



The Inheritor's Powder: A Tale of Arsenic, Murder, and the New Forensic Science

Sandra Hempel

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The Inheritor's Powder: A Tale of Arsenic, Murder, and the New Forensic Science Sandra Hempel Available at any corner shop for little money and, because tasteless, difficult to detect in food or drink, arsenic was so frequently used by potential beneficiaries of wills in the first half of the nineteenth century that it was nicknamed “the inheritor’s powder.” But after wealthy George Bodle died under suspicious circumstances, leaving behind several heirs, the chemist James Marsh was brought in to see if he could create an accurate test pinpointing the presence of arsenic and put this Victorian scourge to rest.

Incisive and wryly entertaining, science writer Sandra Hempel brings to life a gripping story of domestic infighting, wayward police behavior, other true-crime poisonings, and an unforgettable foray into the origins of forensic science. She also solves this almost two-hundred year-old crime.

The Inheritor's Powder: A Tale of Arsenic, Murder, and the New Forensic Science Details

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From Reader Review The Inheritor's Powder: A Tale of Arsenic, Murder, and the New Forensic Science for online ebook

Tam May says

3.5 stars

Obviously, I picked up this book for research, as I'm writing historical mystery fiction and a book that discusses the history of arsenic is a good choice. The book was definitely helpful in that it talks about poisons, unlike other books, in the past rather than in the present. There were some interesting parts here not just about arsenic but also about other poisons. My biggest disappointment with this book was that it seemed to go extensively into tangential details that had nothing to do with the topic of the book, such as the history of the courthouse where Bodie was tried. It was almost like the author was trying to make the work book-length by including all this tangential off topic information. So if you're primarily interested in the topic (history of arsenic and its detection), then you might find yourself skimming over some parts

Bridget says

This is a great book. Part murder mystery, part courtroom drama and part chemistry lesson. It's a very relatable insight into the history of toxicology and it's fascinating. Highly recommend.

Sophieabigail says

Fantastic read, full of twists and turns. This is a well researched and well written history exploring the prevalence of arsenic poisoning in the 19th century, the challenges it presented to forensic science and the hysteria caused in the general public by the perceived threat.

The book traces the murder of a rich older man, and the subsequent attempts to prove who was to blame for his death. Using the investigation and trial as a narrative to pull the reader through the book until the very end is very effective, I read this in one sitting!

Highly recommended to fans of social and medical history, or good old fashioned "whodunnits"!

Jill Hutchinson says

This book is a bit schizophrenic. The author traces the forensic history of identifying arsenic as a cause of death and as a untraceable murder weapon.....and an early case of an arsenic murder which actually made it to court even though the outcome was questionable. It is a good framework for understanding how the science of forensic medicine developed but the author didn't seem quite sure which story to tell.....science or the court case. This made for rather fragmented reading as she jumped back and forth between the two, as well as adding biographies of any scientists involved in developing the tests for arsenic. Interesting but a little awkward in the telling.

DeAnna Knippling says

Life is short. When a poisoner had your name on their list, it was even shorter. The history of the Marsh test for arsenic and the case that prompted its discovery.

This is a popular history book that needed one more round of edits to come to fruition. It's not a bad read--but it feels disorganized and missing key bits of info that the reader is assumed to know (like how arsenic actually kills someone, for example, or that it's a heavy metal and what that means). The book focuses almost exclusively on one case, but that isn't the way the book is pitched--so it feels kind of like a ripoff. "I was kinda promised the history of arsenic!" "Well, actually..." The few other cases referred to aren't really placed in context, either, so if you don't already know about them it might be a bit much.

All in all, I feel that I can't judge whether or not I want to read the author again because the problems I'm seeing should have been caught in edits, and the writing seemed okay except that I had to track down context.

Stephanie LC says

Just way too much irrelevant though well researched detail. It may be that the author considered the core story too thin to be worthy of an entire book and has therefore added a plethora of tacked on side stories to fill out content. The reader gets details, often minute details on the history of poisons and the cases, medical profession and even the families of the medical profession. Interesting but way too much detail clouds the perception of the tale at hand, confuses the reader and ultimately, as I found in my case, just means I wish to move onto something more readable. If you can manage to wade through the sea of facts and the deluge of information not especially relevant to the case, I applaud your efforts.

Jennyb says

This book is little more than a series of progressively more aggravating digressions, but I will tell you one thing: if you are playing a trivia game, you will want Sandra Hempel on your team.

