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## Commuter-Rail Reading: 'Global Catastrophes and Trends'

We get dozens, perhaps hundreds, of books here every week at *The Chronicle*, but who could resist a book with a title like *Global Catastrophes and Trends: The Next Fifty Years*? The book, published last year by MIT Press, lives up to its title in many ways and more. A data-saturated assessment of the major challenges the world will face in our time, the book addresses every possible problem on the horizon, from unlikely “fatal discontinuities,” like a major asteroid, to more probable challenges like water shortages, soil erosion, political instability, and major wars.

Vaclav Smil, a professor at the University of Manitoba, challenges conventional wisdom throughout the book. Perhaps you’ve heard that China will be the ascendant superpower in the 21st century? Think again, Mr. Smil writes. That country faces incredible obstacles with its uneven gender ratio, its environmental problems, and its rigid political system. India, another country frequently listed for future-superpower status, faces similar problems, he insists.



At its core, *Global Catastrophes and Trends* is a book about sustainability and should be read by people who care about sustainability. Those who would want to plan for the future and relevance of higher education should read it as well.

A portion of Mr. Smil’s book is especially interesting in light of current events: Of the many catastrophes discussed in the book, one seems to unsettle Mr. Smil more than others: the possibility of an influenza pandemic. “The likelihood of another influenza pandemic during the next 50 years is virtually 100 percent,” Mr. Smil writes, “but quantifying probabilities of mild, moderate or severe events remains largely a matter of speculation because we simply do not know how pathogenic a new virus will be and what age categories it will preferentially attack.”

The famous 1918 pandemic killed between 25 million and 100 million, according to some estimates. Since



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1918, Mr. Smil points out, global population has more than tripled, people are more mobile, and they have gathered more intensely in cities, a suitable environment for spreading infection. If the next pandemic proportionally matches the severity of the 1918 flu, public-health organizations around the world would be crippled. But who knows how a pandemic would unfold, he writes, or how it would affect financial markets, the global economy, or the psyche of a generation.

That's *Global Catastrophes and Trends* — a book that raises very real possibilities for the future that are both horrifying and yet exhilarating for the challenges they pose.

Scott Carlson | Friday May 1, 2009 | [Permalink](#) | [Contact us](#)

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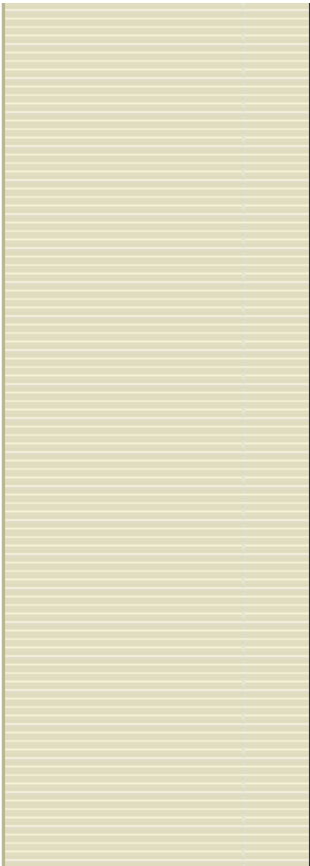
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Buildings & Grounds is written by [Scott Carlson](#)  
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