

Romancing the Atom

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- How has RTA affected your views of science, medicine, the military, the government?
- Did Katherine Schaub “die for science,” as she suggested in her interview shortly before her death? Of what other people in RTA might we also ask this question?
- Did RTA bring back memories for you of the history of atomic development? Which of these memories most surprised you? That is, were you surprised that you had forgotten them?
- Have you or someone you know been affected directly by moments in atomic development?
- What do you or they remember from these personal experiences? Have these memories been revived from reading RTA?
- Consider the 1951 photograph of the men sitting in Adirondack chairs observing an atomic explosion in the Marshall Islands. What “story” does that picture tell you? Is it a vision of “romance” with the atom? How?
- Is it possible to “change our modes of thinking” as Albert Einstein suggested? What would this entail? Where might you as an individual begin in such a “change” of thinking modalities?
- What does RTA bring to mind regarding various environmental issues? Is, for instance, nuclear power a viable alternative to solar and wind power? Why, why not?
- What connections can you make between the “promise” of nuclear energy and, say, the “promise” of deep water oil exploration? Are there similarities/differences?
- By pondering the quotes in support of nuclear power development in Chapter 10, who has the most to gain by investments in nuclear power development? Who might lose?
- If a nuclear power plant is proposed for construction in your regional area, what would your reaction be? What actions might you take?

- What specific events immediately come to mind regarding indigenous peoples from your reading of RTA? Why does that moment come so readily to mind?
- What powers do indigenous peoples have with regard to atomic development?
- How would you characterize the conversation that often takes place when members of an indigenous culture express to others outside their group a distrust of atomic science, military uses of atomic energy, or any other aspect of atomic development?
- If you are diagnosed with a potential health problem, and the doctors tell you they want to immediately conduct a Cat Scan, an MRI, or X-ray, what might you ask before you agree to the procedure?
- We live in moments of “frenzy” such as the uranium frenzy of the 1950s. In the present day, it might be argued that the rush to embrace digital technologies is a frenzy. Do you think this is the case? Are there similar characteristics in these moments of frenzy, or other historical moments of frenzy (oil, timber, gold, etc.) that we have witnessed?
- What do the events surrounding the Fukushima disaster tell us about the atomic mindset? Do those events reinforce any of the arguments concerning the atomic mindset as put forth in this book?
- How have the 2011 events in Japan affected your perception of the “green enthymeme?” How might you think these events have affected the many people quoted in Chapter 9 who argue for nuclear power prior to 2011?

Romancing the Atom

CLASS ASSIGNMENTS

1. Locate and interview individuals affected by or involved with the atom. For instance, there might be a nuclear power plant nearby with employees who would be glad to do this. Also, professors at a local university who are involved with atomic energy are a good source. And, there is a good possibility that there have been people affected by events such as the Alba Craft cleanup who would like to talk about their experiences. This can be done as a group or individual assignment and completed as an oral presentation to the class. NOTE: you should always get written permission from any interviewee as they are “human subjects.”
2. Explore the science of the atom. The elemental make up of the atom and how scientists have come to understand its secrets is a fascinating and very well documented story of science. Conduct a research project that focuses on one of these “stories of the atom” and write a formal report or research paper.
3. Study the history of the development of the Nuremberg Code and how it came to be the source for the U.S. human subject code of ethics.
4. Examine the Freedom of Information Act that was used in the 1990s to open the huge collection of post-cold war documents and other artifacts. Consider what that Act provided to the public understanding of the atomic mindset and what we might not have known if such a governmental Act had not been put into place.
5. Explore the Atoms for Peace movement that began immediately after World War II and that is still functioning as The Federation of American Scientists (see the web site for the FAS below).
6. Investigate comic books, cartoons and popular magazines or books that focus on atomic development. You could also look more deeply into the science kits and games of the 1950s, such as those mentioned in Chapter 2. (See the Oak Ridge University web link below).
7. Create a skit that draws from the stories in Romancing the Atom. The skit could be dramatic, historical, or even satirical, like in the spirit of The Daily Show, The Colbert Report, or The Onion.
8. Research and write a story of your own about a moment in the history of atomic and nuclear development.

9. The Fukushima tsunami and Daichi nuclear power plant meltdown have placed the “green enthymeme” in a questionable light. Refer to some of the quotes about the absolute need for nuclear power and do some follow up research on what these people are saying (or not saying) about nuclear power now.

10. Write a poem about the romance, the mindset, and/or the history of the atomic age.