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ASTROLOGY IN THE AGE OF UNCERTAINTY

Millennials who see no contradiction between using astrology and believing in science are fuelling a resurgence of the practice.

By Christine Smallwood

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A new generation of practitioners is meeting the public's appetite for astrology. **Illustration by Miguel Porlan**

On a Sunday night in June, the twenty-nine-year-old astrologer Aliza Kelly was preparing to broadcast an Astrology 101 live stream from her apartment, on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. A glittering SpectroLED light panel made the living room feel like a tiny movie set. "My manager took me to get these lights at B&H," she said.

A windowsill was lined with gifts from clients—an illustrated zodiac, a white orchid. Kelly sat cross-legged on a taupe ottoman, wearing cat eyeliner and large hoop earrings, greeting people and waving as they appeared in the online chat room. "That is one of my favorite things, as a Leo and as a person—building community," she said. It was a little before eight-thirty, and some of the fifty-two participants—who had paid between $19.99 and $39.99 each—were typing hellos; one woman, in Europe, had set her alarm for 2:30 A.M., to log in. Once the class started, Kelly clicked through a slide deck about ancient Babylonia; William Lilly, the "English Merlin," who was consulted by both sides during the English Civil War; and the signs of the zodiac. To explain the traits of Aries, she put up a picture of Mariah Carey ("She loves getting presents"). For Pisces, she had Rihanna and Steve Jobs. "My main favorite thing is to talk about the signs as celebrities," she said. "Because these are modern-day mythological figures. In ancient Greece, if you said 'Athena,' everyone knew, Oh, that's what Athena is *like*."

Kelly's schedule is typical for a millennial astrologer. She writes books (on zodiac-themed cocktails); does events (at the private club Soho House); offers individual chart readings (a hundred and seventy-five dollars an hour); hosts a podcast ("Stars Like Us"); makes memes ("for lolz"); manages a "virtual coven" called the Constellation Club, with membership levels that cost from five dollars to two hundred; and has worked as a consultant for the astrology app Sanctuary. She also writes an advice column for *Cosmopolitan*, and hosts an occasional *Cosmo* video series in which she guesses celebrities' signs based on their answers to twelve questions. According to the editor-in-chief, Jessica Pels, who has expanded the magazine's print coverage of astrology to nine pages in every issue, seventy-four per cent of *Cosmo* readers report that they are "obsessed" with astrology; seventy-two per cent check their horoscope every day.

Astrology is currently enjoying a broad cultural acceptance that hasn't been seen since the nineteen-seventies. The shift began with the advent of the personal computer, accelerated with the Internet, and has reached new speeds through social media. According to a 2017 Pew Research Center poll, almost thirty per cent of Americans believe in astrology. But, as the scholar Nicholas Campion, the author of "Astrology and Popular Religion in the Modern West," has argued, the number of people who know their sun sign, consult their horoscope, or read about the sign of their romantic partner is much higher. "New spirituality is the new norm," the trend-forecasting company WGSN declared two years ago, when it announced a report on millennials and spirituality that tracked such trends as full-moon parties and alternative therapies. Last year, the *Times*, in a piece entitled "How Astrology Took Over the Internet," heralded

"astrology's return as a compelling content business as much as a traditional spiritual practice." *The Atlantic* proclaimed, "Astrology is a meme." As a meme, its life cycle has been unusually long. "My account, it was meant to be a fun thing for me to do on the side while I was a production assistant," Courtney Perkins, who runs the Instagram account Not All Geminis, which has more than five hundred thousand followers, said. "Then it blew up and now it's like—I don't know. I didn't mean for this to be . . . life."

In its penetration into our shared lexicon, astrology is a little like psychoanalysis once was. At mid-century, you might have heard talk of id, ego, or superego at a party; now it's common to hear someone explain herself by way of sun, moon, and rising signs. It's not just that you hear it. It's who's saying it: people who aren't kooks or climate-change deniers, who see no contradiction between using astrology and believing in science. The change is fuelling a new generation of practitioners. Fifteen years ago, astrology conferences were the gray-streaked province of, as one astrologer told me, "white ladies in muumuus decorated with stars." Kay Taylor, the education director of the Organization for Professional Astrology, said that those who came of age in the seventies were worried about the future of the profession. Now, she said, "all of a sudden there's this new crop." In the past year, the membership of the Association for Young Astrologers has doubled.

