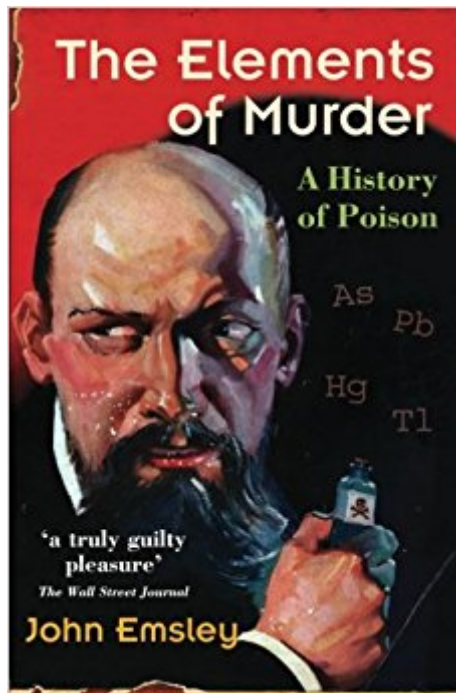




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# The Elements Of Murder: A History Of Poison



## Synopsis

Was Napoleon killed by the arsenic in his wallpaper? How did Rasputin survive cyanide poisoning? Which chemicals in our environment pose the biggest threat to our health today? In *The Elements of Murder*, John Emsley answers these questions and offers a fascinating account of five of the most toxic elements-arsenic, antimony, lead, mercury, and thallium-describing their lethal chemical properties and highlighting their use in some of the most famous murder cases in history. In this exciting book, we meet a who's who of heartless murderers. Mary Ann Cotton, who used arsenic to murder her mother, three husbands, a lover, eight of her own children, and seven step children; Michael Swango, who may have killed as many as 60 of his patients and several of his colleagues during the 20 years he practiced as a doctor and paramedic; and even Saddam Hussein, who used thallium sulfate to poison his political rivals. Emsley also shows which toxic elements may have been behind the madness of King George III, the delusions of Isaac Newton, and the strange death of King Charles II. In addition, the book examines many modern day environmental catastrophes, including accidental mass poisonings from lead and arsenic, and the Minamata Bay disaster in Japan. Written by a leading science writer, famous for his knowledge of the elements and their curious and colorful histories, *The Elements of Murder* offers an enticing combination of true crime tales and curious science that adds up to an addictive read.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Starred Review. Emsley (*Vanity, Vitality, and Virility: The Science Behind the Products You Love to*

Buy) hits a bull's eye in this fascinating, wonderfully readable forensic history of five deadly chemicals (mercury, arsenic, antimony, lead and thallium) and their starring role in that most intoxicating drama of pure evil: murder. A deeply knowledgeable chemist (he's science writer in residence at Cambridge University) with a gift for making accessible the dry and bewilderingly arcane, Emsley's at his best in case studies of infamous poisoners and their victims. During the reign of James I of England, for instance, the poet Thomas Overbury, having fallen out of royal favor, was administered three fatal doses of mercury, only to survive. For his stubbornness he was administered a fourth dose "by enema" and finally succumbed. Mary Bateman, the "Yorkshire Witch," was equally unlucky. Convicted in 1809 of poisoning a client, Mary was hanged and her corpse skinned so pieces could be sold as charms. Not all the incidents are in the past: Emsley also discusses contemporary environmental poisoning from mercury and Saddam Hussein's use of thallium sulfate on his enemies. Fanatical devotees of the macabre might thumb past sections devoted to less sensational history. But the general reader will not be disappointed: each of these deadly toxins was at one time or another promoted for its unique health or beauty benefits. 15 b&w illus. (June) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Readers seduced by this book's provocative title into expecting a spicy catalog of murder and mayhem may be a bit disappointed by its somewhat dry and technical tone. The author, a veteran science writer, certainly knows his stuff, but he may have slightly overestimated his audience's tolerance for discussions of chemical formulas. Still, for the patient reader, there is a wealth of intriguing information here. Emsley traces the evolution of alchemy and explains the central role that the quest to turn metal into gold plays in the history of poison, pausing along the way to note that Isaac Newton's obsession with alchemy may have contributed to his madness. Later chapters discuss the history, uses, and murderous abuses of mercury, arsenic, antimony, lead, and thallium. Yes, it's technical, but just keep plodding: it's not all formulas. Emsley retells enough juicy and lurid (and sometimes famous) stories of murder by poison to enthrall both true-crime fans and budding mystery writers. David Pitt Copyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