Petra CigareX says

This book was a mixture of three elements:

History - the rampant use of poison in the 19thC as a method of disposing of the unwanted who had what the murderer wanted: money, hence the title

Science - the beginnings of forensic science and poisons

Courtroom drama - of several cases.

The elements were all linked through the story of the murder of George Bodle, a wealthy landowner, by his grandson Young John, who blamed his father Middle John. Although he was not found guilty (when he was), with the developments in science in parallel cases, it was shown that if he had come to court ten years later, the court would have reached in a different decision.

This all sounds pretty good, right? It was well researched. The main story, though slight, was a good idea and well written. The science was interesting, especially learning of the mistakes of 'infallible' expert witnesses. The characters, it has to be said, were somewhat flat and undeveloped. The overarching theme was poisoning explicated through a story, but what it should have been was the story first with poisoning being the theme. The author was the wrong person to write the book. She is a journalist specialising in health and social issues, and the book needed someone who could write a cracking good story and develop the characters so we would want to see the right John convicted instead of it all being rather academic and so what-ish. But still, it was an interesting book and 3 1/2 stars.

A fact I learned from the book: that when Parliament dropped the tax on newspapers to make them very cheap, literacy in the UK burgeoned. Especially in those papers (now called, disparagingly, tabloids) that specialised in the salacious. Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose - the more things change, the more they are still the same!

Deanne says

A combination of history and crime generally grabs my interest, though there was an intriguing case at the centre with a strange bunch of characters there was also a lot of details about toxicology and forensics.

Linden says

Sandra Hempel uses the murder of George Bodle in the England of 1833 as a marker for a change in determining whether a death with the symptoms of arsenic poisoning was actually a murder. Known as 'the inheritor's powder' for its use by potential beneficiaries of the deaths of people with income or an estate, Victorian England had been in the midst of a wave of deaths suspected to be poisonings.

An early source of pigment for artisans in Ancient Greece and Egypt, arsenic, like other poisonous substances, had also been a staple for use in treating various malaises in the 1700s. In orpiment, it was an ointment for skin rashes; as white arsenic, it was a rat poison; and as Fowler's, a treatment for leprosy, gangrene, malarial chills and fever. Because of its utility, arsenic was easy to purchase. However, it could also be unseen when mixed in flour or sugar, and couldn't be tasted in most foods.

Hempel traces the work of chemist James Marsh in exploring how to determine the presence of arsenic in a corpse accurately enough to show foul play. His work drew international attention and became the basis for the beginnings of modern forensic science. (248 p.)

Deservedly a PublishersWeekly top ten science book for Fall 2013.

Greer Hopkins says

I won this book from a goodreads giveaway. Technically categorized as "science" the book was a combination of legal, criminal justice, and science history in England during the 19th century.

Overall, I liked the book. It was an interesting read. Hempel demonstrated the problems with the rural and urban justice system and the intrinsic problems that lack of chain-of-custody, incompetent coroners, and the limited qualification required for medical experts. These problems were compounded with limited scientific knowledge. The disparity in verdicts and case outcomes was extensively described with more than just antidotal data.

Hempel had moments where she successfully used foreshadowing and dramatic language to build suspense similar to thriller-style real crime books. Bordering on almost too much minutia, she went into depth regarding the development of the medical profession and the differences between apothecary trade, surgeons, and medical practitioners.

I thought the development of early medical expert witnesses and early forensic science was interesting, but I was surprised that the actual arsenic test was not described in more detail. The book was more legal history than forensic science history and I was surprised it was billed as a science book.

Generally, I enjoyed the book and thought it was well-researched, but I wished the author had speculated more on the suspects, motives, and likely murderer. Also, I wish there had been footnotes to the source material. I don't know if that was a result of a early copy of the book or just an oversight.

Laura says

From BBC Radio 4 - Book of the Week:

On the morning of Saturday 2nd of November 1833, the Bodle household sat down to their morning breakfast, sharing a pot of coffee. That evening, the local surgeon John Butler received an urgent summons - the family and their servants had all collapsed with a serious illness. Three days later, after lingering in agony, the wealthy grandfather George Bodle died in his bed at his farmhouse in Plumstead. The Bodles had been the victims of a terrible poisoning.

In the nineteenth century, criminal poisoning with arsenic was frighteningly easy. For a few pence and with few questions asked, it was possible to buy enough poison to kill off an entire family, hence arsenic's popular name - The Inheritor's Powder.

The surgeon John Butler had set about collecting the evidence that he hoped would bring the culprit to justice but, in the 1830s, forensic science was still in its infancy. Even diagnosing arsenic poisoning was a hit-and-miss affair.

