

Chapter 1

The Stuff Legends Are Made Of

In This Chapter

- ▶ Introducing the guest of honor
- ▶ Understanding why Nostradamus is still famous today
- ▶ Picking apart the truth about prophecy
- ▶ Debating whether Nostradamus really predicted the future

The future is a funny business. Finding out what's going to happen is never easy, and even if you do, there's a fair chance that your views will never see the light of day. But Nostradamus took his predictions very seriously and published them to make sure that people got the message. For a man who's dead and who only achieved a fair amount of fame in his native France while alive, he's left quite the lasting impact. During his lifetime, the small section of his prophecies that were published gained him notoriety, mainly among those people wealthy enough to purchase his publications. Today, his voice is still heard loud and clear — by *many* more people — throughout the world in the multiple books published in various languages that present his prophecies and attempt to interpret them. For most people, though, Nostradamus is just the name of a famous person who supposedly predicted the future, but beyond that, the information is a bit sketchy.

Nostradamus was a fascinating fellow, and I'd like for you to see him in his element. He was a doctor, a writer, a fair cook (rare for a man during the Renaissance), an apothecary (what you'd think of as an early pharmacist/herbalist), and a humanitarian. His words focused on the lives of people he'd never meet and the fates of countries he'd never see. From the past, he still reaches out today, handing us a gift of insight and hope that a positive change will occur within humanity.

Meeting Nostradamus

Getting to know Nostradamus isn't easy. It's been almost 450 years since he last sat down to record a prediction, and that much time obscures even the flashiest of folks. But an even greater challenge facing anyone who sets out to chronicle this writer is that Nostradamus's writings rarely focus on

Nostradamus, personally, and only rarely include an indication of his opinions. But more than writings make the man, and knowing some of the details of his life and times can help you understand just who this guy was and why he still fascinates many people today. (Start things off by checking out Figure 1-1 for a glimpse of what he looked like.)



Figure 1-1:
Walking a
mile in
Nostradamus's
shoes.

Scala / Art Resource, NY

The man

Nostradamus was born under the Zodiac sign of Capricorn (for an explanation of the Zodiac and astrology, see Chapter 6), which may not mean much to you. But to an astrologer (who studies how stars influence people's lives) like Nostradamus, his sign revealed a great deal about his overall character. In many ways, he was a typical Capricorn — a determined man who felt a sense of responsibility and was cautious not to be too rash in words or actions.

Now, you may think that the term *caution* wouldn't be associated with anyone who predicted the coming of the antichrists (yep, you meet these characters in Chapter 13) and global destruction (Chapter 18 is pretty intense), but consider this: He waited to publish the second portion of his most famous predictions, *The Prophecies*, until *after* his own death. Folks in the 1500s weren't

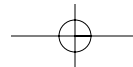
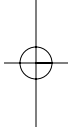
Like everyone, Nostradamus was partially a product of his times — the Renaissance. This period in history swept through Europe during the 14th, 15th, and 16th centuries. (If you're looking at the calendar, think late 1300s, 1400s, and early to mid-1500s.) And if I had to describe the Renaissance, in one word, it would be *change*. (I spend much more than one word describing the Renaissance in Chapter 2.)

Through the early Renaissance, the Christian Church had control over learning and information, because religious leaders and priests were just about the only people who could read, aside from royalty. But then translators and the printing press began to bring books into the hands of more people, and reading spread among high society. As a result, more folks began to think, ideas began to grow and flourish, and the value people placed on the human mind and its abilities skyrocketed. This last idea turned into a revolutionary and lasting movement called *humanism*. Humanism suggested that there was significance, power, and beauty in the human potential to create. Previously, the power of creation and beauty had been limited to a divine source, largely the Christian God.