turned out to be everything I was hoping for when I ordered it. It is a book about poisons and poisonings for the general reader. The fact that it is not burdened with chemical formulae and other details that might interest a chemist, causes it to be both interesting and readable. After leading into

his subject in the first 27 pp. Emsley gets to the principal poisons which are mercury, arsenic, antimony lead and thallium. There are at least two chapters on each. In the last chapter we learn about a dozen other poisons which while rarely employed by murderers, can be deadly. All in all, this book kept my attention throughout its length. I was impressed by it and wished it were longer than its 400-odd pages.

The poisonous elements spotlighted in this book--mercury, arsenic, antimony, lead, and thallium--also served as medications for most of recorded history. It is amazing what people would concoct and swallow to cure constipation, including mercury laxatives and antimony 'perpetual pills' that passed through the gut and irritated it into expelling its contents. These pills could be washed off and recycled. In fact, "there are reports that such pills were highly effective and passed from generation to generation." "The Elements of Murder" makes it clear that it was sometimes impossible to determine whether a victim was poisoned by his enemies or his doctors. The author, John Emsley is both a chemist and an award-winning science writer. He chronicles the characteristics of each element with a magisterial British presence that eludes many American science writers, who sometimes place a heavy reliance on adjectives. Emsley goes for the telling anecdote. The insanity of men slowly poisoned by lead is revealed in a list of items they stored in a lifeboat: "button polish, silk handkerchiefs, curtain rods, and a portable writing desk." The largest mass poisoning by arsenic was actually funded by UNICEF in an effort to provide clean drinking water to the people of West Bengal, India and Bangladesh. Although the stories of individual poisoners and their victims are interesting, the author's investigations into the wholesale slaughter of people by insidious, omnipresent elements in their environment are equally compelling. Were both the Roman AND British Empires brought low by lead? Read "The Elements of Murder" and decide for yourself.

From the title of my review a portion of the reading audience may be turned off; a combination of CHEMISTRY and HISTORY - not everyone's favorite subjects in high school! However, if you enjoyed these subjects then John Emsley has written the book for you! We are acquainted with several "Elements" (although they are all examined as compounds - something I found to be a little misleading - Arsenic Trioxide, Lead Oxide, Antimony Sulphide, Methyl Mercury are the compounds and not singular elements) and how they can do us harm. We are told of each element's colourful history, its discovery and how it had been used in some very bad deeds. This is clearly the most entertaining part - Emsley writes as if he was a Jr. version of Sherlock Holmes in exploring the facts of the case. Each murder is fully detailed with the fate of the poisoner given as the conclusion. I was

a little hesitant about giving 5 stars - for a book on murder by poison I had hoped that cyanide would be covered. However, under the context of "The ELEMENTS of murder" cyanide is never mentioned. I am puzzled because every murder described is not by the raw element, but by a compound of the element. Regardless, to cyanides exclusion, I can still highly recommend "The Elements of Murder: A History of Poison to all history and chemistry fans.

This is a fascinating book. As I read about mercury, I remember seeing a large tube of the mercury ointment that my Grandmother told me was to help heal any scratches or wounds to her skin. I planned to sit back and enjoy a good read about the elements and their effect on our bodies. This book is easy to read. It is not text bookish. As a seasoned, experienced RN, I am learning many new things while I read. It is like actually having fun while I am in class"

I really didn't have an interest in poison until I heard Mr. Emsley on the radio. This book has a lot of history in it and being a history buff I found it really enjoyable. I've learned a great deal about the subject and was really suprised to find how much we are actually exposed to poisons on a daily basis. I was worried that perhaps this may be a rather dry book, but let me assure you it isn't. I found it very entertaing and would recommed it to anyone who has an interest in history or reading about true crime. Or even if you just want to make your boyfriend nervous!

Interesting book and a good read.

Compared to The Poisoner's Handbook by Deborah Blum this book is like wading hip high through mud instead of splashing merrily thru a puddle. Never have finished it.

Rated before! Good book on the history of poison! Very interesting!

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