

The Book of Predictions: Fifteen Years Later

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*It is now possible to verify the accuracy of the first
fifteen years of predictions in this popular book.*

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In newspaper and magazine articles and on various news and entertainment television programs, authorities, experts, and psychics speculate about the future, but when the future comes, we rarely recall these predictions and assess their accuracy. *The Book of Predictions* provides an excellent opportunity to do just that. In 1981, best-selling novelist Irving Wallace and his children, Amy Wallace and David Wallechinsky, published *The Book of Predictions*. The senior Wallace, who died in 1990, had previously written sixteen novels and seventeen works of nonfiction with worldwide sales of 145 million copies. Both Wallace's daughter and son were successful writers in their own right, and the trio had recently collaborated on *The People's Almanac* (1981), which included a few predictions. A number of readers expressed interest in this section of the book,

and, as a result, the Wallaces undertook a separate volume comprised entirely of predictions. Amy Wallace was particularly suited to this task. She had "graduated" from the Berkeley Psychic Institute (a school where six-week classes are offered to help people nurture their psychic abilities) and was said to have developed such skills as clairvoyant reading and psychic healing.

To collect material for their book, the Wallaces consulted experts in a variety of fields. For example, Dr. Willard Libby, who received the Nobel Prize for chemistry in 1960, contributed to the volume, as did Ashley Montagu, the British anthropologist and social biologist. In addition, chapter 9 was devoted to predictions solicited from seven professional psychics, or "seers," as the Wallaces called them. Because each prediction was identified by the year it was supposed to occur, it is now possible to verify the first fifteen years of predictions. Thus, to test the accuracy of professional psychics, we checked all the predictions made in chapter 9 of *The Book of Predictions*—a total of ninety-three predictions. The psychics whose prognostications the Wallaces published included Dennis Conkin, Francie Steiger, Bertie Catchings, Ann Fisher, Beverly Jaegers, Andrew Reiss, and Alan Vaughn. Finally, to provide a comparison group, we selected an equal number of experts from other fields, including Libby, Montagu, computer scientist Edmund Berkeley, scientist and warfare engineer Eldon Byrd, Catholic priest and professor of sociology Andrew Greeley, science fiction author and professor of biochemistry Isaac Asimov, and life-styles editor of *The Futurist* magazine David Snyder.

We developed the following methods for evaluating the psychics and experts. If a prediction was relatively unambiguous, it was scored either a "hit" or a "miss" based on the available evidence. However, many of the predictions were vague or contained several parts. Thus, when a portion of a larger prediction was correct, but the remainder was wrong or could not be verified, it was scored a "partial hit." For example, Ashley Montagu predicted an increase in church-going but a decline in religion and in the quality of spiritual values. An increase in church attendance can be established, but it is impossible to objectively assess a decline in religion or in the quality of spiritual values. In addition, when a prediction was correct but the event happened after the time it was supposed to have occurred, it was scored a "partial hit." These are fairly lenient criteria for judging predictions, but given the difficulty of the task, we felt they were fair.

Our study produced two important findings. First, as Table 1 illustrates, neither experts nor psychics were able to predict the future with any degree of accuracy. Second, although they

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were not particularly impressive visionaries, the experts fared better than the psychics. They tended to make fewer predictions¹ (an average of 7.3 each for the experts versus 13.3 for the psychics) and had a higher percentage of hits (16% versus 6%), although this difference was not statistically significant. However, when hits and partial hits were considered, the experts were more than twice as accurate as the psychics (35% versus 14%), a difference that was statistically significant.² Table 1 also shows the results for each individual psychic and expert in the study. Two of the contributors showed zero accuracy rates, one psychic (Francie Steiger) and one expert (Isaac Asimov). The highest accuracy level was obtained by anthropologist Ashley Montagu with a score of 40 percent for hits and 60 percent for hits plus partial hits.

In addition to fascinating people with the purported ability to predict the future, psychics have a secondary interest in dazzling the faithful with outlandish, futuristic, and improbable prophecies.

An example of a hit credited to one of the psychics was Bertie Catchings' prediction that by 1985 a bloody conflict would erupt between India and Pakistan. However, she was not correct when she predicted that by 1992 an underground railroad tunnel would connect Dallas and Chicago. Engineer Eldon Byrd was correct in predicting that the Soviets would ultimately cease to be a world power, but Dr. Libby was not correct in predicting that by 1990 long-range weather prediction would be accurate.

A partial explanation of the experts' greater accuracy can be found in the nature of their predictions. In general, the experts were more conservative—making fewer predictions and restricting the predictions they made to their specific fields of knowledge. For example, computer scientist Edmund C. Berkeley's predictions were limited to the role of computers in the future. In contrast, the psychics, who had no specific areas of expertise, often made fantastic predictions about events in a wide range of fields, including science, politics, and entertainment. For example, Bertie Catchings thought that by 1992 several satellite stations, floating above major cities, would change solar energy into microwaves which would be beamed back to Earth for conversion into electric power. This pattern suggests that, in addition to fascinating people with the purported ability to predict the future, psychics have a secondary interest in dazzling the faithful with outlandish, futuristic, and improbable prophecies.

