

HAPPY NEW YEAR!

(it may be your last)

So apparently the world is ending. But before you max out your credit card, read on as David Smiedt investigates the hysteria

In show business, it's known as a "triple threat" – the signifier of a rare force who can sing, dance and act. Think Beyoncé. Or Hugh Jackman. Or (most of the time) Liza Minnelli. For those susceptible to doomsday theories and end-of-world conspiracies, the year ahead is a temporal equivalent. And not in the entertaining way, but rather the "you may want to hug nanna a few more times because time is running out" kind of way. The year 2012 has been earmarked as the great global renovation by cultures ancient and science contemporary.

Pay heed to historical myth-makers, astrophysics buffs, astrologists and even the Bible (specifically Revelation, uh, 20:12), and this will be the type of year for which the word "cataclysm" was invented. And that's a pretty impressive feat when you consider how dicey things looked at the start of *last* year, when floods, fires and a tsunami packed a devastating one-two-three punch.

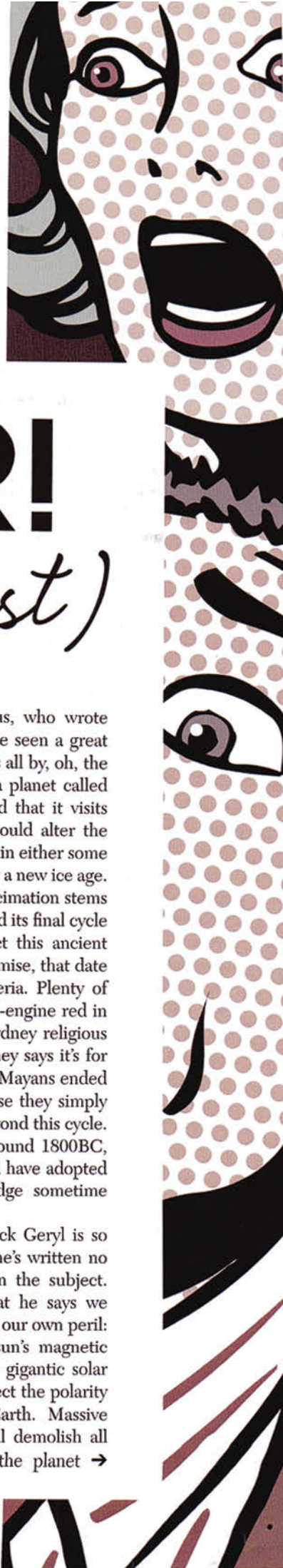
Doomsday predictions have been around for time immemorial – more on that in a moment – but something about 2012 has always held the popular imagination in thrall, its status as *the* year that changes everything locked into place for so long that you have to wonder: will it really mark, as REM once sang, "the end of the world as we know it?" (Those guys, by the way, recently broke up after more than three decades together, a split nobody really saw coming. Do they know something we don't?)

The most notable soothsayer was Nostradamus, who wrote of a comet – actually, he said that "in the sky will be seen a great fire dragging a trail of sparks" – that would doom us all by, oh, the Christmas holidays. Another foretelling involves a planet called Nibiru. The ancient Sumerian culture calculated that it visits our part of the galaxy every 3600 years and could alter the Earth's distance from the sun. This could result in either some fabulous tans (for the first few days, at least) or a new ice age.

But the most talked-about vision of decimation stems from the Mayan calendar, which is set to end its final cycle on December 21, 2012. Despite the fact this ancient civilisation failed to anticipate its *own* demise, that date lies at the heart of much of this hysteria. Plenty of nervous theorists have circled it in fire-engine red in their diaries, though University of Sydney religious studies professor Christopher Hartney says it's for no good reason. He points out the Mayans ended their calendar on this date because they simply didn't see a need to calculate beyond this cycle.

For a culture that emerged around 1800BC, it's understandable they would have adopted a "let's cross the 2012 bridge sometime later" kind of attitude.

Belgian author Patrick Geryl is so certain it's curtains that he's written no less than *nine* books on the subject. So it's no surprise that he says we ignore his warnings at our own peril: "Upheavals in the sun's magnetic fields will generate gigantic solar flares that will affect the polarity of the entire Earth. Massive earthquakes will demolish all buildings on the planet →





and instigate colossal tsunamis and intense volcanic activity. In fact, the Earth's crust will shift, sweeping continents thousands of miles away from their present positions."

