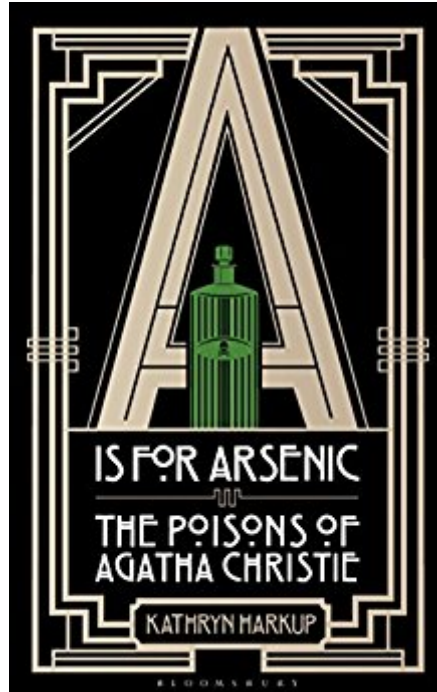


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A Is For Arsenic: The Poisons Of Agatha Christie (Bloomsbury Sigma)



Synopsis

Shortlisted for the Macavity Awards 2016
Fourteen novels. Fourteen poisons. Just because it's fiction doesn't mean it's all made-up ...
Agatha Christie revelled in the use of poison to kill off unfortunate victims in her books; indeed, she employed it more than any other murder method, with the poison itself often being a central part of the novel. Her choice of deadly substances was far from random – the characteristics of each often provide vital clues to the discovery of the murderer. With gunshots or stabbings the cause of death is obvious, but this is not the case with poisons. How is it that some compounds prove so deadly, and in such tiny amounts?
Christie's extensive chemical knowledge provides the backdrop for *A is for Arsenic*, in which Kathryn Harkup investigates the poisons used by the murderer in fourteen classic Agatha Christie mysteries. It looks at why certain chemicals kill, how they interact with the body, the cases that may have inspired Christie, and the feasibility of obtaining, administering and detecting these poisons, both at the time the novel was written and today. *A is for Arsenic* is a celebration of the use of science by the undisputed Queen of Crime.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I was amazed at all the information in this book. Concentrating on the types of poisons used by Agatha Christie in her novels had to be pretty much a labor of love for British chemist Kathryn Harkup because you can tell immediately that she is also a fan of this great icon of crime fiction. The book is written from the British point of view with changes in book titles noted for the American market. I really had my doubts that this subject matter could be presented in such a way that it held my attention for the time it took to read the book, but by the end I found myself wishing there was just one more chapter. But then I would have wanted another and another. The book is very stylishly presented with artwork which is wonderfully evocative of the 1930s art deco style that I somehow assign to the Christie novels even though they were not all written during, or for, that time period. Maybe the really good television series has something to do with that. Each chapter deals with one specific poison beginning with arsenic, then belladonna, cyanide, digitalis, eserine, hemlock, monkshood, nicotine, opium, phosphorus, ricin, strychnine, thallium, and veronal. Each chapter leads off with a brief synopsis of the major novel, or in one instance a short story, the author will be using as an example of the use of that specific poison, then moves on to the story (history) of the poison, how the poison works in the body to kill, whether there is an antidote, some real-life cases, and then how Christie used the poison. I had been afraid the chemistry associated with where the poison comes from and how it works within the body would have been either too technical or too boring for me to enjoy. Wow, was I ever wrong. I discovered all kinds of wonderful facts.

Agatha Christie dispatched the victims in her mysteries more often than not with poison. Was it because poison is sneaky and not very obvious? Was it because she was a bit put off by knife and gunplay? Whatever the reason, it was the method de jour for her victims. This book goes over the Christie atlas of poisons and gives you how they work. To make it more realistic, Christie has characters who are chemists or knowledgeable about poisons. This is how she handles the expository information (to tell the reader how the poison is going to work, without lecturing--give it to a character to get that info across.) Interestingly, Christie makes some mistakes about poisons, too. That's even more interesting reading. Most people are not chemists and biologists, so the workings of poisons are mysterious, but they are interesting. So this book is a fascinating accompaniment for Christie's mysteries, to give you more insight into how these deadly chemicals work. And of course, you'll be up on them for other mystery writers who employ poisons in their books, too. One thing not covered well in this book: the dreadful fact that poison is mostly a terrible way to die. In particular, strychnine is a wrenching, lengthy death that is considered to be very painful--the author describes the muscle spasms but not the fact that it is horribly painful as the muscles give out after long

spasms and contractions. When I started working in a lab at age 16, doing chemical preparations in a biological research lab, the principle scientist gave a long talk at the lab bench about what some of the poisonous chemicals we used could do to you, and in particular was quite vehement that strychnine was one you never wanted to mess with.

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