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Book Reviews: Popular Books Section



...12 GEMS TO SAVOR ...I read this entire book in about three sittings. Often I found myself reading the book while dining simultaneously, as I could not tear myself away from the succulent stories. I know this book would be a roaring success with not only lay people, but also forensic specialists and toxicologists. I have already begun narrating a number of historical anecdotes from this book to my students. If you want to discover the adventurous world of toxicology, read this book...

The Poisoner's Handbook: Murder and the Birth of Forensic Medicine in Jazz Age New York *by* Deborah Blum. Hard Bound, 9" x 6.4" x 1.3".
The Penguin Press, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England. Publication Date February 18, 2010. 336 pages, ISBN-10: 1594202435, ISBN-13: 978-1594202438. Price $25.95.

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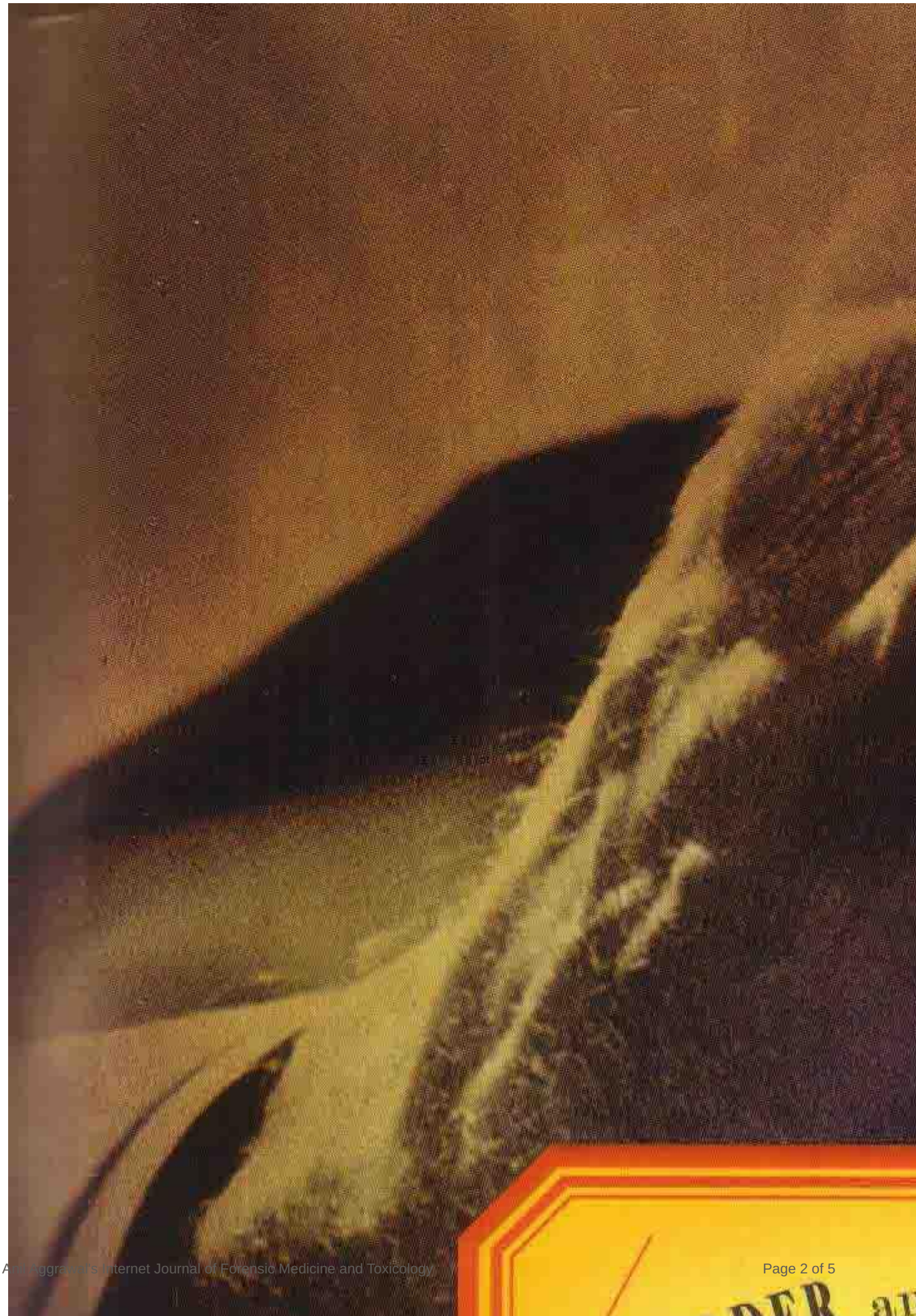

