

# Predictions—or Coincidences?

KARL SABBAGH

“Premonitions are impossible but they happen all the time,” says the jacket text on this book, quoting the author. This is true up to a point. *The Premonitions Bureau: A True Story* is a difficult book to pin down. Fortunately, it is not a wide-eyed promotion of the idea that some people can predict the future (although based on some of the loose terminology and weasel words the writer uses, the reader could be forgiven for thinking it is). But as a *New Yorker* writer (the book started as an article in that magazine), Sam Knight is subtler than that and managed to keep this skeptical reader onside—most of the time—though it is a difficult line to tread. How are we to interpret Knight’s description of one of the key subjects in the book as a *seer* other than as an expression of belief in his abilities?

But fortunately, despite its sensationalist angle, this book is about much more than the Premonitions Bureau of its title. This was a British tabloid newspaper stunt in the 1960s, initiated by psychiatrist John Barker, who was moved by a mining catastrophe in the Welsh village of Aberfan that killed 146 people (most of them children). Barker wondered whether such tragedies could be prevented by monitoring premonitions of future disasters. He put the idea to Peter Fairley, science reporter of the London *Evening Standard*, who jumped at the idea.

Of course, collecting premonitions in advance is not without its problems. Humanity is regularly faced with disasters, including fires, volcanoes, plane crashes, and pandemics, and even random predictions can sometimes make a hit. On a more trivial level, I can safely make a prediction to you, my reader, that in the next few weeks a significant event will occur in your life involving the color



*The Premonitions Bureau: A True Story.* By Sam Knight. New York, NY: Penguin Press, 2022. ISBN 9781984879592. 256 pp. Hardcover, \$28.

red, or perhaps green, and the number three—though it might be eight; it’s a little unclear in my mind. For the reader who suffers a collision with a red car on the third of next month, this may seem conclusive proof of my psychic abilities. For the rest of you, it won’t.

In fact, this book is really the story of four individuals: the psychiatrist, the journalist (whom I knew quite well in the 1960s), and two of the people who submitted premonitions to the Bureau deemed to be most successful, Lorna Middleton and Alan Hencher.

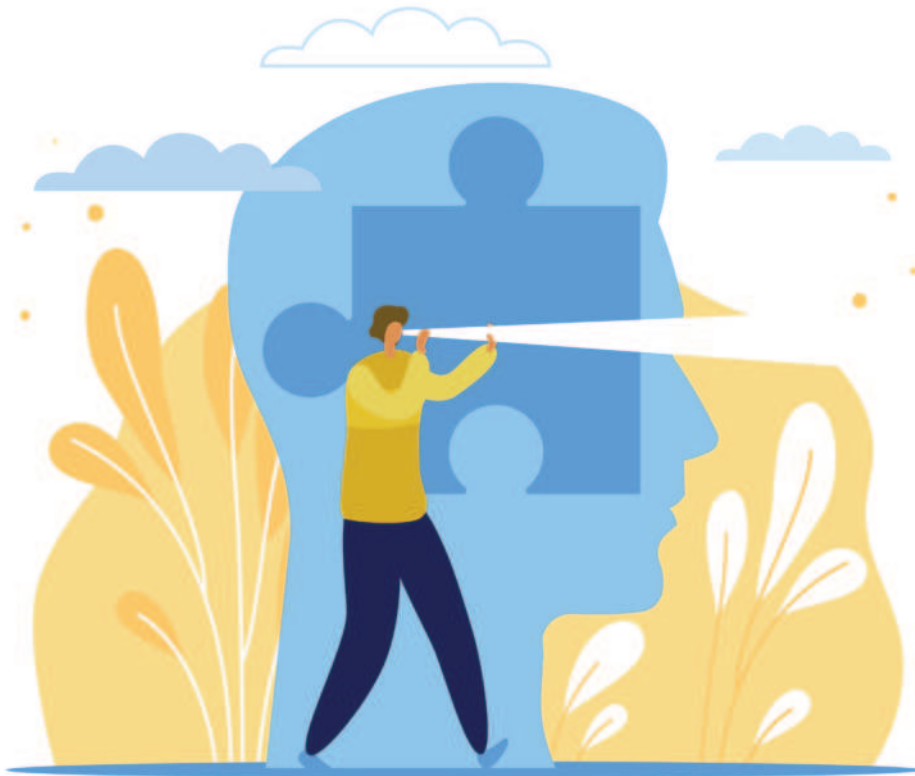
The people were all, in some way, a weird bunch, if truth be told—complex, troubled, obsessed mavericks. Barker was fascinated by death and the way people could will their own deaths. Perhaps it was because he never concealed this fact that his two most prolific “premonitors” expressed concerns about Barker’s own death on several occasions before he died (of an aneurism). Fairley himself was unusual in having a second family unknown to his wife and children (and to me when I knew him) and in wanting to believe in the paranormal. And the picture painted in the book of the two “seers” shows them as decidedly eccentric as well.

