

A JOE PORTUGAL MYSTERY

THE  
*Cactus*  
*Club*  
KILLINGS

In a city of hot cacti and harder steel, these folks  
are crazy about cacti. And a killer goes for cacti.

NATHAN  
WALPOW



OPUNTIA  
44.1A

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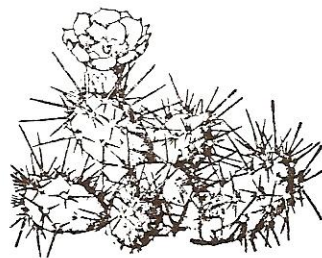
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Whole-numbered OPUNTIA's are sercon, x.1 issues are reviewzines, x.2 issues are indexes, and x.5 issues are perzines.

**ART CREDIT:** No artist credit given for this book cover; see page 14 for the review.

**I ALSO HEARD FROM:** John Hertz, John Held Jr, Rodney Leighton, Scott Garinger, Harry Andruschak, Chester Cuthbert, Russ Forster, Karen Johnson

[Editor's  
remarks  
in square  
brackets.]



FROM: E.B. Frohvet  
4716 Dorsey Hall Drive #506  
Ellicott City, Maryland 21042

1999-10-15

Due to my Alsatian heritage, my default mode is to pronounce the 'ei' diphthong as 'I' and the 'ie' as 'E', because that's how they are pronounced in German. Therefore I'm going to assume it's pronounced 'spires' unless notified otherwise.

[You are correct, but I worry more about the spelling than the pronunciation.]

FROM: Robert Lichtman  
Box 30  
Glen Ellen, California 95442

1999-10-11

It should be noted regarding Bukowski's novel POST OFFICE that not only are there probably plenty of people with similar experiences to Bukowski's and that the book is funny, but that the late Bukowski had a huge following and wasn't particularly underground at all in the final decades of his life.

I read with interest the review of L'ARTE DEL TIMBRO/RUBBER STAMP ART by John Held Jr, at first thinking it was the book on rubber stamps given to me by Donna Nassar, the founder of Rubber Amateur Press Society. Donna used to be married to my long-time friend Paul Williams, the one who used to publish fanzines and went on to found CRAWDADDY!, one of the early rock magazines. The book she gave me is called RUBBER SOUL: RUBBER STAMPS AND CORRESPONDENCE ART, by Sandra Mizumoto Posey, published by the University Press of Mississippi in 1996. Although it gives some history of rubber stamping, it centers on RAPS, which Posey is a member of, and includes numerous full-colour examples of work from the mailings.

[You prompted me to order a copy of this book, since received and which will be reviewed in a future issue of OPUNTIA.]

FROM: Ned Brooks  
4817 Dean Lane  
Lilburn, Georgia 30047-4720

1999-10-14

[re: cross-fertilization between different zinedoms] I recently encountered Mathew West, a fellow typewriter collector on the net who is also a fully pierced and tattooed punk, and a zine publisher with his own Website. We agreed to trade zines, but I don't know how much real communication is possible. I don't know what to think of his RESIST, and he probably can't make much of mine either.

FROM: Harry Warner Jr  
423 Summit Avenue  
Hagerstown, Maryland 21740

1999-10-22

As for the DIY review, I wonder why these people so rarely try a less spectacular but more effective method: instead of demonstrations and resistance, attempt to gain a foothold in government. Minnesota's Ventura proves that it can be done by a maverick. But it is difficult to become a Governor without backing of the establishment, while there are many more accessible posts, particularly in smaller towns where a DIY individual could exercise some influence.



by Dale Speirs

**8-Track Mind #98** (US\$3 from Russ Forster, 23145 Melrose Avenue, East Detroit, Michigan 48021-1779) Digest with top corners clipped to resemble 8-track cartridges, 40 pages. Well recommended. Devoted to the history of 8-tracks and related types of pre-recorded tapes, as well as commentary and news on the 8-track collectibles scene. Alas, what was once a fun hobby of picking up cartridges cheap at flea markets has turned into commodities business.