The corporate world has taken note of the public's appetite. Last year, the astrologer Rebecca Gordon partnered with the lingerie brand Agent Provocateur to produce a zodiac-themed event where customers could use their Venus signs to, in Gordon's words, "find their personal styles." This spring, Amazon sent out "shopping horoscopes" to its Prime Insider subscribers. Astrology is also being used to help launch businesses. This summer, the forty-six-year-old siblings Ophira and Tali Edut, known as the AstroTwins, started Astropreneurs Summer Camp, a seven-week Web-based course. Participants analyzed their birth charts to determine whether they were Influencers, Experts, or Mavens/Messengers, and got advice on how to tailor their professional plans accordingly.

The popularity of astrology is often explained as the result of the decline of organized religion and the rise of economic precariousness, and as one aspect of a larger turn to New Age modalities. Then, there's the matter of political panic. In times of crisis, it is often said, people search for something to believe in. The first newspaper astrology column was commissioned in August, 1930, in the aftermath of the stock-market crash, for the British tabloid the *Sunday Express*. The occasion was Princess Margaret's birth. "What the Stars Foretell for the New Princess" was so popular—and such a terrific distraction—that the paper made it a regular feature. After the financial collapse in 2008, Gordon, who runs a popular online astrology school, received calls from Wall Street bankers. "All of those structures that people had relied upon, 401(k)s and everything, started to fall apart," she said. "That's how a lot of people get into it. They're, like, 'What's going on in my life? Nothing makes sense.' " Ten years later, more than retirement plans have fallen apart. "I think the 2016 election changed everything," Colin Bedell, an astrologer whose online handle is Queer Cosmos, told me. "People were just, like, we need to come to some spiritual school of thought." As Kelly put it, "In the Obama years, people liked astrology. In the Trump years, people need it."

"The idea at the heart of astrology is that the pattern of a person's life—or character, or nature—corresponds to the planetary pattern at the moment of his birth," the historian Benson Bobrick writes in his 2005 book, "The Fated Sky." "Such an idea is as old as the world is old—that all things bear the imprint of the moment they are born." Western astrology had its origins in ancient Mesopotamia, and spread throughout Egypt, Greece, the Roman Empire, and the Islamic world. Astrology helped people decide when to plant crops and go to war, and was used to predict a person's fate and interpret his character. Would he have good luck with money? Would he ascend the throne? (When the astrologer Theogenes cast Augustus' chart, Bobrick writes, the astrologer "reportedly gasped and threw himself at his feet.")

According to Bobrick, Theodore Roosevelt kept his birth chart on a table in his drawing room, and Charles de Gaulle and François Mitterrand sought advice from astrologers. (Astrology has also been used to intentionally mislead political enemies. In 1942 and 1943, the Allies distributed a fake astrology magazine called *Der Zenit*, which, among other things, endeavored to disguise the Allied ambush of German U-boat operations.) Ronald Reagan's chief of staff said that Reagan consulted an astrologer before "virtually every major move and decision," including the timing of his reëlection announcement, military actions in Grenada and Libya, and disarmament negotiations with Mikhail Gorbachev.

For some adherents, astrology can explain everything from earthquakes (Saturn crossing the south node) to the rise of social media (an increase in Cesarean sections has led to an increase in births between 9 A.M. and 5 P.M., and thus a rise in the number of suns in the tenth house, which governs reputation and prestige). But what attracts most people to astrology today has more to do with psychology. Psychological astrology, influenced by Carl Jung, treated the birth chart—a diagram that shows the individual's relation to the cosmos at birth—as the representation of the psyche and used it to talk about such things as purpose, potential, and self-actualization. It's hard to understand the deep appeal of astrological practice without having or observing an individual chart reading, an experience whose closest analogue is therapy. But unlike therapy, where a client might spend months or even years uncovering the roots of a symptom, astrology promises to get to answers more quickly. Despite common misconceptions, an astrologer is not a fortune-teller. In a chart reading, she doesn't predict the future; she describes the client to herself.

