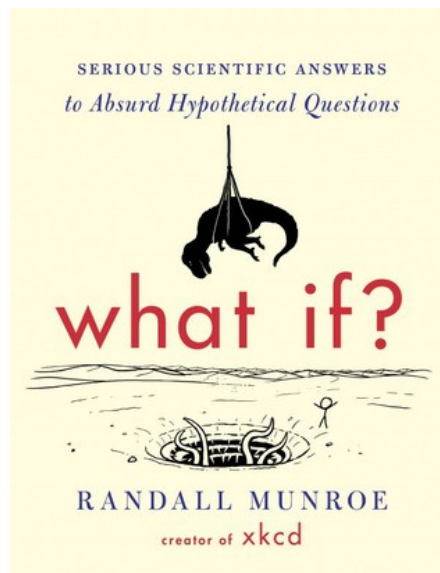




# What If?: Serious Scientific Answers to Absurd Hypothetical Questions

*Randall Munroe*

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Randall Munroe

## What If?: Serious Scientific Answers to Absurd Hypothetical Questions Randall Munroe

Randall Munroe left NASA in 2005 to start up his hugely popular site XKCD 'a web comic of romance, sarcasm, math and language' which offers a witty take on the world of science and geeks. It now has 600,000 to a million page hits daily. Every now and then, Munroe would get emails asking him to arbitrate a science debate. 'My friend and I were arguing about what would happen if a bullet got struck by lightning, and we agreed that you should resolve it . . . ' He liked these questions so much that he started up *What If*.

**If your cells suddenly lost the power to divide, how long would you survive?**

**How dangerous is it, really, to be in a swimming pool in a thunderstorm?**

**If we hooked turbines to people exercising in gyms, how much power could we produce?**

**What if everyone only had one soulmate?**

**When (if ever) did the sun go down on the British empire?**

**How fast can you hit a speed bump while driving and live?**

**What would happen if the moon went away?**

In pursuit of answers, Munroe runs computer simulations, pores over stacks of declassified military research memos, solves differential equations, and consults with nuclear reactor operators. His responses are masterpieces of clarity and hilarity, studded with memorable cartoons and infographics. They often predict the complete annihilation of humankind, or at least a really big explosion. Far more than a book for geeks, *WHAT IF: Serious Scientific Answers to Absurd Hypothetical Questions* explains the laws of science in operation in a way that every intelligent reader will enjoy and feel much the smarter for having read.

## What If?: Serious Scientific Answers to Absurd Hypothetical Questions Details

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Questions Randall Munroe**

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## From Reader Review What If?: Serious Scientific Answers to Absurd Hypothetical Questions for online ebook

Philip says

One of the things that's nice about goodreads is that it lets you embed pictures. ...And one of the nice things about xkcd is that it has lots of pictures licensed under CC Attribution/Non-Commerical - meaning I can post as many as I want to this review.

I'm pretty sure that if you're here, you already know about xkcd. But hey, why the heck not? Right? XKCD is why this Randall Munroe character is famous.

The book comes from his "what if" blog, which is also very good.

I took the book into work with me to show it around - you know - hipster-esque and what not. I'm reading this trendy, new book first.

But the guys at my table were all like, "Yeah... I can see myself reading like 2 or 3 of these and then putting the book down..." Everyone more or less nodded in agreement - even though they thought the book was cool.

Then I looked at the book a little bit more closely, flipped through a little bit and thought, "Huh... that sounds about right. That's probably what I'm going to do..."

I'll add that one guy in my group really hate hypothetical questions... This is mostly because kids in arguments try to prove points by using them stupidly. You know: "But what if Hitler hadn't killed the Jews? Would you like him then?" or "What if Martin Luther King Jr. *had* used violence? You have to admit, it's pretty crazy that we've given this guy a holiday, right?" He has a point.

So, I took the book home - slightly shamed that I hadn't realized it was more for coffee tables than actual reading.

But then I picked it up and read a couple. And a couple more. Next thing I know, a couple of days later the book is done - and I really enjoyed it. ...And I learned a lot. Well presumably.

I did come on here hoping that some of the reviews would challenge Munroe's math. Or any of his conclusions. I mean, if I did on a couple of these, there are bound to be some flame wars in the comments sections of these review right? If I could take issue with a couple... I am **NOT** a math guy.

