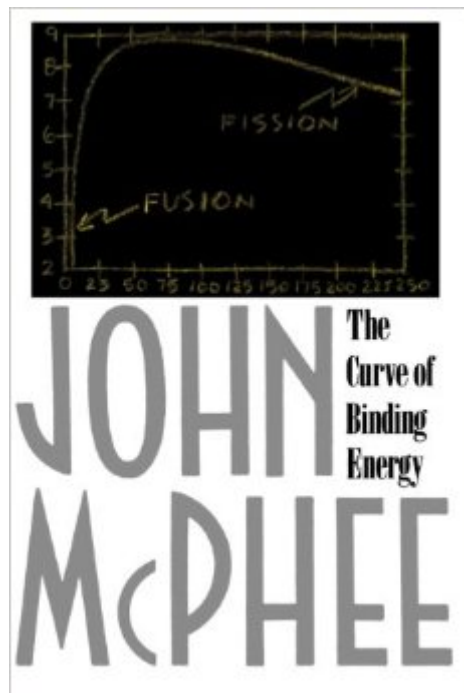


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The Curve Of Binding Energy: A Journey Into The Awesome And Alarming World Of Theodore B. Taylor



Synopsis

Theodore Taylor was one of the most brilliant engineers of the nuclear age, but in his later years he became concerned with the possibility of an individual being able to construct a weapon of mass destruction on their own. McPhee tours American nuclear institutions with Taylor and shows us how close we are to terrorist attacks employing homemade nuclear weaponry.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

John McPhee is a writer for the New Yorker with a particular focus on science and nature. His heroes tend not to be the pure scientists but the engineers, the doers. His 1987 profile of the Old River Control Structure, the enormously complex and epic-scale engineering works that prevent the main body of the waters of the Mississippi from spilling down the Atchafalaya as they really want to, was widely linked at the time of the New Orleans floods last year and deservedly so -- search for "McPhee Old River Control" to read it, it's well worth it. He has a love for the concrete that doesn't prevent him having a good understanding of the underlying science that his engineers use and writes clearly and with energy. The Curve of Binding Energy is about Ted Taylor, a physicist from Los Alamos, his efforts to develop the lightest fission bomb that he possibly could, and how his research pushed him in the direction of proper oversight of post-fission materials. The writing is excellent, pacey and readable, though at times tending too much to the New Yorker structure of "At facility Y I was ushered in to meet Expert X. He had shrewd eyes and an expansive, welcoming half-smile at the corners of his mouth. He said Z." The basic message is: (1) plutonium is easy to

get access to; (2) with current (1974) practices and volumes the amount necessary to produce a bomb (15 kg) would be lost in the statistical noise; (3) this will only get worse as volumes produced go up, and they're projected to go up massively. This is all from the perspective of 1974, of course. Since then, prompted in part by the concerns this book raised (and in part by independent factors such as a fall in the price of oil), the US cut back hugely on reactor starts. Nevertheless, nuclear power in the US grew from 114.

I first read *The Curve of Binding Energy* when I bought the paperback edition in 1974 or 1975. It's one of the most compelling books I've ever read, and when that paperback finally bit the dust after so many readings, I got the Kindle version. In the book, author John McPhee documented the life and thoughts of theoretical physicist Ted Taylor as he accompanied him on a tour of facilities where nuclear fuels were processed or stored. Taylor was a remarkable man, a quirky but brilliant atomic bomb designer who worked at Los Alamos National Laboratory in the post-WWII years, designing smaller but more efficient fission bombs. His smallest successful bomb? The Davy Crockett, which he described as being about the size of a rugby football. The book is heavy on Taylor's concerns about terrorists or criminals stealing uranium or plutonium from nuclear fuel processing or storage facilities, or while these materials were being transported. In the era when the book was published (1974), the future was very bright for nuclear power, which drove Taylor's concerns, since there would be a huge increase in the amount of fuel being processed, plus the large stockpiles of plutonium that would come from the new breeder reactors. But as we now know, that never happened, and very few new reactors were licensed in the U.S. after the 1970s. And with accidents like Three Mile Island (1979), Chernobyl (1986), and more recently, Japan's Fukushima Daiichi (2011), the future of nuclear power looks bleak in the United States as well as many other countries. Ted Taylor was instrumental in designing many of the fission bombs developed at Los Alamos from the late 1940s through the mid-1950s. In the book, he gave a lot of fairly detailed information on how to build a fission bomb.

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