**“Progress” is too often promises, promises to get you to buy, buy.**

The lead story in this issue is the sale of a Pink Floyd quadrophonic sound 8-track for US\$227.50, a record for documented 8-track prices. Since the sale was made on eBay, one might be tempted to blame the Internet, but that is the symptom, not the cause. Globalization of the economy by computer networks has increased the liquidity of collectibles and boosted prices, but cannot be held entirely responsible.

Stamp collectors such as myself have seen this sort of thing before back in the early 1980s, as did numismatists (remember people lining up to buy gold at \$800?) and the other major collectibles of

those times such as antiques.

Prices zoomed up then, as they are doing now, because people were parking their money someplace, anyplace, where they thought they could get rich fast and beat inflation. Most of these pseudo-investors did not buy stamps (wherever I talk about stamps, the same applies to coins or other traditional collectibles) because they had any genuine interest in them. They bought them because they read somewhere that stamps always increase in value (false) and because there was an established secondary market with priced catalogues (true) to guide them.

Stamps fluctuate in value the same as stocks or bonds. There is a steady market of genuine collectors, but they are too few to support the overbought markets. Because there are a small number of extremely high-priced postage stamps, too many non-philatelists assume that all stamps are therefore valuable. The truth is that the vast majority of stamps sell for dimes or a few dollars at most. Sheets of post-WW2 Canadian or USA stamps are so abundant that dealers only buy them for less than face value to use as postage.

You can't convince the mundanes of this unfortunately. One of the banes of a stamp dealer's existence is constantly explaining to them that Grandpa's stamp album is only worth \$10, not the \$10,000 catalogue value. Catalogue value, as Scott's, Gibbons, and other publishers must endlessly explain, is the retail price for

a stamp sold individually, in perfect condition, and sorted out by a dealer. Most stamps sell for less than catalogue because they are sold in sets or bulk, have blemishes, and are not individually examined by the dealer, which drives up labour costs. Dealers do not pay catalogue value for stamps because that is the retail selling price. You have to sell to them at the wholesale buying price, which has to be lower so the dealer can make a profit and earn his living.

Given those problems with the 150-year-old stamp market, consider brief fads such as comics, trading cards, lapel pins, and Beanie Babies. Day trading in slow motion is what they are. Now, alas, it appears that 8-tracks are going that way. I suspect it will only be a matter of time before 8-track forgeries start appearing, or the limited-edition companies get into the act.

Elsewhere in this issue of 8-TRACK MIND, Dan Sutherland addresses this concern by trying to find something that is not and hopefully will never be commodities. His choice was plastic bread tags, the kind used to seal the wrappers on loaves of bread. A good idea. While I still continue as a philatelist, I have a fun collection of business cards, which, like bread tags, are disposable and free. If worse comes to worst, I can always use them to start my fireplace.

## **State of the art is in the eye of the beholder.**

8-TRACK MIND also covers the history of pre-recorded formats, not just 8-tracks but all the false starts and dead ends from the 1920s to the 1960s. I find these accounts of extinct technology fascinating. I don't agree that 8-tracks represented anything close to the epitome of pre-recorded music, always having been particularly annoyed by those clunks as the tape switches programmes. I am, however, sympathetic to those who collect them for love, not as a investment.

My music collection is almost entirely cassettes. I got out of vinyl back in my university days because they were too heavy to haul around every time I moved house. I went to cassettes, which were lighter and less space-consuming than LPs (or CDs for that matter). I did have to break down and buy a CD player recently because some of the music I like is no longer available except as CD, but I only have a dozen or so CDs.

Now, delicious irony, the CD is under pressure from DVDs, although manufacturers are listening to complaints and making DVD players that can also play CDs. Pre-recorded cassettes are now generally only available in Calgary if Top 40 tunes, and then only briefly when the CD is first released.

**“New” and “improved” don’t necessarily mean the same thing.**

The lack of mass-market pre-recorded cassettes doesn’t bother me anyway, as I listen mostly to techno, which is still sold as cassettes in specialty record stores. I also do a lot of taping off non-commercial radio stations such as CBC Radio 2 and university stations. Vinyl is no longer a mass-market medium but is still healthy in the music underground and is not likely to become extinct like 8-tracks.

