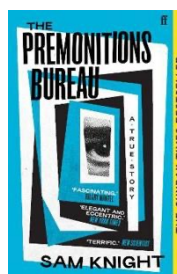


## Sam Knight Details How

### Not to Build a Premonitions Bureau<sup>1</sup>

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A Review of *The Premonitions Bureau: A True Account of Death Foretold* by Sam Knight. Penguin Press, 2022, 249 pp. \$22.57 (paperback)

I spent most of my time as I read and listened to *The Premonitions Bureau* trying to understand Knight's purpose for writing it. The British author did outstanding research, his voice is strong and compelling, and the stories of precognizing dire events – which is the understood definition of “premonition” here – are representative, intriguing, and skillfully conveyed. But to me it appears he was motivated to “explain away” rather than openly investigate the common and often disturbing experience of spontaneous precognition.

Knight thoughtfully details the late-1960s UK attempt to create a central a priori repository for dreams, visions, and intuitions from the public that seemed related to negative future events. The goal of this “premonitions bureau” was to examine the science of precognition and to prepare for, warn about, or potentially avoid the foretold futures. I will not repeat here much of what's already been said about *The Premonitions Bureau*; it has been heavily reviewed and celebrated in several widely read media outlets.

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Instead, I'll dive into the details that are particularly relevant for those interested in anomalous experience and cognition.

The UK premonitions bureau was launched in response to anecdotes from multiple percipients who foresaw, in one way or another, the collapse of a portion of a coal mine that was on a hill above the community of Aberfan, Wales. In this tragedy, 116 children and 28 adults were killed – the number of child fatalities was remarkably high because the slurry covered a schoolhouse when school was in session. The event was a highly emotional target, and according to existing theories about precognitive targets, this one should have produced clear spontaneous precognitions as an excellent attractor in a “time loop” relation with prior premonitions (Cheung & Mossbridge, 2018; Wargo, 2018). From a precognition researcher's point of view, at least the “emotional attractor” portion of the time loop hypothesis was supported. The event was preceded by scores of credible premonitions, so many that the potential that future premonitions could avoid additional tragedies motivated controversial UK psychiatrist John Barker to create his “premonitions bureau.”

Knight is at his best when he describes the experiences of the characters inhabiting Barker's world after the Aberfan disaster. From a scientific point of view, the most informative aspect of the book is the in-depth and careful portrayal of individual premonitory forms – some might call these “noetic signatures” (Wahbeh et al., 2022). He tells of one skilled precog who had light flashes associated with visions and of another consistently accurate precog who had dreams associated with predictive words. Some had dreams appropriate for their own future experience of the precognized event, again supporting the portion of the time loop hypothesis suggesting that one's own future experience is what is precognized rather than a global or third-person point of view

(Cheung & Mossbridge, 2018; Wargo, 2018). For instance, a schoolgirl who died in the collapse of the coal mine disaster reported to her mother on the day before the disaster her dream that she went to school and the school was gone, with something black all over it. This latter example brings up a key distinction that Knight covers well – even though some of the premonitions detailed in the book were described to witnesses prior to the events they predicted and others were told after the fact, in a sense they were all post-hoc. In other words, those premonitions reported prior to the event were later selected by the willing ears of the reporter or researcher who asked for stories of anyone who had heard of premonitions of the disaster. This is not the way rigorous research into spontaneous anomalous experience is done, of course. The methodologies used to examine spontaneous phenomena have come a long way since the 1960s (for a review, see Kelly & Tucker, 2015), and were well advanced of those described by Knight even during the era on which he focuses his attention.

Throughout the book, Knight informs the reader about most relevant aspects of present-day scientific thinking on time and cognition, including perceptual confusions, placebo and nocebo effects, confirmation bias, and mistaken memories. A concern I had with this coverage is that there is a glaring exception of any information about controlled scientific research on precognition, informational time travel, or retrocausality in psychology, neuroscience, or physics (for recent reviews, see Mossbridge, 2021, 2023). Instead, he pushes back on legitimate questions that naturally arise in the mind of any curious reader of a book about premonitions, including any questions related to the nonlinearity of time or time symmetry. He seems to see these questions as signs that the reader's mind has gone too far. That he counsels the reader that this might be the case made me wonder if his goal was actually to guide the mind of the reader away from curiosity, edge science, and open scientific discussion and towards appeals to authority and so-called "settled science."

