

WHAT WILL BE, WILL BE.

OR WILL IT? AS THE

MILLENNIUM DRAWS

NIGHT, PROPHETS WANT TO

TELL US ABOUT IT

You Can't Keep a Good Prophet Down

WHAT WILL TOMORROW bring? Should we carry an umbrella? Invest in corn futures, invade Gaul, book

passage on the *Titanic*? Bet the farm on E-Z Strider in the fourth at Pimlico? Or will the world come to an end by noon? Inquiring minds want to know.

Since humans first grasped the notion of time, we've been annoyed at not being able to see forward in it. It seems unfair that we know last week so thoroughly and can't sneak even a glimpse of next week. We've always struggled to pull back the curtain, supporting a number of industries in the process. The newspaper prints our daily horoscope, based on our astrological sign, but it's usually something like, "A Sagittarius relative will say, 'You were right all along!'" If it doesn't happen, most people bright enough to read a paper stop checking it. Still, we feel there ought to be some light powerful enough to pierce the barrier. If we haven't yet found it, it's not for want of trying.

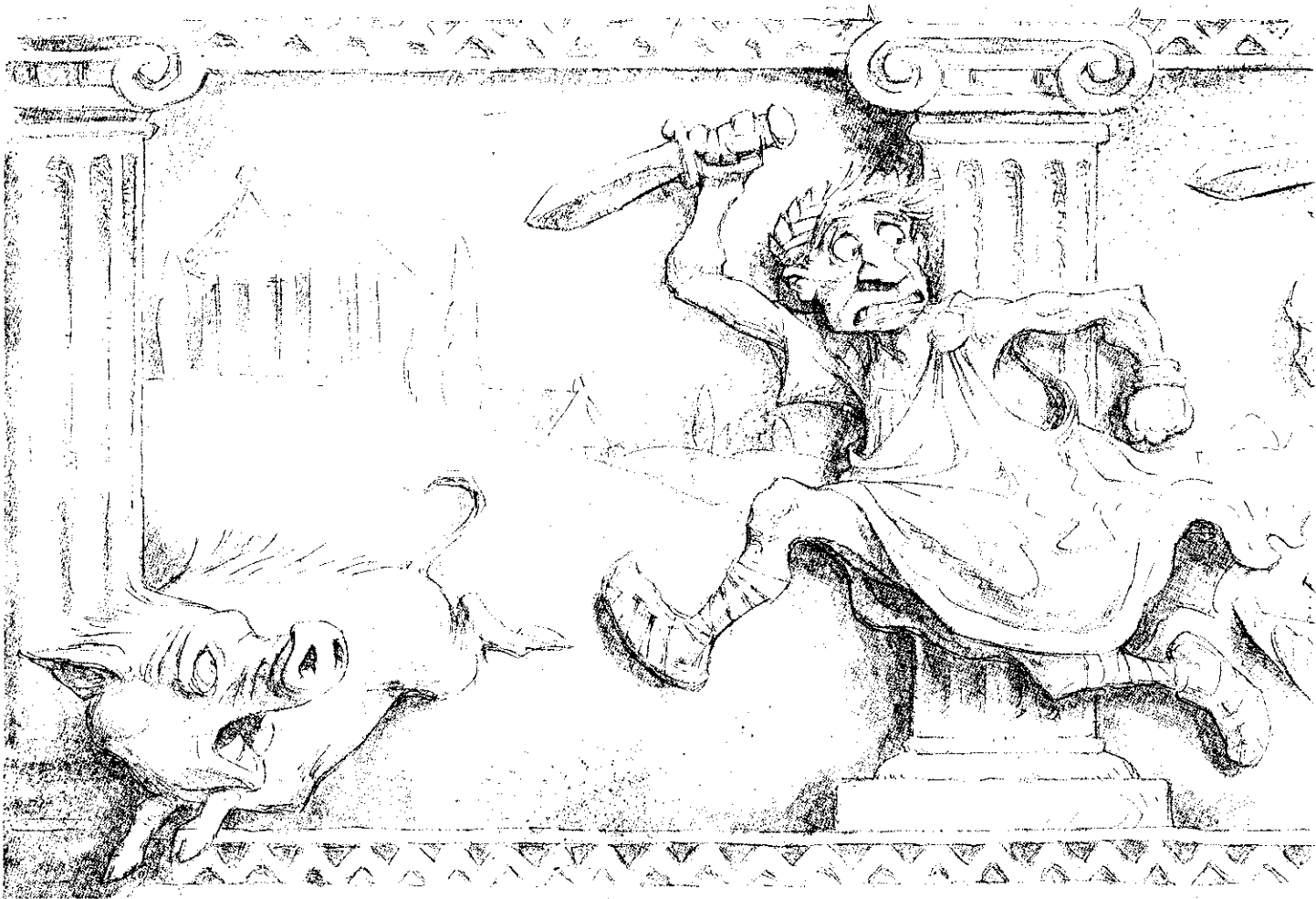
Foretelling the future falls roughly into two categories: interpretive divination, with the message arriving by means of an organized system, as in tarot cards, the *I Ching* and the weather forecast on the evening news; and intuitive div-