Painting, sculpting, creating art of all sorts, writing, creating music, reading ancient philosophers, and even slowly developing a scientific examination of the world were the activities of the day. At first, what you believed helped define who you were, but as the Renaissance progressed, what you believed *and thought* began to define you. All this learning was exciting but also uncomfortable, because thinking individuals aren't all likely to come to the same conclusions. And questioning the status quo started all kinds of struggles over the issue of faith. Many of the new ideas and approaches to life clashed with the teachings of the Church and posed a threat to its previously unquestioned powerful role in life.

Add in the sweeping political and economic changes that rocked the world — well Europe, but the people there thought it was the whole world — and you have a swirling, shifting mixture that's just ripe for mankind to pick a new direction into the future. Standing right in the middle of this commotion was Nostradamus who saw the patterns of change emerging and hoped to use his predictions to warn, guide, and influence the direction of people's lives.





His life

If I say *Nostradamus*, the first thing you probably think of is *future predictions*, and for good reason — they were his major claim to fame. But like his predictions, there's more to Nostradamus than meets the eye. Though *professional future predictor* would've fit on his business card, Nostradamus wore many hats during his lifetime, including student, teacher, astrologer, doctor, pharmacist (*apothecary* was the term of the day), advisor, father, husband, friend, humanitarian, philosopher, alchemist, prophet, and author. Not bad for 62 years of life. (I explore his complete life story in Chapter 3.)

Nostradamus's early education in the standard subjects of the day (such as Latin) helped lay a foundation and provide him with the tools he'd use throughout his life. But, he was exposed to other, shall I say, nonstandard subjects as well, like astrology and the mystical components of the Jewish faith (from which his family converted to Christianity when he was young). I cover many of the key influences on Nostradamus in Chapter 4.

After attending college, Nostradamus took up a career in medicine and made a name for himself by helping the victims of the Black Plague, an incurable disease that spread through Europe, wiping out large populations quickly. Traveling from town to town, he was widely recognized for his work, yet widely criticized among his peers for his unorthodox methods.

After his time as a wandering healer, and after a brief, happy stint as a husband and father, Nostradamus lost both his reputation and his family. He reacted by picking up his doctor's bag and wandering again, but this time he began to look within for answers to life's questions and experience what he believed was the strange power of seeing the future. Nostradamus settled down in Salon, France, and began to acquire a new reputation as a doctor, apothecary, and astrologer who possessed additional skills.

The predictions

If Nostradamus had been content to spend his remaining years as a doctor, apothecary, astrologer, and family man, you and I would've never heard of him. But something clicked as he wandered the countryside, and rumors of his power for prophecy began. But he didn't provide us with written evidence of his insights into the future until he later began publishing *The Almanacs*.

Beginning with yearly publications called *The Almanacs*, Nostradamus used his knowledge of the stars to predict weather and crops. Included in these yearly publications were four-line poems called *quatrains*, in which he predicted events for the year. These yearly publications became so popular that Nostradamus embarked on a larger project of writing predictions for years into the future, up until the year 3737 to be exact. He published these predictions in

a separate volume he called *The Prophecies*. Today, the predictions of *The Prophecies* get the most attention of Nostradamus's works, because there are a total of 942 of them.

But after the first three and a half sections of *The Prophecies* were published, Nostradamus decided that although he'd written the rest of this masterwork, it might be better to keep it unpublished until after his death. The Renaissance was a turbulent time, and Nostradamus knew that the Church, French government (especially the royal family who has its own place in Chapter 8), and certain individuals mentioned in the quatrains may not find the predictions for the future flattering, and as a result, they may decide to bring him up before the Inquisition (a kind of Church court that prosecuted enemies of the Church — real and imagined — that you can read about in Chapter 2).

Nostradamus's predictions range from 1555 to 3737 — a terrific scope of vision. He looked around his native France, predicting the immediate future of Queens, countries, and politics for his own corner of the world (Chapters 7 and 8); the French Revolution (Chapter 9); and Napoleon's career (Chapter 10). As Nostradamus looked farther into the future, he saw a wider world and wrote prophecies that embraced his expanded perspective. His world-view of the years ahead included the horrors that would be the World Wars (Chapters 11 and 12), the changes surrounding the millennium (Chapter 16), changes wrought by natural disasters (Chapter 18), and the light at the end of the tunnel — the hope of the Age of Aquarius (Chapter 19). He even foresaw the people of the future, including the royalty of our own age like Prince Charles and Lady Diana (Chapter 14), and changes in the institution of the family (Chapter 17).