There is something familiar about Knight's pushback against the possibility of the reality of precognition that resonates on every page. I am reminded of well-crafted but desperate attempts to claim that AI is not conscious (as if we understood what consciousness is). With the current backdrop of scientific discovery related to AI outpacing our attempts to understand it, the book can sometimes seem like an elegant but last-ditch attempt to avoid spelling out Knight's own premonition that we are on the cusp of a revolution in our scientific thinking about time. As I read it, I found myself wishing there existed a cross between Thomas Kuhn and Erik Erikson who could have befriended Knight before he wrote this book. In my mind, this person (let's call her "Thomrica Kuhnson") could have at first supported Knight in noting that when data obtained through the scientific method do not conform to our models about how the natural world works, it is reasonable to set aside these data as anomalous as long as our models continue to function well in other areas. You keep an eye on them, you do not ignore them, but you do not assume they are correct. As Knight's exploration went on, Kuhnson would explain that if the phenomena we at first called "anomalous" continue to crop up more and more, even as we improve to use excellent methods in our experimentation, we need to consider changing our models (Kuhn, 1970). Finally, Kuhnson would counsel Knight in his own growth process, gently helping him recognize that while holding onto our identities as authorities in a particular domain feels gratifying, it is more gratifying to learn new things and discover for ourselves the world of legitimate and hard-won data that exists outside our own experience and beliefs, a process that process that allows our egos to integrate with all other parts of the self (Erikson, 1946). But, alas, Kuhnson was not around. Instead, we have this book in which Knight does the intriguing work of valuing, then progressively discounting, the human capacity of precognition.



He does this creation-destruction work beautifully; several times I found myself gasping at his talent. At first, for example, *The Premonitions Bureau* feels like a human potential story that indulges and develops its real-world characters, especially the premonitions bureau founder, psychiatrist John Barker. Later, the same character is shamed in what feels like an unintentional attempt to destroy the reputations of those who would like science to do its job making progress in understanding the unknown. But it is more complex than that. The shame is in fact well-placed, given the abhorrence that arises when the reader reflects -using our modern sensibilities- on the things Barker did to try to “heal” mentally ill patients, including popularizing the lobotomy (which Knight duly notes is a practice Barker later tried to stop). This gives you a feeling for Knight’s ambivalence about the topic – on the one hand, he wants to do justice to human experience. On the other, he wants to show how deluded those are who believe precognition could be real, without publicly revealing the motivations behind his own interest in the topic.

After detailing the painstakingly researched experiences of multiple skilled precogs and the predictions that spurred Barker on in his 18-month maintenance of the bureau, Knight is careful in the final chapter to end with his conclusions that time is linear, most “premonitions” are either self-fulfilling prophecies based on the nocebo effect or confirmation bias, and Barker was delusional to keep his premonitions bureau open when only 3% of the predictions actually occurred, with most of these predictions made by two gifted psychics. Nowhere does he acknowledge any of the controlled studies of precognition, instead writing as if laboratory science after 1968 has nothing to contribute to the question. Nonetheless he is happy to quote modern physicists who support the idea of a single direction for the arrow of time (forward). The overall implication is that we should take from the fable of a foible-filled psychiatrist (Barker) the conclusion that precognition is a deluded emotion, not a capacity that tells us something about how the universe works. Knight demonstrates that the UK premonitions bureau was an exercise in

confusion, vanity, and personality disorders run amok, a description that is unfortunately likely to be accurate. Without stating it as such, his lesson seems to be that any modern effort would be the same. Unsurprisingly, that is not the lesson I took from this book.

About half-way through the book I realized I was focusing on the wrong question – instead of wondering what Knight’s purpose was for writing the book, I needed to assess my reason for reading it. It occurred to me that here was an opportunity to answer the question that plenty of people have asked me over the past decade or so – would it be helpful to create a present-day premonitions bureau? Can we actually use precognized information to navigate the future? Even 3% accuracy might be helpful if we could use machine learning, for instance, to narrow down which precognitions and psychics are likely to be predictive. For instance, assuming we could not have avoided the COVID pandemic, could we have better prepared for the virus if we had had a machine-learning-based publicly sourced premonitions bureau?

As Knight perhaps unintentionally reveals via his kind-hearted and accurately researched character-assassination process, the answer to this question depends on all the factors you would imagine. The lesson I took from *The Premonitions Bureau* is that a present-day precognition-powered roadmap of the future would require exactly the pieces Knight shows us were missing in the late 60s, the lapses that doomed the effort to failure not before Barker showed us what not to do. Specifically, it would need financial resources, technical and scientific innovation, ethical transparency, and the social-emotional intelligence of both staff at the bureau and the skilled precog contributors. In short, the success of a premonitions bureau depends on the level of public and private commitment to the project as well as the character, commitment, and clarity of those making it work. This is especially important considering the ethical implications of setting up a situation in which poorly-intentioned and/or mentally ill precogs can potentially create self-fulfilling prophecies, something Knight alludes to a few times without



surfacing too obviously. I am confident that multiple private and public sector groups agree, and I feel everyone in the psi research community ought to think about what our role will be in these currently proprietary and below-the-radar premonition bureaus.

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