

OPUNTIA

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None of the other Flower Fairies[®]
envied the Opuntia fairy....

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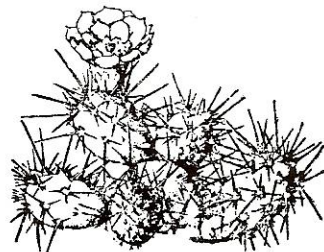
Whole-numbered OPUNTIA's are sercon, x.1 issues are reviewzines, x.2 issues are indexes, and x.5 issues are perzines.

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I ALSO HEARD FROM: Ken Faig Jr, Pascal Lenoir, Bruce Pelz, Ficus, Diane Bertrand, Phlox Icona, Sheryl Birkhead, Bridget Bradshaw, John Hertz, Ken Miller, Scott Crow, Chester Cuthbert, John Held Jr, Rodney Leighton, Sue Jones, Terry Jeeves, Ruggero Maggi

**LETTERS
TO THE
EDITOR**

[Editor's
remarks
in square
brackets]



FROM: Joseph Major
1409 Christy Avenue
Louisville, Kentucky 40204-2040

2001-06-07

Re: blotting paper. There are literary references for it. The criminal in the Sherlock Homes pastiche "The Man Who Was Wanted" left a message on his blotting paper hinting at his whereabouts. Or so Inspector Lestrade believed. Holmes, however, thought it was just a little too obvious. There is also a story about Leonard (not yet Chico) Marx getting a job at a paper factory, losing his week's wages gambling, and swiping a stack of blotters to bring home to Minnie and Sam. In his usual fluent explanations he described how the workers had been paid in blotters that week, and blotters had many uses. Mother began to cry, and Leonard said, "See, you can use them to blot tears, too." Which was why Minnie Marx put her children into show business.

[In OPUNTIA #16, there was an article about a Calgarian who claimed to have invented the idea of Ewoks, and unsuccessfully sued George Lucas. Joseph Major supplied a clipping from the Personals column of the 2001-05-14 of the LOUISVILLE COURIER-JOURNAL, which reads in its entirety as follows.]

"In 1974, while playing Pirates, I created "Jedi Knights" and "The Force". There are 8 witnesses including self, need lawyer, also looking for brother and sister, named Tara and Kelly, from Riatta Dr. in 1974, you were also witnesses. It's true! Call. T. Vincent at 440-439-8671"

[In Canada, any civil tort has to be filed within two years of the causative incident being discovered. I don't know what the American law would be, but waiting 27 years before launching a claim makes one wonder why it took so long.]

FROM: Carolyn Clowes
547 Dover Road
Louisville, Kentucky 40206

2001-06-21

I don't want SF to predict the future or provide answers, but to ask big questions and present other possibilities. It's the only literary form to take responsibility for the future by envisioning it, so writers have a greater challenge. I don't think hard SF is dead,

just ailing. We're definitely dumbed down and numbed out by the media stuff, but a book still needs good characters, a bit of adventure, and a plot.

[Re: panel at Con-Version 17, Calgary] The panel on research confirms what I've found. People love to talk about their work. Like being a reporter, authors must develop sources for things they don't know. This can lead to some strange conversations:

"So you work for the Defense Department? Can you help me blow up a planet?"

"Sure, which one?"

Best to ask stuff like this at a convention, not at the DOD.

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

2001-05-30

[Re: history of blotting paper and pounce] A sort of pounce was still in use at NASA in the 1970s; there was only one brand available, called Skum-X. As Facility Safety Head, I was required to have on file the Material Safety Data Sheet for this substance, which came in a little cylindrical cardboard box with a rotating metal top to open and close the holes for dispensing. It looked rather like grated

Parmesan but had only a faint odour, and was sprinkled on engineering drawings to prevent smearing. The MSDS stated that it was made of "partially hydrolyzed vegetable protein". I think the LD50, the grammes per kilo of body weight required to kill half the rats, had been waived as indeterminable.

I was always a little surprised at the use of sand on inked documents. Sand is gritty and not absorbent. It could only accelerate the drying of ink by increasing the wet area exposed to the air.

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

2001-01-30

[Re: unusual items mailed as parcels] The most unusual thing that ever reached the Warner household came when I was a child: a canary, complete with cage. My aunt out in San Diego mailed it to us the summer we spent at a vacation cottage in the nearby mountains. The canary survived both the trip across the continent and the eventual move back to Hagerstown with no ill effects at all.

Maybe there is a reason why newcomers to SF conventions don't ask for advice from veterans in the field. Such novices may have

attended a few conventions devoted to the field in which they hold jobs or other mundane get-togethers, and their experiences blind them to the fact that SF conventions are quite different from most other types.

