



The Poison Squad: One Chemist's Single-Minded Crusade for Food Safety at the Turn of the Twentieth Century

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The Poison Squad: One Chemist's Single-Minded Crusade for Food Safety at the Turn of the Twentieth Century Deborah Blum **A New York Times Notable Book**

From Pulitzer Prize winner and *New York Times*-bestselling author Deborah Blum, the dramatic true story of how food was made safe in the United States and the heroes, led by the inimitable Dr. Harvey Washington Wiley, who fought for change

By the end of nineteenth century, food was dangerous. Lethal, even. "Milk" might contain formaldehyde, most often used to embalm corpses. Decaying meat was preserved with both salicylic acid, a pharmaceutical chemical, and borax, a compound first identified as a cleaning product. This was not by accident; food manufacturers had rushed to embrace the rise of industrial chemistry, and were knowingly selling harmful products. Unchecked by government regulation, basic safety, or even labelling requirements, they put profit before the health of their customers. By some estimates, in New York City alone, thousands of children were killed by "embalmed milk" every year. Citizens--activists, journalists, scientists, and women's groups--began agitating for change. But even as protective measures were enacted in Europe, American corporations blocked even modest regulations. Then, in 1883, Dr. Harvey Washington Wiley, a chemistry professor from Purdue University, was named chief chemist of the agriculture department, and the agency began methodically investigating food and drink fraud, even conducting shocking human tests on groups of young men who came to be known as, "The Poison Squad."

Over the next thirty years, a titanic struggle took place, with the courageous and fascinating Dr. Wiley campaigning indefatigably for food safety and consumer protection. Together with a gallant cast, including the muckraking reporter Upton Sinclair, whose fiction revealed the horrific truth about the Chicago stockyards; Fannie Farmer, then the most famous cookbook author in the country; and Henry J. Heinz, one of the few food producers who actively advocated for pure food, Dr. Wiley changed history. When the landmark 1906 Food and Drug Act was finally passed, it was known across the land, as "Dr. Wiley's Law."

Blum brings to life this timeless and hugely satisfying "David and Goliath" tale with righteous verve and style, driving home the moral imperative of confronting corporate greed and government corruption with a bracing clarity, which speaks resoundingly to the enormous social and political challenges we face today.

The Poison Squad: One Chemist's Single-Minded Crusade for Food Safety at the Turn of the Twentieth Century Details

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From Reader Review The Poison Squad: One Chemist's Single-Minded Crusade for Food Safety at the Turn of the Twentieth Century for online ebook

Papaphilly says

What an amazing book. This is both truly well written and a reminder how history repeats. if you hear about how good the food used to be, this book reminds you how good the food really was not. The Poison Squad: One Chemist's Single-Minded Crusade for Food Safety at the Turn of the Twentieth Century is history at its best. Told with a reporter's eye, but with humanity, Deborah Blum never lets the reader forget what is at stake. She spins a tale that reads like a well written novel, but never strays from the main point of the book. This is the story of America's food purity law and the battle that started at the turn of the twentieth century and continues to this day.

What comes across very well is this is the type of battle that is waged throughout American history. I was amazed at the companies that are under fire today were under fire then too. I am also amazed how certain brands were always industry leaders in both quality and purity. The same arguments portrayed are used today. It is too expensive, it will not hurt the public, the government has no oversight to name just a few.

The Poison Squad: One Chemist's Single-Minded Crusade for Food Safety at the Turn of the Twentieth Century is also about iconoclastic personalities. Dr. Wiley, the main focus of the book is so single minded, he cannot comprehend compromise.

This is both an excellent history and an excellent read.

Nicholle says

I give this book 5 stars (out of 5). I loved the science/chemistry and history behind the story. The author is an excellent science writer and wrote such an intriguing story. The parts where she described the politics behind the story were boring to me (I cannot stand politics), but a necessary evil in order to describe how the story played out.

