

To assemble a cell, an existing cell is a prerequisite. In order to have form and pattern within a cell, one must have an existing set of structures to direct the assembly and organization of the components of the new set of structures....

An unexpected outcome of these analyses was the discovery that much of the localization depended upon processes separate from those involving DNA transcription and translation....

Most of all, we want to remind the reader that once all the genes of a species are sequenced, and the assumed role of each gene and its expression products are known, the mechanisms by which the products are incorporated into the three-dimensional structure of a living cell would still remain to be understood.... The epigenetic revolution should be as exciting a time as the molecular genetic revolution.

I recommend this book to all biologists determined not to accept unthinkingly the dogma of current molecular biology which tells us that nuclear genes will be shown to control morphogenesis. I can recommend it also to historians of science interested in the question of how some concepts become hegemonic in science and often require decades before they can be superseded.

Do not be deterred by the price of the book. It was set by the publishers, not by the authors, I understand. If you think you cannot afford it for your own library, insist that your institution's library purchase it before it goes out of print.

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The Mask of Nostradamus: The Prophecies of the World's Most Famous Seer by James Randi. Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1993, 256 pp., \$16.95 trade paperback, ISBN: 0-87975-830-9.

Each era produces its favorite seer. Jeanne Dixon continues to captivate Americans after more than a quarter century. This despite her prediction that a comet would obliterate the planet, and presumably all of her fans, sometime during Ronald Reagan's second term in office.

In prophecy as in politics, accuracy doesn't really seem to matter. What counts is having a loyal constituency. For seers this means followers willing to

analyze and re-analyze a prediction until they can find an interpretation that resembles a real event.

Perhaps no seer's words have been subjected to as much scrutiny as those of Michel de Notredame, the prominent 16th-century French physician we know as Nostradamus. The cryptic passages that comprise his 1555 book *Centuries* supposedly foretell major historic events including the great fire of London, the French Revolution, and the rise of Nazi Germany. At last count, *Centuries* had inspired more than 400 books, a movie, and a video, most written by fans.

Nostradamus's latest interpreter is magician and McArthur "genius-award" recipient James Randi. Those familiar with Randi's earlier writings on parapsychology and astrology will not be surprised to learn that the Nostradamus legend is more tarnished than polished by the encounter.

Randi begins with an easily defended, albeit for many SSE members questionable, premise: The tools Nostradamus used to predict the future, precognition and astrology, are scientifically impossible. This being the case, Randi argues that any similarity between Nostradamus's predictions and actual events must be due to errors in translation and creative interpretations of the original text.

To help readers understand how he arrives at his own interpretation, Randi devotes a substantial portion of his book to summarizing Nostradamus's personal life, the politics of 16th-century France, the status of medicine, and popular attitudes toward magic and astrology. His summaries, being the snapshots that they are, leave several intriguing questions hidden in the shadows. Did Nostradamus's medical training provide him with a detailed knowledge of perception-altering herbs? How, exactly, did he manage to stay on the healthy side of the Inquisition, while fellow seers were escorted to the stake? Footnotes would have been a helpful addition.

Randi is at his best when he examines what are supposedly Nostradamus' ten most accurate predictions. His technique is disarmingly effective. Direct translations from the earliest surviving edition of *Centuries* are followed by the preferred Nostradamian interpretations. A brief essay that draws on then-current political events, letters Nostradamus wrote to friends and colleagues, and ancient maps offer alternate explanations for mysterious names and expressions. Thus, readers learn that the name Hister, which over the years has been interpreted to be Napoleon, Hitler, Khomeni, and most recently Colonel Khadafy, may simply be the Hister River, as the lower Danube River was named on early Roman maps. So Randi continues, methodically working his way through each prediction, a skeet shooter exploding clay pigeons.

Public- and high-school libraries that shelve *Centuries* should consider adding balance to their collections by making Randi's highly readable book available to their readers.

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