



Poison Principle

Gail Bell

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When Dr. William Macbeth poisoned two of his sons in 1927, his wife and sister hid the murders in the intensely private realm of family secrets. But secrets can be as corrosive as poison, and as time passed, the story of Dr William Macbeth, well-dressed poisoner, haunted and divided his descendants. Macbeth's granddaughter, Gail Bell, who grew up with the story, spent ten years reading about poisons in order to 'read' and understand Macbeth's life. A chemist herself, she listened for echoes in the great poison cases in history, in myths, fiction and poison lore. As well as Bell's own story, here too are the stories of Cleopatra and Snow White, Madame Bovary and Napoleon's doctor, Dr Crippen and Harold Shipman. Intricate and beautifully written, with a stunning twist at its end, *The Poison Principle* is both a fascinating detective story and a moving memoir of death and deceit.

Poison Principle Details

Date : Published June 6th 2003 by Pan Books (first published September 30th 2001)

ISBN : 9780330491266

Author : Gail Bell

Format : Paperback

Genre : Nonfiction, Autobiography, Memoir, History, Crime, True Crime

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From Reader Review Poison Principle for online ebook

Sasha says

Absolutely incredible - beautifully written, wonderful to read, and a joyous intimacy

Colin says

A book subtitled 'a memoir of family secrets and literary poisonings' promised an enthralling and involving read. Instead this was very much a curate's egg of a book: good in parts, but otherwise dull, long-winded and occasionally florid. The good parts were those that focused on the details - how poisons are produced, how they work and some fascinating case studies (not all of which were literary, although, perhaps unsurprisingly, Emma Bovary features heavily). The 'family secrets' story that forms the framework of the book is occasionally confused and subject to some rather overheated speculation. Gail Bell is a qualified pharmacologist and knows her stuff, and her insight is often fascinating; but just as often it strays into fantastical territory and is couched in somewhat overwritten, and occasionally difficult to follow, prose.

Amanda says

I wanted to like this one a lot more than I did.

It takes a long, circuitous route to discover the truth about the poisoning of two of Bell's uncles, when they were infants. Using exceptional research, it tells the story of poisoning myths, poisoning in fiction and famous poisonings along the way - in a very rambling, and sometimes almost stream-of-consciousness fashion.

The vicarious side of me wanted much more sordid detail, so that's probably my failing, rather than Bell's.

Nola says

The Poison Principle

The Poison Principle is a captivating detective story that combines biography and the scientific exploration of poison and its history. Gail Bell trained as a chemist and was fascinated with the dark family secret that her grandfather murdered two of his young sons by poisoning before her own father was born. In an attempt to discover the truth, Bell not only painstakingly examines all the evidence available in regards to her own family narrative but also sheds light on historical poisoners and the the physical plight of their victims. The scientific language was new to me but instead of being dry it drew me in until the final, moving twist in her own tale.

Helen Katz says

Pedantic! Hard work.

Cleo Bannister says

this is one of those fascinating books where you don't know quite what you are about to learn from one page to the next. If you too love learning more about poisons and those who administer them, you can't go wrong with this book. Even for those of you who don't have quite the same niche interest as me, there is plenty to ponder on the literary side, those myths, fairy tales through Shakespeare and Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* and taking in a few other's along the way.

The backbone of the book is the discovery the author made that her paternal Grandfather had poisoned two of his young sons in their Australian home in 1927. The author started to unravel the truth behind this family tale in 1980 by contacting her Grandmother's sister who one afternoon agreed to be interviewed and told her the facts, the background to the perpetrator William Macbeth, and what life was like for the family at the time, and afterwards.

The book does read a little like a stream of consciousness but fortunately that stream is one of knowledge coupled with intelligence so it maintains a loose kind of structure. Along the way we learn about the origins of some of the popular poisons, famous poisoners which include those who used this method as suicide, forensics and even a poisoned circus elephant gets a place in this eclectic read.