This story is about chemist Dr. Harvey Washington Wiley and how he wanted to make sure that all food was safe, or at least labeled, from adulterants. Such adulterants were arsenic, dyes from coal tar, and boric acid (or borax), just to name a few. He was truly a man ahead of his time because during a time where most individuals (and even companies) were ignorant of science and most companies producing food only cared about making a profit, he strove to make sure food was safe from unnecessary additives (or adulterants) by actually testing the additives to prove that they were in fact harmful to people.

Dr. Wiley set up experiments to feed a group of individuals adulterants, such as boric acid, by comparing that group against a control group not being fed adulterants. The data he and his team of chemists generated was not only rigorous and scientific, but also proved his hypothesis that the adulterants being added to food were in fact harmful to people. Taking this data a step further, he extrapolated that if these adulterants were harmful to healthy (male) adults, these adulterants were even more harmful to babies, children, and the elderly.

Dr. Wiley fought almost his whole career against the politics of the unscrupulous lobby behind the companies making the adulterated foods. What I found so fascinating was that among the few companies that did mass produce food without adulterants was the company that made Heinz ketchup. The owner behind the ketchup not only wanted to make food without adulterants, but he also wanted to prove that making unadulterated food could be profitable, since that was the main argument behind the companies that adulterated food was that they could not be profitable.

What I truly loved about Dr. Wiley was his desire to speak up about the chemistry behind the adulterants, without dumbing it down, to women. He wrote countless articles in magazines and publications geared towards women. He knew that getting women (who make up 50% of the population) on board with his cause would only further his fight in the political arena to achieve his goals. Dr. Wiley even married a suffragist and supported her desire to be jailed for her fight for women to vote.

Another aspect I found so fascinating about this book is the role the government needs to play to protect the average American, or consumer, from unregulated business that cares more about profit than the health of the consumer by taking shortcuts. While I read this book the government shut down was occurring. And it also seems the trend in the current administration is to cozy up to big business that may or may not care about the average American consumer in their bottom line. Only time will tell if this is occurring, and unfortunately as history does repeat itself, who (and how many) will have to get sick and or die before government steps in to protect the average American consumer?

Brenda Ayala says

Dude.

The Industrial Revolution, for all its major leaps toward with invention and innovation, definitely fucked over some people.

Like *a lot* of people.

The biggest take away from this nonfiction book is that given the opportunity, big business will screw us over tenfold unless someone holds them accountable.

They put copper, lead, formaldehyde and so much more in our food.

Kids died from drinking milk. That's so mind boggling that I had to reread the paragraphs focused on that. Paragraphs, plural, because it HAPPENED MORE THAN ONCE OVER SEVERAL YEARS.

This author does an amazing job of compiling all of the information together in a cohesive form. There's a inordinate amount of information within these pages and while it can get a bit dense and repetitive, it never lost my interest. I'm so glad I had the opportunity to read it and I'm going to make damn sure everybody knows to read it.

FIGHT THE MAN!

(Or just hold corporations like Coca-Cola accountable)

Amy says

During his successful 2016 campaign for the White House, Trump promised to have his cabinet "submit a list of every wasteful and unnecessary regulation which kills jobs, and which does not improve public safety, and eliminate them." His FDA commission, Scott Gottlieb, followed that promise by saying what while he recognizes the importance of food safety legislation he wants to "strike the right balance" in its implementation. Consumer groups now anticipate delayed and reduced protections from agencies facing deep budget cuts. The Earthjustice Institute has warned of the "Trump administration's willingness to accommodate even unfounded and partial industry opposition to the detriment of the health and welfare of people and families across the country."

*Such a warning, with its mix of theatrical anger and genuine dismay could have been written, almost word for word, by Harvey Washington Wiley more than a century ago. The sense of *deja vu*, echoing down the years, should remind us of the ways that food safety practices have dramatically changed in this country-- and of the ways they have changed hardly at all. (The Poison Squad, pg. 289)*

I found this book while browsing in my local library and picked it up because public health is always an interesting topic to me. It took me a little while to get started on this book, but once I did I could hardly put it down. The Poison Squad follows Dr. Harvey Washington Wiley in his career primarily as chief chemist for the Department of Agriculture, explains how his research on altered and deliberately unlabeled/mislabeled products came to shape his advocacy for safe and pure (or, at the very least, properly labeled) food and drink, and illustrates for readers the parallels between the complaints and schemes of business of decades ago and the complaints and schemes of business today. Just like the Earthjustice statement could have been written by Dr. Wiley, The Poison Squad is littered with quotations from 19th and 20th century businessmen, their lawyers, and their lobbyists, that could be written - word for word - by the industry-at-any-cost interests of today.