ination, with the medium receiving the word from unseen powers, sometimes in a trance state.

Both must be filtered through interpretation, sometimes wonderfully ingenious.

Many and various are the tools of diviners, from mainframe computers to a handful of pebbles to the mighty constellations overhead. Some of them must have panned out some of the time, since they've endured for millennia. Some have been lost to us, like the ancient art of haruspicy, or reading the insides of slaughtered animals (livers were particularly informative). Of ancient Etruscan origin, they say, this rather messy form of divination seems to have found its way as far as Malaya, Polynesia and Hawaii. The Inca of Peru inflated the lungs of a sacrificed white llama by blowing into them, and studied the patterns of the veins. Alexander the Great, who reportedly called on its practitioners, conquered the known world. It was popular in Rome, and Cicero wrote about it in his *De divinatione* around 44 B.C. The historian Plutarch suggests that before the Ides of March, Julius Caesar took it upon himself to cut open the customary creature and found it contained no heart. The rank-est amateur would take this as a sign to stay

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home in bed, but Caesar went to the Senate anyway, where the assassins were waiting for him.

Perhaps this really was a useful system, but alas, few of us these days know how to read an entrail, and the technique, being a trade secret, has been lost. Not that sheep were off the hook, though; in Scotland, their shoulder blades were regularly consulted ("scapulimancy") in matters of births, deaths and marriages. Since even part of a dead sheep is inconvenient to carry around, smaller and lighter divining aids became popular, and amateurs could learn to work them without joining the haruspimancers' union, and set up in business for themselves.

For more than 3,000 years the Chinese have used the *I Ching*, or *Book of Changes*, as a basis of philosophy, science, statecraft and predictions. In China fortune-tellers still set up shop at street-corner tables, and some of their customers won't make a move without checking in first. One *I Ching* method involves counting out 49 yarrow stalks, which are processed to form hexagrams made up of solid and broken lines. Back in antiquity, the solid line meant "yes" and the broken line "no," but the lore ballooned in subtlety and scope. Now, for instance, four broken lines over two solid lines can mean, "Approach has supreme success. Perseverance furthers. When the eighth month comes, There will be misfortune."

The *I Ching* is not to be undertaken lightly; the translation published by Princeton University Press runs to 740 pages. The more complicated the rules, the more convincing the results, as can be seen in marketing studies, statistical projections and astrology.

Before we learned what they really are, the stars looked bigger and more important, and the ancients felt they must mean something. Along about the third millennium B.C. the Mesopotamians began tinkering with a way to figure them out, with the Babylonians eventually creating the 12 signs of the zodiac. The Egyptians refined it, the Greeks greatly improved the system, and it spread to China. By the late Middle Ages, no progressive European university could hold up its head without a chair of astrological science. Astrology predicted everything from wars to weather, and the sky's aspects at a person's birth were believed to define character and outline much of his or her future.