It is amazing how long some types of technology hang on after they were supposedly dead and buried. When my father, a farm-animal veterinarian in rural central Alberta, died in 1996, I found a batch of 8-tracks in his car. He had been picking them up here and there in the rural villages he passed through on his way to farm calls, some as recently as the early 1990s. Godawful country-and-western, to be sure, but somebody in the recording industry must have still been wholesaling them to village shopkeepers.

This illustrates a point that 8-track collectors have been making and which applies to other forms of technology, whether computers, music formats, or farm tractors. Just because it’s old, doesn’t mean it’s useless. You don’t need Office 2000 if WordPerfect 7 does the job. On our farm, we had a Case tractor

that probably came off the assembly line the first week the company was in business, but we baled lots of hay with it. My brother drives a 1969 Volkswagen van that gets his kids to soccer practice just as well as any 1999 minivan with a captain’s chair and GPS emergency help system.

**Society’s drive is on attaining rather than experiencing.**

It seems a safe prediction that in the next few years, 8-tracks will become a hot collectible. TIME magazine will feature it, your local “Film at 11” television news hour will cover it in the funny-animals-and-weird-people segment, and eBay will sell some more \$200 cartridges. What also seems likely is that the same thing will happen as did in the middle 1980s when the stamp market collapsed and pseudo-investors lost most of their money. They dumped their purchases on the market, driving down prices in panic, and enabling the true collectors to pick up good items cheap. I believe the same will happen again in a few years. The older Baby Boomers are going to be hitting retirement, dumping their fad collectibles, and going back to gilt-edged stocks and bonds. 8-tracks will be left to those who appreciate them for what they are, not what they can get for them.



## ZINE LISTINGS.

by Dale Speirs

[The Usual means \$2 or \$3 cash, trade for your zine, or letter of comment on a previous issue. Americans: please don't send cheques for small amounts to Canada or overseas as the bank fee to cash them is usually more than the amount. US\$ banknotes are acceptable around the world.]

**Roadside #4** (US\$2 from Sarah Oleksyk, Box 4789, Portland, Maine 04112-4789) Nicely drawn comics; I'm glad to see someone publishing who has a bit of talent, as opposed to the usual chicken scratches that make up most of what passes for comics these days. Better yet, Oleksyk's stories have a good narrative thread that keeps the reader turning the pages. In this issue, autobiographical(?) accounts of meeting up with an old classmate, roommates from Hell, overheard conversations, and writing a letter that won't be mailed. Well recommended.

**Plokta #15** (The Usual from Alison Scott, 24 St. Mary Road, Walthamstow, London, E17 9RG, England) SF genzine, starting off with Guilia De Cesare who has problems dealing with regional accents in her computer job: "*Therr be trobble at t' database, Miss Demelzerr. Oi be getting' integerr divoid boi zero errorrrr* ... " and traveling on trains with nothing to read. Elsewhere there be trouble with Dutch asparagus fads, visiting a snake exhibit, a jokey article about non-diets that is funny only to

those who haven't yet suffered the long-term consequences of obesity, the great eclipse of 1999 (with cover photo), and letters of comment.

**The Underground Press #10/99** (Donation to Ron Meek, a homeless person who sells it on 7th Avenue SW in downtown Calgary) Okay, you're won't get this monthly via the Papernet, but I list it for the record. Meek has, however, obtained donated Web space, so you can view back issues at:

<http://www.moose-meadow.com/underground>

This zine is devoted to Alberta politics. This issue takes the poverty industry to task, pointing out that Homeless Awareness Week at the end of September was a non-event intended more for do-gooders to preen, as opposed to actually doing something for homeless such as Meek. The rest of the issue covers a variety of subjects, with a common theme that high taxes and the brain drain are red herrings set up by business and media.

**The Incisors Report #6** (Subscription (pre-supporting membership) C\$20.03 or US\$15 to Toronto in '03, Box 3, Station A, Toronto, Ontario, M5W 1A2) This is the progress report of the committee bidding to bring the 2003 World Science Fiction Convention to Toronto. Besides news and notes, there are reminiscences by attendees at the two previous WorldCons in Toronto in 1948 and 1973.

