

# Author Amy Stewart cheerfully tackles creepy insects and poisonous plants

## BOOK REVIEW

By Stephanie Lodromanean  
The Southwest Portland Post

If you're interested in a fascinating summer read there is a two-volume collection by best-selling author Amy Stewart that tackles the wicked side of plants and bugs.

The books are published by Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill and are affectionately titled *Wicked Bugs: The Louse That Conquered Napoleon's Army & Other Diabolical Insects* [\$18.95 hardcover, 2009] and *Wicked Plants: The Weed That Killed Lincoln's Mother & Other Botanical Atrocities* [\$18.95 hardcover, 2011].

Etchings and drawings in *Wicked Bugs* are by Briony Morrow-Cribbs. Etchings in *Wicked Plants* are by Morrow-Cribbs, with illustrations by Jonathon Rosen.

Stewart is not a scientist, nor does she claim to be; she is a writer with a passion for the misunderstood bugs and plants of the world that don't get much attention, but left to their own devices can wreak havoc.

*Wicked Plants* is the first of the duo. Partly why the book is so entertaining comes from the passion that Stewart clearly has for botany; they are not explained in scientific monotone. The introduction to these chilling plants is

instead an adventure.

We learn about the tobacco plant with "a leaf so toxic that it has taken the lives of 90 million people worldwide; so addictive that it led to a war against Native Americans; so powerful that it led to the establishment of slavery in the American South."

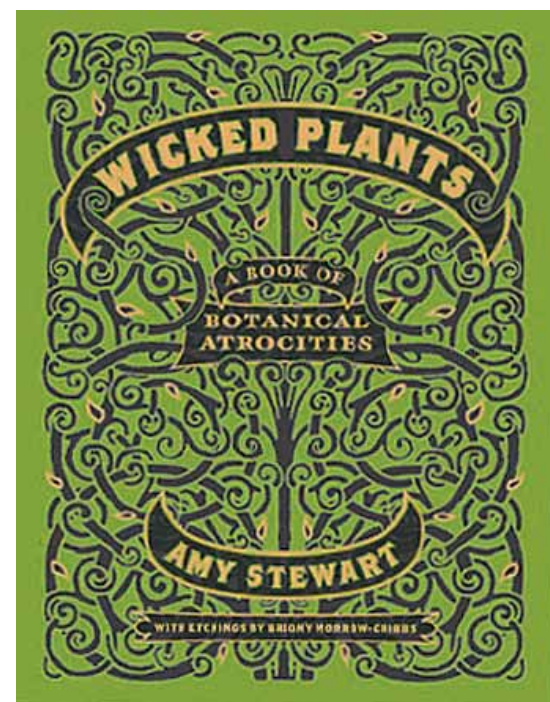
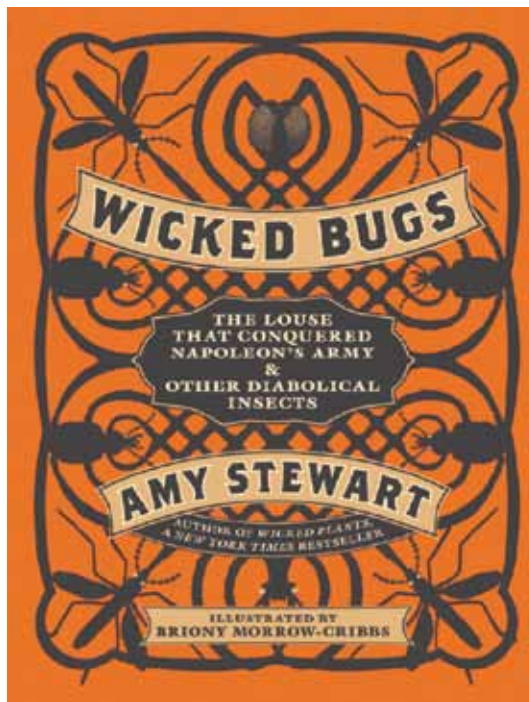
We also learn about the ergot, a parasitic fungus that most likely led to the Salem Witch Trials of 1691.

Regarding the effects of ergot, Stewart writes: "Records going back to the Middle Ages show that from time to time, an entire village would succumb to mysterious illness. Villagers would dance in the streets, go into convulsions, and eventually collapse."

*Wicked Bugs* is equally as captivating as its predecessor. The term "bug" is used loosely in the context of this book.

As Stewart explains, "Entomologists will be quick to protest that the term bug is misleading and they are quite right. Most of us use the word to describe any number of tiny slithering and crawling creatures..."

The "bugs" explained in this book are sure to leave an unsettling feeling on your skin and leave you a lot more



aware of those creepy crawlers that linger just about everywhere in our natural world.

They are equally as fascinating and incredible as the plants explained in *Wicked Plants*. The bugs all have a creepy trait that can lead to death, infestations or other awful endeavors.

One of the more eerie insects you'll meet is the Human Bot Fly. The fly will attach itself to a mosquito and lay eggs. After the mosquito lands on a human, the eggs will fall off and become enlivened by the warmth of the human host.

The host will be left with something like a wound that won't quite heal: "The wound can be painful and itchy, it can ooze a foul-smelling liquid, and some people even claim they can hear the creature moving around." Definitely gives bug bites a new meaning.

If you're looking for a quick and interesting summer read, definitely check out Amy Stewart's *Wicked* books. When you're outside gardening or just walking along some beautiful Portland trails you'll find yourself more aware of what may be around you.

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