I knew about a couple of the cases cited in the text - the poisoning of children with milk that had been 'preserved' with formaldehyde, the mass poisoning of mainly children by Elixir Sulfanilamide - but not the vast majority. Well written, informative, and very, very relevant, The Poison Squad was an amazing book and it is one that I would highly recommend.

However, given that a good many of the descriptions are graphic, I have one caveat: I would try not to recommend The Poison Squad to someone who didn't have at least an ok tolerance for nauseating descriptions, the likes of which are extremely likely to cause intense revulsion at the very idea of some things once being considered 'food.' For example:

Doctors continued to worry over continued reports of "grocer's itch," a side effect of the deceptive practice of grinding up insects and passing the result off as brown sugar. Sometimes live lice survived the process. (The Poison Squad, pg. 66)

The secretary [of agriculture, Wilson] also had endorsed a November decision to seize fifty-two industrial-sized cans of eggs preserved in a 2 percent solution of boracic acid. The Hipolite Egg Company of St. Louis sold these huge cans--forty-two pounds each--to the baking industry at a price much lower than fresh eggs. Hipolite specialized in salvaging dirty, cracked, and even rotting eggs for use in breads and cakes. The company was particularly known for using "spots" (decomposing eggs); mixing their contents into a thick, homogeneous mass; using boracic acid, a by-product of borax [the cleaning product also used for pest control] to halt further decomposition; and then selling the eggy soup by the can. (The Poison Squad, pg.

New options [for coloring agents] arose with synthetic dyes made from coal tars--dense, chemically complex residues left over the processing of coal...The new dyes were durable, cheap, and potent--and rapidly adopted by industrial processors of everything from fabric to food. (The Poison Squad, pg. 229)

The organizers [of the pure food exhibit] decided to exhibit two thousand different brands presenting tainted food and drink sold in the United States. ...Minnesota and South Dakota sent sheets of silk and wool, each five feet square, brilliantly colored with coal-tar dyes extracted from a variety of strawberry syrups, ketchup, jams and jellies, and red wine. Michigan sent samples of lemon extract in which the manufacturer had used cheap but deadly wood alcohol as a base. Illinois provided more faked extracts, such as "vanilla" made only of alcohol and brown food coloring...Participating states provided forty brands of ketchup, labeled as a tomato product, that were mostly stewed pumpkin rind dyed red, and some fifty brands of baking powder that were largely well-ground chalk enhanced by aluminum compounds. To the fury of food industry executives, the fair's head of publicity, Mark Bennett, send out a news release titled "Lessons in Food Poisoning," which noted: "If you want to have your faith in mankind rather rudely shaken, take the time to look about in the exhibit of the State Food Commissioners in the south end of the Palace of Agriculture." (The Poison Squad, pg. 115)

This is a small sampling of just what I could easily find and could be easily understood from a relatively short quote. I personally think the text is all the better for including these details; they do not allow industry malpractice and unethical behavior to hide behind the veneer of polite wording. I think it is necessary the same way that Upton Sinclair's graphic descriptions of the Chicago stockyards and packing plants were necessary (The Jungle, as well as other information about it and the yards themselves are also quoted, by the way). But, because I know not everyone has the same opinion as me, I would try to take into account personal taste when making - or choosing not to make - a recommendation.

Jillian Doherty says

Page turning and solicitous! This incredible story widens the view of what we think we know about how our nation's food. From flood shavings in the chowder, to exactly how much plaster makes sour milk looks just right again – this book is for anyone who loves reading about history that you can't believe is true.