Watch "The Backstory": *Christine Smallwood on how millennials are fuelling a resurgence of astrology.*

The power of description can be great. Couching characteristics in the language of astrology seems to make it easier for many people to hear, or admit, unpleasant things about their personalities—and to accept those traits in others. (The friend who comes over and never leaves? She can't help it. She's a Taurus.) Most astrologers say that it's important not to use your sign to excuse bad behavior. Still, as the AstroTwins have written, "astrology is kind of like the peanut butter that you slip the heartworm pill in before giving it to your Golden Retriever. You can tell someone, 'You're such a spotlight hog!' and they kind of want to slap you. But if you say, 'You're a Leo. You need to be the center of attention,' they're like, 'Yeah baby, that's me.' "

For centuries, drawing an astrological chart required some familiarity with astronomy and geometry. Today, a chart can be generated instantly, and for free, on the Internet. Astrology is ubiquitous on YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, and in downloadable workshops, classes, and Webinars. A new frontier has opened with mobile apps.

In July, I was ushered into a glass-enclosed conference room on the sixth floor of a building in Tribeca to meet with Banu Guler, the thirty-one-year-old co-founder and C.E.O. of the astrology app Co-Star, whose Web site promises to allow "irrationality to invade our techno-rationalist ways of living." Guler is a casting director's idea of a tech executive. She is a vegan who used to design punk zines and was a bike messenger until she got into "a gnarly car wreck." She has cropped hair, a septum piercing, and a tattoo of Medea on the back of one leg. Why Medea? I asked. "Witchcraft," she explained. A copy of Liz Greene's "Relating: An Astrological Guide to Living with Others on a Small Planet" lay

between us. Guler hasn't read it, but it's been on her Goodreads list forever.

The market for astrology apps has changed dramatically in the past few years. In 2015, when Aliza Kelly was raising money for a short-lived astrology dating app called Align, she was mocked by prospective investors. ("Literally, this one guy wrote, 'I usually wish people well, and in your case I don't, because you're defying science and the Enlightenment era,' " she told me.) Now venture capitalists, excited by a report from IBISWorld which found that Americans spend $2.2 billion annually on "mystical services" (including palmistry, tarot reading, etc.), are funnelling money into the area. Co-Star is backed by six million dollars. Since its launch, in 2017, it has been downloaded six million times. Eighty per cent of users are female, and their average age is twenty-four.

Co-Star has competitors. There's the Pattern, an app whose creepily accurate psychological and compatibility analyses are generated by birth charts but are delivered free of any astrological references. (The actor Channing Tatum recently had a meltdown on social media—"How do you know what you know about me, Pattern?"—after his pattern, apparently, hit too close to home.) The doyenne of popular astrology, Susan Miller, employs an assistant, four editors, and eight engineers to produce her books, calendars, Web site (it has eleven million views annually), and app, which caters to those who find the forty-thousand-word forecasts on her site insufficient. (Miller was an early Internet presence, and her style is at once maternal and optimistically pragmatic. At a recent event in Macy's flagship store, in Herald Square, she told the audience, "Freezing your eggs is expensive, but I want every girl here who doesn't have a baby to do it!") Sanctuary offers free daily horoscopes and, for twenty dollars a month, a fifteen-minute text exchange with an astrologer. One person I interviewed compared it to "a psychic 900 hotline for the DM era." The most informative app is Vice's Astro Guide, which the company imagines as a "tool not just for self-care but for cosmic wellness."

