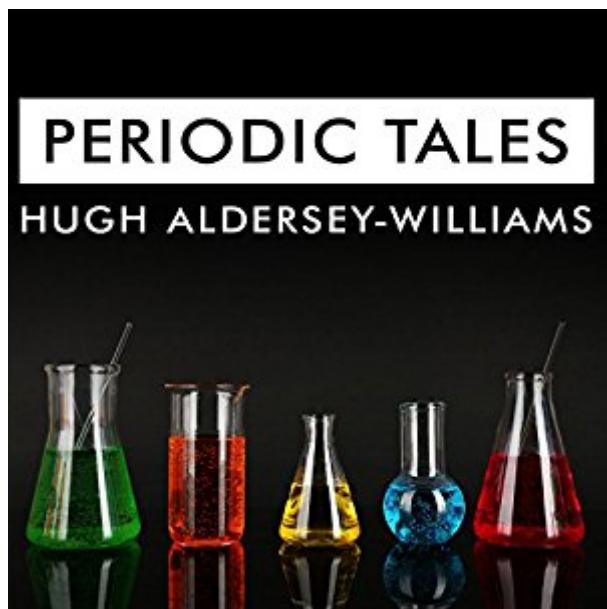


The book was found

Periodic Tales: A Cultural History Of The Elements, From Arsenic To Zinc



Synopsis

Like the alphabet, the calendar, or the zodiac, the periodic table of the chemical elements has a permanent place in our imagination. But aside from the handful of common ones (iron, carbon, copper, gold), the elements themselves remain wrapped in mystery. We do not know what most of them look like, how they exist in nature, how they got their names, or of what use they are to us. Unlocking their astonishing secrets and colorful pasts, Periodic Tales is a passionate journey through mines and artists' studios, to factories and cathedrals, into the woods and to the sea to discover the true stories of these fascinating but mysterious building blocks of the universe.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I have to admit that I was curious when I saw the title Periodic Tales. Did it have anything to do with the periodic tables of elements? If so, why tales? (I had to assume it wasn't just a typo.) The title also attracted me because of a newfound interest in the natural sciences, something I never took in school unless I had to, and which I rarely understood. And, the cover blurb on the back of the book sounded interesting. After buying the book, I read reviews of it on BN.com and .com and feared I might have made a mistake. Some of those who had read it found it uninteresting and a bit self-serving. Others wrote good reviews. The mixture of opinions gave me pause, but I'd already bought the book, so I might as well take the plunge. I was immediately drawn into the stories of the discoveries, the insight, the pure luck in some cases. Did you know that Sweden is the site of the largest number of discoveries of metals in the world? Or that Marie Curie carried a bit of radium

around in her pocket? The historical and biographical information is interesting. The differences in methods and sources, the reactions of new elements, especially in the atomic age. One of the more interesting views of the elements described here is how so many are perceived by the public, artists, professionals, and others. Some are described as being either male or female, good or rich or bad. Silver is female, represents good, while gold is male and rich. Aluminum (aluminium in most of the world) was seen as flashy and modern, but its image has faded, if not its gleam. Chromium adorned automobiles and was considered to be a fancy ideal. The author visited many of the sites of discovery or the mining areas.

Reading Mr. Aldersey-Williams' collection of periodic tales leads you to one inescapable conclusion: some elements of the periodic table are more culturally interesting than others. From the author's point of view, this may be because an element's cultural significance increases with the amount of time we've pounded, polished, or manipulated it. This theory is sensible enough; after all, the most culturally significant elements in this book are gold, iron, silver, lead, tin, and copper. Add to them the radioactive elements--those that opened a new frontier for science, a new dread for mankind--and you have a sturdy bundle of literary alloys that form the book's backbone. Moving out from these, Mr. Aldersey-Williams goes on to fashion many more alloys you hope will be as culturally dense as the others. Many are not. In fact, some are hardly alloys at all, but merely more than stories of their discoveries. Others, examples of elements the author found in a forgotten cupboard. Still more, like those rare earth metals lingering all about the Nordic landscape, leave you appreciative for the author's excursion but questioning their relevance to his overall scheme. If there is a scheme, that is. It can be hard to track. The result: you're not sure whether you're reading a high tech scavenger hunt, a nostalgic tale of the author's childhood, or a true cultural odyssey.

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