

Kyi, Tanya L. *50 Poisonous Questions: A Book with Bite*. Ross Kinnaird. Illus. Toronto: Annick Press, 2011. Print.

This is the second book in the 50 questions series published by Annick Press. In this case the questions are all centered on toxins of various types such as “Can Sheep Cure Snake Bites?” and “Why Was the Hatter Mad?” It consists of eight chapters with titles such as: “Lethal Leaves”, “Murderous Villains” and “Spills and Disasters”. The answers guide young readers through a series of factoids that act as a gateway to learning about world history, the environment and life sciences. A wide range of time periods and geographical locations are covered. For example, one answer is set in 600 BC and involves how the city state of Delphi in ancient Greece defeated the city state of Kirrha by contaminating their water supply with poisonous hellebore leaves. A more contemporary example is the deadly sarin gas attack on a Japanese subway carried out by members of the Shinriko cult in 1995. There is also a significant amount of Canadian content: a deadly spider in a Manitoba classroom, mercury poisoning in Quebec and the discovery of a University of Alberta anthropologist regarding what happened to members of the ill-fated Franklin expedition.

In addition to the questions, it also includes features such as the “poison puzzle” riddles to challenge readers’ powers of deduction and to reinforce what they have been learning. One particularly intriguing example is the case of the umbrella murderer involving a Bulgarian secret service agent. The author also presents information in the form of “Foul Facts” and mini-articles such as “Sprinting for Strychnine”.

The book is illustrated with whimsical cartoon images on a toxic green background highlighted with skulls, cross-bones and warning signs. The look and feel is sure to pique the interest of mid to late elementary school readers and is recommended for grade four or age nine and above. The overall tone and language of the book is light-hearted and not overly academic. It does include a list of resources for further reading, a brief bibliography and an index. There are only 34 resources listed in the bibliography, which is less than one per question. However, given that the articles are designed to be brief and engaging rather than a comprehensive literature review of a given topic this is not inappropriate. This book is entertaining and informative and could be used as supplementary classroom material on a variety of biology, environmental or history related topics.

Recommended: 3 out of 4 stars

Reviewer: Kim Frail