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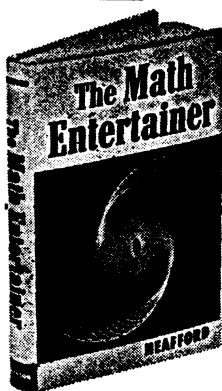
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to the editor

Truth/fiction

I'm beginning to wonder if truth really is stranger than fiction. Your report on research concerning a substance called "polywater" (SN: 1/3, p. 17) tallied detail for detail with a substance described by Kurt Vonnegut Jr. in his novel "Cat's Cradle."

Vonnegut called it "ice-nine"; a chip of the stuff, carried around in a Thermos bottle, eventually accounted for the solidification of every liquid in the world, including that in human bodies. Someone dropped it.

Brrr!

Susan Leigh Smith
Washington, D.C.

(Science fiction often precedes science in a most uncanny way. As a matter of fact, as we pointed out in a previous report, there were hints of polywater in the chemical literature of a few decades ago (SN: 7/12, p. 23). Some chemists are worried that the present polywater will turn the oceans to sludge if someone drops it, but the majority seem convinced this could not happen. Ed.)

Predictably touchy

Your article (SN: 11/29, p. 496) on the aftermath of the fire at the AEC plant in Rocky Flats, Colo., could unjustifiably add fuel to the flames of debate already raging between the AEC and citizens and groups in Colorado.

Plutonium was described as unpredictable and the statement was made that ". . . small plutonium fires are almost an everyday occurrence in Atomic Energy Commission plants that handle it." A neutral reader is left with the impression that the chemistry of plutonium production operations is poorly known and that unexpected and dangerous happenings in its manufacture are the rule rather than the exception. This is

certainly not the case. Plutonium chemistry, physics and metallurgy are quite well known and documented for typical production processes. A good summary, with ample reference, is given in the two-volume "Plutonium Handbook," Gordon and Breach, New York, 1967. Of course, unexpected problems do sometimes arise in plutonium production, as they do in all manufacturing processes, but rarely because of unknown plutonium phenomena. It is because of the widely recognized hazards of plutonium that production operations are so carefully developed and piloted; this caution hardly warrants the term "unpredictable."

The claim that small plutonium fires are an almost everyday occurrence appears to apply to all AEC plants handling elemental plutonium. And it is most certainly false, at least in one case I am familiar with. Indeed, in this case such a fire is a rare thing (when it does occur, the reason is apparent: usually a mistake). Perhaps the writer intended a more limited meaning but, as stated, it is misleading.

R. F. Rogers
Aiken, S.C.

Tritium research

I congratulate you on your concise and accurate interpretation of my hurricane tritium research (SN: 12/13, p. 553).

For your information, I would mention that I am a long-time subscriber to your magazine, which I enjoy very much and find very informative. Keep up the good work!

Dr. H. Gote Ostlund
Prof. of Marine and
Atmospheric Sciences
University of Miami
Institute of Marine Sciences
Miami, Fla.

SCIENCE NEWS

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