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Interview with Kate Brown, author of *Manual for Survival: A Chernobyl Guide to the Future*

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We cannot learn from disasters we do not yet understand. That conviction motivated historian Kate Brown to conduct groundbreaking research into nuclear energy's most infamous chapter and write *Manual for Survival: A Chernobyl Guide to the Future* (Norton, 2019). By digging into recently opened regional archives, conducting dozens of interviews, and visiting sites across Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia, Brown sought to understand the extent of the damage from the 1986 explosion of Chernobyl's reactor No. 4. From the initial reports of doctors that were concealed by Soviet officials to a careful examination of the way radioactive isotopes move through ecosystems, Brown's research suggests the official death toll of 54 is an undercount—perhaps by more than three orders of magnitude. Even more haunting is her contentious claim that we still know too little about the ecological and health consequences of chronic exposure to low-dose radiation. Nuclear states were, in Brown's view, insufficiently interested in studying such consequences in Chernobyl's wake, at a time when they were being sued for reparations by communities living on landscapes on which they had spent decades dropping atomic weapons. In the end, Brown calls not for the shuttering of nuclear power plants or a moratorium on the construction of new ones. Instead, she hopes that by taking a full look at Chernobyl's worst, we can better plan for how to live in our contaminated world full of uncertainty and risk. (Source: [New Books Network](#))

In this episode of *New Books in Environmental Studies*, Brian Hamilton interviews Kate Brown, professor of Science, Technology, and Society at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

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- New Books Network
<https://newbooksnetwork.com/>
- *Manual for Survival* at W.W. Norton & Company
<https://wwnorton.com/books/Manual-for-Survival/>
- “The Last Sink: The Human Body as the Ultimate Radioactive Storage Site” by Kate Brown
<http://www.environmentandsociety.org/perspectives/2016/1/article/last-sink-human-body-ultimate-radioactive-storage-site>

Websites linked in this text:

- <https://newbooksnetwork.com/kate-brown-manuel-for-survival-a-chernobyl-guide-to-the-future-norton-2019/>