The Poisoner’s Handbook
by Deborah Blum

Book review by Albert Ray, MD

I chose mathematics as a major in college because I enjoyed being given a problem that had only one solution. In the end, I could prove that I had arrived at the correct answer, and so could everyone else who checked over my proof. That was why I thoroughly enjoyed this book. The Poisoner’s Handbook engages us with true puzzling stories of death and murder through the birth of forensic medicine during the jazz age in my hometown, New York City. Of late, I find myself addicted to the television shows, movies, and books depicting unsolved crimes with their myriad forensic and cold case files, finally coming to be solved through the persistent exploration of trace evidence, sometimes evaluated many years after the crime or event has taken place, because of the constant advances of new scientific methods and applications coming to the rescue.

A century ago, poisons provided the ideal method for the perfect crime of murder given the corrupt setting of the coroner’s office in New York City. That all changed with the appointment of Chief Medical Examiner Charles Norris in 1918 who, together with his toxicologist Alexander Gettler, put forensic medicine on a firm scientific footing forever. Through the presentation of actual cases, Pulitzer Prize-winning science writer Deborah Blum catalogs the chosen poisons of murderers and those that the environment added to the brew. You will become intimately familiar with chloroform, methyl and ethyl alcohols, cyanide, arsenic, mercury, carbon monoxide, radium, and thallium through her captivating narratives transporting you from the morgue to the courtroom, ultimately revealing “who done it.”

This easy-to-read book is difficult to put down until we conclude, chapter by chapter, what type of poison was involved and who or what was responsible for the ensuing sickness and death. Put your thinking caps on, dust off your memories of chemistry, physics, and mathematics, and mix in all of the experiences garnered from your reading or recollection of Dick Tracy comic strips, Sherlock Holmes mysteries, Perry Mason reruns, Forensic File thrillers, CSI series, or Cold Case sagas, and you will be ready for diving into this book full bore. Anybody who has ever had the full experience of a visit to the metropolis of New York City or still carries the battle scars of having lived there for some portion of his/her life, will be fascinated by the specific references to the actual crime scenes depicted that took place in different neighborhoods of the city they have no doubt come to know.

The book also serves as good refresher for physicians, medical personnel, and medical students of all ages regarding the inherent dangers of the numerous poisons that surround us, and that we so often take for granted in our environment each and every day. Norris and Gettler were armed only with the scientific knowledge they mastered in their studies, their test tubes, Bunsen burners, microscopes, their laboratory, and the tables and dissecting equipment at the Medical Examiner’s office outside Bellevue Hospital in New York City. You become their detective assistant and help solve the poisonings resulting in the deaths they confronted during the roaring 20s, the days of prohibition, the financial collapse of Wall Street, and the period between the two great wars. As well, the book relates the rapidly changing political and legal environment these two very interesting men of science had to deal with as scientists in the first half of the 20th century at Tammany Hall in little old New York.

Master storyteller Deborah Blum constantly reminds us that Norris and Gettler will go down in history as the pioneers of forensic medicine and forever have given the justice system the truths of their research and life’s work. One can only imagine what they could have accomplished in our day and age with DNA technology and other scientific advances that have come about since they carried on their work. In the end though, author Ralph Waldo Emerson said it best, “the surest poison is time.”

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