My interest in poisoners has me fairly well-versed in the most infamous of this group including Crippen, Florence Maybrick, Madeline Smith amongst a whole host of others and I got to know some new ones too with the mini case histories the author provides us with. Gail Bell also looks at the notion that poisoning was a woman's crime, sneaky and devious and using the traditional woman's nurturing hand to provide poison rather than sustenance. She examines the statistics which bear out the truth that most non-accidental poisonings are against family members. As you can tell there is a lot to enjoy and discover but perhaps as a pay-off there is little that goes too deeply below the surface which I have to confess suited me perfectly – this is perhaps a friendlier read than the more learned book that *The Secret Poisoner* was and fortunately doesn't include the gut-wrenching descriptions of poisons doing their work in the human body. What Bell does give us is a look at what action different poisons take on the body, a physiological study rather than one of the symptoms which again, I use the word again, was fascinating!

I have to confess that the subject matter took a turn for the truly bizarre when the author gave some of the characters, including Cleopatra, an imaginary rescue through quick action of those around them, for me the book could have lost these imaginations.

By the end of this meandering look at a whole range of poisoners both real and literary, we find out the truth of what happened to the poor Macbeth boys. A sad tale indeed for the whole family, including the author's father who was fostered out to a rural farm to carry out chores for his bed and board.

Alayne says

I was intrigued by the review of this book, and so I read it and was completely satisfied. An interesting look

at poisons and poisoning through history, research the author had done in order to unravel an old family skeleton in the closet. The answer to the central question of what had happened 90 years ago to her father's two brothers was compelling, and I found the entire book fascinating.

Fishface says

This was not the book I expected -- a pharmacist writing about a double murder in her family as someone with a personal connection to a poisoning case. The author ranges all over true crime, history, even mythology and folk tales as they relate to poisoning. Beautifully written -- almost poetic. Highly recommended.

Claire says

This is a weird comparison to make, since the subject matter is very different, but I had the same problem with this book as I did with *The Bling Ring*: there's too much information and too little analysis. Bell decided to tackle her family history, the different concepts of poisoners throughout the entire history of time AND threw in a bunch of very literary prose that had nothing to do with real life. In the end, it was a lot of ideas thrown at you without much thought behind them.

The story about her family was very interesting, and I wish she had stuck with that. Obviously, the question of whether or not William MacBeth poisoned his sons might not have made a whole book, but I would have loved more context. It was difficult to tell when any of this was happening because she spent so little time setting the scene. The parts she did get into -- how someone with no medical license could have passed himself off as a doctor at the time -- were fascinating, and I wish she had talked about what the Australian criminal justice system was like at the time.

Also: (view spoiler)

Nick Davies says

I've mixed feelings about this. On the one hand, this book deals with a very interesting subject - both in terms of the author's personal family history and also regarding poisoning in general - and there is plenty of variety and breadth in the content of this quirky book. Bell comes over as intelligent and blessed with an interesting wit and willingness to touch on a wide range of aspects of the subject of this book - science, art, history, literature, even philosophy and psychology. It makes for a read which is often enlightening and impactful.

So why the three-star mark? For me because I never escaped the feeling that this was a fifty-page family history story padded out with a hundred pages of relevant background, and a hundred more pages of meandering nonsense. The latter half of the book is mired in irrelevant musings on famous incidents, portrayals and rumours of poisonings, often going well past the facts and pertinent context to witter on for pages about all kinds of playfully described considerations that the author made when (over-)researching the (relatively simple) story of her grandfather - a quack and black sheep of the family. I'm torn because I enjoyed a lot of what Bell had to say, but also frequently found myself furrowing my brow wondering what the hell tangent had the writer gone off on now?

Erin says

I don't usually go to the effort of writing reviews for bad books, because I feel for the most part that bad books usually are easily identified. For example, one does not usually pick up a Harlequin Romance expecting great literature. Or even much variation in plot.

This book is an exception. It was surprisingly bad, but the blurbs on the cover specifically describe otherwise, to my great disappointment. It was so annoying, I am going to list the reasons.

1) The book title includes the statement "A Story of Family Secrets". The only problem is that it is not. This book is a diatribe or treatise on poisoning, with a little bit of the family story thrown in to try to bond it all together. It fails to do even this, since the family story made up so little of the book.