In case there aren't any flame wars yet, let me start one: On page 114 in answer to the question, "If everyone on the planet stayed away from each other for a couple of weeks, wouldn't the common cold be wiped out?" he says, *"The common cold is caused by a variety of viruses, but rhinoviruses are the most common culprit. These viruses take over the cells in your nose and throat and use them to produce more viruses. After a few days, your immune system notices and destroys it, but not before you infect, on average, one other person."*

Then he has a footnote which reads, *"Mathematically, this must be true. If the average were less than one, the virus would die out. If it were more than one, eventually everyone would have a cold all the time.* But that can't be right? Can it? It's tough to tell whether he's serious or not, because sometimes the footnotes are jokes, and other times they're not.

But here, it made me question the math of the rest of the book. He's very meticulous in his calculations throughout, but here he doesn't factor in seasons, or how vast the globe is... Wouldn't it make more sense that when we have the virus we average more than one infection - and then people stay away from us - and are more cautious in general - which is why the number goes back down but doesn't die out completely?

It took me a while to get over this, undermining the whole book for a couple seconds. Seriously, if he had just said "but not before you infect, on average, on other person." I wouldn't have thought twice about it.

Of course, I doubted him on other footnotes: pg 134 *"Although it's a little different, if you drip superglue on cotton thread, it will catch fire."* That can't be right can it? That's another of his jokes? Right?

Munroe also interspersed "Weird (and worrying) questions from the what if? inbox. ...Honestly, most of these weren't any weirder than the questions he was already answering. And sometimes I think they only seemed weird, but I think he may have missed the trail.

Like on page 236, the question is, *"What is the probability that if I am stabbed by a knife in my torso that it won't hit anything vital and I'll live?"*

There's a stick figure that says ..."Asking for a friend... former friend, I mean."

But I think it's a legitimate question. And I'm pretty sure it comes from the movie SCREAM. - wasn't it a major plot point? So, Thomas, (the person who asked the question) wherever you are - I don't think you're a weirdo. (...Yeah, yeah, yeah... spoiler alert, if you're reading this in 1996... Although, I'd be willing to wager if anyone can travel through time, it's Munroe. He's sure studying that stuff. And Einstein. And Schrodinger. Also, probably J. Robert Oppenheimer.)

And the book is so dated. He mentions the "new-fangled writing section" of the SAT on page 278. That was dropped way back in 2016. - Time travelling - am I right?

Finally, Munroe - if you're reading this - *and I know you are* just take the plunge and watch Dragon Ball Z already. You may hate it, but don't knock it till you've tried it, right?

Seriously - loved the book. Thought I would like it, didn't think I would love it. Didn't think I would read it the whole way through - finished it in under 3 days.

...Also, shouldn't this go under like... a sci-fi shelf? Since the questions are hypothetical... Isn't this exactly what science-fiction is? It's just not told in narrative form in this case?

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**Manny says**

**Q: What would happen if every geek in the world received a copy of *What If* tomorrow morning?**

A: Actually, less than you'd think.

First, a little background about this book. If you're a geek, it's unputdownable, a word that, if you think carefully, means "cannot be put down". (You may not be aware of this fact, since the word is nearly always misused). So the geek who receives it is going to carry on reading through breakfast, through lunch, while he's supposed to be working, and on through dinner, ignoring the non-geek guests who have come to visit. He'll interrupt conversations every now and then to ask things like "Could you build a bridge across the Atlantic out of Lego bricks?" or "How close would you need to be to a supernova to be killed by the neutrino flux?". He'll finish just as the last guest leaves.

There is a common myth, most likely spread by geeks, that what they do is somehow pretty important to Western civilization. If you're easily impressed by this kind of propaganda, you might expect that markets will crash as geek traders neglect their buy signals, nuclear experiments will explode as geek scientists look away from their control panels, and terrorists will strike with impunity as geek intelligence analysts fail to turn up for work. All that sounds pretty bad.

But let's stop and consider for a moment. Is any of the above geek behavior novel or unpredictable? Hardly. Geeks are always doing this kind of thing, and society has learned to work around them. Important as they may be *in the long run*, there's always some dependable non-geek person ready to step in just in case the geek in question has stayed up all night playing Halo or watching a Star Wars marathon. The non-geek will cover for them until the geek has got over their fifteen hour internet speed-chess session and is ready to do whatever it is they're actually being paid to do.

