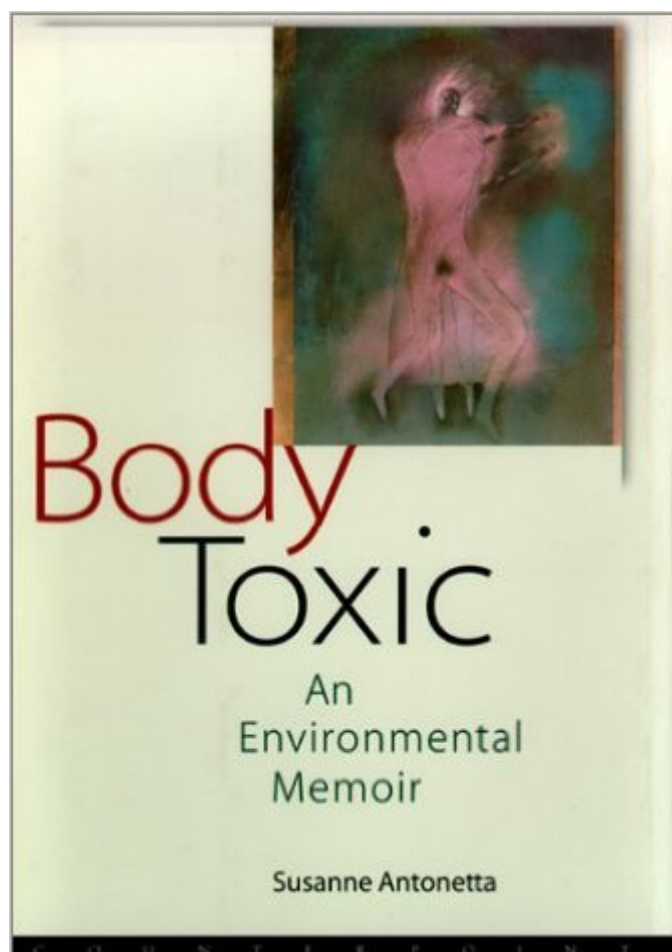


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Body Toxic: An Environmental Memoir



Synopsis

Two immigrant families drawn together from wildly different parts of the world, Italy on one side and Barbados on the other, pursued their vision of the American dream by building a summer escape in the boglands of New Jersey, where the rural and industrial collide. They picked gooseberries on hot afternoons and spent lazy days rowing dinghies down creeks. But the gooseberry patch was near a nuclear power plant that released record levels of radiation, and the creeks were invisibly ruined by illegally dumped toxic waste. One by one, family members found their bodies mirroring the compromised landscape of the Barrens: infertile and damaged by inexplicable growths. Soon the area parents were being asked to donate their children's baby teeth to be tested for radiation.

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Customer Reviews

This memoir read like poetry and narrative. I was especially enthralled by the author's attempt to 'read her body like a novel', to understand herself from beginning to end, from inside to out, and then back again. She explores the impact of environment, genetics and family dynamics on self. She shows the classic outcome of shame, secrecy and silence as they collude to prevent one from learning about their history in context to their family of origin, over time, and in relationship to the environment. This is truly a new genre by a writer who is gifted in insight and narrative and has great courage in exploring herself and sharing her insight with the reader. Thank you, Ms. Antonetta

Written in a style both haunting and poetic, this book captured my attention immediately. Susanne

Antonetta examines the environmental and political issues of radioactive waste, nuclear reactors and chemically poisoned water supplies, blended with excerpts from her memoirs as a child, growing up in New Jersey in the 1950's when silence and family secrets were sacrosanct. Spending extraordinary summers as a child in a bungalow built by her grandfather, facing the small inlet of Barnegat Bay, the author blissfully picks berries and runs through wide open spaces, taking in the colors, sounds and smells of the area, oblivious to the horrific danger all around her. This book is so personal, so beautifully descriptive and so painfully honest, I am reminded, once again, that the real heroes are walking among us.

As a former Ocean County resident involved in both the Ciba Geigy and Oyster Creek Nuclear issues from 1970 until about 1995, I have to say that Susann Antonetta has written a classic. She writes with enormous grace and piercing honesty about subjects I know to be true. The book successfully weaves the intricate contradictions American life provides those of us who educated ourselves out of blue collar New Jersey towns only to face how little our lives meant to those making decisions about what and where to manufacture and dump.

Two immigrant families from different parts of the world pursue their dream by building a summer home on the boglands of New Jersey outside the industrial zone - and find their family members falling prey to mysterious illness. Science fiction? No, fact and autobiography in *Body Toxic: An Environmental Memoir*, a title which tells of their health decline and presents a first-person story of toxic environmental effects on generations.

Let's be clear: this isn't some sob-story autobiography about some chick blaming her infertility on the power plant next door. Antonetta has written a gorgeous, unsettling book that pushes the boundaries of literary memoir. Written in muscular, skilled prose, the "environment" of Antonetta's memoir points to the sludge-filled and strangely seductive New Jersey Pine Barrens of her childhood; it refers equally to the toxic world created by her impenetrable, neurotic immigrant family. Antonetta tells hallucinatory, poetic stories that float between the two environments while never misstepping into the sentimental. Indeed, it is a rare pleasure for me to read a woman's story--especially one intimately engaged with problems of fertility and the body--that is so devoid of cliché and self-pity. Antonetta has plenty of honest anguish, but it is balanced with a damning dry humor, and a sharply raw perception of herself, her family, their history and the history of the land upon which the story unfolds.

While "Body Toxic" is an environmental memoir, it is debatable whether the accent should be placed on the term environmental, or on the term toxic. In all probability it should be toxic, because that term is more apropos to the disfunctional maternal side of the family whose emotional problems, while apparently exacerbated by the environmental conditions Antonetta describes, predate them. As the book starts, it is reminiscent of "A Civil Action", and reader becomes caught up in the environmental devastation of what was a seemingly benign seaside vacation retreat. However, the work deftly becomes more of a family memoir, periodically interwoven with descriptions of the environmental devastation of Ocean County New Jersey which, ironically her mother's family refused to recognize, just as they suppressed acknowledging their family's many aberrant behaviors and personalities. While perhaps a trite comparison, the family reminiscences are reminiscent of the writing of Jamaica Kincaid in terms of the cadence, and occasions of repetition. Perhaps this is no coincidence since Antonetta focuses on the family's Afro-Caribbean roots (or perhaps I subconsciously looked for such a similarity). This is an important, beautifully written, and bittersweet work. I highly recommend it.

This book reads like poetry. The author tries to understand herself and her history from the outside in, as the collaboration of environment, family and genetics on who she is as a woman. She talks about the toxins in the environment and how her living nearby many of them are possible reasons for some serious health and emotional issues she now struggles with. She also examines the toxins that can come from family and surroundings - the ones that cause stress, shame, secrecy and silence. These are often discussed in memoirs but she combines the physical and emotional toxins together to try and make sense of her life. She takes the memoir to a new genre, one that reaches for the outside in order to understand what has occurred on the inside. She tries to understand herself and her make-up based on the elements at work on her life during her developmental years. I could not put this book down.

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