



## The Elements of Murder: A History of Poison

By John Emsley

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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 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. Indeed, we meet in this book 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, a grand total of 20 people. 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 (almost certainly a case of acute lead poisoning), 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 poisoning 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.

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### Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

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)

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From [Booklist](#)

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*

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Review

"A delightful potion of chemical erudition, forgotten science history and ghastly murder schemes.... Reading *The Elements of Murder* is like watching a hundred episodes of *CSI*, but without having to sit through the tedious personal relationships of the characters.... Along the way the bodies pile up as Emsley relates spectacular case histories of poisonings, accidental and criminal.... Emsley mines what he calls 'the darker side of the periodic table' with consummate skill."--Dick Teresi, *The New York Times Book Review*

"A fascinating anecdotal history of killing by five elements--mercury, arsenic, antimony, lead and thallium.... With something of interest on almost every page, it combines the satisfactions of a detective story, intriguing snippets of history, popular science, unsolved mysteries and murder. A powerful brew." --P. D. James, *Sunday Telegraph*

"Emsley captures the creepy common ground of science and homicide.... Beyond the scandals and celebrities, what makes 'The Elements of Murder' such a charming read is the absurdity of its anecdotes.... Hitchcock could make many films from this book."--Brenn Jones, *San Francisco Chronicle*

"Fascinating, wide-ranging and, let's not mince words, macabre new history of poison.... A truly guilty pleasure."--*Wall Street Journal*

"The list of the famous who may have been poisoned by one of these devious toxins is a long one, from Pope Clement II to Mozart. Emsley has dug up the dirt on these and a rogue's gallery of lesser-known cases.... If the golden age of poisoning is gone (replaced, to be sure, by other forms of mayhem), in Emsley's book it's still very much alive."--Laurence A. Marschall, *Natural History*

"Emsley retells enough juicy and lurid (and sometimes famous) stories of murder by poison to enthrall both true-crime fans and budding mystery writers.... The author certainly knows his stuff."--*Booklist*

"Emsley 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 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."--*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

"I heartily recommend that this book be read and added to the library of every chemist, toxicologist, and avid crime fiction reader, wherever they may be around the world. This book is an absolute delight and, for the price, a bargain to boot."--*Chemical and Engineering News*

"Both as a natural history of poisons and as a near-encyclopedic who-used-what-how reference, the book fascinates. The glossary and bibliography are most helpful. So dangerous is the world that many readers will choose to stay home, working on that special sauce for mother-in-laws meat loaf."--*Foreword Magazine*

"This absorbing volume is equal parts chemistry, history and mystery, but you don't need to be a scientist, historian or murderer to appreciate all three facets."--*BookPage* (Beach Reading Selection)

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