Co-Star's daily horoscopes appear under categories that are only slightly incomprehensible, such as "Mood Facilitating Responsibility" or "Identity Enhancing Emotional Stability." The app generates content by pulling and recombining phrases that have been coded to correspond to astronomical phenomena. Currently, the company employs four people to write these "bits" of language—two poets, an editor, and an astrologer. The app sometimes generates nonsense —"You will have a bit of luck relating to your natural sense of self-control," it told me recently—and can be blunt to the point of rudeness. Users like to screenshot and post Co-Star's push notifications, activities that help explain why the company doesn't spend anything on advertising. "Don't even try to make yourself understood today. It's not worth it" is a typical example of the tone. Guler relishes it. "It's not, like, 'Go sit and journal and write four sentences about the world you wish to see,' " she said, leaning across the table. "It's, like, 'Go take a fucking cold shower.' "

On the day we met, Guler, like everyone in her office, was wearing all black. This happens, she said, "not infrequently." (Whether it happens more frequently when journalists are visiting, she did not say.) Guler first realized that astrology could be a business when she went to a party for a friend's newborn with a birth chart as a gift, and everyone at the party wanted one for her baby, too.

When Guler was a child, her mother used to do readings from the grounds in her thick Turkish coffee. It was, Guler said, a way to have conversations about feelings that would otherwise be difficult. "The sludge, for lack of a better word, forms shapes," she said. "It's, like, 'There's this divot or valley here—what's going on with you? Something bad?' " Today, she said, "anxiety's up, depression is up, loneliness is up." But, with astrology, "you can use this language to walk into a room and be, like, 'I'm going through my Saturn return. I'm reckoning with restrictions and limits and boundaries right now.' "

On the one hand, Guler said, today's problems are bound up with the rise of technology: "We're really operating from this place that technology is doing something weird to our brains." On the other hand, she said, technology will be the antidote, by teaching us to speak about ourselves. Co-Star currently allows you to find friends and read their astrological profiles, and its future plans call for more "social" features. Co-Star, like all tech companies, dreams of "bringing people together"—to spend more time, presumably, on the app itself.

In "The Stars Down to Earth," Theodor Adorno's 1953 critique of a newspaper's sun-sign column, he argued that astrology appealed to "persons who do not any longer feel that they are the self-determining subjects of their fate." The mid-century citizen had been primed to accept magical thinking by systems of fascistic "opaqueness and inscrutability." It's easy to name our own opaque and inscrutable systems—surveillance capitalism, a byzantine health-insurance system—but to say that we are no longer the self-determining subjects of our fate is also to recognize the many ways that our lives are governed by circumstances outside our control. We know that our genetic codes predispose us to certain diseases, and that the income bracket we are born into can determine our future. "Fate" is another word for "circumstance."

On a hot Tuesday night this summer, two dozen students of astrology gathered in a stuffy back room of the Open Center, in midtown Manhattan, to discuss a partial lunar eclipse and the birth chart of Jeffrey Epstein, who had recently been arrested on charges of sex trafficking. Anne Ortelee and Mark Wolz, astrologers who have been leading the class in various locations for twelve years, sat up front. Ortelee, talking fast, mixing jargon and dry jokes in a manner not unlike that of a sportscaster calling a game, pointed to the details of the chart. Epstein had his sun in Aquarius and his moon in Aries, so he was used to having his way. Venus, which rules love, money, and pleasure, and Mars, which rules action, desire, and war, were in Pisces, suggesting trouble with boundaries and addictive tendencies. She said that his "Mercury-Uranus-Venus-Mars configuration" represented "sex with young children—Mercury is young children, Mars is sex."

Some of the students were studying to pass accreditation exams; others were simply interested in deepening their knowledge. A few had been coming to the class for years. A young man in the front row with deep-set eyes and a faint mustache noted that the arrangement of Saturn, Neptune, and Uranus could indicate a sudden and unexpected death. Ortelee, who wore a flowered dress and held a sweating cup of iced coffee, nodded. "This is not a guy who's going to live long in prison," she said. A woman in a red dress raised her hand to point out the connection between the July

eclipses (there were two) and the astrology of October, 2018, when Brett Kavanaugh was sworn in as a Supreme Court Justice. "Kavanaugh was also an evil Aquarius," she said, to general murmurs.