This was flattering. It was all very well for a deck of cards to take an interest in us, but to have the great wheeling constellations, light-years away and unimaginably huge, bend down to care about our love-life and travel plans was awesomely gratifying: we must be more important than even we had thought. Prince and pauper alike consulted the stars before they took important steps.

We still do, only now we like to think of ourselves as



scientific, so we keep quiet about it, the stars have gone underground. Sophisticates scoffed when they heard that President Reagan's wife checked in regularly with an astrologer and, based on the astral calculations, advised her husband when to schedule important matters, but Mrs. Reagan wasn't alone. The financier and philanthropist J. P. Morgan kept an astrologer on staff, and it's safe to suppose that if he hadn't found the fellow useful, he would have fired him. Your stockbroker may not want to tell you, but there's a chance he, too, cocks his eye at the heavens. Apparently, astrological advice is a big, if quiet, business in the market. One Wall Street astrologer claims to have 15,000 clients, including some from the largest money management firms; billions of dollars in investments, he says, are swayed by the stars. On the Internet, investment services can be found that boast of such systems as "using planetary 'trace' synthesis to predict market direction."

Mastering the essential skills of star-tracking will take you around three years, but if you have a knack for it, it might be as sound an investment as medical school.

For the impatient, there are faster ways to see tomorrow. In about the ninth century A.D., gypsies, more properly called Rom, moved out of northern India and kept on moving. Traveling hither and yon, they specialized in horse-trading and fortune-telling, occupations in which

mobility is an advantage. The fortune-tellers used crystal balls, cards and dice, and read palms and tea leaves, passing the techniques down through the family.

Apparently, some people really do see things in crystals. Practice helps. The Maya of Guatemala use small crystals in divination rituals, along with the red seeds of the flute tree, and call them *ilb'al*, "instrument for seeing," the same word they use for eyeglasses and telescopes. The gypsies like a good-sized ball, which impresses clients. (Sometimes they gaze impressively even if they can't see shucks in the thing.) For best results, the ball should be wrapped in black silk when not in use, and once a month, or at the full moon, washed, dried and exposed to the moonlight for half an hour.

Reading tea leaves requires more imagination than tea. First the client drinks almost all the tea and, with her left hand, turns the cup around three times, swirling the liquid to spread the leaves, then tips it upside down, turns it around again and makes a wish. The seer then considers the blobs of tea stuck to the sides. Blobs closest to the handle are the most influential; nearest the rim, the most current; the blobs at the bottom foretell events that may be as far away as a year, which is as far as leaves can see. The

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list of possible shapes runs into the hundreds and calls for creative vision. A bird, for instance, means good news ahead, unless it's an owl, which means a new business venture probably will fail. You need to look sharply to distinguish a fox, signifying treachery, from a dog, meaning loyalty. Or, for that matter, to distinguish anything at all from a wet tea leaf.

Gypsies and tarot cards arrived in the West at about the same time, and while Romany fortune-tellers claim they can do just as well with a plain deck of cards—the Six of Diamonds can mean an unhappy end to a marriage—their customers get more bang for their buck from the tarot. It radiates dark mysteries. In the 14th and 15th centuries it was condemned by the church as the Devil's invention, banned in several European cities and burned in the marketplace in Nuremberg, so how could it be meaningless? The Fool; the journeying Hermit; the Hanged Man; that

raven with the King of Wands, bearer of hidden information; the utter ruin of the Ten of Swords, probably the darkest omen in the deck—the cards feel weighty as bricks with their load of secrets. The reader can lay them out in any of a variety of patterns, interpret them in almost any way, and only the most skeptical customer will disbelieve: cards like that must know a thing or two.

