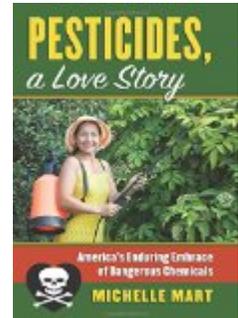


**Michelle Mart.** *Pesticides, a Love Story: America's Enduring Embrace of Dangerous Chemicals.* Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2015. 344 S. \$34.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7006-2128-6.



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To write the history of pesticides, historians face a dizzying array of choices. First, despite the definite article in the previous sentence, we must decide which pesticides will serve as the subject. Leading up to World War II and since, agricultural chemists developed hundreds of chemical insecticides and thousands of formulas. We must also decide which group of actors will serve as the focus: agricultural chemists, farmers (or farmworkers), public health officials, chemical corporations, government agencies such as the FDA or the USDA or the EPA, toxicologists, consumers, NGOs, wildlife, and so on. The story (stories) of pesticides are complicated by scientific complexity and scientific uncertainty. How government legislators and regulators have negotiated such complexities and uncertainties adds yet another layer to the stories. Teasing out these stories requires sifting through many thousands of pages of testimony, especially to understand environmental risk after World War II. Popular perception filters all the elements of the history of pesticides. Never has the expression, “Well, it’s complicated” launched

more attempts to explain such a critical element in environmental history.

With *Pesticides, A Love Story: America's Enduring Embrace of Dangerous Chemicals*, Michelle Mart explores the ongoing significance of pesticides to Americans. Frankly, she had me at “Love Story.” Americans used pesticides extensively in agriculture, public health (think mosquito control in the fight against malaria and other arboviruses), war, and even gardens and lawns, not to mention household applications in the never-ending quest to fight pest insects of a spectacular diversity. But is that love? Yes, Mart argues convincingly, and she frames each chapter with a catchy reference to the relationship status. Thus, “Foreign Affairs” captures the role of pesticides in the Green Revolution and the deployment of herbicides in Vietnam, and “Love is Blind” suggests ongoing commitment to pesticides despite horrific disasters at home and in Bhopal, to name one. You get the idea. Even if the device is a bit too clever, it worked for me, and I strongly suspect my students will feel the same way. Thinking back on the

significant claims of *Pesticides: A Love Story*, Mart's chapter framing sticks in my brain, ready for recall. Time to test it on students.

As a cultural historian, Mart is chiefly interested in popular perception. How did Americans understand pesticides as well as benefits (and ultimately risks)? How did the media interpret science and regulation of chemical pesticides? By focusing on media accounts, Mart avoids several deep wells of endlessly reducible complexity (technical scientific details and legislative hearings are two). Occam would love the opportunity to parse the details ever more finely, razor in hand, but readers struggle to sift through exposures at parts per million and expressions of toxicity as LD<sub>50</sub>s. In the final analysis, *Pesticides, a Love Story* reveals how the media, including scientists who wrote for the public, interpreted the science and regulation of risk as it related to pesticides. Thus, in analyzing the significance of the publication of *Silent Spring* (1962), she emphasizes the reaction of chemical companies and their efforts to discredit Rachel Carson. Offsetting such attacks were equal, perhaps greater, attempts to defend Carson's claims. Of course, the ensuing environmental movement and the DDT ban in 1972 vindicated Carson.

Beyond its accessibility to a broad spectrum of readers (pun intended), *Pesticides, a Love Story* offers an impressive breadth of coverage, with sections devoted to the assessment of herbicides, Integrated Pest Management, endocrine disrupters, organic foods, and GMOs, all in addition to the familiar topics like the role of DDT in controlling malaria during WWII. Such breadth of coverage would usually come at the cost of depth, but Mart's thoughtful analysis gives readers much to contemplate.

*Pesticides, a Love Story* provides one of the clearest distillations of popular perceptions of pesticides and their impact on health and the environment to date. Michelle Mart arranges wide-ranging coverage of pesticides (domestically and

abroad), risks posed to people and wildlife, and potential alternatives, all under a provocative thesis. Given the ongoing commitment in American agriculture to pesticides in the face of threats to environmental and human health, love may well be the best explanation; it certainly functions effectively in this important new book.

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