



Napoleon's Buttons

By Penny Le Couteur, Jay Burreson

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Napoleon's Buttons is the fascinating account of seventeen groups of molecules that have greatly influenced the course of history. These molecules provided the impetus for early exploration, and made possible the voyages of discovery that ensued. The molecules resulted in grand feats of engineering and spurred advances in medicine and law; they determined what we now eat, drink, and wear. A change as small as the position of an atom can lead to enormous alterations in the properties of a substance—which, in turn, can result in great historical shifts.

With lively prose and an eye for colorful and unusual details, Le Couteur and Burreson offer a novel way to understand the shaping of civilization and the workings of our contemporary world.

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Editorial Review

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Women who use birth control pills probably care more about their effectiveness than about how they actually work, and although ignorance here may be bliss, it also cheats one of a good science story, involving a driven chemist making a serendipitous discovery about cortisone. Le Couteur and Burreson roll out 17 episodes selected for their salience in affecting health as well as history at large. This pair of chemists doesn't overinterpret a particular chemical as a historical influence but makes speculating on, say, piperene, a sporting diversion. Piperene is the molecule that causes taste buds to sting from pepper. Venice had a monopoly on the pepper trade, which rivals wished to break, motivating the voyages of discovery. Although connections frame the authors' tales (the title refers to tin buttons, which contributed to Napoleon's defeat in Russia), each story dwells on its molecular protagonist. The authors diagram the formula and shape of each, from the polymer behind the sheen in silk to the ionic bonds in the taste of salt. Well-conceived, well-done popular science. *Gilbert Taylor*

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Review

"Well-conceived, well-done popular science." ---Booklist

About the Author

Jay Burreson, Ph.D., has worked as an industrial chemist and held a National Institutes of Health special fellowship at the University of Hawaii.

Penny Le Couteur, Ph.D., is a professor of chemistry at Capilano College in British Columbia, Canada, and the recipient of a Polysar Award for Outstanding Chemistry Teaching in Canadian Colleges.

Laural Merlington has recorded well over one hundred audiobooks and has received several AudioFile Earphones Awards, including one for *Never Say Die* by Susan Jacoby.

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