Some teachers use students' birth charts in classes, but because a chart is personal—"Looking at your chart is kind of like looking at you naked," the student with the mustache told me—Ortelee prefers to use the charts of notable figures. Astrologers have been doing so for a long time. In 1552, Luca Gaurico, a court adviser to Catherine de Médici, published a book of horoscopes about Popes, cardinals, princes, and other famous men. Similar books followed, featuring analyses of Erasmus, Albrecht Dürer, and Henry VIII. More recently, Ortelee's class had studied the charts of Tucker Carlson and Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, who lit up the Internet this spring when a staffer confirmed her birth time (one of the three pieces of data, along with date and location, that are needed to calculate a birth chart). In another class this summer at the Open Center, I listened as the students discussed the birth chart of Boris Johnson. "Does anybody see why he has the hair that he has?" a woman in tortoiseshell glasses asked. In September, the class turned its attention to Capitol Hill. On Instagram, Ortelee pointed out that House Speaker Nancy Pelosi announced an impeachment inquiry into Donald Trump only minutes before "Mercury was sextiling Jupiter, promising information and news that we should all pay attention to."

It's a commonplace to say that in uncertain times people crave certainty. But what astrology offers isn't certainty—it's distance. Just as a person may find it easier to accept things about herself when she decides she was born that way, astrology makes it possible to see world events from a less reactive position. It posits that history is not a linear story of upward progress but instead moves in cycles, and that historical actors—the ones running amok all around us—are archetypes. Alarming, yes; villainous, perhaps; but familiar, legible.

Ortelee later explained to me that people pop up in the news *because* the movements of the planets through the sky, known as transits, are activating their charts. This can work on many levels. "When the Titanic happened, there was a big Neptune transit, and when the 'Titanic' movie came out, years later, there was a huge Neptune transit," she said. "You heard Celine Dion everywhere. And now there's a mini Neptune transit, so there's a 'Carpool Karaoke' with Dion and James Corden singing the 'Titanic' song in the fountains in the Bellagio."

Others see astrology as having the power not just to explain the political situation but also to change it. Chani Nicholas uses astrology as a tool for social justice and radical action. "To be a human is to suffer," she said when we met. "I don't think we should fight that. But we also can't dwell there." Nicholas's work includes readings about what a new moon in Scorpio means for the #MeToo movement, and the import of Saturn's position for the future of DACA. "I'm interested in helping people get to the core of their purpose and then to use that to be of service in the world, as quickly as possible," she said.

I met Nicholas, who is in her forties, in July, when she was visiting Brooklyn from Los Angeles. She had arranged for a private tour of the exhibition "Nobody Promised You Tomorrow: Art Fifty Years After Stonewall," at the Brooklyn Museum, with her friend Tourmaline, who had short films in the show, and two of the exhibit's curators. While the

curators talked, footage of the transgender activist Sylvia Rivera flashed on a video screen. Nicholas pulled up Rivera's chart. At the moment of Rivera's birth, the sun—which, Nicholas said, represents the essential self—was at the same degree as Uranus, the planet of disruption, which, she said, will "tear this whole thing down." But all this, Nicholas went on, was happening in the sign of Cancer, which signifies home and nurturing. "How do we care for people radically?" she asked, explaining how the chart was relevant.

Nicholas has a million online readers. She now rarely books private chart readings, because the demand was overwhelming. Her business is based on selling downloadable workshops, and she curates free monthly Spotify playlists for each sign. In January, she will publish her first book, "You Were Born for This: Astrology for Radical Self-Acceptance." Back in 2012, Nicholas was one of the organizers of the first Queer Astrology Conference. "When you queer something, you try to see it outside cultural norms," she said. She uses astrology to talk not just about sexuality and gender but also about race, class, and climate.

Nicholas believes that astrology appeals because it gives "context" to people and to world events. Like religion, it says that there is something beyond material existence, but it doesn't teach dogma, or prescribe action. Many astrologers I interviewed expressed concern that astrology can be misused to generate fear or to extort, but mostly, Nicholas said, it's a way of "framing the thing we're in." As humans, she said, "we need rhythm. We need ritual. We need timing."