2) When I mention treatise, I mean it. This book jumps from topic to topic to topic, touching on everything but covering nothing in great detail. When I picked up this book, I wanted to read about a family story. I did not want to read about (for example): Nathaniel Hawthorne's use of poisoning in his story "Rappaccini's Daughter", how cruel animal research is the basis of what we know about poisons today, the use of cyanide in capital punishment, a history into Victorian-age research into the effects of cyanide on the human body, the use of poisoning as a subject in paintings, the treatment of poisoning in poetry, the atomic number and placement on the periodic table, etc. etc. etc.

3) And on the chance one is in the mood for bona-fide research, this book falls down again. There are only 53 references listed in the very back of the book. None of the 53 are mentioned or referred to at all in the body of the book. A proper reference work of this length, given the number of "facts" she included, should have had several hundred references, and they should have been referenced properly.

4) Finally there is the fact that she relays many, many stories as fact, when it is at best really an example of the "non-fiction novel" (as in Capote's *In Cold Blood*). Once again, no references.

I only question why I forced myself to finish this book.

DonutKnow says

Deceit, betrayal, fact, inquiry and a whole of a lot of science. I learned a few things about poison and power, which I think was one of my favourite themes that the author explored.

I also admired the depth of research in poison history and poison stories that were so intriguing.

There were definitely times when I dozed off and whole minutes in which I tuned out the science, but it wasn't totally focused on that aspects and I was incredibly grateful for that.

I wouldn't necessarily recommend it, because it was just an audiobook to pass the time on commute, but it had its interesting moments so read it if you want. :D

Tina says

A written documentary into the curious history of the study and use of poison, including the authors family

skeletons. Scientific storytelling at its best. Listening to an audio version was a treat, such clever descriptions and interesting facts.

Jessica says

Things I don't need:

- 1) A true crime book that turns into the history of poison.
 - 2) A nonfiction book that uses over the top flowery language better suited for a Harelequinn Novel.
 - 3) To know the dictionary's definition of executed. Any author still using this transition trick should be "executed" from the literary world unless they are in fifth grade and writing an essay on government.
 - 4) Random vignettes of random people who have poisoned other random people in the past with random poisons.
 - 5) An almost 4 page dissertation of the painting "The Death of Socrates".
 - 6) Reading the author's outre "rescue fantasies" regarding people who have been poisoned.
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Jennifer (JC-S) says

‘Poison is rarely if ever perfect.’

In 1927, William Macbeth apparently poisoned two of his sons with strychnine. William Macbeth was Gail Bell’s grandfather, and he died before she was born. When Gail was ten, her grandfather’s sample case was delivered to her father. She opened one of the bottles in the case, and put the end of the stopper to her nose.

‘My father snatched it from my hand and said ‘Never, never do that. You could die.’

In 1980, Ms Bell spoke with her Great-Aunt Rose, six months before Rose’s death, and was told about William Macbeth. Rose’s story was that she and her younger sister Ellen met William Macbeth, a travelling showman who travelled the country selling his miracle cures. Ellen and William married and had four sons. But when the marriage came under strain, according to Rose, William poisoned first his ‘retarded’ first son Thomas and then a few months later his son Patrick. Ellen left with her two surviving sons while William, although never tried for these murders, continued his life of crime. According to Rose, he impersonated a doctor in a lunatic asylum, stole money from the bank account of a rich inmate and then, decades later, died of tuberculosis.

Ms Bell thought that there must be more to the story, and was struck by the comment of another relative who believed that Rose herself fancied William, until he married Ellen. Would it be possible to find out more, especially now that all of the participants were dead?

‘Sometimes, stories are a melange of subjective truths, and sometimes lies tell you more than all the evidence you can hunt down.’

By persevering, Ms Bell was able to find the truth (which readers learn in the final pages of the book). Ms Bell started with a few newspaper clippings, birth marriage and death certificates. In the end, with

information in a file from a mental institution, she is able to find the truth. And the truth shows her grandfather in a different light.

‘Antidotes come out of the shadows, like kind spirits holding lamps.’

I found this book fascinating. Ms Bell is a pharmacist and a teacher as well as a writer. Along the way, while unravelling the story of William Macbeth, we are treated to an extensive history of poisoning. Fictional and historical poisoners are included, as are those poisoned. A range of poisons are discussed, as are their effects on both humans and animals.

Toxicity takes many forms and not all poison is chemical.

Jennifer Cameron-Smith