Where the Food Explorer took us on a wild ride, discovering where our food came from – this wowzers of a history will make you soooooo glad we had Dr. Wiley on our side ensuring we aren't poisoned daily!

Galley borrowed from the publisher.

Eustacia Tan says

After reading about how teas used to be adulterated, the synopsis of The Poison Squad caught my eye. And, I have to admit, the book shocked me – I didn't think that deception in food could be that bad!

The Poison Squad is the story of Harvey Wiley, the father of the Pure Food and Drug Act. The early 1900s was a bad time for food – as the book puts it, " 'Honey' often proved to be thickened, colored corn syrup,

and ‘vanilla’ extract a mixture of alcohol and brown food coloring. ‘Strawberry’ jam could be sweetened paste made from mashed apple peelings laced with grass seeds and dyed red” and so forth.

Given my interest in tea, I kept an eye out for fake tea and found something called “lie tea”. As the book describes it, “this substance, as its name implied, was an imitation of tea, usually containing fragments or dust of the genuine leaves, foreign leaves, and mineral matters, held together by means of a starch solution.”

Ewwwww!

Apart from the fake food, a lot of food was preserved with poisonous substances like formaldehyde, borax, and much more. One scientist in Wiley’s division “tested 198 samples of candy and found that a full 115 were tainted by the use of dangerous dyes, mostly arsenic and lead chromate.”

Back then, food manufacturers argued against government interference in food regulation, arguing that these were harmful to the business. Additionally, they argued that it was better for the food to stay preserved than to have it rot (further) and spread diseases. It took Harvey Wiley and his poison squad, a team of volunteers who subjected themselves to the preservatives to see their effects, to prove that what was in the food was bad for the human body.

You would think that once all these fakery and harmful preservatives were brought to light, the government would want to move swiftly and clamp down on these food manufacturers, right? Well, although the American public was rightly outraged at what they were eating, the government was strangely reluctant to act. Agriculture Secretary, James Wilson, thought that Wiley was too much of a crusader and even brought in a board of people whose purpose was to ‘review’ Wiley’s findings.

I found *The Poison Squad* to be a fascinating read. It covers Wiley’s years in office and documents his battle to make sure food is pure. Wiley is extremely strict about food standards, perhaps so strict that harmed it his political career, but you have to admire him for it.

If you’re interested in food safety, or just interested in knowing more about how food and the regulation needed, this is the book to read. It’s hooked me from the start and I couldn’t put it down. And while there was a pretty long list of people (long enough that the first few pages were a character list), keeping track of them felt natural. You don’t have to be a history buff to enjoy this.

Disclaimer: I got a free copy of this book from the publisher via NetGalley in exchange for a free and honest review.

This review was first posted at Eustea Reads

Mary says

Fascinating but, at the same time, deeply disturbing, account of the decades-long effort by Dr. Harvey Wiley, a chemist in the U.S. Department of Agriculture at the beginning of the 20th century, to protect consumers from adulterated food and drugs. A hundred years ago, Dr. Wiley’s name was probably familiar to most Americans. My thanks to author Deborah Blum for reminding us of his important contributions, which continue to improve our lives today.

Claudia says

Today, when talking about the safety of our food, we are concerned with MSG; high-fructose corn syrup; trans fats, synthetic sweeteners, artificial colors among others. In the late 1800's into the early years of the twentieth century, you would have been concerned more about arsenic, formaldehyde (yes, embalming fluid); salicylic acid, copper sulfate, and borax being used as preservatives. Coal-tar dyes to make the food appear fresh and bright. Saccharin to replace the more expensive sugar. Acetic acid replacing lemon juice. So-called neutral spirits colored, flavored and called whiskey. Nitrites to bleach flour to brilliant whiteness. Lead and a variety of minerals in candy.

It is suspected that hundreds if not thousands of young children were killed by milk that was more chemical than dairy - the recipe could be a pint of water to each quart of milk after the cream was skimmed off. Add a bit of chalk or plaster of paris for whitening. Molasses to give it a golden color and to replace the cream, a squirt of something that may include pureed calf brains. And don't forget the formaldehyde! Yummy, isn't it? You don't want to know what could be in butter.