**ConTRACT V11#5** (The Usual from John Mansfield, 516 Portage Avenue, Winnipeg, Manitoba R3C 0G2) Newszine for Canadian SF conventions with listings and notes about recent conventions. Most of this issue is taken up by a thoughtful essay on the decline in SF fandom and what might be the cause.

**The Enlightened Source Journal #1** (The Usual from Ted Robertson, Box 26, Jenks, Oklahoma 74037) One of those zines which welcomes a wide variety of viewpoints, but ends up mostly with Christianity and anti-government commentary. The common failing of this type of zine is that the participants are sending in essays that address only their concerns, with no response to the others. The result is a cacophony instead of a debate. A good lead-off essay on when the real millennium was, since Jesus was born either a few years B.C. or a few years A.D., not that it makes any difference to those determined to celebrate January 1, 2000, instead of January 1, 2001.

**Grammar Q And A #19** (The Usual from Misti and Scott Crow, Box 445, Clements, California 95227) Single-sheet zine covering confusions of the English language from 'such as' versus 'like' to when to capitalize.

**Kreuz-Aktionen #3** (Mail art Usual from Wilfried Nold, Eppsteinerstr. 22, D-60323 Frankfurt, Deutschland) Nicely produced in card covers, this is the documentation for participants

in the ongoing Cosmic Cross mail art project. Mostly in German but some English sections and the art does not need translation.

**Ethel The Aardvark #87** (The Usual from Melbourne Science Fiction Club, Box 212, World Trade Centre, Melbourne, Victoria 3005, Australia) SF clubzine with news, reviews, and letters of comment. This issue carries a number of reports about the 1999 World SF Convention hosted by Australia.

**For The Clerisy V6#36** (The Usual from Brant Kresovich, Box 404, Getzville, New York 14068-0404) Genzine for expats, discussing Okinawan omens, the Turkish earthquake, artists from the lunatic fringe, and letters of comment.

**Mimosa #24** (The Usual from Nick and Richard Lynch, Box 3120, Gaithersburg, Maryland 20885) Fanhistory zine with articles by the SF fans who were there back when. For the modern zinester, an account of publishing and book reading during the Polish military coup of 1981. This should be required reading for those who whine because they can't paste together shoddy Star Trek web sites using copyrighted photos and think they are hard done by when Paramount shuts them down. Real censorship is not a multinational corporation protecting its intellectual property; it is the secret police detaining you without charge or trial.



**The Bibliofantastic #15** (\$2 from C.F. Kennedy, 39 Claremore Avenue, Scarborough, Ontario M1N 3S1) Literary zine with a poetry, short stories, reviews, and letters of comment. Also there is the script for a short play, in which two befuddled Maritimers going down the road to Calgary run into problems with La Sovereignty de Quebec.

**CounterClock #5** (The Usual from Wolf von Witting, Lakegatan 8, 13341 Saltsjobaden, Sweden) SF fanzine, in English. Convention reports from Sweden and Germany, fanhistory of Sweden in the 1950s and the 1970s, and letters of comment.

**Or Something #1** (The Usual from Garth Spencer, Box 15335, Vancouver, British Columbia V6B 5B1) Single-sheet newszine by the 1999 winner of CUFF, which sent him from Vancouver to Fredericton, New Brunswick, for the national SF convention called Canvention. CUFF is the Canadian Unity Fan Fund, designed to help pay the way of a western fan to an eastern convention or vice versa, usually alternating from year to year.

**Angry Thoreauan #25** (US\$5 from Randall Tin-ear, Box 3478, Hollywood, California 90078) The theme of this special issue is coprology. In between the usual music, zine, and book reviews are articles on the history of excrement use and/or disposal, and the sociology of same. (I note, for example, that my WordPerfect 8 spellchecker does not have 'coprology' in it.)

**Dataphile Fall 1999** (The Usual from SF and Fantasy Club, Viking Union 202 Box V-1, Bellingham, Washington 98226) SF clubzine with fiction, movie reviews, and convention news.

