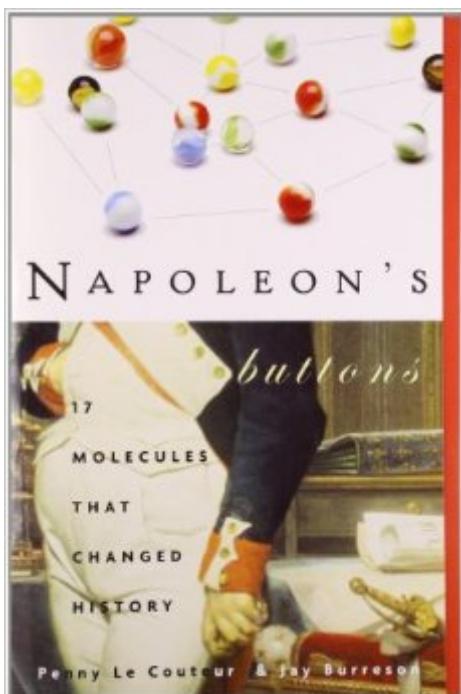


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Napoleon's Buttons: How 17 Molecules Changed History



Synopsis

Napoleon's Buttons is the fascinating account of seventeen groups of molecules that have greatly influenced the course of history. These molecules provided the impetus for early exploration, and made possible the voyages of discovery that ensued. The molecules resulted in grand feats of engineering and spurred advances in medicine and law; they determined what we now eat, drink, and wear. A change as small as the position of an atom can lead to enormous alterations in the properties of a substance-which, in turn, can result in great historical shifts. With lively prose and an eye for colorful and unusual details, Le Couteur and Burreson offer a novel way to understand the shaping of civilization and the workings of our contemporary world.

Book Information

Paperback: 384 pages

Publisher: Jeremy P Tarcher; Reprint edition (May 24, 2004)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1585423319

ISBN-13: 978-1585423316

Product Dimensions: 6 x 0.9 x 9 inches

Shipping Weight: 13.6 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.5 out of 5 stars 195 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #17,379 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #112 in Books > Science & Math > History & Philosophy #119 in Books > Science & Math > Chemistry > General & Reference #131 in Books > Science & Math > Technology

Customer Reviews

Women who use birth control pills probably care more about their effectiveness than about how they actually work, and although ignorance here may be bliss, it also cheats one of a good science story, involving a driven chemist making a serendipitous discovery about cortisone. Le Couteur and Burreson roll out 17 episodes selected for their salience in affecting health as well as history at large. This pair of chemists doesn't overinterpret a particular chemical as a historical influence but makes speculating on, say, piperene, a sporting diversion. Piperene is the molecule that causes taste buds to sting from pepper. Venice had a monopoly on the pepper trade, which rivals wished to break, motivating the voyages of discovery. Although connections frame the authors' tales (the title refers to tin buttons, which contributed to Napoleon's defeat in Russia), each story dwells on its molecular protagonist. The authors diagram the formula and shape of each, from the polymer

behind the sheen in silk to the ionic bonds in the taste of salt. Well-conceived, well-done popular science. Gilbert Taylor Copyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved --This text refers to the MP3 CD edition.

"Most of us never give a thought to ... the chemicals that have changed the world. This is brought out beautifully in Napoleon's Buttons, with its brilliant blending of chemistry and culture. I found it engrossing, and a delight to read." "Well-conceived, well-done popular science."

