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Zee Levin, William R. Cotton, eds.
New York:Springer, 2009, 386 pp.
ISBN: 978-1-4020-8869-2, $229

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Craig Nelson; Stéphane Vialette, eds.
New York:Springer, 2008, 265 pp.
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Monika Heiner, Adelinde M. Uhrmacher, eds.
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Maddalena I. van Oppen, Jamie M. Lough, eds.
New York:Springer, 2009, 178 pp.
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Nancy Newman
Cambridge, MA:MIST, 2008, 272 pp.
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Vivien Gornitz, ed.
New York:Springer, 2009, 1,049 pp.
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Arthur Philip Cracknell, Vladimir F. Krapivin, Costas Varotsos
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Omar K. Young, Leslie A. King, Arthur Philip Cracknell, Vladimir F. Krapivin, Costas Varotsos
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David M. Whitacre, ed.
New York:Springer, 2009, 205 pp.
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Honda Garelick, Huw Jones, eds.
New York:Springer, 2008, 194 pp.
ISBN: 978-0-387-79283-5, $31.95

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Committee on Improving Risk Analysis Approaches Used by the U.S. EPA, National Research Council
Washington, DC:National Academies Press, 2008, 478 pp.
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Roger D. Peng, Francesco Dominici
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Zili Yang
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Sustaining Life: How Human Health Depends on Biodiversity
Eric Chazan, Aaron Bernstein, eds.
New York:Oxford University Press, 2008, 542 pp.
ISBN: 978-0-19-517509-7, $34.95

Technology and Society: Building Our Sociotechnical Future
Deborah G. Johnson, Jameson M. Wittmer, eds.
Cambridge, MA:MIST, 2008, 648 pp.
ISBN: 978-0-262-60073-6, $42

Insatiable Curiosity: Innovation in a Fragile Future
By Helga Nowotny, translated by Mitch Cohen
Cambridge, MA:MIST, 2008, 179 pp.
ISBN: 978-0-262-14103-1, $30

Nowotny’s conclusions are unequivocal. There has been a permanent change in the social context of scientific enquiry and technological innovation. The tensions arising from the conflict between the drive for technological novelty and the need to guard against its possibly adverse consequences are more likely to increase than to abate, as innovation continues its headlong course. But that is no reason to erect barriers against the pursuit of the new. We need to preserve freedom of inquiry, with all its potential benefits, while increasing the vigilance with which we seek to anticipate its possibly deleterious side effects. We cannot stop the merry-go-round that began with the Scientific Revolution of the 17th century and the Industrial Revolution of the 18th. An accelerating rate of innovation is the defining characteristic of the society we have created, and we must find the nerve to live with it and devise methods of social control that will enable us to do so safely.

But in devising these controls, we need to protect researchers and designers from the narrowing influence of commercial sponsorship, with its preoccupation with short-term returns, and the unifying effect of the tunnel vision that comes with political agendas. Nowotny’s most important insights are that as a consequence of these commercial and political pressures, too much present-day research activity is goal oriented, in a narrow sense; and that excessive concentration on goals is pernicious, because it militates against serendipity, those unexpected discoveries that open up new possibilities that could not have been envisaged at the outset of the program that produces them.

The book comes with endorsements from several respected American academics, and for those whose professional interests or public responsibilities lie at the interface between science, politics, and economics, it could be said to be required reading. But for those who do not usually swim in these waters, a word of warning is in order. Nowotny is no ivory-tower academic. Every page of the book bespeaks the breadth of her reading, her interests, and her understanding of the political and commercial realities underlying the issues she explores. But she is a philosopher, and her long involvement in what one might call the sociology of science shows in the occasionally too-dense language in which her arguments are phrased. This makes her book rather hard going for the non-specialist, and those with only an amateur interest in its subject matter may find the reading of it an unrewarding experience.

Cyril Aydon
Cyril Aydon is a full-time writer specializing in the history of science. His books, which include A Book of Scientific Curiosities, A Brief Guide to Charles Darwin’s Life and Times, and A Brief History of Mankind, have been published in 11 countries.