Nostradamus continued to write prophecies and draw up astrological charts for predicting people's lives until his death in July 1566. He even predicted his own death, according to one of the many stories told about him, though some stories bear only a passing resemblance to the truth. (See Chapter 3 for a rundown on all of the works Nostradamus published and tales of his death.)

Or should I say, the prophecies?

The art of telling the future is as old as mankind. People are naturally curious and want to know what the future holds. Most of the time, the act of seeing into the future is referred to as *predicting*, or *making a prediction*. That's fine, but it's really not specific enough — meteorologists *predict* the weather, after all. With Nostradamus, things worked a bit differently, and that difference — the influence of a divine force — changes what may be a *prediction* into a more lofty-sounding *prophecy*. My feeling is that Nostradamus used two rather specific ways to look into the future:

- ✔ **Divination:** Some divination systems you may be familiar with are the tarot deck, the patterns in the stars, and all manners of coins, sticks, and stones. Each system involves using *symbols*, a process where one thing

represents another thing (a picture of a heart may represent love, for example), and a person who has studied the symbols and the system interprets them. Divination often focuses on obtaining answers about one person's life.

✓ **Prophecy:** *Prophecy* is a way of performing divination with some form of divine assistance, or aid from a higher power, and often includes meditation or prayer. The purpose for prophecy is likely religious and is generally for the good of all humanity, instead of focusing on one person's life. Skeptics raise even more concerns about prophecies than divinations, because people giving prophecies predict the future *and* claim that the info came in on the divine hotline.

Nostradamus used both divination and prophecy, and in his case, the Christian God was the divine assistance he sought to guide his writings and insights. So, the works Nostradamus produced were technically *divinations* and *prophecies*, but I often use the term *predictions* throughout this book as well, because it's so common. But when I feel Nostradamus must have been particularly hooked up with a higher power to produce such an accurate view into the future, I make sure to point it out — just like I point out instances when lack of sleep seems to have caught up to him and he turned out a real clunker. (I cover the business of predicting the future in detail in Chapter 5.)

The idea that God gave Nostradamus visions helped to give his writings a bit more believability among the very religious population of the Renaissance, and it helped keep him out of trouble with the local Church when push came to shove. Well, okay, it only *mostly* kept him out of trouble (see Chapter 3 for more on Nostradamus's run-in with the Church). The Church didn't really like when people claimed to speak directly with God. That was their job, and they weren't about to be downsized.

So, how'd he do it?

Nostradamus sat at night in the third-floor study of his home in southern France meditating and contemplating the future. He used all the mystical methods he'd encountered, including pieces from Pagan religions, alchemy (see Chapter 6), the Kabbalah (mystic tradition of Judaism), and Christian mysticism (I discuss these last two in Chapter 4). To clarify his visions, he used calculations of how the planets and stars influenced people and countries he saw (check out Chapter 6). After he made his notes (probably in Latin, the language of the learned men of the Renaissance), Nostradamus wrote quatrains in French about the future he saw.

The quatrains were written largely in Provençal French, the language of the region where Nostradamus lived and grew up. But he added in so many puns, symbols, and tricks to confuse the average reader that interpreting his quatrains is difficult even for scholars (I cover the reasons behind this obscurity and some of the tricks he used to blur the lines in Chapter 6). He was trying to communicate, but he went to great lengths to make his writings hard to

understand. Negative or wrong predictions could've gotten him killed (see "The predictions" section earlier in the chapter for more on the societal forces confronting him), and not everything came up roses in his visions, so he walked a fine line between telling the truth and pleasing the people who had power. (For more on the form and function of his writings, and an exploration of the quatrains in which he describes the scene of his nightly prediction sessions, see Chapter 5.)

