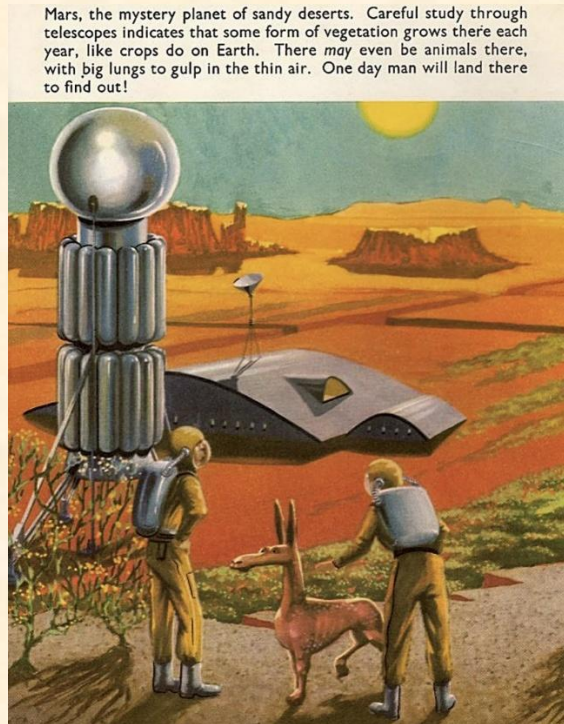


# How Soon is 2050?

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Fantasies such as the one on the right were staples of annuals for young boys when I was of an age to read them during the late 1950s and early 60s. Towards the end of the 60s the year 1984 presented a less comfortable image on account of its resonance with the cold war rhetoric that was an ever-present background to the lives of teenagers. However, to a fifteen-year-old, 1984 was literally a whole lifetime away and could be ignored on account of its perceived distance from the present. Orwell had created his dystopian vision in 1949, a thirty-five-year projection. This is much the same time span as the vision of 2025 that I had created for my pupils, the “millennium children” back in 1992, a vision that turned out to be too conservative.



There are lessons to be learned here. The first and most obvious is that making predictions about the future and therefore the whole enterprise of foresight studies and futures education is a hazardous business resting on shifting sands. The second, which is the one I mainly want to address in this essay is that our perception of time and the very conception of “the future” are both highly subjective. As an occurrence spread over time, the ongoing process of global heating stands at an opposite extreme to the 2020 Covid pandemic. The latter was an event so rapid that governments worldwide were left in no doubt about the need to prioritise immediate action over all other spending commitments except for health services, inextricably tied in any case to the pandemic spread of a novel virus.

Human subjectivity in the perception of time and when “the future” is has made it far more difficult for governments to prioritise the mitigation of global heating. Arbitrary dates such as 2050 for “net zero” have been set but as time passes it becomes ever clearer that it is largely meaningless to define 2050 as “the future”. How will 2050 differ from 2040 or 2060? What will happen between 2030 and 2070? How long before “the future” arrives? Ten years, fifty years or a hundred years? This same subjectivity allows the average citizen to ignore the fact that a climate emergency was declared in 2019.<sup>a</sup> An “emergency” is something you respond to as an immediate top priority and deal with straight away, but even though we know what to do, we don’t do it because “the future” appears continually to recede. So, the “emergency” isn’t really an emergency with the result that as each day passes, “the future” simply moves forwards another day and business continues as usual.

Clearly, “the future” cannot recede infinitely. In 1963, when I was ten years old and out for a walk with my father, we passed the “Kingdom Hall of Jehova’s Witnesses”. I asked him what it was. I can’t

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<sup>a</sup> By a majority of councils in the UK.

remember his exact words, but they were something along the lines of ‘where a bunch of crackpots who are getting ready for the end of the world meet’. He definitely used the word “crackpot”. A few enquiries revealed that this event, Armageddon, was to be in 1976. My young life was therefore to end when I was only twenty-three. I took comfort in the fact that my father was perhaps wise in his “crackpot” assessment but, failing this, 1976 was still a long time in “the future” and could therefore in any case be ignored by a ten-year-old.

In 1992, I was talking to children about floods, wildfires and storms that would be part of their future. I don’t recall setting an actual date, other than a vague notion of the time those children would have similarly aged children of their own, perhaps between 2020 and 2030 – a very long time in “the future” for these children. Well, here we are in 2026. These “millennium children” are now grown up, a fair number of them are indeed now themselves parents of eleven-year-olds. In 1992, when the UK annual mean temperature was 8.74 degrees<sup>b</sup>, those children watched a fictitious BBC weather forecast in which mean annual temperatures for 2030 exceeded 10 degrees, with consequent heat waves, dangerous to some. “The future”. At the time of writing, the mean annual temperature for 2026 is not yet known and we shall have to wait another five years before we know what actually happens in 2030. However, 2025 was the most recently recorded of several record-breaking years and the hottest year yet recorded in the UK with a mean annual temperature of 10.09 degrees. So, we have a fair indication of the way things are heading.