So delivering a copy of *What If* to every geek in the world will only really have two important effects. It will make a great many geeks very happy, and (assuming of course that the copies are paid for) it will turn Randall Munroe into a billionaire.

And who could possibly have anything against that?

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**Patrick says**

I've been a reader of XKCD for ages. Not just a reader, a fan. A big goey, geeky fan.

So much of a fan that when I heard about this book, I went so far as to abuse my power as an author to get an Advance Reading Copy of the book, so that I could enjoy its deliciousness sooner. And... y'know... taunt people on the internet.

And it worked. I got an early copy. And I treasured it. I petted it. It was precious to me. Precious.

Then life got in the way. Conventions. Promotion for my own book launch. I had dad stuff to do. I had prep work for the yearly Worldbuilders fundraiser. Then I had my book tour....

Through all of this, I carried my precious ARC around, waiting for the time when I'd be able to spare the brainpower to read it. I even took it on tour with me. (Honestly, this book has more frequent flier miles than any three of you put together.)

It wasn't until I got back home that I started it. I wanted something to read before I went to bed, and I picked What If because I was worried if I picked up another book I'd be reading half the night and it would screw up my already dysfunctional sleep schedule.

Despite my best intentions, I read half the book that night. It cost me precious sleep I couldn't afford to lose. But I don't regret it. Not a bit.

It's clever, but if you know anything about Randall Munroe, that won't come as a surprise to you. And it's funny, and witty (which are two different things, by the way.) But again to readers of XKCD this won't come as any sort of surprise.

The surprise was how *\*easy\** it was to read. There's some decent science in there, but it wasn't anywhere nearly as brain-taxing as I'd expected. Munroe does a brilliant job of explaining very complex concepts simply. That's a rare gift.

The other surprise is how much it pulled me in. I expected to read the book in dribs and drabs over a couple weeks. Instead, I tore through it. That's not usually the case for me with non-fiction books.

In brief, it's worth your time. Even if you haven't read his comic. Even if you haven't ever heard of Randall Munroe. Even if you're not into science. You should pick this up and read it. You'll be glad you did.

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## Steve Alexander says

This is one of the most entertaining books I have ever read. And I have read over 10 books.

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## Miranda Reads says

*Trying to thoroughly answer a stupid question can take you to some pretty interesting places.*

Randall Munroe, ex-NASA employee and author of the **wildly popular webcomic XKCD**, decides to look at several, undoubtedly, absurd questions and find scientific answers to them.

**Nothing is too absurd for him** - whether it be the logistics of finding your soulmate to what happens if our moon suddenly disappears - **Munroe answers it all.**

*But I've never seen the Icarus story as a lesson about the limitations of humans. I see it as a lesson about the limitations of wax as an adhesive.*

I absolutely **loved the tone** of voice throughout the book.

*There's no material safety data sheet for astatine. If there were, it would just be the word "NO" scrawled over and over in charred blood.*

His **hilarious deadpan** just absolutely cinched this book for me.

*It's not the fall that kills you, it's the sudden stop at the end.*



xkcd has got an inbox where people can submit questions of any kind - and they do. The questions have to be seen to be believed. Randall Munroe takes all the questions seriously - and tries to provide "scientific" answers to each. This book is a collection of such questions and answers. The answers are sometimes tongue-in-cheek, but there is the spirit of serious scientific investigation (experiment - observation - interpretation) in each: accompanied by his signature stick figures and one-liners, they are a delight to read.

Some sample questions:

"What would happen if you tried to hit a baseball pitched at 90% the speed of light?"

"How quickly would the oceans drain if a circular portal 10 meters in radius leading into space was created at the bottom of Challenger Deep, the deepest spot in the ocean? How would the Earth change as the water is being drained?"

"Supposing you did Drain the Oceans, and dumped the water on top of the Curiosity rover, how would Mars change as the water accumulated?"

"When (if ever) did the Sun finally set on the British Empire?"

"If an asteroid was very small but supermassive, could you really live on it like the Little Prince?"

"If you suddenly began rising steadily at one foot per second, how exactly would you die? Would you freeze or suffocate first? Or something else?"

These are just a sample. There are many, many more.