We feel the same way about computers. Tell us a prediction is the result of trillions of factoids copulating invisibly in a computer and giving birth to next year's consumer trends, pollution levels, crop yields or inflation rate, and we're as gullible as any Greek at Delphi. We yearn to believe. We want to believe in computers as ardently as our forebears wanted to believe in sheep's livers—or was it shoulder blades?

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What saith the computer? Will a huge asteroid slam into us at 1:30 P.M. on October 26, 2028, lobbing us back to the Stone Age? Maybe, maybe not. As of early March 1998, it seemed likely, but the next day the astronomers recalculated and changed their forecast. Everyone was greatly relieved.

And what of global warming? Just before it came to town, many in the climatological game were expecting another ice age any minute, and the opposite news was almost a pleasure; warming sounds better than freezing. Some of us secretly liked the idea of sunbathing in March, even at the expense of a few low-lying islands, but a scientific seer named William H. Calvin has other plans. As he explained in the *Atlantic Monthly*, earth's climate does sudden flip-flops every few thousand years, which tells him that soon, and quite abruptly, the climate of Europe could resemble Siberia's and Santa Barbara could feel like Juneau. In a world so unsuited for agriculture, many of us would quickly starve and the survivors would run amok, fighting over remaining food supplies.

We don't even know if it will warm up by Wednesday. We spend more than four billion dollars a year to have our short-term weather foretold, and the revelations of the National Weather Service—barring surprise events like tornadoes and those hurricanes that keep changing their minds—are really useful for about 24 hours from the

moment of conception, making weather forecasters among the most successful of all professional predictors. They are still pretty good out to 48 hours, after which they begin to decline in accuracy. Eventually you might as well go back to the *Old Farmer's Almanac* with its secret formula, or watch the cat lick its paw, meaning rain, or the black bands on the woolly bear caterpillar, meaning cold.

Many on Wall Street are willing to pay a fortune to have their fortunes predicted by modern science, but when the market crashed in 1987, everyone was just as surprised as they'd been in 1929. It's enough to make a tea leaf blush. In 1985, the distinguished economist Ravi Batra wrote *The Great Depression of 1990*, computing the variables and predicting, in the absence of economic reforms, "the worst economic turmoil in history," an "impending cataclysm," the global depression of 1990 that will "plague the world



through at least 1996" and cause untold suffering. His words were number one on the *New York Times* best-seller list. Pundits trembled.

In technology, the many expert consultants and think-tank gurus hired to foresee innovations are dead wrong more than 80 percent of the time. Jules Verne did better than that. The term "foreseeable future" is an oxymoron. We like to think that, even though we ourselves may behave impulsively, everything else is organized and rational and therefore predictable. It isn't. If we lose our grip



on a heavy object, it will probably hit the floor in the near future, but there isn't much else we can count on. Anything can happen. Winston Churchill tried to predict things for a while and then gave up, complaining that the future was just one damned thing after another.

Maybe we should abandon divination systems and go back to oracles. We could probably save money, since the diviners now have heavier investments in technology than they did in the heyday of tarot cards, and charge accordingly. Oracles enjoyed a worldwide following of satisfied customers for centuries, and if longevity is any measure of success, the Delphic establishment may have been the most successful prediction business ever, running full tilt for a thousand years, from 700 B.C. to A.D. 300.

The oracle of Apollo at Delphi was located at the foot of Mount Parnassus in central Greece, rather out of the way, since it wouldn't do just to stop off at the oracle for a quick read on your way to the grocery store. Its spokesperson was a woman—prophesying was one of the few respectable careers open to women—who had to be chaste, over age 50, and dressed as a maiden. She was called the Pythia, maybe because she received her messages from a mystical python, having first drunk from the sacred spring and then gone down to the basement, where she sat on a sacred three-legged stool and chewed on sacred laurel leaves. In her excited state, some of what she said did make sense and some didn't. Priests interpreted in verse.

