



The Rise of Nuclear Fear

By Spencer R. Weart

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After a tsunami destroyed the cooling system at Japan's Fukushima Nuclear Power Plant, triggering a meltdown, protesters around the world challenged the use of nuclear power. Germany announced it would close its plants by 2022. Although the ills of fossil fuels are better understood than ever, the threat of climate change has never aroused the same visceral dread or swift action. Spencer Weart dissects this paradox, demonstrating that a powerful web of images surrounding nuclear energy holds us captive, allowing fear, rather than facts, to drive our thinking and public policy.

Building on his classic, *Nuclear Fear*, Weart follows nuclear imagery from its origins in the symbolism of medieval alchemy to its appearance in film and fiction. Long before nuclear fission was discovered, fantasies of the destroyed planet, the transforming ray, and the white city of the future took root in the popular imagination. At the turn of the twentieth century when limited facts about radioactivity became known, they produced a blurred picture upon which scientists and the public projected their hopes and fears. These fears were magnified during the Cold War, when mushroom clouds no longer needed to be imagined; they appeared on the evening news. Weart examines nuclear anxiety in sources as diverse as Alain Resnais's film *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, Cormac McCarthy's novel *The Road*, and the television show *The Simpsons*.

Recognizing how much we remain in thrall to these setpieces of the imagination, Weart hopes, will help us resist manipulation from both sides of the nuclear debate.

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Editorial Review

Review

This is a wonderful book, which I can't wait to assign to my students. It's not a conventional history of the nuclear age, but something much more unusual and creative—an exploration of the images and emotions that nuclear weapons and power generation have inspired, from the dropping of the Bomb up to the recent crisis at the Fukushima reactor in Japan. The interplay of emotion and reason in the atomic debate of the past 100 years is handled with great sensitivity but also incisive criticism. Neither side in that debate escapes Weart's penetrating rebuttal of their wilder claims. (Gerard De Groot, author of *The Bomb: A Life*)

Published in 1988, just two years after the catastrophic explosion at Chernobyl, Weart's *Nuclear Fear* remains a classic study of the way imagery has dominated the nuclear debate. This book is a slimmed-down and revised version of the earlier 550-page volume. Its publication is well timed. The threat of global warming has brought about a second nuclear age, with even some environmentalists now accepting that nuclear energy has a role to play in a low-carbon future. But the meltdown at the Fukushima reactors may undermine that—opinion polls show that fear of all things nuclear is back to pre-1990 levels. From scientists' fantasies of a utopian nuclear-powered White City, to anti-nuclear fears of radioactive mutated monsters, Weart reveals how our atomic dreams and nightmares form "one of the most powerful complexes of images ever created outside of religions." He argues convincingly that these potent images prevent us from facing the real issue: how are we to "improve world prosperity while burning less fuel?" (P. D. Smith *The Guardian* 2012-04-07)

[A] fascinating, insightful book...It's a thoughtful look back at our emotional relationship not just with atomic weapons but with nuclear radiation generally, from its discovery by the Curies through Fukushima, a history of how radiation went from "Gee Whiz!" to "OH NO!" It is also wonderfully entertaining, as Weart weaves his story around the way radiation has been reflected in popular culture. You'll be familiar with some of the elements of the story, amazed by others...[An] important book. (David Ropeik *Scientific American* 2012-06-15)

[This is a] streamlined history accessible to the general reader...[It] is impressive, fusing a bold argument with deep erudition in history, politics, physics, psychology, economics, art, and literature...Any future history [of nuclear energy] will have to place Weart's arguments at the center...*The Rise of Nuclear Fear* is a fresh account of the nuclear age. (Michael D. Gordon *Physics Today* 2012-06-01)

Weart originally published this work in 1988 as *Nuclear Fear*. This revision is a far more palatable working of a history that most people of a certain age will recognize as forging their lives. It is not only impressive for its illustrative range, from movies and magazines to abstract expressionism and Nobel science, it is a page-turning tour de force with power and relevance writ in memory of Japanese fishermen aboard the *Lucky Dragon* and recapitulated at Fukushima. Historically framed, this sobering fantasy of very real nuclear fears in 300 documented, annotated pages, with a personal update, time line, and, of course, that index, is a must read. (L. W. Fine *Choice* 2012-11-01)

About the Author

Spencer R. Weart is Director Emeritus of the Center for History of Physics of the American Institute of Physics.

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