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If you love science, or just like asking seemingly idiotic questions just for the heck of it, or both (like me!) - this book is for you. Or you can just hop over to Munroe's site and read these - and many more - there. You can even submit an absurd question yourself.

This book is pure bliss.

**("Wikipedia Protester")**

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**Valerie says**

My evil plan of reading this book in small doses aloud to my students during math class has worked. Several of them have bought their own copies, and they are, I believe, planning to use their math skills for good, and not for world domination.

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**Paul Bryant says**

Mr Munroe includes some "weird and worrying" questions from his website's inbox which he presents

without attempting to answer – one favourite was:

**If you saved a whole life's worth of kissing and used all that suction power on one single kiss, how much suction force would that single kiss have?**

I guess the answer might be “what pharmaceutical products have you ingested during the last four hours?” or “May I speak to your parents?”

Another person named Jon Merrill asked

**How fast would a human have to run in order to be cut in half at the bellybutton by a cheese-cutting wire?**

Answer has to be “as fast as I will be running if I ever meet you Jon”.

And a person called Kenneth asked

**What if every day, every human had a 1 per cent chance of being turned into a turkey, and every turkey had a one percent chance of being turned into a human?**

Randall does not provide a response to that one but I would have said Kenneth, if only life were like that. Wouldn't it be *fabulous*?

Everybody likes this book and I liked half of it, the other half was so far over my head it might have been a distant Andean condor croaking Sanskrit into a Bluetooth headset. Some of the stuff Randall devotes pages of detailed analysis to did not tickle my ivories, like

**What would happen if a hair dryer with continuous power were turned on and put into an airtight 1 x 1 x 1-meter box?**

I mean, get a life. Who the flock cares about a hair dryer in a box? But many are very interesting. He tackles the old chestnut

**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 time?**

He picks Rhode Island (it's just big enough for everyone on Earth, surprisingly) as a designated place where this event might be staged, and imagines the result. In regard to the jump and the landing itself, not so much would result. But then he imagines the implications of all those people trying to get back home from Rhode Island. It's terrible – it's an apocalypse. If this mass jumping event was actually staged it would cause the immediate termination of civilisation and the death of billions.

*The edge of the crowd spreads outward into southern Massachusetts and Connecticut. Any two people who meet are unlikely to have a language in common, and almost nobody knows the area. The state becomes a chaotic patchwork of coalescing and collapsing social hierarchies. Violence is common.*

Yes it is a nice book but I do not recommend that you wolf down this book as I did in 2 days, because it's like TOO MUCH and it can get annoying. You keep thinking of your own absurd questions –

**How many soldier ants would it take to chew through my leg in one hour? And would I survive?**

And really, there is one question which I really want to ask Randall, it's actually been something I have been wondering about for a long time – you know those vending machines stuffed full of really unhealthy chocs and crisps and cokes? Well, imagine a person was chained to one of those and had an infinite amount of small change within arms reach. Then imagine the vending machine gets refilled by the usual contractor in the usual way (who never notices the chained person). So : how long would it take the captive to die from a constant diet of crap? If they were only eating chocs and crisps and drinking cokes? A month? Six months? A YEAR?? It's really bugging me. I may have to launch a practical experiment.

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## Diane says

This book opens with the best disclaimer I have ever seen:

"Do not try any of this at home. The author of this book is an Internet cartoonist, not a health or safety expert. He likes it when things catch fire or explode, which means he does not have your best interests in mind. The publisher and the author disclaim responsibility for any adverse effects resulting, directly or indirectly, from information contained in this book."

That disclaimer really sets the tone for this fun book about science: *Dangerous ideas ahead, folks! Don't get too close -- these things could kill ya!*

Randall Munroe used to work at NASA, and now he creates the webcomic XKCD (which sounds less stressful than the NASA gig). On his website, he takes "absurd hypothetical questions" from readers and tries to answer some of them. Here are some of my favorite questions in this book:

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?

If every human somehow simply disappeared from the face of the Earth, how long would it be before the last artificial light source would go out?

How long could a nuclear submarine last in orbit?

From what height would you need to drop a steak for it to be cooked when it hit the ground?

If everyone on the planet stayed away from each other for a couple of weeks, wouldn't the common cold be wiped out?

Which US state is actually flown over the most?

Is there enough energy to move the entire current human population off-planet?

How high can a human throw something?

How fast can you hit a speed bump while driving and live?

