

Pesticides, A Love Story: America's Enduring Embrace of Dangerous Chemicals

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The strength of *Manhood on the Line* is its unvarnished examination of the power of masculinity. At the same time, it slights other forms of masculinity present at the height of industrial America. The Association of Catholic Trade Unionists (ACTU), for example, played a powerful role in unionizing efforts and in opposing communists in the labor movement. In a different context, Meyer identifies Paul Ste. Marie as a militant union leader but does not note that he was an ACTU leader as well. Beyond their ability to shut down Charles Coughlin, the “Radio Priest” who voiced anti-Semitic and pro-fascist sentiments by the late 1930s, and to mobilize priests to participate in organizing Ford Motor Company workers in neighborhood parishes, the ACTU offered a model of masculinity inflected with Catholic notions of fatherhood and respectability. Informed by Meyer’s impressive book, other scholars will come to study a fuller range of working-class masculinities.

Pesticides, A Love Story: America’s Enduring Embrace of Dangerous Chemicals, by Michelle Mart. CultureAmerica Series. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2015. 344 pp. Notes, bibliography, index. \$34.95 hardcover.

Reviewer David D. Vail is assistant professor of history at the University of Nebraska at Kearney. His book, *Chemical Lands: A History of Pesticides, Aerial Spraying, and Health in North America’s Grasslands*, is forthcoming from the University of Alabama Press in 2018.

In 1945 *Capper’s Weekly* reported that many residents agonized over the rise of agricultural chemicals such as DDT and 2,4-D. An October editorial captured those anxieties: “Little is known about the toxic effect of DDT on humans. . . . Much confusion has resulted over the popular sale of DDT recently. Most users will have to learn what form or with what solution they want to buy it. There’s a very specialized form of DDT for each use. Some dealers are reported[ly] selling very weak solutions and making exaggerated claims for it. To protect themselves purchasers are advised to read the labels carefully and acquaint themselves with the potency needed for the job to be done” (*Capper’s Weekly*, October 13, 1945). Pesticides could protect crops, but landowners and agriculturalists worried about the risks.

A growing group of scholars such as Frederick Rowe Davis (*Banned*), David Kinkela (*DDT and the American Century*), and Nancy Langston (*Toxic Bodies*) has been exploring the scientific, political, and ecological histories of the toxic chemicals so ubiquitous on Iowa, Nebraska, and Kansas farms. Michelle Mart adds a new cultural synthesis to help explain an ongoing paradox: How, even in the midst of caution and skepticism, can Americans view pesticides with such “remarkable

continuity" in "how attitudes toward pesticide use remained relatively stable from the 1940s to the present day" (2)? Mart argues that this "love" for chemicals throughout the postwar era and beyond may be long lasting, but it is certainly not static. "Even articles that warned readers to be careful about safety," Mart points out, "never implied that there was any danger if *all* directions were followed. . . . In sum, magazine and newspaper articles—despite occasional words of caution—shaped popular attitudes toward pesticides by celebrating their effectiveness and advocating their use" (27).

In subsequent chapters, Mart explores how, throughout the postwar era and beyond, agricultural chemicals were welcomed tools in farming at home and in foreign policy efforts abroad. Even as Rachel Carson warned against the dangers of DDT in her 1962 book *Silent Spring*, which helped spark the American environmental movement and led to the insecticide's eventual banning a decade later, agricultural chemicals remained central to protecting fields and sterilizing homes. That commitment, according to Mart, only strengthened in the following decades despite disasters such as Bhopal and Love Canal. By the 1980s, a potent combination of scientific reports, extension relationships, and general environmental awareness failed to diminish Americans' cultural embrace of insecticides and herbicides: "Once extremist voices were quieted, people could settle back into a comfortable confidence that environmental issues were being addressed, the new laws of the 1970s gave many false confidence and obscured the systemic and philosophical impact of industrialization on the environment" (178).

For readers of the *Annals of Iowa*, Mart's book supports some historical complexities of midwestern agriculture while conflicting with others. Editorials in *Capper's Weekly*, *Kansas Farmer*, and the *Nebraska Farmer* described pesticides as "poisonous medicine" that healed sick fields from insect invasions or noxious weed advances. Deep concerns about toxicity, shady aerial sprayers, or chemical drifts all powerfully shaped the region's inclinations toward pesticides. Use obviously increased, but not in predictable ways. *Pesticides, a Love Story* serves as a crucial history for understanding the challenging cultural, scientific, environmental, and agricultural relationships around pesticides that continue to afflict Iowa and the Midwest in the present.