**The Adventures Of Hemlock Soames (And Flotsam) #1** (L2 or US\$5 from Ken Cheslin, 29 Kestrel Road, Halesowen, East Midlands B63 2PH, England) Anthology of Sherlock Holmes parodies. Enjoyable stories that read well. The twist in these stories is that Soames the detective is the idiotic buffoon, bluffing his way through cases, while his trusty valet Flotsam does the actual intellectual work.

**Out Of The Kaje #5** (The Usual from Karen Johnson, 35 Mariana Avenue, South Croydon, Victoria 3136, Australia) Time travel thoughts, SF fandom, what to take to Mars, reviews, letters of comment, and fannish glossary.

**PhiloSFy #13** (The Usual from Alexander Slate, 8603 Shallow Ridge Drive, San Antonio, Texas 78239-4022) Genzine discussing philosophical matters amidst the usual personal accounts and letters of comment. This issue looks at the morality and ethics of medicine, governance, and their relation to society as a whole.

**Barmaid #8** (The Usual from Yvonne Rowse, Evergreen, Halls Farm Lane, Trimpey, Worcs. DY12 1NP, England) Perzine; Yvonne broods a duckling and not just figuratively, shoes, the death of her father, reviews, and letters.

**Erg #147** (The Usual from Terry Jeeves, 56 Red Scar Drive, Scarborough, North Yorkshire YO12 5RQ, England) A look at SF magazines and fanzines of the first half of the 1900s, fiction, and cliched fiction.

**The Thought #115** (The Usual from Ronald Tobin, Box 10760, Glendale, Arizona 85318-0760) Articles on radio commentator Dr. Laura, American politics, feuding about abortion, United Nations bashing, and various other items. Lots of letters from readers.

## AMATEUR PRESS ASSOCIATIONS

Apas are a form of zine distro dating back to the late 1800s. SF apas date back to the 1930s, and there are a large number formed in more recent years. There are individual variations in the procedures, but for most apas, you send in x number of copies of your zine to the Central Mailer or Official Editor. The C.M. then collates the zines into bundles and sends back a set to each member. You pay an annual fee to help cover the cost of postage.

For some apas you must meet certain requirements such as proof of activity in zinedom or interest in the particular specialization of the apa. There are many general apas, but most specialize around a specific topic or geographical area. Above all, an apa requires active participation, not simply passively subscribing. You will be expected to publish a minimum number of pages per year, known as minac. Apas are for the creative and self-motivated who seek a community of like-minded zinesters. Some apas have annual conventions, but most apahackers never meet.

And how to become involved? I list a few herewith that I am personally familiar with. The definitive directory of apas is the **New Moon Directory**, price US\$6, which lists hundreds of apas. Its publisher Eric L. Watts resides at 1161 Research Drive NE, Marietta, Georgia 30066-5539. If you are interested in becoming involved with an apa, here is the place to begin.

**Point Of Divergence** (US\$10 per year for postage, plus 30 copies of your zine, double-sided 8½ x 11. Write first to Jim Rittenhouse, Box 562, Lisle, Illinois 60532, to verify vacancies are available.) This bimonthly apa requires a minimum of two pages of original material once every other issue. It is devoted to alternative history and sizes up at roughly 250 pages per bundle. World War Two and the American War Between The States tend to dominate the discussions, but there are other alternatives

discussed as well, such asteroid impacts , workers' revolutions, and colonialism gone awry. Solid reading; mostly essays and extended commentary but also some fiction, as some POD members are working on novels and timelines.

**Linguica** (Sample copy US\$2 from Sarah Ovenall, 1821 Hillandale Road, Suite 1B, #132, Durham, North Carolina 27705) The theme of this apa is languages, covering every aspect from etymology to grammar to culture, although the members do veer off topic into personal life, movie reviews, etcetera.

**Fantasy A.P.A.** (Sample bundle US\$5 from Ken Forman, 7215 Nordic Lights Drive, Las Vegas, Nevada 89119-0335, or details only about joining from Robert Lichtman, Box 30, Glen Ellen, California 95442) . This quarterly apa is nominally about SF, but in actual practice is largely perzines and reviewzines with a fannish tinge. One feature of this apa is the mailing comments, which are remarks by members on each others' zines in the previous bundle Members are required to send in 65 copies of their zine, which is the membership limit.