Other times and places used fiercer stuff than laurel leaves, such as hashish and peyote, and in Peru, the Inca seers drank ayahuasca, a powerful hallucinogen that jolted the central nervous system into oracular mode. At Apollo's temple at the Peloponnesian city of Argos, a chaste woman tasted the blood of a sacrificed lamb and saw the future; at Aegira in Achaia, the priestess drank bull's blood, and in the Philippines, it was pig's blood, which she herself extracted with a dagger. In the Hindu Kush, the sibyl put a cloth over her head and inhaled smoke from the sacred cedar until she twitched all over and fell down prophesying. Often no stimulus at all was required, and the inspired one simply flew into a sacred fit, receiving messages sometimes for days. Oddly enough, prophecy was considered a gift rather than an affliction. In Greek tradition, Apollo gave it to Cassandra in exchange for her amorous favors, but she reneged on her side of the bargain. He paid her back by arranging that nobody would believe her, however loudly she proclaimed Troy's doom. You didn't play games with Apollo.

Consulting oracles was rather like trolling for information on the Internet—you had to frame the question care-

*Once a month, or at the full moon, the ball
is washed, dried and exposed to the
moonlight for half an hour.*

fully. The Athenian historian Xenophon was invited to go on an ambitious military campaign into Persia, and Socrates told him he should check with Delphi first. So Xenophon went over to Parnassus and asked which gods he should make a sacrifice to in order to make the trip safely. Answers received and sacrifices made, he reported back to Socrates, who was horrified; he should have first asked whether it was a good idea to go at all. It wasn't, and presently Xenophon found himself trapped deep inside the Persian Empire, in charge of 10,000 panicky Greek soldiers, and had to fight his way back through 1,500 miles of enemy territory. The right answer didn't help if you'd asked the wrong question.

A simple yes or no answer was safer. At the oracle of Zeus at Dodona, first mentioned by Homer, priests or priestesses interpreted messages from the rustle of the

sacred oak leaves or perhaps the reverberations of a bronze cauldron, but they also took written questions, scratched on lead tablets, that were returned with “yes” or “no” on the back. Statesmen and generals consulted the oracles on national matters, but the average citizen got answers, too. On two of the surviving lead tablets, one Heracleidas asked if his current wife was going to give him children, and one Cleotas wondered if raising sheep would be a profitable undertaking.

Besides taking direct messages from the gods, seers kept a sharp eye on the omens, observing thunder and lightning, how birds flew and sacred chickens pecked, what the spiders were doing. Omens have survived sturdily into modern times, and many of us still almost believe that a bird flying into the house means a death in the family and a broken mirror brings seven years of bad luck. (There are always more bad omens, as in “ominous,” than good ones.) In Egypt, priests watched the numerous temple cats closely because their every move meant something. The expression in their eyes foretold whether the ailing would succumb or survive.

As the monotheistic religions took over, the oracles sacred to individual godlets faded and the hierarchical

churches denounced freelance prophecy, except under their own auspices. Their official prophets no longer concerned themselves with individual questions and secular plans. They tackled the big themes.

Untangling Saint John’s biblical Revelation is not for amateurs. The novice staggers out of it as from a bad acid trip. He has seen the future, and it contains beasts with six wings apiece, covered all over with eyes. A lamb with seven horns; hail and falling fire mixed with blood. Locusts swarm out of the smoke that rises from a bottomless pit, but they’re shaped like horses, with men’s faces, lions’ teeth, and stings like scorpions. These are fol-

lowed by horses with fire-breathing lions’ heads. Next appears a red dragon with seven crowned heads and ten horns, pursuing a woman who escapes. Later, the ocean becomes like dead-men’s blood, and every living thing in it dies. The “cities of the nations” collapse in the worst earthquake in history, the islands flee and the mountains vanish. Then birds get invited to a great supper where they “eat the flesh of kings, the flesh of captains, the flesh of mighty men,” and men who have not worshipped the beast come to life and live happily for 1,000 years, to be followed by Judgment Day.

John tells us that all this “must shortly come to pass.” Some feel—even hope—it could be any minute now, but most of us would rather wait.

