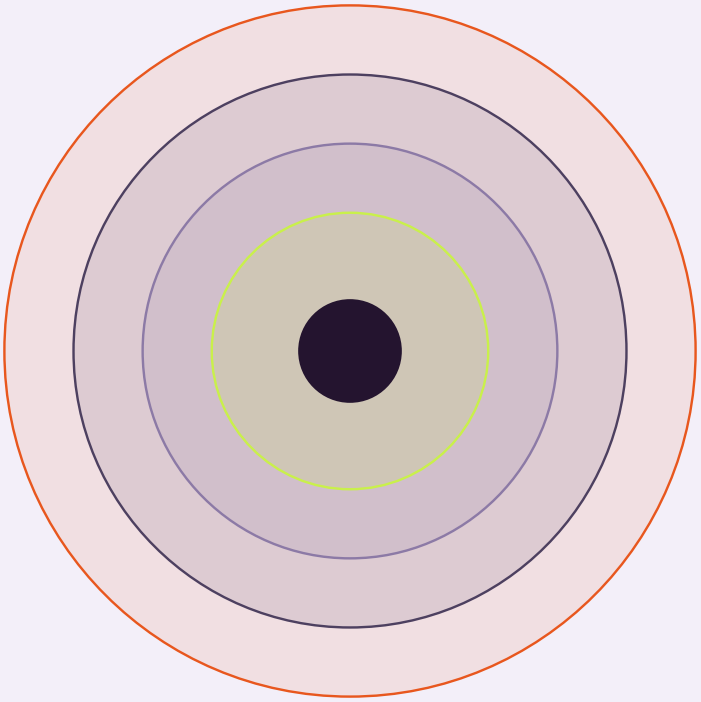


Biological War: A Scenario

A reading of the book by Annie Jacobsen (2026)

1. ACTION BOOK

CONTENTS

Inside this edition

The book in a minute 3

The takeaways 4

Your action book 6

Before you go 7

PART TWO · THE ACTION BOOK

The setup checklist 9

Rotate your supplies monthly 10

Check before you share 11

Keep prescriptions a week ahead 12

ABOUT THIS EDITION

This is HourLife's reading of Biological War: A Scenario, in our own words. It is not a substitute for the book.

BEFORE YOU START 01

The book in a minute

Annie Jacobsen is an investigative journalist who writes about national security and military science. Her previous book, Nuclear War: A Scenario, played out a nuclear exchange minute by minute, and Biological War applies the same method to disease. It follows an imagined chain of events that begins with an accident at a high-containment laboratory in Siberia and, over six days, carries a weaponised pathogen from Russia to the United States and toward the breakdown of public order. Jacobsen argues that biological war can begin without an attack, that the first hours are the only real chance to contain an outbreak, and that those hours tend to be lost to uncertainty and poor cooperation between rivals. The scenario rests on interviews with former defence and intelligence officials, emergency managers and scientists, including a former Soviet bioweapons scientist and a former head of FEMA.

Below are the 9 ideas HourLife readers vote up most, each in our words with a note on what it asks of you, and then the steps that put them to work.

WHAT READERS KEEP

The takeaways

1 HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

A biological war does not need an attacker; an accident can start one.

Jacobsen's scenario opens with an explosion at a high-containment lab in Siberia, not with a strike. Her point is that a release does not have to be deliberate to be catastrophic. A pathogen does not care whether anyone meant to let it out.

2 HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

The first hours are the only real window, and they are spent not knowing.

In the scenario, the blast is seen almost at once, yet no agency can say whether anything escaped. Containment works best before anyone can confirm there is something to contain. By the time the answer arrives, the window has closed.

3 HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Air travel turns a local accident into everyone's problem within days.

Disease once moved at the pace of people on foot and by ship. In the book it moves at the pace of an airline schedule, carried from Russia to the United States by ordinary travellers who have no idea they are sick.

4 HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

A crisis that depends on a rival's honesty will not get the facts in time.

American officials in the scenario press Moscow for information about what happened at the lab and get nothing useful back. Without shared facts, every later decision about borders, flights and hospitals is made half blind.

5 HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Money spent on biodefence is not the same as a defence that works.

Jacobsen argues that large biodefence budgets have not produced systems that perform when tested, and she points to the testing and coordination problems of the Covid years. Her question is less how much is spent than what actually works on the day.

6 HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Disease surveillance only sees the people it counts.

In interviews about the book, Jacobsen names gaps such as people without a fixed address who never appear in the data, and tests that pile up faster than labs can process them. An early warning system is only as early as its blind spots allow.

7 HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Read the book as a stress test, not a forecast.

The scenario stacks worst cases on purpose to show where institutions break. Critics writing in the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists argue that this makes it a poor map of real biological risk, and that outbreaks can be bent by behaviour and response in a way a missile cannot. Both readings are useful.

8 HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Knowing a little biology is what keeps fear from turning into panic.

Jacobsen has said she wants the book to create pressure rather than panic. Understanding in plain terms how infections spread and how dangerous they are helps people make calm, proportionate choices for their families.