--Booklist "Well-conceived, well-done popular science." --Booklist "The authors unearth a wealth of anecdotes from all parts of the world and use them effectively to illustrate the technological underpinnings of modern society. Thoughtful, often surprising, smoothly written." --Kirkus Reviews "Entertaining accounts of how various objects' chemical properties might have changed history." --Library Journal "What does the fiery compound C17H19O3N have to do with the discovery of North America? Plenty, according to this remarkable collection of scientific sleuthings. The book's cases -- especially the chapter blaming Napoleon's disastrous Russian campaign on the eponymous tin fasteners that failed to hold French uniforms together -- unfold like CSI meets the History Channel. A splendid example of better reading through chemistry. B+" --Entertainment Weekly "This book is both original and fascinating; I was quickly absorbed by this refreshing mix of science and history; I learned a lot of both and read this book quite quickly for a science book." --The Literary Flaneur

Good opening story, drawing in the significance of chemicals and their impact on world events. However, the narratives gets pretty technical after that and the book needed a few more example stories to keep the relevance going. Overall, I did enjoy the book and learned a tremendous amount about several chemicals and elements and their impact on the history of man. I would recommend to others who like to delve into the details a bit more than the average reader.

Delightful reading. As always with great books like this one, I wish I had heard these stories ages ago. I recall how distasteful I found studying organic chemistry as a young college student. These authors turn an otherwise noxious subject for me into a wonderful, creative, and entertaining journey into reasons and rationales for the various paths of history, knowledge, and culture. Fascinating. I'm sure when students walk into their lecture halls they are met with incredible and knowledgeable professors of organic chemistry, and the stories they can tell. Wow!

I enjoyed this book very much. Each chapter is devoted to a particular molecule, e.g., glucose, silk, phenol, salt, etc., and discusses both its chemical structure and its significance to civilization. To a former engineer who somehow escaped even a smattering of organic chemistry, this book explained a lot in an easy-to-follow manner. The authors illustrate each molecule schematically, and in many cases show how a subtle difference in structure can lead to dramatic differences in chemical behavior. Makes me wish I had studied organic chemistry in college. The chapter on oleic acid (olive oil) was particularly interesting. I now understand what is meant by "saturated fat", "monounsaturated fat" and "trans-fat", and why soap works. A lot of information, easily absorbed. My only quibble is that the authors thought they had to conclude each chapter with a few paragraphs about "how this molecule changed history". That got tiresome, fast.

VERY interesting chapters - I have selected a few for my chemistry students to read, and they actually admit that they are interesting. Easy to pick up and read a chapter at a time.

Intriguing look at historical events and how chemistry influenced the outcome. Historical accounts very good. Chemistry details too much for the lay person, but probably interesting to the chemist/scientist.

Purchased for daughter's summer reading for junior year of high school. She has found it interesting

I've always been a fan of "what-if" storylines and historical non-fiction, so when I was required to read this book for class, I wasn't entirely disappointed. Burreson and LeCouteur are not only capable scientific authors, but capable authors as well. Though they present technical drawings and scientific jargon, they mitigate these with simple and effectual text. They give the facts of how these molecules changed and accentuate the impact of these molecules by describing the consequences if these molecules hadn't been discovered or used. For those who are infrequent or sporadic readers, the division of the book made it easy and enjoyable to read for someone who usually only read in-between class periods. I found chapters easily digestible, full of historical and scientific information, and even found myself surprised when I had a fair knowledge of the topic at hand. What I enjoyed most about the book though, was the fact that almost every molecule is commonplace today. There's nothing so far from popular culture that everyday people won't understand. Sure, most people may not know all the scientific names of witch herbs, but everyone's heard of the witch trials. Other sections like "The Pill" show just how relevant some of these molecules really are. Even

without scientific designation or more descriptive detail, almost everyone is aware of what "the pill" is even with such an innocuously vague name. All in all, you could do way worse for required reading or scientific literature.

I teach high school chemistry, i.e., I sell a product to customers that don't want it but desperately need it. One of the surest ways I have found is to tell a good story; this book is a goldmine of really great stories. If you don't teach chem., this book helps lift the veil to give a glimpse of what science geeks get so geeked about. Ms. Le Couteur's book puts you there, in the lab, as some of the world's most amazing molecules are discovered, and gives you a sense of what it is like to be that chemist getting a peek at how nature has wired up the universe.

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