Food manufacturers were certainly inventive with their additives. Sometimes the only thing missing in the product was what it was advertised and sold as. Of course, what it could include was mashed fruit and vegetable leavings. Charred rope. Sawdust. Crushed nut shells, ground insects and floor sweepings of all kinds.

This book is about Dr. Harvey Washington Wiley, a chemist in the employ of the federal Department of Agriculture (the infant FDA) and his fight to eliminate toxic minerals and chemicals from the foods available to the American people. The same chemicals/additives, which were forbidden for use in Europe and Canada, flooded American food.

And it was a long, exhausting fight. Utilizing the resources available, Wiley would create his 'poison squads' which would be volunteers who would take in the chemical investigated over a period of time and record any negative impacts on their health. The data would be analyzed and the report released to the public.

Of course, the manufacturers fought hard and long. They were all about using cheaper materials instead of authentic, pure food products. Most were certainly not willing to make the product a few cents more expensive but without toxic additives. But Dr. Wiley had his supporters as well - the AMA, women's groups, several Congressmen and Senators, various state-level secretaries of agriculture, newspaper journalists especially after the publication of Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* which blew the lid off the meatpacking industry of Chicago. Fanny Farmer and her famous cookbook. H.J. Heinz that proved that food could be uncontaminated, tasty and appealing to the buying public.

1906 saw the passage of the Pure Food and Drug Act but food industry lobbyists managed to convince industry-friendly politicians to basically weaken and gut the law. But it was a start and Dr. Wiley eventually lost his neutrality in his crusade for unadulterated and safe food which caused tension within the Department of Agriculture. Taking on Coca Cola for their cocaine and caffeine. Taking on the whiskey manufacturers. Saccharin and bread whitening agents.

In the end, Dr. Wiley felt the best decision for him and his family was to continue his crusade through a job offered by Good Housekeeping magazine. He never saw the modified Food, Drug and Cosmetic Act of 1938

which corrected the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906. Unfortunately, it took the death of more than a 100 people who were poisoned and killed by cough syrup sweetened by antifreeze.

This is a vital book to read. Not just because of how far food safety has advanced over the years but how much more work needs to be done. Additional laws and updates to food and drug regulation over the years is in danger from our current administration as Trump promised to eliminate every unnecessary regulation and it seems that the FDA and its work is once again under fire. Only time will tell if it survives or is stripped of its authority and dominion.

Vaira Selvakani says

Definitely an eye opener into how FDA dealt with adulteration and consumer food safety. Worth the read.

Leah K says

A fascinating look at the beginning of the FDA and the man who made it possible. Definitely kept me interested. We've come so far and have so much further to go.

E says

Clearly well-researched, it's a look into the life of Dr. Harvey Wiley and also the precursor department to what we know as the FDA today. It's both fascinating and horrifying, the list of preservatives and agents that industry manufacturers considered common to put in their food for the masses. No one will be surprised that half of one chapter is devoted to Upton Sinclair and "The Jungle" but how many people know that the federal government put Coca-Cola on trial? I'd recommend this book to anyone who enjoys history, chemistry or food.

Emily says

This author's previous book is one of the most popular I've encountered, in that everyone I know who's read it, loved it. It was about the emergence of forensic medicine (and solving poisoning cases) against the backdrop of Prohibition-era New York.

In this work she takes on a scientifically similar topic with a good deal less surrounding jazz and excitement. Early in the twentieth century, the food supply was far from the bucolic ideal we might imagine having existed before the emergence of junk food and factory farms. In fact, food purveyors regularly adulterated foods with all sorts of disgusting bulking materials, or added toxic substances like arsenic to achieve bright colors. Some foods were straight-up fakes.

The book is full of hair-raising examples. For example, milk producers wanted to stretch their production.

