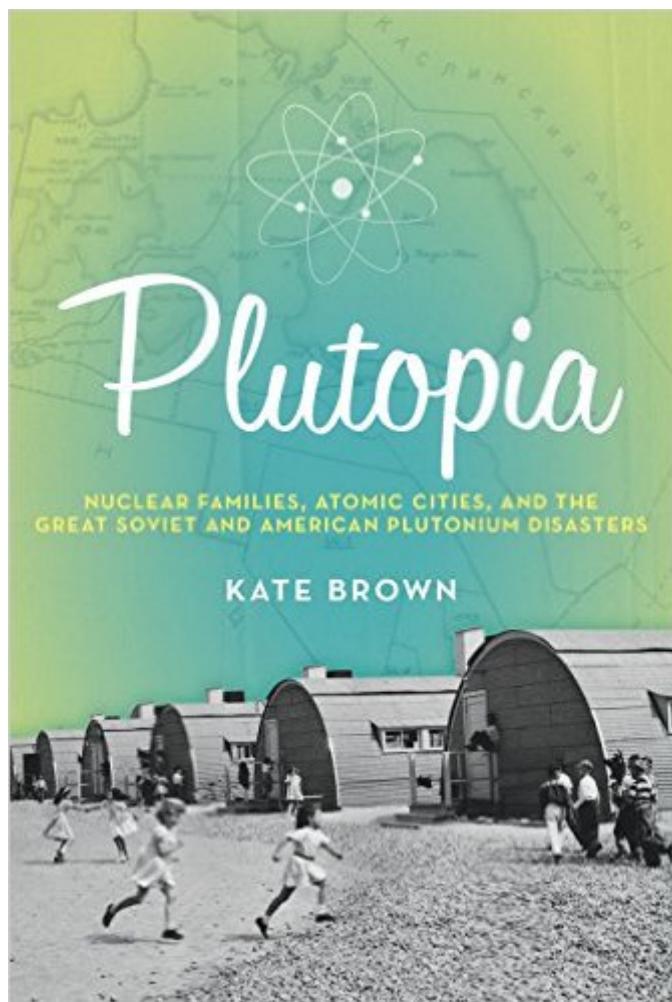


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Plutopia: Nuclear Families, Atomic Cities, And The Great Soviet And American Plutonium Disasters



Synopsis

While many transnational histories of the nuclear arms race have been written, Kate Brown provides the first definitive account of the great plutonium disasters of the United States and the Soviet Union. In *Plutopia*, Brown draws on official records and dozens of interviews to tell the extraordinary stories of Richland, Washington and Ozersk, Russia—the first two cities in the world to produce plutonium. To contain secrets, American and Soviet leaders created plutopias—communities of nuclear families living in highly-subsidized, limited-access atomic cities. Fully employed and medically monitored, the residents of Richland and Ozersk enjoyed all the pleasures of consumer society, while nearby, migrants, prisoners, and soldiers were banned from plutopia—they lived in temporary "staging grounds" and often performed the most dangerous work at the plant. Brown shows that the plants' segregation of permanent and temporary workers and of nuclear and non-nuclear zones created a bubble of immunity, where dumps and accidents were glossed over and plant managers freely embezzled and polluted. In four decades, the Hanford plant near Richland and the Maiak plant near Ozersk each issued at least 200 million curies of radioactive isotopes into the surrounding environment—equaling four Chernobyls—laying waste to hundreds of square miles and contaminating rivers, fields, forests, and food supplies. Because of the decades of secrecy, downwind and downriver neighbors of the plutonium plants had difficulty proving what they suspected, that the rash of illnesses, cancers, and birth defects in their communities were caused by the plants' radioactive emissions. *Plutopia* was successful because in its zoned-off isolation it appeared to deliver the promises of the American dream and Soviet communism; in reality, it concealed disasters that remain highly unstable and threatening today. An untold and profoundly important piece of Cold War history, *Plutopia* invites readers to consider the nuclear footprint left by the arms race and the enormous price of paying for it.

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Customer Reviews

Kate Brown writes that radioactive material "migrated from industrial to residential zones, from soils into food, from air to lungs to bloodstream, bone marrow, and finally DNA, so bodies themselves now serve as nuclear waste repositories." The medical section of the U.S. Army's Manhattan Project, the top-secret World War II machine that built the first atomic bomb, conducted human experiments that remained classified for 50 years. E.I. DuPont de Nemours & Co. played a major role in the Manhattan Project in 1943, designing, building and operating the massive U.S. plutonium-production complex on 780 square miles of land along the Columbia River at Hanford, Washington. Like miners' canaries, workers in the chemical industry are often the first line of exposure to environmental toxins. "In the early thirties," writes Brown, "a DuPont chemical dye plant had an outbreak of bladder cancer among its workers. DuPont officials hired Wilhelm Hueper, a German scientist specializing in toxins, to figure out what was giving the workers cancer. Hueper isolated a new chemical agent, beta-naphthylamine, used in dye production, which, he said, caused bladder cancer in rats. Rather than pull the chemical from the line, DuPont officials took Hueper off the research project, and when he refused to drop the issue, they fired him. Fearful that Hueper would broadcast his findings, they assigned another scientist, Robert Kehoe, at the company's Kettering Lab, to carry out research that would discredit Hueper's findings. For the next twenty years, DuPont workers continued to use beta-naphthylamine, which caused bladder cancer in nine out of ten employees exposed to it.

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