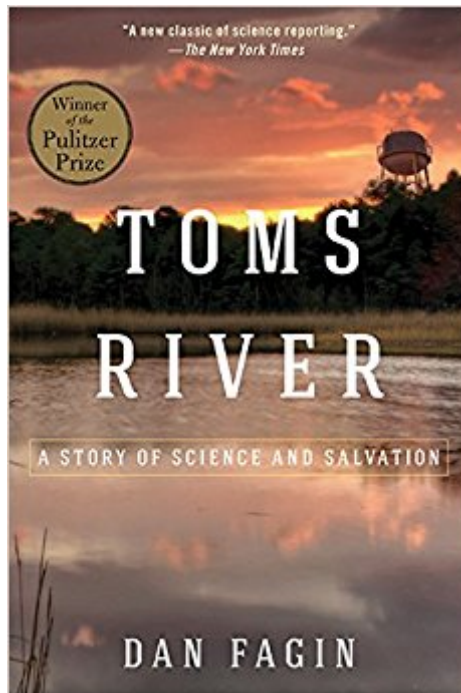


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Toms River: A Story Of Science And Salvation



Synopsis

The true story of a small town ravaged by industrial pollution, Toms River won the 2014 Pulitzer Prize and has been hailed by The New York Times as "a new classic of science reporting." Now available in paperback with a new afterword by acclaimed author Dan Fagin, the book masterfully blends hard-hitting investigative journalism, scientific discovery, and unforgettable characters. One of New Jersey's seemingly innumerable quiet seaside towns, Toms River became the unlikely setting for a decades-long drama that culminated in 2001 with one of the largest environmental legal settlements in history. For years, large chemical companies had been using Toms River as their private dumping ground, burying tens of thousands of leaky drums in open pits and discharging billions of gallons of acid-laced wastewater into the town's namesake river. The result was a notorious cluster of childhood cancers scientifically linked to local air and water pollution. Fagin recounts the sixty-year saga of rampant pollution and inadequate oversight that made Toms River a cautionary tale. He brings to life the pioneering scientists and physicians who first identified pollutants as a cause of cancer and the everyday people in Toms River who struggled for justice: a young boy whose cherubic smile belied the fast-growing tumors that had decimated his body from birth; a nurse who fought to bring the alarming incidence of childhood cancers to the attention of authorities who didn't want to listen; and a mother whose love for her stricken child transformed her into a tenacious advocate for change. Rooted in a centuries-old scientific quest, Toms River is an epic of dumpers at midnight and deceptions in broad daylight, of corporate avarice and government neglect, and of a few brave individuals who refused to keep silent until the truth was exposed.

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Customer Reviews

When I was in high school, my family lived less than 10 miles from the New Jersey title city of this book. In those days, the landscape of that part of Ocean County was not yet populated with the McMansions of New York and Philadelphia commuters. In addition to the stunted pines and pin oaks that mark the Pine Barrens, the area was dominated by the remnants of closed post-WWII poultry farms, some cranberry bogs, gravel pits and horse farms...and not much else. When we roamed the mostly unfenced woodlands between roads often named for mills and creeks, it was not unusual to come across 55-gallon drums whose unknown contents either still oozed or had solidified into unnatural blobs of brightly colored who-knows-what. We gave these a wide berth as we pressed on with the business of being kids. Even though we kidded openly about south Jersey attracting the remains of organized criminals gone wrong, we had little idea what other maliciousness hid behind the many stands of trees and unmarked dirt roads...In "Toms River", Dan Fagin weaves together the intricate threads of economics, science, politics and personal tragedy in this examination of how both a chemical giant (Ciba-Geigy) and entrepreneurs in industrial waste disposal contaminated the ground water (and to a lesser degree, the air) of a sleepy coastal town. He takes on complex issues to address the history of industrial processes (and the disposal of their by-products), both in Europe and in the United States. He adds narratives on the economics of rural America, the indifference of elected and appointed government officials, the science of environmental medicine, and the dynamics of popular fights against more well financed adversaries when the extent of the human and environmental tolls are realized.

This is a difficult book to categorize. It is certainly a monumental effort to document comprehensively the nuances of the last two or three centuries of the interaction of scientific and technological achievements with human ineptitude and insensitivity. The subtitle, "A Story of Science and Salvation", is catchy but somewhat inept; there is no "salvation" in sight, as far as I am able to discern. Fagin's effort is NOT an easy read; indeed, I might not have finished it at all had I not had two full days when I was in a situation where I could read intensively without distractions. It is technical enough that I was grateful for my master's degree level training in organic chemistry, but regretted the fact that I do not have the background in biochemistry and genetics, not to mention statistics and epidemiology, that might have made the other parts of the discussion more

comprehensible. The historical commentary from Paracelsus on was intriguing, and the technical detail extraordinary, and at the same time, very readable. Obviously, in the phrase that has become the paramount cliché for our era, "Houston, we have a problem!" Since the birth of synthetic organic chemistry and Perkin's development of aniline dye from coal tar - upon which event, as Fagin explains, this whole narrative hinges - we have had a Jekyll-Hyde situation going on with our chemical technology. Huge benefits and ghastly hazards are two sides of the same coin.

Unfortunately, the thing that tips the balance drastically in the direction of the hazards is, as Fagin's book clearly documents, the unavoidable element of human greed and thoughtlessness. As long as there's a profit motive, the benefits of scientific advancement will be far outweighed by the environmental exploitation.

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