When, if ever, will the bandwidth of the Internet surpass that of FedEx?

How quickly would the oceans drain if a circular portal 10 meters in radius leading into space were created at the bottom of Challenger Deep, the deepest spot in the ocean? How would the Earth change as the water was being drained?

How many Lego bricks would it take to build a bridge capable of carrying traffic from London to New York? Have that many Lego bricks been manufactured?

What would happen to the Earth if the Sun suddenly switched off?

If you are interested to know any of the answers to those questions, this book is for you! What made this so much fun, aside from the ridiculous questions, is Munroe's sense of humor. Several times I laughed out loud at his drawings and his answers, which is not something that usually happens when I'm reading about science. Oh, and be sure to read his footnotes, which have even more jokes.

I think this book would be a great gift for kids who love to ask crazy questions about how the world works. I think I would have loved it when I was 10.

\*I need to thank my GR friend Brendon for pointing out this marvelous book, because I had never heard of the author before. It's the miracle of Goodreads!

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## Brendon Schrodinger says

Every nerd knows Randall Munroe from his wildly humorous and insightful xkcd.com comics right?

You don't? What the hell are you doing here listening to me blab on? xkcd.com

For all those people still here, and who obviously know Randall's work, let's just bask in the mixture of intelligence, cleverness, hilarity and properly labelled axes. All the nerd girls want to sleep with him and all nerd boys want to ~~sleep with him too~~...be him.

So it seems like he has been running a column on his website where people suggest extreme scientific hypotheticals and he tries to make sense of them and work out what would happen using his extreme knowledge of math and physics. I obviously have not been to observant because this book is the first I have heard of it. I guess I'm a bit of a shit fan. Hang on, I payed him for the book. Best fan ever.

The book is a collection of questions he has answered as well as questions he did not answer for the good of society as a whole. Answered questions include "If every human somehow simply disappeared from the face of the Earth, how long would it be before the last artificial light source would go out?" and "How fast can you hit a speed bump while driving and live?". These are the questions that I always ask while out in the world but I tend to forget as soon as I'm home. Or out of the shower. Definitely shower thoughts.

Questions not answered include "What is the probability that if I am stabbed by a knife in my torso that it won't hit anything vital and I'll live?" and "How fast would a human have to run in order to be cut in half at the belly button by a cheese cutting wire?" It's fun to laugh along with these, but it does make you realise that there is a fine line between scientist and horribly obscene psycho killers. Mad scientists are common in literature while Mad Florists not so much.

So this is the book for those readers who are tired of the science question and answer compendiums full of

"Why is the sky blue?". I adored it and I want more.

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## Riku Sayuj says

### Change.Org Petition: Despicable Munroe

The International Astronomical Union recently named an asteroid after Randall Munroe; asteroid 4942 *Munroe* is big enough to cause a mass extinction if it ever hits Earth.

Not that he needs an asteroid to do that. He has his minions devising millions of ways to do it, on a subversive site they call xkcd.com. This book is a set of leaked manuals.

It should be clear to all how dangerous this guy (and his site) really is. But all Government agencies fail to heed my warnings.

I exhort you to read this and then contact your local representative immediately. We can stop him. Together.

If you still have doubts, let me remind you of numerous disaster movies — there is always only ONE GUY who saw it coming! Do you really want to ignore me?

Eager for your support,

Thanks.

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## Lindsey Rey says

I highly recommend taking the audiobook route for this one unless you absolutely love very technical science. Wil Wheaton's narration was excellent and he delivered Munroe's humor perfectly! I loved this so much I bought a hard copy for my coffee table.

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## Ted says

### What if ... every Goodreads review had to be written in a randomly determined time? What per cent of submitted reviews would end with a completed sentence?

Well, this amounts to the question of, what per cent of reviewers would simply stop typing when the time ran out, instead of finishing up what they were saying and ignoring the stupid rule.

But there could be a correlation (or inverse correlation?) between how reviewers reacted to such a rule, and the day job they had – or the “purity” of the field they worked in.

At any rate, let's see ...

Random time in the interval 45 minutes to 75 minutes: **53:51**

I'd better turn off the baseball game. Right.

