements indeed have remained in the forefront of homicidal poisonings throughout human history. I made some calculations and realized that he spends - on an average - about 60 pages to each of these poisons. Each chapter is full of strange, unbelievable, interesting true stories. I am tempted to narrate a few of them here, but perhaps I would not be able to do justice to them; I would almost definitely lose some grip in my narrative. It would make a lot more sense to buy the book and read the stories in their entirety.

The second part of the book comprises of minor elements - 12 of them. These are barium, beryllium, cadmium, chromium, copper, fluoride, nickel, potassium, selenium, sodium, tellurium and tin. These poisons are dealt with in minor detail - around 2-3 pages for each poison. I personally enjoyed this section more, because I knew so little about these poisons. And so little information about them is available elsewhere. A general reader I believe would greatly enjoy the entire book.

...To sum up, it is an essential reading for persons who love true mysteries and whodunits. The book is written in a non technical language and an average reader would greatly enjoy this book. Even a professional toxicologist - like me - would enjoy the book greatly, if only to read the several interesting poisoning cases given in this book...

It is customary to dwell upon the flip side of a book in a review. Honestly I can't think of any, except perhaps that the book does not have pictures or photographs. Inclusion of a few pictures or photographs from historical archives could perhaps have made the book a bit more attractive, but Emsley more than makes up for this omission by his masterly narrative.

To sum up, it is an essential reading for persons who love true mysteries and whodunits. The book is written in a non technical language and an average reader would greatly enjoy this book. Even a professional toxicologist - like me - would enjoy the book greatly, if only to read the several interesting poisoning cases given in this book. I know I can pepper my lectures with these stories now to make them so much more interesting. Students of chemistry would find the book equally appealing because the chemistry of each element is explained in detail in an easily understandable language. The book should also be very useful for historians of crime, forensic scientists, chemists, crime investigators, lawyers and judges, although it is not primarily intended for them. The book is primarily intended for the general reader, who of course would find it irresistible.

the linked page (emsley) to read interview with John Emsley, the author of this book.

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the linked page (page002ex) to read excerpts from this book.

(Michael Bywater reviews The Elements of Murder: a History of Poison by John Emsley - 952 words.)

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The Elements of Murder

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