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Letters to the Editor

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Readers' Visions

Barbara R. Jasny, Pamela J. Hines, Linda J. Miller

Do you think things are changing rapidly now? According to some of our readers, you haven't seen anything yet! Several months ago, *Science* invited entries for an essay contest in which readers were asked to imagine the life of a scientist in 2050. As a prelude to our celebration of the new millennium, for the next 4 weeks we are presenting the 12 winning essays of our Visions of the Future competition. We hope that reading these essays during the month of December will be a holiday present to our audience; it has certainly been a treat for us to administer the contest.

We asked our contestants to offer a glimpse of the future through a scientist's eyes—a description of a typical day, or a grant application, or an address to a professional society. What issues will the scientists of 2050 be confronting? How will scientists communicate? Where will the balance fall between professional and personal growth? What tools will scientists be using? What ethical issues will be relevant? Where will young scientists find financial or societal support? Entrants were invited to break the shackles of our present reality and let their imaginations run free.

We received 160 essays from all around the world, and participants ranged from students to professors emeritus. Certain themes recurred. Many entrants speculated on the interface between humans and computers, cloning and genetics, ecology and the possibility of environmental doomsdays, neurochip implants, conquering AIDS, transcending the aging process, or the social structure of science. A certain degree of wish fulfillment was present, as several essays involved scientists who started new and exciting careers when in their 60s or male scientists who relied (in one way or another) on computers with clearly female personas. We were also intrigued by the lack of predictions that humans would be moving toward some "perfect" image. Instead, our winning essay writers on the whole celebrated our glorious diversity, warts and all, by suggesting that technology would be used to enhance our strengths and move beyond our deficiencies.

Unlike our normal peer review process, the judging was idiosyncratic and subjective—we picked the essays that seemed to us to be the most interesting, amusing, creative, and thought-provoking. The winning authors* are receiving free subscriptions to *Science* and *Science*-related tokens of our esteem and appreciation.

Although we could not publish their essays in their entirety, we do want to give Honorable Mentions to two entrants whose words stuck in our minds. First, we would like to recognize Lloyd Fricker from New York for his exceedingly jaundiced views of the future and to give you a sampling of his proposals: "In 2010: To cut study administration costs, study sections are simply given 10 million dollars in cash at the start of the meeting. Applications with great scores are sent piles of cash, thus eliminating the NIH administrative costs, and reducing university overhead costs as well. An unanticipated major benefit is that many awardees do not write another application, and are never heard from again. Real estate prices in South America skyrocket." We would also like to recognize José Israel Aragón Romero from Cusco, Peru, who described the problems of using tamarind-shaped robots to study animal behavior in the Amazon, for his ideas and for the unforgettable line, "Where did I leave the trimolecular machete?"

Before you dismiss this as a frivolous exercise on the part of a usually sober magazine, remember how many of Jules Verne's predictions—from submarines to space travel—actually came true. If our contestants have only captured a glimmer of what the future holds, then there are many challenging and exciting experiences to come!

*The winning contestants are Seth Shostak; Simon H. Friedman; Eva Bushman; Jill Trehwella and Don M. Parkin; Daniel Booth; Paul K. Wolber; Ruth Kohen; Mary Ann Krug; Joshua T. Vogelstein, Jacob V. Vogelstein, and Bert Vogelstein; Caurnel Morgan; Manju M. Hingorani; and Edward McSweeney.

**"[O]ur winning
essay writers...
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