

The Arsenic Century: How Victorian Britain was Poisoned at Home, Work, & Play

By: James C. Whorton
Review by: Gena LaScala

Today's modern age may have its own slew of hazards, but the notion of being killed by your wallpaper or clothing probably is not one of them. In James C. Whorton's engaging and macabre *The Arsenic Century: How Victorian Britain was Poisoned at Home, Work, & Play*, the subject of poison arising in the everyday lives of the Victorian public is simultaneously a fascinating, horrifying, and informative read. Whorton is Professor Emeritus of the History of Medicine at the University of Washington, Seattle, and has many publications on the history of health and medicine. His writing shows thorough research and dedication, yet it remains easy to read for anyone picking up the book, thanks in part to his story telling style.

The Arsenic Century chronicles the pervasive use of said poison throughout the 1800s, whether it was used to do purposeful harm to another, or perhaps simply meant to enhance the pigment in one's green wallpaper. Whatever the case was, arsenic was practically everywhere. Whorton begins the book with a look at how arsenic was used as a weapon that, for a long time, was considered discreet and undetectable, and it was far too easy to obtain. He provides many examples of documented poisoning cases throughout the book, and narrates them in a way that keeps readers hooked on the facts and well as the scandal. Due to arsenic's common use as a tool for murder, the medical profession had to adapt in its wake; toxicology became a newfound art. From there, the author explores arsenic's use in dyes, candles, food, clothing, alcohol, medicine, and even beauty treatments. Arsenic was used in so many different household items and was processed within so many different professions that it became a widespread public health problem. Poisoning could come from virtually anywhere, and Whorton intricately explores how and why this issue lasted for so long. He also expresses the hope that readers will consider this information as a starting point for recognizing "the myriad chemical threats facing the world today."

The Arsenic Century may focus on a particular time period and a specific poison, but the book's message is ultimately one that we can reflect upon today. James Whorton provides an in-depth, yet easily accessed narrative exploring Victorian Britain's dangerous dance with poison and how it affected the medical profession, businesses, and society as a whole.

About the Reviewer

Gena LaScala has a Master's degree in History from Salem State University and a fascination with all things weird and medical, especially if they're Victorian. When she isn't at work grooming dogs, she's either reading or catching up on the latest true crime podcast.

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