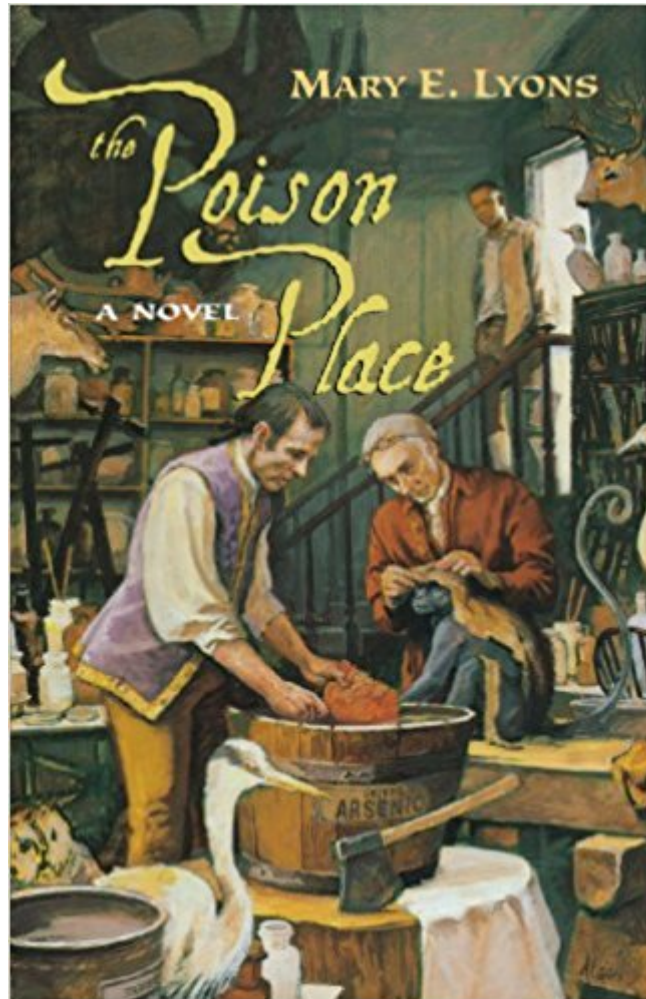




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# The Poison Place



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## Synopsis

It's a stormy night in 1827 when Moses Williams, Charles Wilson Peale's former slave, relates his startling account of life within the walls of Peale's famous Philadelphia museum. His voice resounding through the empty halls and corridors, Moses leads us through his adolescent friendship and rivalry with Raphael, Peale's son; his frustrations at Peale's unfulfilled promises of freedom; and his nagging suspicion that Peale may have had a hand in his own son's death.

## Book Information

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Age Range: 12 and up

Grade Level: 7 and up

## Customer Reviews

Grade 5-8. As in *Letters from a Slave Girl* (S & S, 1992), Lyons enlarges upon the known history of a real person born into slavery. Moses Williams is owned by painter/museum entrepreneur Charles Willson Peale. Because he is close in age to Peale's oldest son, Raphaele, Lyons creates a fictional friendship. As Rafe struggles to earn the respect and love of his father, Moses tries to earn his freedom. The story, told by Moses as an old man while he leads his daughter through Peale's museum, shows clearly the frustration of an intelligent and talented young man who is forced to endure invisibility and subhuman treatment even in relatively enlightened post-Revolutionary Philadelphia. The first-person voice conveys Moses's resentment toward the Peale family, Charles in particular, very clearly. Unfortunately, the device of answering his daughter's unheard questions and referring to the hazards as they move from room to room in the museum serves more to disrupt

the story than to create immediacy. The mystery, whether Peale knowingly allowed Rafe to die slowly of arsenic poisoning from the taxidermy solution used to preserve animals for his museum, never moves beyond Moses's speculation. The story of the rivalry between Rafe and his father's favorite son, Rembrandt, is given equal treatment with Moses's longing for freedom, so the slave's struggle lacks strong focus and dramatic tension. However, once readers get into the rhythm of Moses's folksy voice, this is a quick-moving read, full of fascinating detail about extraordinary people in an extraordinary time. ?Sally Margolis, formerly at Deerfield Public Library, IL Copyright 1997 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

In a riveting work of historical fiction from Lyons (*Catching the Fire*, p. 1032, etc.), readers take a transforming tour through Charles Willson Peale's museum in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Moses Williams, a silhouette cutter and former slave, leads his daughter through each room and recants the story of his master's life, creating his own sketch of the jack-of-all-trades who produced portraits, plays, and a museum of art and taxidermy to make money he couldn't hold on to. Readers learn of a greedy and deceitful man (hardly recognizable as the man in Janet Wilson's *The Ingenious Mr. Peale*, 1996) whose relationship with his eldest son was a tragic battle of wills. Williams's own struggle from servitude to freedom, based in facts, unfolds in stark contrast to Peale's apparent scheming and frivolity. The authentic details and fertile atmosphere combine with lively characterizations until even Williams's daughter, always silent, ever listening, has a personality as she moves through chilly rooms where the smell of arsenic seems to linger in the air. (b&w illustrations and diagrams) (Fiction. 12-15) -- Copyright ©1997, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

This is one of those books that completely has a hold on you while you read it. The best thing about it? You're excitedly reading historical fiction and gleaning many facts about the artist Charles Peale, the Civil War, slave life, etc. The story is being told right to you, as recalled by the main character, Moses Williams. The chapters are set up in a tour-like layout of Peale's Museum. Moses leads you from one room to the next, continuing to tell you about his life as you step in and look at your new surroundings. He verbally guides you personally, making this a very imaginative book. For example: "These stairs are tricky, like everything else round this place. The wood's been scalloped by thousands of boots and slippers." Permeating every part of the story, there is the foreboding Poison (arsenic), and the creeping presence of Charles Peale---a great artist and taxidermist in his day,

although out of his mind, as the story progresses. I rather enjoyed learning about arsenic, about preserving dead animals, about life as an artist, about using a physiognotrace, and so much more. The author has done a wonderful job of piecing everything together into a riveting novel. There is an eerie and mysterious appeal to the book, which keeps you wondering what will take place next. Notes: I do not remember any profanities used whatsoever---but every once in a while, just for a brief moment, a certain word or phrase seemed to be insinuating something offensive. Because of this, I felt it right to take my rating down to 4 stars.

I would highly recommend The Posion Place by Mary E. Lyons. It is truly a gem of a book. A fasinating story, told in the words of a formor slave, makes it come alive, and keeps you wondering, 'What happens next?' If you don't like historical fiction books, you should still try this novel. It's difinetly one in a class of it's own!

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