Finding the Key to His Lasting Fame

Nostradamus was a strong believer in the Christian faith, a fact that may surprise you, because many people think of him as a fortuneteller of sorts. But Nostradamus has achieved a different kind of immortality from the kind typically offered through Christianity. His prophecies have been continuously in print since his death, with five to ten new interpretation books per year in the modern era, a record shared only by the Bible. As long as his prophecies are in print, he and his legacy will remain an active part of human life. The trick to achieving this kind of notoriety is to find out what keeps people interested in Nostradamus and returning to his quatrains for answers.

There you have it. Go back and read the last sentence again. That's the key: People want answers. We want to participate in life, but we also want to hedge our bets a bit and know what the future holds. But beyond a glimpse of the pattern of the future, I believe that people want some reassurance that there's a bigger picture, whether it's a divine plan for things or simply a logic for the way the world works. I think that deep within the heart of the individual lies the subconscious need to be connected to the pattern of the universe, or put another way, people don't want to be alone and responsible for all this mess (that humanity has made during the course of our history).



So how does this deep longing to find a pattern relate to Nostradamus? If he was correct with his predictions and was able to connect with a divine power and the pattern that connects all of life, then it's true (or at least possible) that both the divine and the pattern are real. In other words, I think that if Nostradamus was indeed able to predict future events, his feat gives some real foundation to the idea that we're all part of a bigger pattern in the universe, that we belong and are important to that system, and that the pattern has a purpose. We're not just randomly wandering around until wars, disease, and our own technology make us obsolete. Nostradamus's ability to predict the future gives us hope.

I believe people especially turn to Nostradamus because his prophecies have been examined more than any other works that claim to see into the future, and he seems to have had much success in prophecy, judging from the number of quatrains that are widely believed to have come true (see the "Discovering the Truth (or Not) Behind His Prophecies" section later in the chapter).

Whew, okay, if you can swim your way out of that philosophical hole, then you won't have trouble understanding another key that keeps Nostradamus high on the list of recognized names: sheer curiosity. Television executives know that ending a TV show with unresolved issues keeps people coming back. Life, as it has gone on so far, has been one great big cliffhanger, because none of us regular people (who can't see into the future) know what's going to happen next. Nostradamus even made sure that his prophecies weren't only about his own time so that people would constantly revisit his work. His prophecies cover just over 2,000 years, which is a ton of material. Nostradamus insures that people will keep coming back, sheer genius for someone wanting to leave his mark — and a marketing plan that'd be hailed as brilliant if such things existed in his day.

Discovering the Truth (or Not) Behind His Prophecies

The one question that stands out among the debates over the topic of Nostradamus is, "Did he actually predict the future?" And I'm prepared to give you both my answer and other people's answer to that question. But first, I think a more basic question has to be considered: "Is predicting the future possible in the first place?"

Determining whether predictions are possible

For many years, scientific testing of all manners has been conducted to try to prove or disprove the idea of prediction, including testing with coin tosses, astrology, shuffled cards, and other seemingly random procedures. The arguments for and against prediction being real are pretty convincing on both sides and keep many people balanced on the fence and uncertain about their conclusions. In this section, I discuss predictions and my view on whether they're real or just fireside stories, and I examine what critics say about the truth or fiction of Nostradamus's prophecies.

Accounting for one author's view

In the end, whether or not predicting what will happen in the future is possible is a matter of personal opinion, and I definitely have an opinion. Through my own life experiences and after studying dreams, divination, and prophecy for years, I believe firmly that knowing the future is possible. I've been surrounded by the past, the present, and the desire to know the future all my life. It's one of my compelling passions, which is why I'm bringing my ideas about Nostradamus and prophecy to you.