In 1928, Harrison Martland, a young New Jersey medical examiner met his mentor Charles Norris, and wanted advice about some bones that he had unearthed. The bones belonged to a young woman – a dial painter – who had died a mysterious death. During life she had reveled in painting her hair, cheeks, even teeth in deadly radium she worked with, so she could smile like a Cheshire cat in the dark. Not only watch dials, but just about everything she painted with radium glistened in the dark. Radium had other tangible uses too. Public was mad with its “invigorating effects”. A company sold Radithor – Certified Radioactive Water as a tonic. People discovered that some hitherto unknown health springs in Europe contained radon – a byproduct of radium disintegration. And surely radium should have been responsible for the health effects. Doctors were curing cancer with it. Even Madam Marie Curie during her famous 1921 US tour, kept it with impunity in her shirt pockets showing it to a curious public at her lectures. Joining the public mood were the poor dial painters, who like everybody else thought they were dabbling in something perfectly innocuous – nay healthy – activities. Yet many of them died a horrible death. Why?

This remarkable book by Deborah Blum – a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist – answers not just this, but dozens of other historical curiosities. Each chapter begins with an interesting story, and then seeks to find answers.

The book under review is a rare treat for forensic specialists, toxicologists and laymen alike. During my 35 years of teaching in forensic medicine and toxicology, I have found that the concepts of these subjects are not very easy to communicate to the lay people. Yet Blum does this so deftly – almost effortlessly – that one is tempted to think she is dealing with easy subjects. Toxicology is no easy subject, take it from me. But thanks to her excellent communication skills and sound knowledge of the subject that she makes it very easy for all of us.

Deborah Blum



Deborah Blum (born October 19, 1954), a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, is no stranger to anyone. Beside
Scientific Proof of Life After Death, Love at Goon Park: Harry Harlow and the Science of Affection (named a
Times Notable Book of the Year in 1997), The Monkey Wars (a Library Journal best book of 1994 in Science a

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As I delved in more stories, I began to realize the enormity of my own ignorance about many interesting toxicological aspects – especially historical aspects of toxicology. Read the chapter on methyl alcohol, and you would know the unwritten history of Prohibition and the doomed 18th Amendment.

In virtually every chapter we meet two forensic pioneers – Charles Norris and Alexander Gettler. Together they ruled the world of American forensic medicine in the first half of twentieth century. Many refer to this period as the Golden period of Forensic Medicine in America. With "Wet chemistry" – use of test-tubes, beakers, and flasks - Gettler achieved much more than a brilliant chemist would do today with modern gadgets. He is known for his researches outside of toxicology too. We still talk and discuss about the Gettler test in drowning – a test he suggested in a paper in 1921 in JAMA.

Each story in this remarkable book is a gem – and there are 12 of them in all. On chloroform, wood alcohol (methyl alcohol), cyanides, arsenic, mercury, carbon monoxide, radium, ethyl alcohol and several others. Some stories are told in two parts.

I read this entire book in about three sittings. Often I found myself reading the book while dining simultaneously, as I could not tear myself away from the succulent stories. I know this book would be a roaring success with not only lay people, but also forensic specialists and toxicologists. I have already begun narrating a number of historical anecdotes from this book to my students. If you want to discover the adventurous world of toxicology, read this book.

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