"The standard recipe was a pint of lukewarm water to every quart of milk—after the cream had been skimmed off. To improve the bluish look of the remaining liquid, milk producers learned to add whitening agents such as plaster of paris or chalk. Sometimes they added a dollop of molasses to give the liquid a more golden, creamy color. To mimic the expected layer of cream on top, they might also add a final squirt of something yellowish, occasionally pureed calf brains." (loc 236). "Cloves" were made of burned seashells or "pepper" from charcoal and sawdust--and there were few laws restricting any of these practices. Children were poisoned by milk "preserved" with formaldehyde.

The main figure here is Dr. Harvey Wiley, who tried to use his role at the Agriculture Department to research food safety and bring about legislation to protect Americans' health. The fundamental problem with this book is that Wiley's career was long and slow-moving, full of bureaucratic maneuvers that don't exactly leap off the page like the juicy revenge poisonings in Blum's previous book. In his personal life, Wiley also romanced a librarian from the Library of Congress, which reads like a painfully prolonged case of mild sexual harassment culminating in the lady taking stock of her independent economic prospects and marrying him.

Blum's writing, research, and story-telling are still well-done--this is just a topic that's going to appeal to fewer, and only more patient readers.

David says

It is heartening to see this excellent new history getting favorable attention on the radio, in newspapers, in online journals, and in both food blogs and science blogs.

In addition, there are already many reviews here on Goodreads that adequately summarize and elaborate on this book's fine qualities, so I thought I would allow myself the freedom to write a few words about what the century-old struggle for safer food in the US has to say about current unpleasantness. There are many similarities.

It's hard to believe that anyone would construe the liberties we enjoy in the United States as permission to introduce known poisons, insect body parts, rodent excretia, etc., into food, but that's exactly what many food manufactures, big and small, did. Furthermore, attempts to limit known poisons, etc., from the food supply were treated as outrageous examples of government overreach and hysterical attention-seeking. Of course, from this distance, the champions of such "freedoms" look like the villains they were, and their arguments ring extremely hollow.

We can only hope that people will be around in a century to give today's analogs the ridicule they richly deserve. Now, of course, the stakes are higher. Instead of simply poisoning an entire country, today's villains have the opportunity to wreck the whole world.

This book also reminds how difficult it is to do the right thing. There are many pitfalls. For example, the book's splendidly cantankerous hero, log-cabin-born chemist Harvey Washington Wiley, was a thorn in the side of corner-cutters and quacks of all varieties well into his ninth decade. However, like a lot of people in the do-gooding business, he occasionally loses focus of the main goal and wastes precious time and resources on fringe issues. Wiley, for example, was an enthusiastic consumer of bourbon and pursued a strict definition of what type of restorative should be allowed to bear that proud label. I have been known to favor an occasional snort myself, so I appreciate his enthusiasm, but I recognize bourbon is (as is often said here in The Nation's Capital) not the hill you want to die on. Defending the purity of milk, flour, canned goods, etc.,

brings a rosy glow of mother- and baby-protecting saintliness to your advocacy. Bourbon – not so much. There are only so many hours in a day, so many battles you can fight. Choose wisely.

Speaking of choosing your battles: Wiley knew that his cause was just, and he was for much of his life the smartest person in the room. As a result, he tended to shoot off his mouth and (another Nation's Capital cliché coming up) not suffer fools gladly. Most of the time, people who really needed defending benefitted from this tendency, but when you are in the room with the President of the United States, it's often wise to choose your words carefully, even if (perhaps especially when) the President is a bit of a tool. In Wiley's case, he unnecessarily alienated the affections of Theodore Roosevelt. The consequences were not disastrous, but even Wiley himself admitted that it would have been wiser to keep his trap shut.

Finally, remember: *the struggle never ends*. It's natural enough, when long work results in success, to take a moment out to do a triumphant happy-dance, but remember while shaking what God gave you that your opponents are already looking for ways to roll back your improvements and undermine your good works. As happens similarly today, evil lawyerly minions who opposed Wiley managed to change the wording of legislation and rule-making so that strict guidelines were replaced with weasel words (e.g., "The guidelines now merely banned an undefined 'excessive' amount" (Kindle location 2430)). These words can then be litigated into meaninglessness, and/or cost pesky do-gooders a small mountain of legal fees.