"I absolutely love astrology," Alex Dimitrov said. "But it's a gateway drug to the real magic, which is poetry." On a Friday night in July, I had dinner at the Odeon, in Tribeca, with Dimitrov and Dorothea Lasky, who run the Twitter account Astro Poets, which they launched in November of 2016, just after Trump's election. Ten weeks later, they got some negative feedback because of a joke about yoga, and Lasky called Dimitrov at three in the morning and said that she wanted to delete the account. "I was, like, 'Excuse me?' " Dimitrov remembered. He took a sip of rosé. Dimitrov, who is dark and compact, was wearing fitted jeans and a Def Leppard shirt. "That was Aries behavior," he said. The feed now has five hundred thousand followers.

Dimitrov and Lasky think of the signs formally, as "poetic constraints," and imagine them interacting like characters in a novel. On their Twitter feed, in addition to the horoscopes, lists, and pop-culture references that populate all astrology social media, they quote poets they admire. The night before, someone had texted Dimitrov a line by Eileen Myles—"It is summer, I love you, I am surrounded by snow"—and he had tweeted it. "Honestly, it's the Sagittarius

mantra," he said. (Dimitrov, like Myles, is a Sagittarius.)

The Astro Poets' horoscopes employ exquisite images, turning sharply from low to high, from humor to pain or grief. Here's the horoscope they tweeted about Pisces for the week of August 4th: "A wind is a little reminder. Reminder of what, you ask. The rain. The rain!" Don't ask them what it means. Lasky, resplendent in sparkling eye makeup and a crocheted necklace, said that the whole point of a poem "is it's supposed to be your friend, and you're supposed to commingle with it." On the first episode of the Astro Poets podcast, which débuted in August, she explained that astrology is also a friend—something that can witness your life and help make sense of it.

Still, those who turn to astrology for clarity will be bemused by the Astro Poets. Some of their most passionate readers long for plainer speaking, or at least for someone to put their poetry into prose. "We have these translators," Lasky said. "There was one translator who was an Aquarius, Mimi—as soon as I would write a tweet, Mimi had an alert and would translate it for people. But Mimi, after a few years, has retired, and everyone is really sad."

A few weeks later, I met the Astro Poets at Enchantments, a store in the East Village, where the poet Alice Notley used to shop. Dimitrov, Lasky, and I picked out herbs and figurines and candles. Then we went to Canal Street to have our aura photographs taken. (Lasky's and Dimitrov's auras seemed to match, like two halves of a blue-and-purple rainbow.) The plan was for us to do a "very positive" spell on the Brooklyn Bridge. But it was more than ninety degrees, and we wandered for a long time looking for the pedestrian walkway, and eventually settled on a bench in the shade under the bridge. Lasky lit the candles, and we all silently meditated on our intentions for this article. A pigeon hopped tentatively nearer.

One way to cope with uncertainty is to demand certainty. Another is to learn to dwell in uncertainty, to find solace and even beauty in what is, and must be, unknown. Dimitrov and Lasky's new book is called "Astro Poets: Your Guides to the Zodiac," but for a long time they toyed with putting the word "mystery" or "magic" in the title. "Those ideas are so important to us," Dimitrov said. As Samuel Reynolds, who began researching astrology in the nineteen-eighties in order to disprove it and is now on the board of the International Society for Astrological Research, told me, "To talk about the planets literally having some measure of effect on you brings up all kinds of questions that I don't think astrology is prepared to answer." Instead, Reynolds said, astrology is "symbolic and spiritual"—a literary language whose truth can neither be validated nor invalidated by empirical science.

For some people, the complex system itself is a source of pleasure: there's math involved, rules to master, vocabulary to memorize. For others, it permits a play of interpretation. As the planets transit, they move into different signs, picking up different meanings. In one context, Uranus indicates sudden death; in another, revolutionary energy. There are myriad combinations for storytelling. At the Odeon, Lasky said that when poetry transits—when it moves from meaning to meaning—it doesn't let go of what came before. She started to explain the Greek root of the word "metaphor" ("to carry across"), when Dimitrov broke in.

"It's about negative capability," he said. "To endure doubt is ultimately the only thing you can do in life—to not strive for meaning or answers, and to endure the state you're in." ♦

An earlier version of this piece misstated the title of the Astro Poets' new book.

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