Scientists cry hocus-pocus. NASA's David Morrison fronts the agency's "Ask An Astrophysicist" internet program, where he debunks these claims. "Magnetic reversal takes place every 400,000 years, on average," he says. "As far as we know, such a reversal doesn't cause any harm to life on Earth. There is no reason to expect a reversal any time soon, or to anticipate any bad effects on life when it does happen." As for the solar flares? NASA says "the next solar maximum will occur in the 2012-2014 time frame and is predicted to be average, no different than previous cycles throughout history."

Geryl remains unconvinced, and those who agree with him point to incidents involving aeroplanes, whose internal navigation systems rely on accurate readings of the magnetic fields. A runway in Tampa, Florida, had to be replotted and renumbered, while the January 2011 crash of a Kogalymavia Airlines flight en route from Siberia to Moscow was officially attributed to a "critical failure" of its avionics system to compensate for the shifts. And those mass bird and fish deaths we heard about last year? Some peg them to this shift.

Here's what else you can look forward to if Geryl is right: a decimated global power grid. Nuclear-reactor meltdowns. Total anarchy at every traffic light. Useless Blackberries, iPhones and iPads. And the worst: quick extinction of frozen food. Life without Paddle Pops? What's the point?! Actually, says Geryl, you probably won't have time to contemplate it. Asked if Australians could survive this mess, he says: "It's unlikely. You are looking at tidal waves that are two kilometres high – and the only [local] mountains high enough to withstand these waves are in national parks where you don't have access to food and materials." And thanks to those predicted polar shifts, Australia will become "ice-cold." At least that might solve the Paddle Pop problem.

It's important to remember we've been here before, most recently in late 1999, when worries about the so-called Y2K computer glitch caused, ahem, lots of journalistic hand-wringing and threatened to overshadow the arrival of the new millennium. An entire cottage industry sprang up devoted to helping consumers handle the impending meltdown, featuring everything from how-to handbooks and dehydrated-food packs to T-shirts and even a cookbook (still available on Amazon for the low cost of \$12.95!). Then the clock struck midnight on January 1, 2000, and exactly nothing happened. So please forgive comparative religion expert Dr Julian Droogan of Macquarie University for shrugging

off the frenzy. "In many religions – Christianity, Judaism, Islam – there is a day of reckoning," he explains. "At the moment there seems to be a renewed sense of anxiety in society – prompted by economic concerns, environmental issues, even the mass media – and when these elements intersect, you get people putting stock into doomsday theories.

"If you asked a Chinese person or a Hindu if they were worried about the world ending in 2012, you'd probably get a flat 'no'. Western cultures see time as being finite. They see time as a cyclic. It's something that repeats and renews." And, he reminds, "There's no record of what the Maya believed would happen at the end of their

NUCLEAR-REACTOR MELTDOWNS ACROSS THE GLOBE. TOTAL ANARCHY AT EVERY TRAFFIC LIGHT. USELESS BLACKBERRIES AND IPHONES

calendar. The most probably they would've said: 'The calendar has finished, better make a new one!'"

Indeed, there are plenty who believe this "ending" is far less about the collapse of civilisation than a realignment of priorities. Hartney says many who adhere to the Mayan calendar have altered their view as the "end" approaches. "Followers have refabricated their thinking," he says. "They now believe that in December, there will be a significant spiritual change all over the world that will bring in a new age [of] co-operation and a more intense spirituality."

Tired of having their culture used as a sack-clothed scapegoat by panic merchants, some Mayan elders are now trying to clarify their forefathers' intent. Guatemalan priest Carlos Barrios says the end of this calendar cycle has nothing to do with crumbling mountains or panicked hordes.

Rather, he foresees a new era marked by decreased materialism, increased compassion and greater respect for the earth. "Humanity will continue," he says, "but in a different way. Material structures will change. From this, we will have the opportunity to be more human." Ironically enough, of all the 2012 prophecies flying about the cultural ether, his may actually be the hardest to believe. **m**

END NOTES: Why sit around worrying about the end of the world when you can watch it happen from the comfort of your couch or movie theatre? Here's a guide to the best mortal-disaster movies ever, rated on a scale from ridiculous to realistic.

RIDICULOUS



Mars Attacks! (1996)



Armageddon (1998)



I Am Legend (2007)



Melancholia (2011)



The Road (2010)

REALISTIC