In The Great Lead Water Pipe Disaster, Werner Troesken looks at a long-running environmental and public health catastrophe: 150 years of lead pipes in local water systems and the associated sickness, premature death, political inaction, and social denial. The harmful effects of lead water pipes became apparent almost as soon as cities the world over began to install them. Doctors and scientists noted cases of acute illness and death attributable to lead in public water beginning in the middle of the nineteenth century, and an editorial in the New York Herald called for the city to study the matter after a bizarre illness made headlines in 1868. But officials took no action for many years. New York City, for example, did not take any steps to reduce lead levels in water until 1992, long after the most serious damage had been done. By then, in any case, much of the old lead pipe had been replaced with safer materials. Troesken examines the health effects of lead exposure, analyzing cases from New York City, Boston, and Glasgow and many smaller towns in Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and England. He draws on period accounts, government reports, court decisions, and economic and demographic analysis to document the widespread nature of the problem, the recognized health effects—particularly for pregnant women and young children—and official intransigence. He presents an accessible overview of the old and new science of lead exposure—explaining, for example, why areas with soft water suffered more harmful effects than areas with hard water. And he gives us compelling and vivid accounts of the people and politics involved. The effects of lead in water continue to be felt; many older houses still have lead service pipes. The Great Lead Water Pipe Disaster is essential reading for understanding this past and ongoing public health problem.

My Personal Review:
Troesken(T) has done an excellent job of demonstrating why lead was used in ,and continue to be used in, water pipes over a period of 150 years despite a great deal of scientific and anecdotal evidence linking the lead to numerous physical ailments being available to city planners during this time period. The answer was that decision makers were penny wise and
Lead water pipes were very cheap to build, long lasting, and easy to maintain. One area of discussion that should have been more heavily emphasized was the overwhelming connection between lead exposure and lower IQ scores. Lead exposure from birth to age 10 leads to a loss in IQ of from 6-10 points. The major groups impacted are black and Latino - Hispanic Americans getting their drinking water from city-metropolitan water systems. This accounts for about 40% to 67% of the alleged disparity in IQ scores that is supposed to exist between white and black Americans. These facts are ignored by Herrnstein and Murray in their book The Bell Curve (1994).

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