



# Apollo's Arrow

*David Orrell*

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For centuries, scientists and charlatans have claimed to know what's happening tomorrow before tomorrow comes. But how well can we really predict the future? Can past events—Hurricane Katrina, bull markets, the SARS outbreak—help us understand what will happen next? Will scientists ever be able to forecast catastrophes, or will we always be at the mercy of Mother Nature, waiting for the next storm, epidemic or economic crash to thunder through our lives?

In *Apollo's Arrow*, Canadian scientist David Orrell looks back at past prognosticators, from the time of the Oracle at Delphi to the rise of astrology to the advent of the nightly news, showing us how scientists (and some charlatans) predicted the future. He asks how today's scientists can claim to anticipate future weather events when even three-day forecasts prove a serious challenge. Can we predict epidemics? Can we accurately foresee our financial future? Or will we only find out about tomorrow when tomorrow arrives?

The trajectory of an arrow is something that can be determined reasonably accurately from the arrow's starting position and its velocity using the laws of physics. But if there's a gust of wind that is not included in the model, then the arrow will depart slightly from its predicted path. Might not be important, unless you happen to be the person waiting at the other end with the apple on your head.

Studies have shown that social forecasting, scientific and otherwise, is about as accurate as random guessing, despite the vast numbers of highly paid experts employed to do it. If the futurologists of the 1960s had been right, for example, I would probably be writing this in an orbital space station as my personal robot tends to my toenails.—from *Apollo's Arrow*

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