Okay, the clock is started,

**Author** Randall Munroe writes the on-line comic strip *xkcd*. (See example above.)

<https://xkcd.com/>

On the site, it's billed as **A webcomic of romance, sarcasm, math, and language**. There's a lot of casual references to computer stuff too. Munroe used to work at NASA as a physicist (I think), then decided to do this other gig. The gags he draws range from single frame, to three frames, to multiple frames extended down your computer screen – sometimes with rafts of text in table form, or anything else that he thinks appropriate for the laugh he's aiming at.

A couple hints for looking at xkcd.

- 1) The humans are always drawn as stick figures. Their gender is shown by types of hairdos on the females. In the strip above, the sociologist, chemist, and mathematician are girls. Obviously.
- 2) By hovering your mouse over the picture (not clicking) a “bonus punch line” (my phrase) will appear. (That won't happen with the cartoon above.)

**44:03**

## **the book**

The secondary title is *SERIOUS SCIENTIFIC ANSWERS to Absurd Hypothetical Questions*.

There might be about 60 of the Question/ANSWER articles in the book. (No time to count them.)

Interspersed with these are a dozen single page pieces called “Weird (and Worrying) Questions from the What If? Inbox”. Each page has a couple questions, with no response by the author, except for sometimes a cartoon drawing, a stick figure saying something, etc.

Here's a quite worrying example, #6

Q. What is the total nutritional value (calories, fat, vitamins, minerals, etc.) of the average human body? – Justin Risner

Q. What temperature would a chainsaw (or other cutting implement) need to be at to instantly cauterize any injuries inflicted with it? – Sylvia Gallaher

(These are probably the worst in the book.) One of these that I wished he had answered was this one.

Q. What if every day, every human had a 1 percent chance of being turned into a turkey, and every turkey had a 1 percent chance of being turned into a human? - Kenneth

The main entries are 3-5 pages long, mostly text, some cartoons accompanying. It's often hard to anticipate

where Munroe will go with a question.

One item is called No More DNA. The question is, “This may be a bit gruesome, but ... if someone’s DNA suddenly vanished, how long would that person last?”

Munroe notes that the average person would be about a third of a pound lighter, then gives a list of several ways that one can lose that amount of weight easier [more safely too!] – such as peeing.

When he gets to seriously addressing the question, he says, “To get an idea of what it might be like, lets turn to mushroom poisonings.” Specifically – the *Amanita bisporigera*. The several related species (from America and Europe) are called by the name **destroying angel**. These mushrooms contain **amatoxin**, which binds to an enzyme that is used to read information from DNA. “It hobbles the enzyme, effectively interrupting the process by which cells follow DNA’s instructions.” The amatoxin causes irreversible damage to whatever cells it collects in, in its case, the liver and kidney. There is a *walking ghost* phase of Amanita poisoning, where the person seems to get better – but their cells are accumulating irreversible and lethal damage. Munroe says this is probably similar to what might happen in the case of the absurd question being answered.

Other examples of DNA damage he talks about are from radiation and chemotherapy.

I was appropriately horrified by this piece, but I learned about a mushroom I’d never known of, that apparently can be found in the area I live in. SO I now know what it looks like, having searched it out. (Not that I eat wild mushrooms.)

Most of the questions are not this disturbing, though they are equally absurd.

How long could a nuclear submarine last in orbit?

What if everyone actually had only one soul mate, a random person somewhere in the world?

How much space does the physical internet take up?

If you call a random phone number and say “God bless you,” what are the chances that the person who answers just sneezed?

The book is like a box of assorted chocolates. You can never tell what you’ll find inside one. It might be scary, it might be funny; it might be just plain fascinating, you might learn something really strange. You very well might want to read parts of it to your partner (share the candy). Any or all, as well as other flavors not mentioned.

But the best thing about this book is to just leave it around. Pick it up and flip to a page when you have guests. Or pick it up when you have nothing better to do, and eat one of the candies again! They keep coming back, really.

**00:20** I’ll quit while I’m not behind.

.....

**Previous review:** It Can’t Happen Here Sinclair Lewis *or can It?*

**Random review:** Stoner John Williams

**Next review:** The Angle of Repose *lit., not science or math*

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## **Felicia says**

AMAZING BOOK! I love love love it and frankly, there's no better book to read on the toilet. Off the toilet too, but I learned so much and the writing is so engaging and entertaining and just MARVELOUS. Of course in the style of xkcd, this and Atlas Obscura would be my go-to book gifts this year.

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