

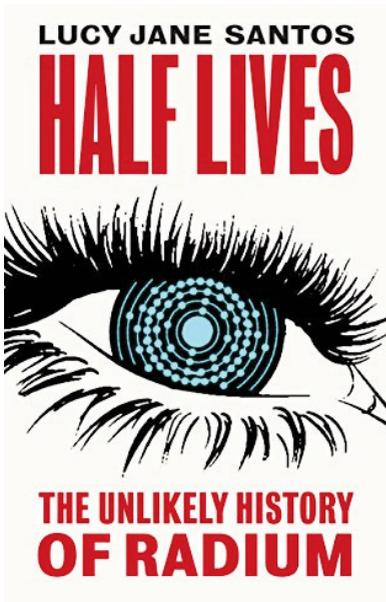
Radiant Radium

*Lucy Santos
interviewed by
Becky Alexis-Martin*

*Medical radium treatments offered some of the first cures for cancers. However, the discovery of radium's specific medicinal benefits inspired manufacturers to include this toxic and expensive element in everything from cold remedies to face cream and soap. These products offered no special benefits to their users, but invoked a glowing aura of luxury and health. Beyond the 19th century craze for quack cosmetics, radium has been used for everything from fluorescent airplane dials to diet supplements. I caught up with historian, journalist and author Lucy Santos about her excellent new book at the intersection of science and culture, *Half Lives: The Unlikely History of Radium* (Ikon Books, £16.99) – and her unique online *Museum of Radium*.*

Firstly, what inspired you to write *Half Lives* – and why radium?

I enjoy buying boxes of vintage cosmetics and interesting things from auction houses – and on one instance, I bought a box that contained a mysterious little pot emblazoned with ‘Tho Radia’. I discovered that it was a beauty product containing radioactive radium and thorium. It got me thinking – where, when and why did these products arise? What was their cultural significance? I was frustrated because there was little context, apart from perhaps a quote on an advert and some comment about the silliness of all those involved. There was this notion that radium was just for quacks and idiots, but this is a gendered perspective – this idea that ‘women will do anything to be beautiful’. It’s a much broader and more interesting story than this



– arising at a time when radium was big business and permeated across our culture. I needed to explore and share these elusive stories – so I decided to write the book myself.

What is the most unusual radium-related object that you discovered during your research?

There are so many interesting objects. I have a collection of things that I own – and then objects that I wish I owned. One of my own favourite objects is the Radol ‘radium impregnated cancer cure’, invented in 1904 by an American man who claimed to be a doctor and cancer specialist, with access to radium. This was all completely untrue. He sold bottles of a water and alcohol tincture that he promised would cure any variety of cancer, but there was no radium in them. He was eventually sued out of existence, but at one point he sold a month’s worth at a time – with ‘patient’ instructions to drink a glass after every meal – a very sophisticated cure plan. Someday I would love to own a ‘O-Radium Hat Pad’ – it’s a pouch filled with radioactive material, that people would wear underneath their hats to purportedly stimulate hair growth. It had an amazing tagline, ‘Whenever you are wearing your hat - you are subjecting your hair to beneficial rays!’ Brilliant for the bald.

Do you think women are under-represented in nuclear histories?

I think it is all down to Marie Sklodowska-Curie really. It is too easy to focus on her, and then you’ve ticked a diversity box by mentioning her. I have drawn out some previously unexplored women’s histories in *Half Lives*. For instance, I have researched and written about Helen Cavendish – this fantastic pioneering woman who had an exclusive hair and beauty salon in London in the 1910s. She invented the ‘Caradium Hair Restorer and Radium Beautifier’, which was popular among London’s elite. She was a brilliant businesswoman – battling her right to use ‘radium’ as a term on her products, despite being taken to court by a man who trademarked radium – and she won! So, there is this other radioactive history of women who are not scientists, which has been comparatively ignored.

Did your research take you anywhere interesting?

I travelled across the UK to the spa towns of Bath and Buxton to learn about their ‘radium spa’ pasts. At one time, Bath called itself ‘Britain’s Radium Spa’ in the *Daily Mail* — and self-described as the place that’s the

most naturally rich in radioactivity in the UK. I explored the forgotten places where you could previously buy radium cures. For example, Humphreys and West on Cheap Street once sold ‘radium bread’ which was made from the waters of Bath Spa. Now, it’s a Burger King – so I love the idea of this multi-layered history, of sharing this radioactive history that no one knows. In Buxton, the Museum and Art Gallery used to be the Peak Hotel, and once offered a complete radium treatment. You could convalesce there to breathe radon gas, as it was considered to be beneficial to health. The pump room in Buxton was once open for glasses of radium water, and was specially refitted with a large marble basin to diffuse radon gas.

Is there one thing that you would like people to take away from your book?

The nuance of using untested unknown products. There was this idea that people in history were stupid for using radium products, and I wanted to situate their choices in a wider context, and to think through the cultural history of the time. For example, Radior started selling cosmetics in 1916, and were included in the first edition of *Vogue* – in fact, they went to the US in September 1915 and made their fortune. I wanted to situate these cosmetics in the wider culture; they were part of something else, a migration of beauty companies – aspirations of money and hope despite Europe’s decimation in the First World War. Radium products are not just a random quirky part of our cultural history, they fitted into what was normal and usual for the time.

Thank you so much for your time Lucy. It has been a pleasure to speak to you, and to learn more about radium and your new book. You can learn more about Lucy’s work at her website (lucyjanesantos.com) and virtual museum of radium . I would love to see some of your collection at an exhibition someday. Half Lives: The Unlikely History of Radium is written by Lucy Santos, and is available from all good booksellers.

Dr Becky Alexis-Martin is a pacifist scholar and photographer. She is the author of Disarming Doomsday (see Spokesman 144), winner of the L.H.M. Ling Outstanding First Book Award, and shortlisted for the Bread and Roses Award. ‘An Interview With...’ highlights her favourite nuclear authors and their work.