In the space of a year, the Bureau

received 723 predictions of which eighteen “came true” in Fairley’s estimation. To take one example, on March 21 Hencher foresaw a plane crash of a Caravelle jet soon after takeoff. It took a while, but four weeks later a Bristol Britannia (not a Caravelle), a turboprop (not a jet), crashed before landing (not on takeoff), killing 126 (not 124). (As a matter of interest—not mentioned by Sam Knight—in the three months after Hencher’s premonition, there were seven other commercial airliner crashes, killing a total of 259 people. One of the others was even a Caravelle.)

Reading this sort of stuff can make you hyperaware of the nature of coincidence. A few random examples: Hencher’s prediction of 124 dead in the plane crash comes *on p. 124* of the book. I read the mention by Knight of Jeremy Taylor, a seventeenth-century Anglican vicar, an hour or so after I had been talking to my wife about—yes, Jeremy Taylor, the seventeenth-century Anglican vicar. On p. 200, there is an event that occurred *on my birthday*. On p. 67, there is an account of the death of Donald Campbell during a world water speed attempt that took place in 1967.

In the end, what this book shows is the human propensity to look for mean-

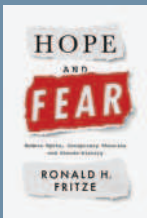


ing and patterns in essentially random events. I have seen an analysis of the experience many of us have had, when someone thinks of a person—perhaps a friend or relative—and within an hour a letter or phone call is received from that very person. The statistics of such events—based on the number of people the average person knows, the likely number of times we think about them *without* hearing from them within an hour, the number of calls, letters, and emails we receive every day—suggest that if we lived in a world where such things *never* happened, there would be a real cause for concern and investigation. That would be a claim of the paranormal if ever there was one. ■

Karl Sabbagh is a writer, documentary maker, and publisher in the United Kingdom. He has written twelve nonfiction books and made several documentaries, some exploring claims of the paranormal. He is also a CSI scientific and technical consultant in astrology.

## NEW AND NOTABLE BOOKS]

*Listing does not preclude future review.*



**HOPE AND FEAR: Modern Myths, Conspiracy Theories, and Pseudo-History.** Ronald H. Fritze. “People will believe the strangest things,” Fritze, a professor of history and religion, begins this book. It is an understatement. He explores the fringe ideas and conspiracy theories people have turned to over the decades, from myths about the Knights Templar and the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel to Nazis and the occult, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, and UFOs. He demonstrates that when myths and pseudohistory dominate a society’s thinking, reality and truth fall by the wayside. The disruptions of globalization have led to people embracing conspiracy theories and, in his words, “freakish fantasies.” What will be the outcome? We don’t yet know. University of Chicago Press, 2022, 271 pp., \$27.50.



**MY ADVENTUROUS LIFE.** Dick Smith. Dick Smith is a national hero in Australia—an entrepreneur [Dick Smith Electronics], publisher [*Australian Geographic*], globe-trotting aviator, environmentalist, philanthropist, and skeptic. A fellow of the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry, he sponsored James Randi’s investigations of dowzers in Australia, which led directly to the creation of the Australian Skeptics. This book

recounts that episode, but it is mainly about his other adventures. A few of the chapter titles gives the scope: “Planning My First Expedition,” “Taking to the Skies,” “Solo around the World in a Helicopter,” “Solo to the Top of the World,” “Off the Edge of the World,” and “Marching to a Different Drummer.” The book has won the Australian Book Industry Awards’ 2022 “Biography of the Year.” Allen & Unwin, 2021, 342 pp. \$39.27.



**THE PREMONITION: A Pandemic Story.** Michael Lewis. In October 2019, a global group ranked the United States #1 among all 195 countries on readiness to combat a pandemic. What went wrong? Best-selling author Michael Lewis examines the story of how the great talents of a society are wasted if not properly led. He explores the gaps between our society’s then-reputation and its performance against COVID-19. He tells the story mainly through its heroes—scientists, epidemiologists, physicians, and other world-class medical experts who did their best to warn the country of the dangers of a pandemic—and the wall of ignorance that was the official response of the Trump administration to the COVID-19 outbreak. Norton, 2021, 304 pp., \$30.00.

—Kendrick Frazier