In modern times, the most famous, prolific and long-winded prophet was a French physician calling himself Nostradamus who, in the mid-16th century, wrote more than a thousand mysterious predictions, covering events up to the end of the world in A.D. 7000 (or, some analysts claim, 3797). Basically his messages came directly from God, he said, but he helped them along by holding a forked divining rod over a brass bowl of water, like

an antenna. And a fine brew of messages he got, too, full of earthquakes, plagues, famines, nuclear wars, space aliens, the Antichrist and Armageddon, but, like all proper oracles, he needs interpreters and lots of them.

There has never been a shortage of volunteers. In the right hands, Nostradamus can be seen to have foretold the abdication of Edward VIII of England in 1936, the 1974 kidnapping of newspaper heiress Patty Hearst by radicals, the 1979 Iranian hostage crisis, and even that dustup in the Falkland Islands in 1982, which was obviously what he meant by “the great queen . . . shall enter into the port.” However, he also foretold the death of Pope John



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Paul II in 1996 and the election of a French pope.

His inspirations arrived in rhymed quatrains, not always the best way to convey information, but, carefully studied, they yield strange fruit. One scholar finds that he took a surprisingly close interest in World War II, predicting the birth and demise of Hitler, the Nuremberg Trials, the landings at Anzio and Normandy, and MacArthur's return to the Philippines. An odd hobby for the 16th century, but prophets tend to be odd.

Considering that he died in 1566, when the United States was still no more than a bump in the road to the Orient, it's touching how often he thinks of us, even warning us of the poisonous tidal wave that will destroy the tall buildings of Atlantic City at some unspecified date. (He said he could, if he felt like it, give exact dates and times for everything, but that "would not please everybody.") He predicts President Kennedy's assassination quite clearly: What else could he have meant by "Before the people, blood shall be spilt," except maybe a Mike Tyson fight? However, Edward Kennedy will be elected President, as is made plain by his reference to "the great young brother." Nixon and Watergate aren't neglected; obviously Nixon is the "heretical man" who will be condemned by the city because they thought he "had changed their laws," and elsewhere, "the old man . . . deprived of his place" and "his [political] sons eaten before his face." Why, it's Nixon to the very life! The prophet even foresees, more than 400 years in advance, the expulsion of Harrison Williams of New Jersey from the United States Senate in 1982, a truly magnificent feat of premonitory nit-picking.

Our own Nostradamus was Jeane Dixon, Washington real estate agent, astrological columnist and darling of the supermarket tabloids. Her advice was sought, we're told, by Presidents, ambassadors, business tycoons, visiting foreign statesmen and thousands of the lesser faithful. While she may not have been up to the Frenchman's literary standards, she stuck her neck out further and prophesied in plain English. Working by seat-of-the-pants inspiration, fleshed out with a crystal ball and astrology, she foretold President Kennedy's assassination, tried to warn his brother Robert of his own impending doom, and knew years ahead of time that Martin Luther King, Jr., would be murdered. She could pick racehorses, too.

In her 1969 book, *My Life and Prophecies*, she offered us a few flashes on the future. She assured us that by 1970 Fidel Castro, who has been losing power, would be physically removed from Cuba. "I sense he [Castro] feels sudden death lurking around the corner," she claimed. Vice



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President Spiro Agnew's career would prosper. Because our educational system was tilted too far toward technology and ignored agriculture, America would experience severe food shortages after 1979. And in the mid-1980s a comet slamming into the earth would cause catastrophic earthquakes and tidal waves.

Dixon didn't die until 1997, a bad career move. George Orwell had the foresight to be buried 34 years before his dreaded "1984" of totalitarian thought-control misfired. One sees the wisdom of being, like the oracles, inscrutable or, like the gypsies, in a position to pack up and leave town before the future rolls in.

