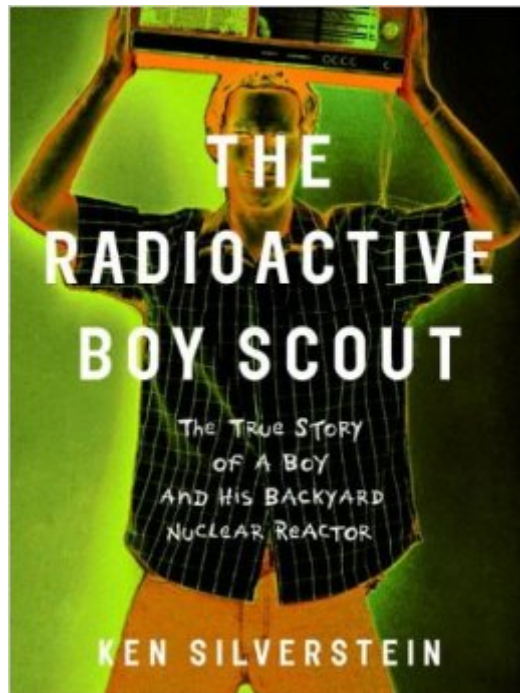


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The Radioactive Boy Scout: The True Story Of A Boy And His Backyard Nuclear Reactor



Synopsis

Growing up in suburban Detroit, David Hahn was fascinated by science, and his basement experiments—building homemade fireworks, brewing moonshine, and concocting his own self-tanning lotion—were more ambitious than those of other boys. While working on his Atomic Energy badge for the Boy Scouts, David's obsessive attention turned to nuclear energy. Throwing caution to the wind, he plunged into a new project: building a nuclear breeder reactor in his backyard garden shed. In *The Radioactive Boy Scout*, veteran journalist Ken Silverstein recreates in brilliant detail the months of David's improbable nuclear quest. Posing as a physics professor, David solicited information on reactor design from the U.S. government and from industry experts. (Ironically, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission was his number one source of information.) Scavenging antiques stores and junkyards for old-fashioned smoke detectors and gas lanterns—both of which contain small amounts of radioactive material—and following blueprints he found in an outdated physics textbook, David cobbled together a crude device that threw off toxic levels of radiation. His unsanctioned and wholly unsupervised project finally sparked an environmental catastrophe that put his town's forty thousand residents at risk and caused the EPA to shut down his lab and bury it at a radioactive dumpsite in Utah. An outrageous account of ambition and, ultimately, hubris that sits comfortably on the shelf next to such offbeat science books as *Driving Mr. Albert* and stories of grand capers like *Catch Me If You Can*, *The Radioactive Boy Scout* is a real-life adventure with the narrative energy of a first-rate thriller.

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Customer Reviews

I have no quarrel with anti-nuclear books or thoughts, but this book presents itself as "The frightening true story of a whiz kid and his homemade nuclear reactor." It's not. The author spends far too much time criticizing nuclear power and oddly enough, the Boy Scouts, and far too little on the actual incident that led to the story. Silverstein's anti-nuclear slant is obvious. Chapter 2 (sarcastically titled "From the Radium Craze to the Soaring Sixties: Science Conquers All") is a criticism of all things nuclear, including Hiroshima, the Atomic Energy Commission, using nuclear energy to generate electricity, and the Cold War. Writing about the Boy Scouts' "Atomic Energy" merit badge booklet, he says "Such was the pronuke slant of the pamphlet that it...was authored by a group of nuclear-power advocates." (Who else would the Boy Scouts ask to write it?) He continued "The Boy Scouts systematically whitewashed the many problems encountered by nuclear power." Silverstein devotes nearly a full chapter to criticizing the Boy Scouts as an institution. He writes "The Boy Scouts have always claimed to be apolitical, but the group has had a decidedly right wing character." He devotes a page to reciting a cynical poem that mocks the Boy Scout motto "Be Prepared" with lines like "Be prepared to hold your liquor pretty well" and "Keep those reefers hidden...when the Scoutmaster's around, for he will only insist that they be shared. Be prepared!" What's the point of that? Silverstein also states "So shameless and enduring was [the Boy Scouts'] shilling for nuclear power the the scouts later helped the industry turn the partial core meltdown and mass evacuation of Three Mile Island into a marketing opportunity." (He later acknowledges that Three Mile Island produced zero fatalities and resulted in the precautionary evacuation of only pregnant women and small children.) The book is not about a "radioactive Boy Scout." It is a critique of nuclear power and the Boy Scouts. He of course has every right to express those thoughts, but I felt deceived and cheated out of my \$13.95. (I Google'd the book's author, "Ken Silverstein." You might want to as well.)

I was David's scoutmaster when he was preparing for his Eagle Scout Board of Review. I was to contact five registered adult Scout leaders, who would comprise the Board. One prospective adult told me he could not sit on the Board, because "something happened". I learned that David and some friends were stopped by the cavaliering Clinton Township (Michigan) Police, who were randomly stopping teens and searching their cars for stolen tires. David was not allowed to keep his experiments in his stepmother's home, so he kept everything in his car trunk. The cops found no tires, but saw his stuff and overreacted. Days later, David's father phoned and said that David would no longer pursue the Eagle Scout rank. A month or so later, a man claiming to be a reporter phoned

my home, wanting to do a telephone interview about David. After a few moments, I refused. There was something negative about the line of questioning. As a Scout, David was always clean-cut, polite, and well-liked by the other boys. My take is that David had the scientific curiosity of a Tesla or Edison; not of an evil prankster. David's father, like so many divorced and re-married men, walked a tightrope between caring for his son and appeasing a new bride. As for Mr. Silverstein, he should keep his story factual, and keep his opinions about Scouting to the editorial pages.

I found it fascinating to read about the exploits of David Hahn and his ability to acquire and experiment with radioactive materials. Ken Silverstein has done a good job of including pertinent scientific background with the personal story of David. My main criticism is that there are several errors in the technical chemistry provided in the book: For example, vinegar is 5% acetic acid (not 30%). Canthaxanthin is not a steroid. Electromotive force creates centrifugal force which then allows for the separation of U-235 and U-238. The combined number of protons and neutrons in a nucleus is called the mass number. When David used a charcoal grill inside the shed, the chief hazard was carbon monoxide (not carbon dioxide). Tyrosine is an amino acid (not an enzyme). Carboxylic acid refers to a class of compounds. Cesium-137 undergoes beta decay (not gamma ray emission). Also, the author confuses volatility with reactivity. It is unfortunate that the text was not reviewed by a chemist who could have pointed out these errors prior to publication.

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