I also believe that predicting the future can be accomplished in countless ways — divine insight, tarot card readings, astrology, dreams, or other methods (see Chapter 5 for in-depth explanations of these ways). Whether associated with a culture or religion, types of divination have existed as long as mankind has, and for me, that says a lot. Surely people would've put down divination and left it to rot if it wasn't working for them. But every year, people continue to try to view the future, most especially when there's trouble in the world. Major events like terrorist attacks (I explore these quatrains in Chapter 15) and earthquakes (these quatrains are in Chapters 18 and 19) create a flurry of interest in prediction because people want to know how to prepare, how to adjust, and how to react to the changes.

One important distinction you may notice as you read this book is that I believe in predicting the future, but I don't believe that the future is set in stone. I look at it this way: The future that's seen in visions is simply the pattern of life's tapestry as it's currently being woven together, and we still have the ability to make changes to the tapestry as it's woven. You and I have free will to move about in the world and make our own decisions. After all, in my view, we're part of the system on Earth and aren't separate.

Counting on critics

The modern age has brought with it a fascination of all things scientific and provable. Critics of prediction insist that people are merely listening to the parts of a prediction that they want to hear and conveniently tying them to facets of their lives that seem to match. This kind of convenient matching is the key for critics who say we're just filling in the blanks, but I believe that an outline of events can be in place with the details (even ones that don't match) changeable as time moves forward, and we weave changes into the tapestry of life.

For example, imagine that a fortuneteller predicts that a dog will come into your life in the next three days, and the event will be important to your future happiness. Because you're probably like most people and want to be happy, you'll probably be on the lookout for a dog. Two days later, you happen to see an attractive person walking a dog and smiling at you. Events happen, you manage to meet and fall in love, and the fairy-tale ending of your choice follows in due time. Was it the fortuneteller's prediction coming true or just events that were going to happen?

Critics insist that the prediction isn't necessarily true just because a dog was involved in this event. The happiness could just as easily have come from a sudden inheritance of money from a dog-lover than it did from falling in love with the dog-walker. The point is that you're suddenly trying to match the circumstances to the prediction and are in effect making events match the prediction. Unlike the critics, I believe the fortuneteller saw a general pattern, and tipping you off to it is a way of helping you to recognize the potential of that smiling dog-walker rather than ignore it.

It's a dog eat prophecy world, and the critics can continue to debate over whether predictions are scientifically possible, but I prefer to look at prediction with a wider perspective than just the scientific. I give the doubting critics some credit, but I believe that quite possibly the fortune teller's prediction (even if it's imaginary) was a valid way to look at likely patterns ahead. Determining what to do with the prediction is the individual's decision, but the prediction of what's likely to happen is still real.

Turning the attention to Nostradamus

Nostradamus's prophecies keep the average person interested, because people are curious and have a need for hope. Scholars and critics are a tougher crowd to keep hooked, but Nostradamus even managed this feat, because everyone sees something different when he or she reads the quatrains, and the argument over who is right and who has missed a clue within the twisting words of the quatrains makes for an interesting academic study. Beyond academics, though, everyone wants to know what's hidden in the prophecies to know what events are going to happen in the future.

Ever hear the story about the five blind men who all touched the same object? Each one described what he experienced, but every description was different. They were each touching a different part of an elephant, and the tusks, feet, trunk, tail, and skin are all very different when described individually. Both scholars and critics of Nostradamus are like the blind men, seeing only a small piece of the elephant-sized picture. I believe that if you listen to everyone and don't discount everything, eventually the truth will find an outline, and you can recognize the whole elephant (true meanings and messages from Nostradamus) among the quatrains.

Critics of Nostradamus

Not everyone agrees that Nostradamus was the best of the best when it came to slinging prophecy and creating astrological charts. Even astrologers who shared the same night skies doubted the man they referred to as an amateur. The list of evidence to support their claims that Nostradamus was an amateur astrologer included inaccurate planet positions in his charts, missed calculations, including two suns in an astrology chart, sloppy conclusions, and inaccurate predictions that were almost completely opposite of what actually happened. These objections arose mainly from the yearly almanacs but were applied to the *The Prophecies* after they were published.