## **HISTORICAL READING**

**The Mass Flights Of Italo Balbo** by Robert Lana (American Air Mail Society, 1996) 8.5 x 11 perfectbound paperback, illustrated

throughout. (\$19.95 from Saskatoon Stamp Centre, Box 1870, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan S7K 3S2. Visa/Mastercard accepted).

There aren't many people left who were around in the early days of aviation and understood the full impact of the excitement of those days on the general public. Aviation then was as dangerous and expensive as space travel is today. One of aviation's early quests was to make trans-Atlantic crossings as safe and routine as possible. From the first successful flight in 1919 by Alcock and Brown to 1930, only 15 flights out of 47 made it across the Atlantic.

Enter Italo Balbo, born 1896 in northern Italy. He served in World War One, and later became Italian Air Minister. Balbo was one of Mussolini's inner circle. He was a fascist opposed to anti-Jewish laws, and thought that Italy should not have been fighting in World War Two. He died in 1940 in a stupid accident at Tobruk, shot down by his own panicky troops who mistook his plane for a British raider.

Balbo's main claim to remembrance by posterity are the mass flights of 14 to 61 aircraft he led. They went across the western Mediterranean in 1928 to Spain and France, across the eastern Mediterranean in 1929 to the Balkans and Ukraine, in 1930 to Brazil, and, his most famous flight, across the North Atlantic in



1933 to Newfoundland and eastern United States. The flights were honoured by postmasters and philatelists with stamps, postmarks, and numerous commemorative labels, envelopes, and postcards. This book catalogues these items with prices and rarity guides. Not surprisingly, the material is expensive.

All of Balbo's flights used a strange double-hulled seaplane that looked like a flying catamaran. The Savoia Marchetti 55 had two engines mounted back-to-back on top of the centre span; they powered a pull-push system of propellers. Wingspan was 25 metres tip to tip.

His last mass flight in 1933 brought out huge crowds to see the planes. 30,000 spectators tripled the population in Shediac, Nova Scotia, to see the Italians arrive. 100,000 lined the streets in Chicago, and there was a tickertape parade in New York City. Roads were named after Balbo in Chicago and Newfoundland (still there today), much to the annoyance of Mussolini, who had tried unsuccessfully for the same honour. On the return flight, Balbo's planes stopped at Shoal Harbour, Newfoundland, where the government honoured him by overprinting some Newfoundland stamps "1933/GEN. BALBO/FLIGHT./\$4.50". Notwithstanding the price, for \$4.50 was a huge amount in the depths of the Great Depression even in cheap Newfoundland dollars, the stamps sold well to collectors. So well, in fact, that they were immediately forged to help supply the demand.

The book is reference reading rather than a biography or popularized history.

Even if you don't collect airmail postal history, it is still interesting because it is a reminder of an exciting age when the possibilities were only being dreamed of.

## COLD READING

It used to be that collecting Canadian SF was easy enough. There would be one annual anthology, one prozine (ON SPEC), a few semiprozines, and maybe three or four novels or short story collections. Now I don't attempt to keep up with the flood beyond ON SPEC and the anthologies. Even the latter are starting to come out faster than I can spot them.

One such anthology is **Divine Realms**, edited by Susan MacGregor (Ravenstone, 1998). ISBN 0-88801-227-6, trade paperback. The announced theme on the back cover blurb is spirituality, God, faith, and the universe.

The stories are all competently done and readable, but as a collection for a theme, they do not hang together well. It is not the authors' fault but the editor, who seems too timid in the face of God. She should have worked harder to collect stories to match the theme, rather than accept stories that could be called spiritual only because a priest walks through a scene.

“The Power Of Faith” by Jason Kapalka is close enough to the theme. Two dealers in fake holy relics, one the blind master and the other his apprentice, are taken by surprise when a saint’s jawbone really does cure illness or injury. The two remain cynical nonetheless, even though the master had his sight restored. Neither can accept miracles on faith; both keep wondering where the catch is.

