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# The Weight Of Certainty—Selected Stories Of Steve Mathys

By Mike Lindstrom

Recently the Forecasting and Futurism Section has enjoyed being among the sponsors of the Speculative Fiction Contest. The Contest invites those actuaries who are so inclined to submit a short, original work of speculative fiction. These works are distributed to the general SOA membership to read, and are also considered for awards by different panels. For the past several years the section has awarded a prize for the best use of forecasting in a story.

On behalf of the section I would like to congratulate the 10<sup>th</sup> Speculative Fiction Contest Forecasting and Futurism Section Prize winner, Steve Mathys for his story, “Calibration.”

“Calibration” describes a day in the life of Stuart, a businessman in Capitol City. Stuart subscribes to the services of a company called Precision Dynamics, which provides a list of custom probabilities in regard to a series of today’s personal events submitted by the customer the night before. If the probability provided by Precision Dynamics is less than the a priori probability for a given event, then it can be assumed that the given event will take place that day with a high degree of certainty. On the morning in question, Stuart receives a very troubling number—for the probability that he will die that day. The story unfolds as Stuart responds to what he believes to be his imminent demise.

I recently had the opportunity to speak with Mathys, who has been writing stories since before college. He first entered the Speculative Fiction Contest back in 2003, acting on a suggestion from a coworker who knew he enjoyed writing. He ended up winning a prize that year for the story “Antiquity in their Midst.” More stories for subsequent contests followed, such as “Condemnation of Fate,” the detective story “Eight Seconds, or Maybe Nine,” which became his favorite from the contests, and the Ninth Speculative Fiction Contest Forecasting and Futurism Section Prize winning story, “The What Ifs.”

As in “Calibration,” the lead character of “The What ifs” has her life greatly altered by a forecast of the future. After

projections of her athletic career show a large probability of early injury, she is not picked for the draft. In a chance encounter she meets the modeler who ran the projection and they develop a relationship. Eventually he gives her the opportunity to have access to the model and she must decide whether or not to use it. That is, she has the choice between knowing with a high probability which life decisions will be optimal, or she can continue to live her life without guidance. Mathys believes it is not the certainty that is scary, but it’s the loss of the opportunity to change things that might prevent someone from wanting a perfect forecast.

Whether writing a story or doing actuarial work, Mathys enjoys the process of “making something out of nothing,” and feels that creativity has a place in his day job as well. He says actuaries should always be searching for a better solution, rather than just relying on what was done previously. His reluctance to be overly influenced by one source is also evident in his reading, as he limits himself to only one book by the same author in any given year. He admits that even in a fiction contest for actuaries, the story has to come first. Let’s hope he continues to put it there. ▼



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