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A Poison Like No Other: How Microplastics Corrupted Our Planet and Our Bodies by Matt Simon

Heath Skroch

University of New Mexico School of Law (Student)

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BOOK REVIEWS

A Poison Like No Other: How Microplastics Corrupted Our Planet and Our Bodies by Matt Simon* (Island Press, 252 Pages; 2022)

A Poison Like No Other: How Microplastics Corrupted Our Planet and Our Bodies, authored by Matt Simon, illuminates the issue of microplastics—an international problem that may poison humans for thousands of years to come. Matt Simon details the origins and consequences of microscopic plastic particles found in everything from our food and bodies to the air we breathe. Various environmental organizations, such as the Plastic Pollution Coalition and the Plastic Soup Foundation, have praised *A Poison Like No Other*. And still, for readers unfamiliar with plastic chemistry or its environmental effects, Simon’s writing is accessible and engaging.

The growing concern over trash enveloping our cities and oceans is evident, though historically, plastics have not been a central focus. Observing plastic bags, soda bottles, and candy wrappers blowing in the wind around town is common in most cities and towns today. Unfortunately, concerns about plastic often yield to the economic reality that plastic is a cheaper alternative to other materials. Simon depicts this harsh reality and offers a hopeful, though partial, solution: “[a]ll the pieces of plastic great and small are out there for good, but we can at least turn down the tap.”

A Poison Like No Other is organized into five chapters each with distinct subject matter explored. In Chapter 1, “Welcome to Planet Plastic,” Simon introduces the issues posed by plastics and their nearly “immortal” nature. Specifically, Simon explains that plastics take hundreds or thousands of years to decompose. Plastic items, like bags, break down into smaller and smaller pieces while maintaining their chemical composition as plastic. Once reduced to the size of a pencil eraser, these pieces become “microplastics,” which can further degrade into “nanoplastics,” small enough to enter individual cells. Chapters 2, 3, and 4, “A Voyage on the Synthetic Seas,” “A Land Corrupted,” and “Breathe Deep the Plastic Air,” discuss the origins, discovery, and potential impacts of plastics in the oceans, land, and air, respectively. Each chapter serves to remind readers of how plastics corrupt various aspects of our planet. Finally, Chapter 5, “Turning Down the Plastic Tap,” discusses potential solutions to the plastics pollution problem.

Simon’s writing style in *A Poison Like No Other* has several strengths. First, the text is written in a manner that allows a wide audience to easily grasp the material. Simon successfully distills complex scientific language into terms understandable by the average reader. While scientific experts may not find the book groundbreaking, it serves as an excellent entry point for readers concerned with environmental issues.

Secondly, Simon adds engaging context to his explanations, making the book feel more like a narrative than scientific literature. By weaving personal stories and concise explanations together, Simon casts a wide net to bring in a diverse range

* Matt Simon is a senior staff writer at *Wired* covering biology, robotics, and the environment.

of readers. The introduction commences with a science experiment aimed at identifying the amount of microplastics descending to Earth in rain droplets. From there, the story flashes back to the origins of plastic. Subsequently, the book delves into a tale of plastic infiltrating the water we drink, the ground from which we cultivate our food, and finally, the air we breathe. Throughout the book, readers become increasingly aware of plastics infiltrating food, water, and air, ultimately settling inside people's lungs, digestive systems, blood, and brains. Through narrative technique, Simon transforms plastic from a material used to craft wrappers into a fairy tale villain. By the conclusion of the book, readers comprehend this villain's evolution and thus fear it even more.

While these strengths are on display, a consistent sense of pessimism serves as the book's greatest drawback. What is the case for consumers to care about microplastics if there is no way to remove them from the environment, and we will likely continue creating them? Simon argues that while we may not be able to eliminate existing microplastics, we can limit and hopefully halt the flow of plastics into the environment. Thus, Simon's story concludes with a somewhat hopeful outlook on a developing crisis, refusing to shield readers from hard truths—truths ironically affirmed by the plastic dust jacket that protects the hardback edition.

Ultimately, *A Poison Like No Other* offers a compelling discussion of the looming threat of microplastics. Simon's writing serves as an introduction to the microplastics crisis for individuals of all knowledge levels. While the book acknowledges that plastics will not be eliminated entirely, it calls consumers to action by urging them to demand companies use less plastic in their products. Though Simon does not offer a perfect or complete solution to the crisis, he raises awareness and contributes to the public discourse on an issue that will likely have lasting effects on us all.

Heath Skroch
JD Candidate, Class of 2025
University of New Mexico School of Law