This is a fine book about a man whose life work benefitted others. In his lifetime, he received a certain amount of fame and monetary reward for his selflessness, but now he is largely forgotten, while names of murderous racists of the same period and earlier still grace our high schools and highways, and their graven images still infest our parks and public lands. Read this and remember someone worth remembering.

I received a free electronic advance review copy of this book via Netgalley and Penguin Random House.

Jeimy says

This is billed as a fascinating story about how food was made safe in America, but I have to disagree with the second part of that statement. It is about how food was made safer. However, it doesn't take much for readers to see how much our capitalistic government bends to serve the whims of corporations. Food adulterations continue to occur. Read this book to understand how much has improved and ponder how far we still have to go.

Beth Menendez says

Solid 4.5 stars. I'm dinging it half a star because it is a scince-y book that can get a little dry at times and I think it may lose some readers because of this. However, for anyone who think that the Whole Foods movement and Clean Eating is a new fad, you are gravely mistaken. Deborah Blum does a fantastic job of making Dr. Harvey Washington Wiley come to life. Dr. Washington was the Chief Chemist in the Department of Chemistry and fought for YEARS trying to get congress to approve bills for the Pure Food and Drug movement. Before this movement it was completely legal to add preservatives to food so that spoiled food could then be served to the masses. Yes. Spoiled food. Since mass refrigeration was not really a thing yet, nor was any kind of safety guidelines for chemicals (whether used in food or drugs) all kinds of sketchy things were going on with food for the masses. Milk a little off? No worries, we'll put formaldehyde

in it. Oh, was that cow a bit sick? No worries, we'll use some potassium nitrate (saltpeter) to keep it okay. It does not matter that saltpeter will actually kill you. It's cheaper than sodium chloride (table salt) so it's fine. Seriously. The stuff they put in medicines... eek. Just eek. So how does Dr Wiley come in? He began to protest that what manufacturers put in things was deceiving the populations. That maple syrup is not syrup. It's coal tar derived color agents (seriously) and water with a little sugar. Later with a lot of saccharin in it. Because it's cheaper. There were huge arguments over corn syrup as a cheaper additive to foods than sugar. Wait - aren't we STILL arguing about this. Yes, yes we are. After reading this book I am realizing how much has stayed the same and not changed a bit. Oh the topics might be a little different but the court case involving Coca Cola and their ingredients that were both addicting to people and toxic to them that went round and round could be replaced with the energy drinks of today all over the same chemical - caffeine. The way that what we eat is literally influenced by who is in the White House was a bit of a shock. Dr. Wiley had harder times certain years simply because the president in office elected secretaries that made Dr. Wiley's job almost impossible. The fact that the main secretary to the USDA over him had ties to manufacturing making his job nearly impossible at the end of his term could have read like it was happening today. Upton Sinclair's book The Jungle was more than just a novel - it was a whistle blowing land mine that showed many what was going on with the "food" we eat. Even with that book selling thousands of copies there was much attempt to discredit Sinclair which were eventually successful because Sinclair was a socialist - he just wanted everyone to get a fair (clean healthy) shake. Manufacturers and lobbyists were not about to let this happen and so he became a pariah in Washington.

The one thing that resounded throughout the book is how much we fight over the minutiae until there is a national epidemic sadly has not changed. The 1906 original Pure Foods bill (Dr Wiley's bill) came into effect after many children died from the formaldehyde in the milk after YEARS of dying on the floor of Congress. The 1938 bill that beefed (no pun intended) up the bill came about after many children died from taking cough syrup that had been made with sweetened with diethylene glycol (antifreeze). Similar bills were passed in 1956 and 1971 after injury to women and children. Why do I mention this? Because we are STILL fighting this battle - remember when there was salmonella in the peanut butter? Remember how no one could eat salad last Thanksgiving because of E.Coli? Yes, we are still fighting getting clean, pure food from manufacturers. If that is not scary I cannot think what is. Before we look at the past with rose colored glasses we need to realize that the fight for balance of what is actually good for us and what can be had cheaply is still going on. For this reason alone, I highly recommend this book.
