



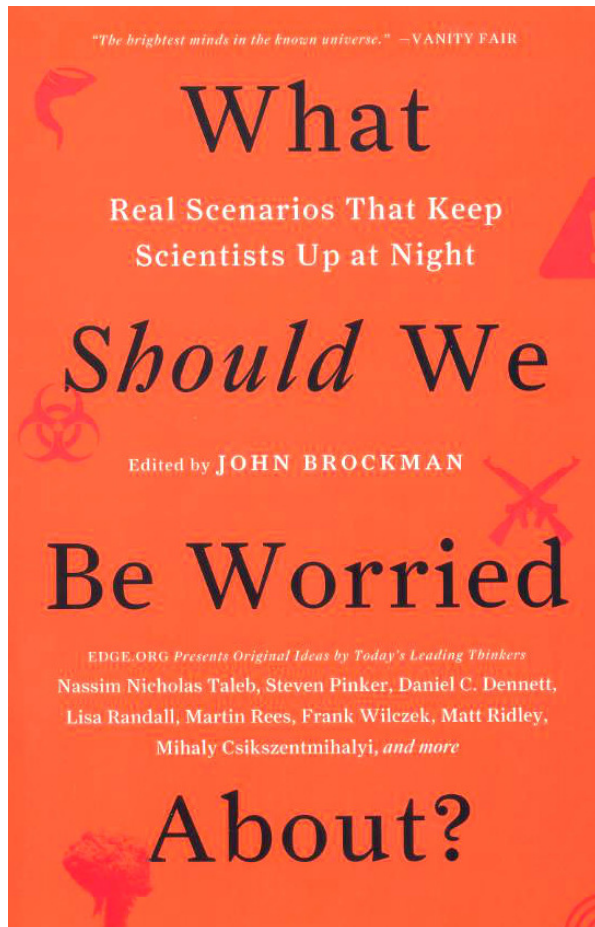
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# DAILY NEWS

## 'Worried' delivers a dark picture

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*"What Should We Be Worried About? Real Scenarios That Keep Scientists Up at Night," edited by John Brockman. New York, NY: Edge Foundation (an imprint of HarperCollins), 2014. 499 pages, \$15.99.*



"We worry because we are built to anticipate the future," John Brockman explains near the beginning of "What Should We Be Worried About? Real Scenarios That Keep Scientists Up at Night," a collection of short essays he edited from a wide range of intellectuals representing a myriad of academic and artistic disciplines. "Nothing can stop us from worrying, but science can teach us how to worry better, and when to stop worrying."

I was fascinated by this book from the moment I picked it up at Barnes & Noble. I had heard of a few of the writers Brockman tapped for this volume, but I was unfamiliar with most of the names listed in the table of contents. Moreover, I could not find any rhyme or reason to the authors selected to present their various perspectives on what should, in fact, be on our radar screens when it comes to what we should be distressing about. Although everyone arguably has some connection to science, I found it impossible to identify a common thread characterizing all of the contributors.

Most of the selections run only two to three pages, which made the book particularly easy to digest in a series of short sittings. Over the week it took me to get through all of the vignettes, I probably spent no more than an hour

reading the book at any one time. Still, many of the ideas resonated with me on several levels. I found myself thinking about what I had read as I was involved in other activities throughout the day. For example, I spent my entire run one afternoon reflecting on the chapter by Martin Rees, "We are in denial about catastrophic risks." Rees is an emeritus professor of cosmology and astrophysics at the University of Cambridge.

"We're entering an era when a few individuals could, via error or terror, trigger a societal breakdown with such extreme suddenness that palliative government actions would be overwhelmed," Rees warns. "Some would dismiss these concerns as an exaggerated jeremiad: After all, human societies have survived for millennia despite storms, earthquakes, and pestilence. But these human-induced threats are different: They are newly emergent, so we have a limited time base for exposure to them and can't be so sanguine that we would survive them for long, nor about the ability of governments to cope if disaster strikes." He

then goes on to describe some of these scenarios in a way that would make even the most ardent optimists question our ability to survive their aftermath.

Another chapter that got my attention was “Our Blind Spots” by Daniel Goleman, the celebrated author of the highly influential “Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ,” published in 1995. Here is what he says we should be worried about: “Human systems of transportation and energy, construction, and commerce, a scientific consensus tells us, are degrading the global systems that support life on our planet. This damage poses an enormous long-term threat to life as we know it. And yet these changes are too macro or micro to be noticed directly. That indifference to danger bespeaks a blind spot built into the brain.”

I was perhaps most impressed (or depressed, depending on your interpretation) by a short section by Leo M. Chalupa, vice president of research at George Washington University. In “The Growing Gap Between the Scientific Elite and the Vast ‘Scientifically Challenged’ Majority,” Chalupa sums up the fears shared by most of those who truly understand that our survival on this planet is not a foregone conclusion.

“Consider the vast factual ignorance that has repeatedly been documented in recent years,” he notes. “Most people do not believe in evolution; a substantial proportion believe that Earth is only a few thousand years old; many think that vaccines do more harm than good; and (a particularly troubling one for those of us in the brain sciences) it is commonly thought that the brain is a muscle. It is also worrisome that, for the most part, our educational institutions from grade school through college do not teach science the way scientists actually do science. We must do far better, and we need to do so now.”

Brockman has been a cultural icon since the 1960s. After earning an MBA from Columbia, he immersed himself in the avant-garde movement that included Andy Warhol and Bob Dylan. He is the author of five previous books including “By the Late John Brockman,” “Afterwards” and “The Third Culture: Beyond the Scientific Revolution.” He is also the editor of 22 other books, including “Ways of Knowing,” “The Greatest Inventions of the Past 2,000 Years,” “The Mind” and “This Explains Everything.”

Brockman is perhaps best known as the founder of Edge.com, a thought-provoking and provocative website devoted to an exploration of progressive ideas that cut across multiple disciplines.

As Gary Marcus notes on his blog at The New Yorker, “A few of the essays are too glib; it may sound comforting to say that ‘the only thing we need to worry about is worry itself’ (as several contributors suggested), but anybody who has lived through Chernobyl or Fukushima knows otherwise. Surviving disasters requires contingency plans, and so does avoiding them in first place. But many of the essays are insightful, and bring attention to a wide range of challenges for which society is not yet adequately prepared.”

I tend to agree with Marcus’ assessment of Brockman’s collection of cautionary tales. Fair warning: “What Should We Be Worried About?” is a hypochondriac’s worst nightmare. So if you are already apprehensive about what lies in store for the future, you might want to sit this one out. Otherwise, you probably won’t be able to put the book down once you start reading.

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