We need another way of looking at the problem of “the future”. It surprises me that so many otherwise highly intelligent people are prepared to set arbitrary dates such as 2030 or 2050, only to have their intended significance repeatedly ignored at the ballot box. Strangely enough, the answer may yet lie with the Jehovah’s Witnesses. The date for Armageddon had previously been set for 1914, then again for 1925. After 1976, the Witnesses were presumably beginning to question their own judgement and after the failure of Armageddon to arrive in 2000 seem to have acknowledged what the Bible actually says - that no one knows the exact day or hour of Jesus’s return—not even the angels or the Son—except the Father (Matthew 24: 36). Current believers should therefore remain watchful and vigilant. Indeed. No one knows when climate Armageddon will come, still less how long the battle will last, but the need to remain watchful and prepare, NOW, has never been greater.

Perhaps the problem is with the entire concept of Armageddon? The breaching of the 10-degree UK barrier has not been climate Armageddon. It seems likely that 11- and 12-degree barriers will also be breached in the UK as overall global heating approaches two degrees. Recent advances in our understanding of the Atlantic Meridional Overturning Circulation (AMOC) tipping point have raised awareness that Europe, currently the most rapidly heating continent, may even experience a reversing trend with uncomfortable cooling to disruptive levels. Wisely, no precise date has been set for this, but the most authoritative recent studies agree that AMOC weakening has already begun and have set not a date but timescales to be experienced by children currently living.<sup>1</sup>

Assuming that a significant cooling of the global north in conflict with further heating in the global is experienced, at what point in which year will it be Armageddon? Tellingly, the more benignly optimistic images of boys’ annuals dating from the 50s and 60s have been replaced by dystopian literature such as *Ice* (Arnold Federbush 1978) or *The Coming Global Superstorm* (Art Bell and Whitley Strieber, 1999). Rooted in the modelling of possible AMOC trends as understood in the 1990s, Bell and Strieber’s writing inspired the film *The Day After Tomorrow*. This was released in 2004 and briefly filled the minds

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<sup>b</sup> Data from UK Met Office.

of a generation of teenagers with complete nonsense about possible timescales for a catastrophic rapid cooling of the Northern hemisphere.

It is perhaps time that we stopped using words such as 'Armageddon' which so misleadingly project events occupying multiple decades as happening overnight. The effect is clearly counter-productive in that real trends are confused with Hollywood disaster fodder, allowing most young people to ignore "the future" in their lives much as I did during the 1960s and 70s. More thoughtful and sensitive young people may develop debilitating, unfocussed anxiety, a reaction probably no more helpful. Perhaps also unhelpfully the "highway to hell" metaphor used by Antonio Guterres has the unfortunate consequence of drawing attention away from the fact that there are many people alive today who have already experienced or are currently experiencing "hell" in the form of floods, wildfires, storm events and heat deaths.

The perception of hell is, like the perception of time, largely subjective. Those of us (the majority) who have not yet experienced a seriously destructive flood, wildfire or perhaps deaths resulting from excess heat or very high winds cannot know exactly how we will feel. It can be easy to forget that in other parts of the world, there are plenty of people who have already experienced such events, perhaps more than once. "Hell" or "Armageddon" are thus functions of place at least as much as of time. Have we nothing to learn from their experience? Also part of the mix is the fact that human activity in the present is a significant contributor to problems commonly blamed entirely on global heating. A prime example would surely be degrees of desertification that have resulted from deforestation and illegal logging at least as much as climate heating. Another would be sinking land heights caused by excessive groundwater abstraction, an issue that is regularly obscured by a focus only on rising sea levels.

Maybe we have just been asking the wrong question. Suppose that the preparation of the young focussed more on the present? Suppose that those who have not yet had first hand experience of climate disasters learned from those that had? Might we then develop greater awareness of and more compassionate concern for the inequality and injustice in the global distribution of climate disasters? There are plenty happening now in real time, but distance allows us to ignore them much as time allows us to ignore what is going to happen, if not to us, then to our children. If we extended our sense of place to include current locations of climate "hell" and conceived "the present" not as what is happening today, but as what is happening during the lifetime of people currently living, we might solve the problem of the infinitely receding future that never comes. Perhaps then the future would take care of itself.

Boat of Garten  
May 2026

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<sup>1</sup> Thornalley, D. et al (2018) Anomalously weak Labrador Sea convection and Atlantic overturning during the past 150 years, *Nature*, 556: 228-234.

Van Westen, R. et al. (2025) European Temperature Extremes Under Different AMOC Scenarios in the Community Earth System Model, *Geophysical Research Letters*, 52,

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