“Best Damn Cheesecake In The Universe” by Diane Walton is a stereotypical story about a hole-in-the-wall shop that appears out of nowhere. Not a weapons shop, but selling cheesecake of a special kind. The story is about as close to secular as it can get without leaving the subject of faith.

“Body And Blood” by Louise Marley is about what happens when a novice nun really believes in transubstantiation and turns the communion wine into blood. “Not In Front Of The Virgin” by Mary Woodbury tells of one of those miraculous appearances of the image of Mary, in this case on a spare bedroom wall. The reaction of the devout Catholics who live there is to wallpaper over the image. Keeping the faith does not necessarily mean people appreciate the fuss and bother that comes with a miracle.

“Thanksgiving Day At The Temple” by Donna Farley is a First Contact alien story. The alien happens to be a priest who understandably confuses doctors and hospitals with preachers and churches.

While the remainder of the stories are well written, they don’t really belong in this theme anthology. Some are the usual small-press literary magazine style, with dream sequences, mood pieces, and pointless vignettes. The parade of angst stories becomes monotonous, making the anthology more of a mild horror collection than a theological one, what with voodoo, vampires (transubstantiation again, a vampire survives on communion wine), and a nod to quantum mechanics.

The most noticeable thing as I approached the end of this anthology was the absence of any real look at faith and spirituality. The stories mostly relied on gimmick. The authors collectively appeared to be skittishly evading God.

**Tesseract 8** is the annual anthology of Canadian SF, the ninth in the series (there was a volume Q, for translations of stories from Quebec). This year’s volume was edited by John Clute and Candace Jane Dorsey. Trade paperback, Tesseract Books, 1999, ISBN 1-895836-61-1.

Once again a few too many angst stories, even though all are well written from a technical aspect. "Viking", for example, is well written but is a bland, post-apocalyptic story of survivors awaiting an invasion while trying to keep the remnants of civilization going. It would have been exciting fifty years ago, but today fails to stir the reader. What would be at home in any issue of ANALOG is the story "Gone With The Sea", about the last shrimp farm heading to bankruptcy. Local natives wise in the ways of nature bring in their knowledge to save the crop. As a professional horticulturist who deals daily with lack of genetic diversity in urban landscapes, I could see the plot coming three pages away. But it is a good puzzle story for those not familiar with the hazards of monoculture.

There are some good stories though. "Strategic Dog Patterning" starts off as another mean-streets cyberpunk story. I was busy sneering at it as I read it, but the sneer was wiped off my face when the story shifted abruptly and neatly into a look at what would happen if feral dog packs suddenly underwent speeded-up evolution en route to a group mind. The story follows an animal-control officer who finds the traditional strategy of killing alpha males to disrupt a pack doesn't work anymore. The dogs have reached the point of learning co-operation in such tasks as destroying communication antennas.

"Umfrey's Head" takes place

on a decadent Earth where role-playing games are becoming too realistic. The Stepin Fetchit actors who keep the games going for the visitors are getting bored, and decide to spice things up with real reality, not virtual reality. This shouldn't really matter, since the game visitors are the type of too-rich coupon-clippers who wouldn't be missed. One of the visitors, however, has plans for the first stargates in his head, not one to be targeted as a potential victim.

"Extispicy" (look it up) is an interesting tale of a real-estate developer who uses necromancy not only to pick the best raw land sites for new suburbs, but also when to bail out ahead of real estate market crashes.

Overall I rate this anthology as about 60%. No bad stories as far as technical writing skills are concerned, but a number of them were done just as well back in the 1950s. I'm surprised that John Clute, with his encyclopedic knowledge of SF, let some of these in.

## SHARP READING

**The Cactus Club Killings** by Nathan Walpow (Dell, 1999, ISBN 0-440-23491-3) A bit of a misnomer, for the title and the cover art, which depicts an opuntia bleeding from a stab wound, are



misleading. The star plants in this book are euphorbias, the succulent species of which resemble cacti as a result of convergent evolution, but which are unrelated botanically. I was pleased that I could do no successful nitpicking in this paperback, for the author has been growing cacti and other succulents for two decades, and is President of the Sunset Succulent Society (Los Angeles). He gets all the facts correct.