So when a chemist named James Marsh was called as an expert witness in the case of the murder at Plumstead, he decided that he had to create a reliable test for arsenic poisoning, or the murders would continue and killers would be left to walk free. In so doing though he was to cause as many problems as he

solved. Were innocent men and women now going to the gallows?

*Sandra Hempel, author of *The Inheritor's Powder*, is a medical journalist who has written for a wide variety of both popular newspapers and magazines and specialist publications, from the *Mail on Sunday* and *The Times* to *Nursing Times* and *BMA News*.*

*Abridged by Libby Spurrier
Director: David Blount
A Pier production for BBC Radio 4.*

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b039...>

Adam says

Sometimes you think of a book as important, not because it's groundbreaking or a bestseller or even an entertaining read, but because it reminds you just how fortunate you are to be living today rather than, say, six or seven generations ago. For instance, *The Inheritor's Powder* by Sandra Hempel has a pretty straightforward premise: it's the story of a farming family in 19th century England who are poisoned, leaving many of them violently ill and killing the elderly patriarch, and the search for a culprit using a new and untested area of science and criminal justice that will eventually become known as forensic science.

Beneath this story, however, is where we find the book's true relevance. In order to not only track down the poisoner but also convict him or her in a court of law, investigators and scientists alike had to deal with corrupt or incompetent officials, outdated methods of evidence-gathering, sloppy detective work, and a court system that still allowed members of the jury to serve while drunk...a prospect made all the more horrifying by the knowledge that inquests and trials were sometimes held at the local pub. On top of all this, the poison that was suspected of being used in this case--arsenic--was difficult to test for, and had it not been for the ragtag group of academics and policemen honored by Hempel herein, an accurate test would not have appeared for some time, allowing countless more murderers to walk free and strike again. (And, as Hempel points out towards the book's close, the setbacks that come with developing a revolutionary new procedure often resulted in criminals walking free, though that was also sometimes due to a judicial system with little interest in following its own procedures.)

In reading Hempel's book, you are struck time and again with just how primitive the entire system was only 160 years ago--only a few decades after our own country, brand new in the world, wrote itself a Constitution guaranteeing judicial practices like the right to due process, a trial by jury, and a safeguard against self-incrimination.* *The Inheritor's Powder* is filled with stories of detectives getting drunk on the job, losing evidence, or even passing it around to friends at a pub to be contaminated or destroyed; coroners, untrained in even the most basic aspects of anatomy, who offer shoulder shrugs when called to the witness stand; judges who speed through five trials a day, just for the sake of appearing expedient; and so on. To us, living in a world where trials are usually tedious and dull--a far cry from how they're depicted in film and television--these anecdotes are downright appalling.

What's worse, the vast majority of those living in 19th century England saw little issue with the fraudulent science, slipshod criminal justice system, and hack police work of the day--to them, it was their normal--and only when a few small but influential figures raised their voice did public opinion and social ideas begin to change, albeit slowly. Which makes Hempel's book significant, if for no other reason to emphasize the

forgotten roles of those very influential few, but it also makes those revelations a little worrying. After all, if so much of science, law, and criminal justice has changed in just a century and a half--their idea of normal now seen as mind-boggling incompetence and tragedy--what will writers think of *us* two hundred years from now? What aspects of our own society will future Sandra Hempels look back on with disbelief, derision, even scorn? How will we--supposedly advanced, supposedly progressive, unstoppably self-assured--be written about after a half-dozen or so generations have passed?

What's more, the issues that will most likely doom us in those books--our swelling prison-industrial complex, a prison population disgustingly imbalanced along racial and socioeconomic lines**, racial profiling, the entertainmentization of trials via 24/7 news networks--are almost wholly ignored by those in a position to change them, if not outright promoted by them, which is not unlike England more than 150 years ago. We hope, in reading these stories from the past, that our own James Marsh or Alfred Swaine Taylor will emerge to right these wrongs. For the sake of our future.

*Hempel's book focuses entirely on forensic science in England. For the story of forensic science's origins in the United States, see Deborah Blum's *The Poisoner's Handbook*, an excellent read.

**See Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow*...and once you see it, pick it up and read it.

This review was originally published at There Will Be Books Galore.

Margaret says

Author couldn't make up her mind whether she wanted to write about arsenic in general or one poisoning case in particular. Made for a confusing and annoying read.

Bettie? says

BOTW

Review: <http://bettie.booklikes.com/>