9 HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Research that keeps us safe needs a clear line between it and weapons work.

Jacobsen argues that protective research and weapons engineering should run in separate lanes. Her critics warn that treating whole fields of legitimate science as suspect could weaken the defences we need. Both sides agree the line has to be drawn clearly.

PUT IT TO WORK

Your action book

Do the setup steps once, then keep the habits going. The setup changes your week; the habits keep it changed after the first good one.

The download puts this whole reading and a printable action book in one PDF: the setup checklist, then a page of real calendar days for each habit, starting on the day you choose.

SET UP ONCE

- [ ] Build a two-week home supply
- [ ] Write a household health sheet
- [ ] Choose your trusted sources now
- [ ] Agree a household contact plan
- [ ] Name a backup carer

KEEP UP DAILY

- ◯ Rotate your supplies monthly
- ◯ Check before you share
- ◯ Keep prescriptions a week ahead

30 days · Nov 6 - Dec 5, 2026

Part two, after the reading, prints each of these as a page to fill in by hand.

THE LAST WORD

Before you go

Pick one step from the action book and do it today. An idea from a book starts to count once it changes what one ordinary day looks like.

PART TWO

The action book

Change the setup once, then keep it up. 5 setup actions to do once, and 3 habits to mark each day for 30 days.

Nov 6 - Dec 5, 2026

Print it, or write on it in any PDF app.

SET UP ONCE

The setup checklist

Each of these is done once. Do one a day, and check it off when it is done.

☐ SETUP 1

Build a two-week home supply

Add a few extra tins, dry goods and bottles of water to each shop for the next month, until you have about two weeks' worth for everyone at home, pets included.

Store it where you will see it.

MY VERSION DONE ON

☐ SETUP 2

Write a household health sheet

List each person's medicines and doses, allergies, doctors and insurance details on one page.

Keep a paper copy with your documents and a photo of it on your phone.

MY VERSION DONE ON

☐ SETUP 3

Choose your trusted sources now

Bookmark your national and local public health agency, and check that emergency alerts are switched on in your phone's settings.

Decide today which sources you will believe when a scary headline breaks.

MY VERSION DONE ON

☐ SETUP 4

Agree a household contact plan

Pick one relative or friend outside your area whom everyone will contact if you are separated, and agree who collects the children if schools close early.

Write it on the health sheet.

MY VERSION DONE ON

☐ SETUP 5

Name a backup carer

Ask one person whether they could look after your children, pets or an older relative for a while if you fell ill.

Give them a key and the health sheet.

MY VERSION DONE ON

DAILY HABIT 1 OF 3

Rotate your supplies monthly

On the first weekend of each month, cook from the oldest items on your shelf and replace them on your next shop.

Nov 6 - Dec 5, 2026 · 30 days · circle each day you do it

SMALLEST VERSION

CUE

WHERE

November 2026

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
						1
2	3	4	5	6 ○	7 ○	8 ○
9 ○	10 ○	11 ○	12 ○	13 ○	14 ○	15 ○
16 ○	17 ○	18 ○	19 ○	20 ○	21 ○	22 ○
23 ○	24 ○	25 ○	26 ○	27 ○	28 ○	29 ○
30 ○						

December 2026

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
	1 ○	2 ○	3 ○	4 ○	5 ○	6
7	8	9	10	11	12	13
14	15	16	17	18	19	20
21	22	23	24	25	26	27
28	29	30	31			

EACH FRIDAY

WHAT HELPED

WHAT GOT IN THE WAY

ONE CHANGE TO THE SETUP

DAILY HABIT 2 OF 3

Check before you share

When an outbreak story breaks, read what your public health agency says before you forward anything.

Nov 6 - Dec 5, 2026 · 30 days · circle each day you do it

SMALLEST VERSION

CUE

WHERE

November 2026

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
						1
2	3	4	5	6 ○	7 ○	8 ○
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EACH FRIDAY

WHAT HELPED

WHAT GOT IN THE WAY

ONE CHANGE TO THE SETUP

DAILY HABIT 3 OF 3

Keep prescriptions a week ahead

Ask your pharmacist how to order regular medicines a little earlier, so nobody at home is ever down to their last few days.

Nov 6 - Dec 5, 2026 · 30 days · circle each day you do it

SMALLEST VERSION

CUE

WHERE

November 2026

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
						1
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30 ○						

December 2026

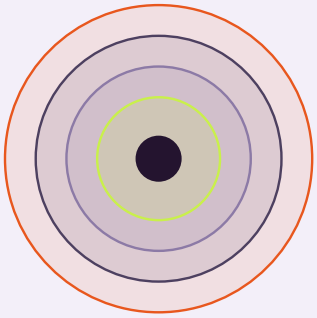
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EACH FRIDAY

WHAT HELPED

WHAT GOT IN THE WAY

ONE CHANGE TO THE SETUP



The time to prepare for a crisis is the quiet week before anyone believes it could happen.

HOURLIFE NOTE AFTER ANNIE JACOBSEN