Five people were killed after letters laced with anthrax were mailed to U.S. Sens. Tom Daschle and Patrick Leahy, NBC-TV news anchor Tom Brokaw, and others in September 2001.

A month later, Bruce Ivins, a microbiologist at the U.S. Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases in Fort Detrick, Md., was asked to analyze the contents of one of the envelopes.

"I've been working here 20 years," he told a colleague, "and I've never seen anything that pure."

Although he held a patent on an anthrax vaccine, Mr. Ivins added, even he could not produce such high-grade powder: "I'm good but not that good."

In all likelihood, he was lying. Although he never confessed (before committing suicide in 2008) and no "smoking gun" can prove his guilt beyond a shadow of doubt, a substantial body of evidence, according to David Willman, a Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter for The Los Angeles Times, points to Mr. Ivins as the guilty party.

In his book, the author draws on an avalanche of research, including interviews with everyone involved (except Mr. Ivins' wife), to provide a meticulous and mesmerizing account of the worst act of bioterrorism in American history.

It includes details about the FBI investigation that pursued the wrong man for years and leaked information about him to the media, and the decision of Bush administration officials to use the anthrax attacks as a pretext for war against Iraq.

Mr. Willman lays bare the microbiologist's sinister secret life. A seemingly gentle, genial, church-going, if socially awkward, scientist, Mr. Ivins had a history of depression, paranoia and bizarre behavior long before he was hired to work at Fort Detrick.
Turned down for a date by a member of Kappa Kappa Gamma when he was an undergraduate at the University of Cincinnati, he began what would be a lifelong vendetta against the sorority. Mr. Ivins broke into chapter houses to steal copies of rites of initiation, harassed members by assuming their identities and threatened murder. It is no accident, the author suggests, that Mr. Ivins sent his letters from a mailbox in New Jersey that was directly underneath the Princeton chapter of Kappa Kappa Gamma.

He was obsessed as well with female co-workers at Fort Detrick. When one of them did not respond regularly to his emails, he followed her to upstate New York, where she was playing in a soccer match. If she had not been injured and taken off the field, he told his therapist, he would have offered her wine spiked with poison when the game ended.

Mr. Willman demonstrates that he had the motive (a market for rPA, his genetically engineered anthrax vaccine, and an enhanced professional reputation), the know-how and the opportunity (permission to enter the lab with the Ames strain of anthrax at any time) to commit the crime.

In early 2002, moreover, he submitted false samples of anthrax from his lab to FBI agents. And he went out of his way to finger seven of his colleagues as likely suspects.

Mr. Willman reveals that the research institute did not require psychological evaluations that might have barred Mr. Ivins from employment. To this day, the institute opposes government appropriations for bio-defense that are contingent on additional security requirements for personnel.

Although he acknowledges that some "valid questions" about the case remain unanswered, Mr. Willman makes a compelling case, well beyond a reasonable doubt, that Bruce Ivins, by turns compulsive, calculating and crazy, was the anthrax killer. And that he may well have meant what he said when he emailed friends in 2008:

"Please know that whatever happens, there is love in my heart for people and for our planet."

Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University.