Recently a lot of people who once scorned predictions have taken to wondering anxiously about our immediate future, and whether the turn of the millennium will bring something stranger than computer problems. Even the briefest tour of the subject on the World Wide Web leaves the scroller dizzy by the expected hailstorm of catastrophes, fiends, demons and avenging angels disguised as flying saucers, all coming soon to a world near you. Like children leaning forward to watch the odometer roll up zeros, we brace ourselves for the big change and possible doomsday. (Since many of the world's billion-plus Muslims are counting time from A.D. 622, numberless Jews from 3761 B.C. and more than a billion Chinese from 2637 B.C., doomsday will need to be fairly selective.)



We used to take a much brighter view. It's a mystery why—surrounded as we are by peace and abundance—we have grown so gloomy, and why our movies about the future never make us want to go live in it. Fifty years ago, we all looked merrily forward to an era of effortless speed and convenience, our every need fulfilled by cheap, clean nuclear energy. And back in 1887, Edward Bellamy's wildly popular book, *Looking Backward, 2,000-1887*, foretold a gentle paradise, untroubled by hunger or conflict; all advanced countries have converted peacefully to socialism, all incomes are equal, and workers retire at 45 with no money worries, because "the nation guarantees the nurture, education and comfortable maintenance of every citizen from the cradle to the grave."

Now, as the mystic date approaches, more of us expect Armageddon than foresee Utopia. It even begins to look as if Bellamy was wrong, but hey, anyone can make a mistake; Karl Marx's inevitable worldwide workers' revolution turned out to be evitable after all, and so did Adolf Hitler's thousand-year Reich. (As for Thomas Malthus, who chillingly predicted in 1798 that rampant population growth would lead to starvation and societal collapse, the jury is still out.)

The year 1999 also is ominous, because the figure turned upside down shows three sixes, said to be Satan's home number, though nobody explains why he didn't turn up in 666 itself. According to Nostradamus, in 1999, in July, "a great king of terror will descend from the skies," and between November 23 and December 21, "the War of Wars will be unleashed." This will happen, according to interpreters, over Manhattan, and bring about either a general doomsday or merely a change of religion. Opinions vary. We may hardly notice the king of terror, though, since we've been engaged in a devastating war with the Antichrist since 1973 and, even at this moment, are wrapping up Armageddon. Some analysts say Nostradamus has two-thirds of us dead of AIDS by 2000, but according to others, our worst plagues will be over by then, though the dead are going to rise from their graves in 2007.

In Jeane Dixon's version, the war and "sudden destruction" don't start until 1999. (This must not be confused with her World War III, which broke out in 1958 over the

Chinese islands of Quemoy and Matsu.) As in Nostradamus, oceans and landmasses switch places, with lightning and noises offstage. In 2000, Chinese and Mongol troops invade the Middle East. When Israel emerges victorious, the Israelis recognize it as a miracle and accept Jesus Christ as the Son of God. Then the Dixonian vision sees a blazing cross in the sky, simultaneously visible to the whole world, or at least to the


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bits that survived the war and floods, and everyone becomes disciples of Christ. Everyone, that is, except the Antichrist, who's still around, somehow.

Well, you never know. Remember Nostradamus got a lucky hit on the Great Fire of London, and maybe the Anzio landing, and Dixon called Kennedy's death. They could be right again. Thousands believe.

At the recent annual conference of the World Economic Forum in Switzerland, two eminent scientists convinced their colleagues that presently robots will be so intelligent they'll take over, and may, if they want, keep humans as pets—R2-D2 training Luke Skywalker to heel and fetch.

Many once-levelheaded people are expecting the next few years to be, at the very least, interesting. If they aren't—if they trudge by with only the usual number of bullying robots, seven-headed dragons, airborne crosses, walking corpses, and kings of terror dropping onto Manhattan—well, it's going to be a terrible letdown.

It won't slow us up, though. We'll just dust ourselves off and start to work on 3000. You can't keep a good prophet down. 

Barbara Holland's new book, *Wasn't the Grass Greener? A Curmudgeon's Fond Memories*, will be published this spring by Harcourt, Brace. Peter de Sève, of Brooklyn, also designs characters for animation.