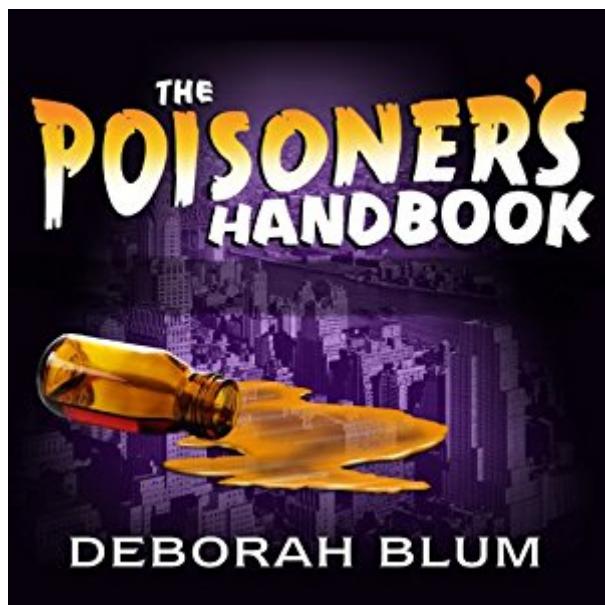


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# The Poisoner's Handbook: Murder And The Birth Of Forensic Medicine In Jazz Age New York



## Synopsis

Deborah Blum, writing with the high style and skill for suspense that is characteristic of the very best mystery fiction, shares the untold story of how poison rocked Jazz Age New York City. In *The Poisoner's Handbook*, Blum draws from highly original research to track the fascinating, perilous days when a pair of forensic scientists began their trailblazing chemical detective work, fighting to end an era when untraceable poisons offered an easy path to the perfect crime. Drama unfolds case by case as the heroes of *The Poisoner's Handbook*—chief medical examiner Charles Norris and toxicologist Alexander Gettler—investigate a family mysteriously stricken bald, Barnum and Bailey's Famous Blue Man, factory workers with crumbling bones, a diner serving poisoned pies, and many others. Each case presents a deadly new puzzle, and Norris and Gettler work with a creativity that rivals that of the most imaginative murderer, creating revolutionary experiments to tease out even the wiliest compounds from human tissue. Yet in the tricky game of toxins, even science can't always be trusted, as proven when one of Gettler's experiments erroneously sets free a suburban housewife later nicknamed "America's Lucretia Borgia" to continue her nefarious work. From the vantage of Norris and Gettler's laboratory in the infamous Bellevue Hospital it becomes clear that killers aren't the only toxic threat to New Yorkers. Modern life has created a kind of poison playground, and danger lurks around every corner. Automobiles choke the city streets with carbon monoxide, while potent compounds such as morphine can be found on store shelves in products ranging from pesticides to cosmetics. Prohibition incites a chemist's war between bootleggers and government chemists, while in Gotham's crowded speakeasies each round of cocktails becomes a game of Russian roulette. Norris and Gettler triumph over seemingly unbeatable odds to become the pioneers of forensic chemistry and the gatekeepers of justice.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

I am a professor of chemistry at a major university, and Deborah Blum's book was an impulse buy for me. After all, you can't go wrong with a popular science book about forensic toxicology and chemistry, can you? It appears that this is the first book I regret buying for my Kindle (I am trying to get a refund now). Most, if not all of the chemistry (and physics) in this book is entirely disconnected from the reality of science. Blum's treatment of poisons, analytical procedures and basic science ranges from simple misstatements, inaccuracies and misunderstandings to statements that are outright wrong. Some of these are listed below:<sup>\*</sup> The action of mustard chemical warfare agents has nothing to do with "becoming a ferocious form of sulfuric acid". Mustards act through alkylative damage of DNA (and other biomolecules).<sup>\*</sup> Sodium carbonate is not an acidic chemical.<sup>\*</sup> HCN is not a "potent acid".<sup>\*</sup> No additional source of hydrogen is needed to perform a Marsh test for arsenic.<sup>\*</sup> It is not likely that arsenic compounds will crystallize in the tissues of a poisoning victim.<sup>\*</sup> The Reinsch test is not a simple color test, as is implied by Blum's description. This is according to Gettler himself: [...]<sup>\*</sup> Electrical current is not measured in volts.<sup>\*</sup> Blum's description of radioactive decay, to borrow a phrase from Wolfgang Pauli, "is not even wrong". This list is by no means comprehensive - these are just some of the many cringe-inducing parts in the book. Blum spends pages upon pages on this bad science, talking about "ooze", "bubbling mess", "whizzing" elementary particles, "crystals of white arsenic" found in bodies, and "synthetic methyl alcohol called methanol".

As I started "The Poisoner's Handbook", I thought this was a great book: a fine history of modern American forensic science, told through a double biography of Norris and Gettler, two of its major founders, and illuminated with engrossing tales of murder, mayhem, and nightmarish misadventure. That thought died as soon as I started to spot the technical explanations that were uninformative, misleading, or downright wrong. Will a dozen examples do? p. 56: Hydrocyanic acid (HCN) is not a potent acid or corrosive; it is just about the weakest acid known. The fact that it is ferociously toxic has nothing to do with its acidic strength. p. 22: Chloroform is not terribly corrosive; on keratinized tissue (normal skin) it has no effect at all. p. 86: You cannot get anything by mixing arsenic (As), copper (Cu) and hydrogen (H<sub>2</sub>) because the first two are metals and the last is a gas that does not

react spontaneously with either of them.p. 179: Radium (Ra) does not react with water to produce radon (Rn); it produces Rn by atomic decay.p. 183: Radium (Ra) does not decay to produce polonium (Po) and radon (Rn) - its atomic weight is far less than that of Po and Rn combined so it cannot produce both. It can decay to produce Rn, which then decays to produce Po.p. 187: Sodium carbonate (Na<sub>2</sub>CO<sub>3</sub>) is not slightly acidic; as any highschooler knows, it is moderately basic.p. 191: There is no such thing as diethyl phlatate. (Did Blum mean diethyl phthalate? Did anyone proofread this book?)p. 201: Ethanol (EtOH) does not "dissolve" into acetic acid; it is converted to acetic acid by tissue enzymatic activity.p. 206: DDT is not an organophosphate; it contains no phosphorous at all.

I love reading about famous crimes, medical oddities, and cases solved by forensics. This book has them all, and is every bit as entertainingly well-written as my old favorite, **THE MEDICAL DETECTIVES**. by Berton Roueche. Better yet, the title, **THE POISONER'S HANDBOOK**, is not just hyperbole. In describing famous New York City crimes committed with poison, the author discusses the chemical makeup, toxic effects, and early-20th-century sources of (1) chloroform, (2) methyl alcohol, (3) cyanide, (4) arsenic, (5) mercury, (6) carbon monoxide, (7) radium, and (8) thallium. In reading this book, you will probably find that there is a lot you thought you knew but didn't really know about well-known poisons frequently encountered in mystery novels and television shows. Did you think that fast-acting cyanide delivers a "one whiff, you're done" death? Think again! Did you think that only Skid Row bums drank wood alcohol during Prohibition? Not so! Did you know that Marie Curie died of radiation poisoning? Probably, but did you know exactly how radium works in the body to produce aplastic anemia and death? In reading this book, you will also learn about pioneering forensics efforts that required the grinding up of large samples of brain and organ tissue prior to laboratory testing. (In the early 20th century, testing was done with "wet" chemistry; today it is done with "dry" chemistry that only requires smears for testing.) The testing itself required many time-consuming steps and tricky procedures. Some of the testing involved tissue samples that were retained in room-temperature containers for weeks and months.

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