

BOOKS

Interview

Future shock

In *Visions*, scientist of the people Michio Kaku takes a look at what's around the bend

Ignore the sad-sack screeds of *X-Files* millennialists: We might be dancing toward an Age of Aquarius. If we can survive the next 100 years. That's the message of Michio Kaku's new book, *Visions*, a frighteningly informed meditation on the scientific technicalities of the coming century.

"So many people feel afraid of science," Kaku says from his office at the City University of New York, where he's Henry Semat Professor of Theoretical Physics. "They saw the atomic bomb; they saw Three Mile Island. My attitude is that it's power; it's neutral. It depends on who harnesses that power."



Recently, Kaku has been best known as the most strident opponent of NASA's *Cassini* Saturn probe, which was launched earlier this month with a 72-pound payload of ultratoxic plutonium. That was him last July, camped out at the main gate of Cape Canaveral Air Station, hurling NASA's own obscure worst-case stats back at them. "[The rocket's] failure rate is one out of 20," he chanted, evoking a dust cloud of radiation frying 200,000 taxpayers. "How do you quantify human stupidity?"

Visions is the end result of Kaku's quantification of human intelligence. Culled from ten years of interviews with 150 scientists on his nationally syndicated radio program (*Explorations* airs on WBAI on Wednesdays at 8pm), the book serves up plausibly optimistic scenarios for the uses of computers, bioengineering and the space program.

Visions offers a picture of life in 2020: You walk into your kitchen, and your appliances hand you breakfast. Your car drives itself to work. Your doctor zaps a start-up tumor with a couple "smart molecules." At a party, your eyeglasses discreetly remind you

whom you're talking to. You shop and date by TV, all the while wisecracking with a hundred disposable computers verbally indistinguishable from the friends you used to have.

It's a future of cheap and abundant power, the routine elimination of inherited diseases and the replacement of silicon by electron-manipulating computers. Like Edward Bellamy's 100-year-old best-seller *Looking Backward*, *Visions* belongs to a cautiously anti-dystopian school of forecasting.

Kaku himself is no one's vision of a theoretical physicist. Voluble and attractive, he projects a virulent strain of enthusiasm that's hard to shake. "I like to communicate the excitement I feel," he says happily.

That excitement originated in San Francisco, where his Japanese-American parents, both interned during World War II, worked as a gardener and a maid. As a kid, Kaku coiled 22 miles of copper wire on a football field and built an atom smasher. It won him first prize at the National Science Fair, along with the approval of Edward Teller, head of the U.S. H-bomb project. Teller handed him a scholarship to Harvard. The day after Kaku's 1968 graduation, he got drafted.

"That changed my life," he recalls. "For the first time, I saw what you could do with physics. I was shooting [practice] mortars. I could calculate how high they went, all the parameters, in my head to keep myself busy. But then I realized that when those things came down, they were supposed to kill somebody."

High blood sugar kept him out of combat; he left boot camp completely unwilling to follow Teller into the bomb factory. "It was like a message from heaven: You were destined to die on some unnamed hill in Vietnam, and I've given you back your life. Now do something with it."

What he did was launch a one-man mission to popularize science—through his radio show, frequent speeches and books such as 1994's best-seller *Hyperspace*, a weird trip into ten-dimensional space and time.

Time travel, however, is not one of Kaku's visions of the future. Neither are ray guns, force fields, transporter rooms or invisibility. But some of his pronouncements—"by 2020 scientists will be able to connect a variety of organs to silicon chips"—might strike cynics as equally suspicious.

Kaku knows better. "The only danger I see is either we'll pollute ourselves or we'll blow ourselves up. It's going to be a toss-up. It's going to be close."—Martin Kihn

Visions is out now (Anchor, \$24.95).

What the City's Coming To

Brian Hall



The author of *The Saskiad*, a former Barnes & Noble Discover Great New Writers selection, will read from, discuss and sign copies of his new book, *Madeleine's World*, an extraordinary account of his daughter's first three years. Reading • Discussion • Signing

Thursday, October 30th, 7:30-8:30 PM
Upper West Side
2289 Broadway at 82nd Street

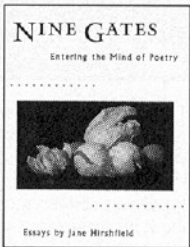
Geoff Nicholson



Author Geoff Nicholson will read from and sign copies of his darkly funny new novel, *Bleeding London*, and *Footsucker*, now available in paperback. Reading • Signing

Thursday, October 30th, 7:30-8:30 PM
Astor Place
4 Astor Place, between Broadway and Lafayette

Jane Hirshfield



The award-winning poet will read from, discuss and sign copies of *Nine Gates*, a collection of essays in which she explains how poetry can transform our experience of contemporary life. Reading • Discussion • Signing

Monday, November 3rd, 7:30-8:30 PM
Astor Place 4 Astor Place
between Broadway and Lafayette

For information on daily events in our city stores, call the Manhattan Barnes & Noble Events Line at (212) 727-4810.

Barnes & Noble

Booksellers Since 1873