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# Review of: Alan McHughen, Pandora's Picnic Basket: The Potential and Hazards of Genetically Modified Foods

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## Review of: Alan McHughen, Pandora's Picnic Basket: The Potential and Hazards of Genetically Modified Foods

### **Erratum**

The citation for this review is *12 RISK* 143 (2001) in most commercial databases.

Alan McHughen, *Pandora's Picnic Basket: The Potential and Hazards of Genetically Modified Foods* (Oxford University Press 2000). Acknowledgements, introduction, glossary and abbreviations, resources, index. ISBN 0-19-850674-0 [277 pp. \$25.00 Cloth, 198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016-4314].

*Pandora's Picnic Basket* seeks to educate ordinary consumers about genetically modified foods in order to help them make informed choices in their purchasing decisions. The author, Alan McHughen, attempts to achieve this objective by explaining the basics of genetic technology at the beginning of the book.<sup>1</sup> McHughen suggests that genetic modification is not a new phenomenon, but has been a natural process of genetic evolution and selection of species. He explains that while conventional foods have been genetically modified using traditional methods, the traditional methods entail the added risk of unknown genes being transferred.<sup>2</sup> The author asserts that risk is minimized in the new genetic modification techniques because the transferred genes are scientifically documented.<sup>3</sup>

Throughout the book, McHughen compares the risk associated with conventional foods to the risks associated with genetically modified foods. McHughen argues that the risks now associated with genetically modified food have always existed in a higher measure for conventional foods. Because consumers never previously objected to these risks, McHughen asserts that they have no basis to do so now. In addition, McHughen distinguishes between the risks associated with the genetically modified process and the product. The author suggests that risks associated with each vary accordingly.

McHughen explains the incidents of food contamination allegedly associated with genetic modification. In doing so, he exposes the scientific ignorance of the activists, the popular media, and the political leaders.<sup>4</sup> He urges consumers to place things in a proper perspective by consulting other reasonable means of information on the subject

<sup>1</sup> See Alan McHughen, *Pandora's Picnic Basket: The Potential and Hazards of Genetically Modified Foods* 17-60 (2000).

<sup>2</sup> See *id.* at 66.

<sup>3</sup> See *id.* at 70.

<sup>4</sup> See *id.* at 119.

(which are provided in the last chapter).<sup>5</sup> As proof of genetically modified food's safety, the author points out that genetically modified foods have been consumed in North America for the past twenty-five years without any mishaps. He further suggests that the consumer's fears about the risks are unfounded since a comprehensive regulatory scheme is in place to deal with genetically modified foods. He warns the reader that over-regulation and unnecessary labeling would serve no purpose except to raise the prices of essential food commodities.

Although the book is informative and easy-to-read, it does reveal the author's leanings towards genetically modified foods. At certain times the arguments seem overreaching. For example, McHughen tackles environmental concerns regarding gene escape from pesticide-resistant crops to nearby weeds by explaining that such superweeds may not survive the eco-system. He also explains that other pesticides can be used to control these superweeds. This solution, however, would defeat the purpose of producing a pesticide-resistant crop, because the pesticides used to control weeds would also endanger the crop.<sup>6</sup>

Overall, the book is commendable in its contribution to consumer information regarding genetically modified foods. It may fall short, however, of convincing its readers to adopt genetically modified foods in the market-place.

Shimona Pratap Singh†

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<sup>5</sup> See *id.* at 265.

<sup>6</sup> See *id.* at 126.

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