



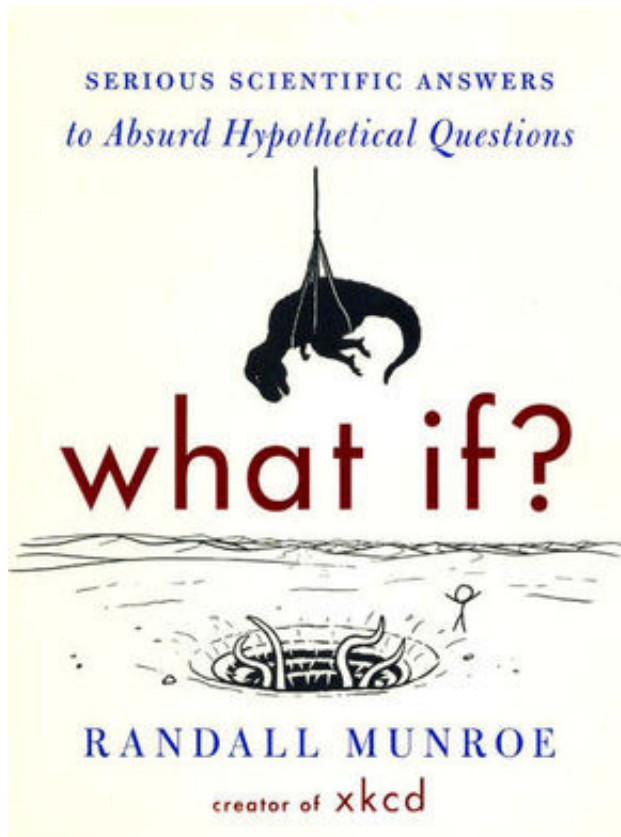
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DAILY NEWS

'What If?' an enjoyable ride

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"What If? Serious Scientific Answers to Absurd Hypothetical Questions" by Randall Munroe. New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014, 303 pages, \$24.00.



"What would happen to the Earth if the Sun suddenly switched off? This is probably the single most popular submission to "What If," Randall Munroe reveals in "What If? Serious Scientific Answers to Absurd Hypothetical Questions," his new bestseller based on "xkcd," the online comic he's published for the last ten years.

"We won't worry about exactly how it happens," he continues. "We'll just assume we figured out a way to fast-forward the Sun through its evolution so that it becomes a cold, inert sphere. What would be the consequences for us here on Earth?"

Munroe then proceeds through all the advantages we could expect to realize if indeed the Sun stopped shining, including a reduced risk of solar flares, improved satellite service, better astronomy, reduced infrastructure costs, cheaper trade, as well as safer children and parsnip.

"In conclusion, if the Sun went out, we would see a variety of benefits across many areas of our lives," Munroe explains. When asked if there are any potential disadvantages to this scenario, he replies wryly, "We would all freeze and die."

If you love this kind of dry humor, then you'll definitely want to add "What If?" to your personal collection. The book consists entirely of a variety of questions sent in by readers of Munroe's online comic over the last decade or so. Each question is given the same treatment – a tongue-in-cheek answer in which the author initially approaches the inquiry from a quasi-serious angle. In almost every case, however, it doesn't take long for the reader to figure out the sarcasm inevitably imbedded in the response.

To be completely honest, I found myself smiling at several of the short chapters. Many of the queries have crossed my mind over the years, although I'm not sure I would have confessed to this prior to reading "What If?" Then again, I'm sure I'm not alone in my experience. Munroe has a knack for addressing the issues most of us have wondered about, but were too embarrassed to admit to others.

One of the features I found particularly endearing about Munroe's venture into the surreal world of conjecture relates to the fact that he does not confine his imagination to just the physical realm. Sure, a lot of the vignettes deal with what you might expect. I mean, who hasn't wondered "What would happen if everyone on Earth stood as close to each other as they could and jumped, everyone landing on the ground at the same instant?" or "How much physical space does the Internet take up?" (It turns out not much and about the size of an oil tanker).

What makes this volume interesting to a wider audience is that the author delves into so many different areas that most everyone can find something they have secretly speculated about within the confines of the three hundred or so pages it takes to deal with all the questions sent in by Munroe's fans.

For instance, consider this little gem: "What if everyone actually had only one soul mate, a random person somewhere in the world?" Fess up, who hasn't had this thought cross his or her mind, if only for an instant? But before you get your hopes up, consider what the author has to say about finding the one person who could make your life complete, even if he or she did actually exist:

"The odds of running into your soul mate would be incredibly small. The number of strangers we make eye contact with each day can vary from almost none (shut-ins or people in small towns) to many thousands (a police officer in Times Square). If ten percent of them were close to your age, that would be around fifty thousand people in a lifetime. Given that you have five hundred million potential soul mates, it means you would find true love only in one lifetime out of ten thousand."

Another aspect of "What If?" I found engaging was that it made me think about several different things in a completely new way. I found myself reading many of the chapters more than once, and then thinking about them when I was engaged in other activities during the day. Some of the explanations only made sense after I had put the book aside and went for my daily run through the neighborhood. It was not uncommon to have an "ah-ha" moment hours or even days after I had first encountered one of the hypothetical's presented in the book.

Prior to his foray into the public arena, Munroe worked as an independent contractor for NASA; his specialty was robotics. It was there he created "xkcd," the popular stick figure comic he publishes on the web. After graduating from Chesterfield County Mathematics and Science High School at Clover Hill: A Renaissance Program, he attended Christopher Newport University, where he earned a degree in physics. He has written one previous book, "xkcd: volume 0," which was published earlier this year.

One last point to ponder: "How fast can you hit a speed bump while driving and live?" Let me just say first off that if you've ever worried about this one, you can relax. It's not the speed bump you need to be worried about, although he does warn against "trying this at home."

"The typical sedan has a top speed of around one hundred twenty miles per hour," Munroe notes. "Hitting a speed bump at that speed would, in one way or another, probably result in losing control of the car and crashing. However, the jolt itself probably wouldn't be fatal."

So, if you are looking for something to read that's off the beaten path, and especially if you are one of those folks who likes to think outside the box, "What If?" might just be the book for you. I enjoyed it immensely.

— Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.