Molecules of Murder: Criminal Molecules and Classic Cases

By John Emsley

Reviewed by Tim Harrison, University of Bristol, UK

Molecules of Murder: Criminal Molecules and Classic Cases is a highly readable book that is a must-read for those interested in crime or popular science. It follows on from author John Emsley's earlier book: *Elements of Murder: Criminal Molecules and Classic Cases*.

The book is divided into several sections: a preface which contains a brief history of the milestones in the analysis of poisons, two main sections covering ten poisons, a glossary explaining some of the technical terms used in the book, and finally, further reading suggestions. The main body of the book consists of ten chapters covering five naturally occurring chemicals, and five poisons made by humans. All ten poisons have been used in famous murders. The final part of Chapter 10 also includes details of other poisons used to assassinate prominent people through the ages.

Each chapter in the main sections begins by covering the chemistry of the poison, its discovery, its use in medicine, its effects on the human body and why it is poisonous. The last part of each chapter details the part that the molecule played in one or more infamous murders in the UK or the USA, how the murderer operated and (sometimes) how they were eventually caught. The substances discussed are ricin, hyoscine, atropine, heroin (diamorphine), adrenaline (epinephrine), chloroform (trichloromethane), carbon monoxide, cyanide, Paraquat and polonium-210.

Key scientific terms found in the 20-page glossary are highlighted in bold in the main text; the glossary offers further information on the chemistry involved – particularly useful for those whose science knowledge is very limited. This includes some formulae and imperial/metric conversion tables. For those who wish to develop their knowledge, suggestions for further reading on general and specific poisons are also provided.

This very well written book should find its way into most school libraries, as it will appeal to those – young and old – who are fascinated either by the chemistry involved, or by the history of several murder cases.

Details

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