In modern times, objections to Nostradamus aren't based on his astrology but on his choice of words (namely, that they're obscure) and the fact that all the predictions seem to be recognized in the clarity of hindsight. Critics tend to discount foretelling if there isn't enough information to actually recognize the event *before* it happens.

If you look at the prophecies after an event and say, “Hey, Nostradamus predicted this,” you run the risk of using *selective agreement*, which is a lot like selective hearing: You pick out the parts of a quatrain that agree with what you want to see (like the details of an event) and then ignore everything else that might contradict that point of view. The unusual symbols and vague references within the quatrains make Nostradamus’s prophecies a playground for those people who want to interpret his words to suit a particular need (especially political). Nostradamus’s critics frequently remind everyone that the reliability of the prophecies is just about average, statistically speaking.

Supporters of Nostradamus

The people who avidly read and study Nostradamus’s works tend to think that critics are overly harsh on the man who was trying to save his own neck from persecution. They say it’s not Nostradamus’s fault if the real meaning in the quatrains remains hidden until after a predicted event has happened. It’s possible that Nostradamus intended the real meaning to be discovered afterward as a record of events that couldn’t be changed but that he foresaw. Later seers like Jeane Dixon even divided their predictions of the future into two categories — those that could be changed and those that would happen regardless of anything else.



I believe that Nostradamus thought it was important to have a background of valid quatrains (those that were identified *after* the event as being right) to provide the rest of his prophecies with a foundation of legitimacy. He was building a reputation, you see. This kind of record would support the idea that the other predictions were true, if only the meaning could be deciphered. Knowing that some quatrains have been identified as real prophecies (predictions that have come true) makes looking at the other quatrains more interesting and worthwhile. People want to keep reading his work, meaning Nostradamus succeeded in his goal of leaving a record for mankind.

This book reveals that by and large, I believe Nostradamus had a pretty strong knack for this kind of work. I also believe that he was human, and people make mistakes, which would explain why some of his prophecies seem like gibberish and some of the prophecies are just wrong. Either that, or the way we understand the individual quatrains is faulty, which is always a possibility.



But the interpretations within this text, as with any text on Nostradamus, are just that — an individual’s thoughts on what Nostradamus might’ve meant. My thoughts about the power of prediction and prophecy (that they’re real and interesting areas of study) have influenced my interpretations of the quatrains. Keep this in mind as you read through *Nostradamus For Dummies* and develop your own opinions.



Throughout the book, I give you tips and guidelines for coming to your own conclusions about Nostradamus’s meaning so that you’re not stuck listening to me. I’m just here as a guide and to provide you with the right tools, so you can get your own idea of where you want to go to do your own exploring.

Hearing from Nostradamus himself

Although Nostradamus didn't have a publicist to make sure that press releases contradicted bad reputation or rumor, the prophecies themselves became a tool for him to rebuff critics. In the *Preface to The Prophecies*, written to his son, César, Nostradamus admitted that his prophecies weren't going to be easy to decipher. Apparently, the real meanings are only going to become clear when a new age appears, and ignorance becomes a thing of the past. I guess that time is now, because here I am with the power of technology and worldwide publishing, writing *Nostradamus For Dummies*.

Nostradamus admitted in the *Preface to The Prophecies* that he clouded the meaning of the quatrains intentionally, and he made no apologies for being difficult to understand. Most people who study Nostradamus believe he clouded the meanings to prevent the ignorant (who might misuse the information) and the vengeful (who might kill him) from figuring out what was going to happen in the future.

In *The Epistle to Henry II* (another writing by Nostradamus that contains prophecy), Nostradamus noted that his critics may find him hard to understand. But Nostradamus made no attempt to explain why he insisted on writing this way, other than to say that only wise people (whom he described as people who studied the same mystical traditions he did) would be able to understand his prophecies.