The psychics in *The Book of Predictions* also show a bias toward foretelling good news. For example, Beverly Jaegers predicted that sometime between 1984 and 1986 virtually all cancers would be instantly arrested, cured, and eventually eliminated through a reprogramming of DNA. Similarly, Francie Steiger suggested that by 1993 auto repairs would be eliminated when a substance called "memory metal" was invented that could pop back to its normal shape when dents and bends

were simply heated. Unfortunately, the desire to create excitement in the present with tales of a spectacular and generally happy future makes it less likely that psychic predictions will come true when the future actually arrives. As a result, professional psychics survive on the hope that few of those who seek their services will bother to check their accuracy.

Evidence that unskilled professional psychics can be financially successful comes from the discovery that several of the psychics from *The Book of Predictions* are still practicing and are thought—by some, at least—to be quite gifted. Ann Fisher, who had an accuracy rate of 25 percent in this study, has been working in Montreal for the past twenty years. She

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makes her living by doing hypnosis, interpreting astrology charts, and giving forty-dollar-per-hour consultations (*The Gazette* [Montreal], August 1, 1994). Alan Vaughn works at SRI International and is described by many as “the best predictor available today” (*The Evening Standard* [London], June 20, 1994). Bertie Catchings continues to work as a psychic in the Dallas–Ft. Worth area and has been described by *The Dallas Morning News* (July 12, 1993) as “the best in the busi-

ness.” A search of several databases failed to produce any current references to the other psychics consulted by the Wallaces. We can only hope that they have gone on to professions for which they are better suited.

Our results are consistent with previous investigations of the accuracy of psychic predictions. For example, once a year science writer C. Eugene Emery Jr. publishes an assessment of tabloid psychics (see his assessment for 1996, “What? I Don’t Remember That!” *SKEPTICAL INQUIRER*, January/February 1997). Emery, who has been collecting tabloids since around 1980, has said, “When it comes to forecasting unexpected events, psychics historically have had an abysmal track record”

(“Psychics Fail Once Again,” *Skeptical Briefs*, December 1994). Often psychics’ reputations seem to be made on the basis of a single dramatic prediction. For example, Jeane Dixon is credited with having foretold President John F. Kennedy’s

assassination. In fact, she merely employed the well-known twenty-year death cycle—from 1840 to the time of her prediction, every president elected to office in an even-decade year (e.g., 1960) died in office.³ Furthermore, although in 1953 Dixon did predict that a blue-eyed Democratic president (unnamed) elected in 1960 would die in office, by the time 1960 arrived she predicted the victory that year not of Kennedy but of Richard Nixon, a Republican (Bringle 1970, 35). So she had made contradictory predictions, not unusual in the psychic trade. Dixon’s overall batting average is extremely low, and our examination of *The Book of Predictions* suggests that her performance is typical of professional psychics.

Perhaps the best response to those who claim they can foretell the future was exemplified by Emery himself. In January of 1994 the tabloid psychics made their usual forecasts for the coming year. Among them were predictions that an earthquake would turn Florida into an island, Michael Jackson would become an evangelist, and thousands would die in South Carolina at the hands of a teenager who would accidentally detonate a homemade nuclear bomb in his basement (“Headlines That Didn’t Happen,” *SKEPTICAL INQUIRER*, Spring 1994). When asked to comment on these predictions, Emery said, “I predict that it won’t happen.”

Notes

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1. $t(12) = 2.18, p < .06$.

2. $\chi^2(1, N = 144) = 9.58, p < .01$.

3. Ronald Reagan’s survival of two full terms in office ended the twenty-year cycle. He was first elected to office in 1980.

References

- Bringle, Mary. 1970. *Jeane Dixon: Prophet or Fraud?* New York: Tower Publications.
 Wallechinsky, David, Amy Wallace, and Irving Wallace. 1981. *The Book of Predictions*. New York: Morrow.

TABLE 1

Accuracy of predictions made by psychics and experts in *The Book of Predictions* for the years 1981-1996

	No. of Predictions	Hits	Hits + Partial Hits	Percentage Hits + Partial Hits	
PSYCHICS	Bertie Catchings	20	2	3	15%
	Dennis Conkin	13	3	3	23%
	Ann Fisher	4	0	1	25%
	Beverly Jaegers	17	0	3	18%
	Andrew Reiss	7	0	2	29%
	Francie Steiger	20	0	0	0%
	Alan Vaughn	12	1	1	8%
Totals	93	6(6%)	13	14%	
EXPERTS	Isaac Asimov	3	0	0	0%
	Edmund Berkeley	8	0	2	25%
	Eldon Byrd	6	1	3	50%
	Andrew Greeley	6	1	3	50%
	Willard Libby	8	0	2	25%
	Ashley Montagu	5	2	3	60%
	David Snyder	15	4	6	40%
Totals	51	8(16%)	18	35%	