The novel starts off with another club President, of the Culver City Cactus Club, found deceased with a euphorbia stuffed in her mouth. Euphorbias have toxic sap and produce very painful inflammations on skin, or, as in the case of the defunct, cause the throat muscles to swell shut thereby causing asphyxiation. The hero is Joe Portugal, upon whom, in the usual tradition of murder mysteries, suspicion is planted (pun intended). The Vice-President of the club is next on the list of victims. Joe is Secretary of the club, and in between investigating the murders is arguing with the Treasurer of the club as to who will be next to get it. Joe is rather miffed that anyone would think the Treasurer outranks the Secretary of the club. The meetings of the cactus club are much like any club meeting in SF fandom, aquarium-keeping, or philately, and the author certainly gets that correct.

Joe still listens to 8-tracks and is not on the Internet, so this novel appeals to the neo-Luddite readership. The author plays fair with the clues. I am fairly expert in the world of succulentophilia but

I didn't spot the murderer until near the end. SPOILER ALERT: Pay more attention than I did when they mention the deceased was involved in genetic engineering of succulent plants and poinsettias. END SPOILER ALERT. I suspect that this was because I was following too closely the botanical aspect in search of nitpicks, while a mundane reader would watch the suspects a bit closer.

Lest anyone think cactus hobbyists are harmless old fools, as compared with the harmless young fools in SFdom, the great issue of the former is field-collected plants. Cacti are stripped from habitat by German horticultural smugglers who could teach the Columbian drug lords a few tricks. CITES, an international agreement to control traffic in endangered species, is a constant subject of discussion in cactus journals. It also shows up in this paperback, and Walpow does a good job of educating people about the cactus underground.

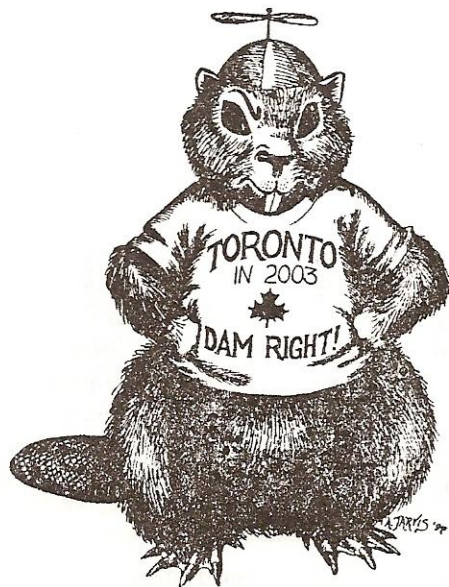
A good read as a mystery novel, and an even better read if you know something about the succulent plant hobby.

**Ruby Ruby** by Bradley Harris (Anvil Press, 1999, ISBN 1-895636-23-X) Trade paperback, murder mystery, available at Chapters or Indigo. A first novel by  
a former President of the

Calgary Philatelic Society. Harris gave up his practice as a defense barrister here in Cowtown and moved to the USA. He took a complete change of lifestyle as a playwright and novelist, now lives in Memphis, Tennessee, and is married to an American woman.

I mention those biographical details because the hero of this fast-paced pulp novel is Jack Minyard, expatriate Canuck living in Memphis, former soldier of the 1 PPCLI (1st Battalion, Princess Patricia Canadian Light Infantry), now a security chief for a rent-a-cop company. Not too close a resemblance to the author, who, I presume, did not personally inspect 45-gallon drums in back alleys filled with blood instead of restaurant grease back when he was defending persons known to police. But that is what Minyard is doing, as well as trying to figure the connection with the murder of an elderly night watchman who was guarding an empty, abandoned warehouse.

The novel moves along nicely. Unlike all too many authors, Harris knows how to keep the narrative flowing steadily instead of stopping it with expository lumps or padding it out with mood pieces or scenic vignettes. He uses too many adjectives, though, in trying to write in the hard-boiled detective style but that is only a minor quibble. The blurb mentions other Minyard novels in progress, and I am looking forward to reading them, hopefully in a not-too-distant future.



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