FROM: Lloyd Penney
1706 - 24 Eva Road
Etobicoke, Ontario M9C 2B2

2001-02-16

We have now sold one-third of the print run of our Canadian Unity Fan Fund trip report [available for \$10 at above address]. We were the 1998CUFF winners, and travelled from Toronto to Montreal. We travelled to Vancouver in 2000 as Fan Guests of Honour at V-Con 25. Sherry Neufeld of Saskatoon was the 2000 CUFF winner, and came to Toronto for Canvention.

I have always thought that while conventions are businesses in themselves, they must be operated, marketed, and budgeted like businesses. The fannish aspects of it will take the hard edges off the business part of things, and the best efforts the committee makes will not necessarily produce the best results. Once the convention is done and all the fannish requirements are taken care of, then the committee can move back into business mode.

FROM: Candas Jane Dorsey
Edmonton, Alberta

2001-01-26

There is a slight correction to be made in the summary you made about my speech [at ConVersion 17, in 2000]. I am not editing a reprint series. The series which I referred to is the excellent new imprint by Bakka Books' John Rose and Salman Nensi. Stone Fox Publishing has issued MANUSCRIPT FOUND IN A COPPER CYLINDER.

I am not involved with this imprint but admire their initiative greatly and wanted others to know about the availability of these hitherto out-of-print texts.

PHILATELIC LEGENDS: THE MESSAGE UNDER THE STAMP

by Dale Speirs

An urban legend that appeared during wartimes amongst the general population was the one about a prisoner of war hiding a message under the postage stamp on his letter home. The letter would say that all was well, and urge that the stamp be soaked off for somebody's stamp collection. When done, a message would be discovered telling the exact opposite of the letter. This story

circulated among the general public who were unaware that POW mail goes through the system without stamps. Even supposing that the mail had stamps, they would be checked by censors for precisely this sort of thing. It was standard practice for wartime censors to remove stamps to check for hidden messages or microdots [3], and if the text of the letter urged that the recipient soak it off, that was waving a red flag in the censor's face. As a specific example, during World War One, the Germans were able to force the Dutch to stop using postage labels in their internment camps (Nederlands was neutral in that war) for fear of messages hidden underneath them.

The American War Between The States.

This philatelic urban legend is said to have circulated during the American Civil War, and the message underneath the stamp was that the prisoner's tongue had been cut out. I have not found any exact citations for when this was current, just an unattributed remark on a Website.

The World Wars.

As early as December 1914 of the Great War, newspapers were condemning the message under the stamp story as rumour-mongering [1]. The British version was that a relative or friend had a letter from

a POW in Germany. The letter had no real news but urged the addressee to soak off the stamp "for Tommy's collection". There being no one in the family named Tommy, the recipient soaked off the stamp out of curiosity, and discovered real and disquieting war news underneath the stamp.

The rumour became vicious during World War Two. In 1943, the version was that a captured American sailor wrote from a Japanese prison camp that all was well. For a reason not specified, the mother of the POW steamed off the stamp to discover a message "They cut off my hands!". The immediately obvious flaw in the story is that if the POW's hands were cut off, then how did he manage to write the letter? In 1944, the same story re-appeared in England, this time the Gestapo being the culprits [2]. And again, during WW2, POW mail did not require stamps.

References.

- 1] Anonymous (as V.V.V.) (1915-01-02) A few days ago: A random chronicle. THE SPHERE 60(780):26
- 2] Brunvand, J.H. (1989) The message under the stamp. *in* CURSES! BROILED AGAIN! Published by W.W. Norton & Co., New York. Pages 73 to 75.
- 3] Anonymous (1939-11-25) Tricks of the spy trade: Invisible ink, bogus coins, and sweets. ILLUSTRATED LONDON NEWS 195:772-773

CON-VERSION: A BRIEF HISTORY

by Cliff Samuels

In the beginning there was darkness, and it was calm. We had summertime to relax.

First there was light; and the light was the idea that we could do our own version of a science fiction convention and people would come.

On the second day, we gathered our faithful to create a new con. On the third day, we defined what a convention should have: lots of programming and movies. The programming would be fun and plentiful. On the fourth day, we picked a location: somewhere with a hot tub.

On the fifth day, we spread the word and did lots of work. Work begat work and begat more work. On the sixth day, people came, and they had fun. Lots of fun. On the seventh day, we collapsed, happy with a job well done. On the eighth day, we started again.

Okay, so it didn't quite happen that way. Con-Version was born by a group of people, friends who wanted to go to a convention not just to party but to learn and grow. We wanted to meet

authors, artists, and scientists. We wanted to ask questions about how they did what they did. We also wanted to have fun. Doing and going to a convention should be fun. It should not be a requirement but something to look forward to. Those of us that started all of this wanted to meet authors in our home town. And the best way to do it was to ask lots of people to help fund it.

In the summer of 1983, in my usual Saturday activity of going to bookstores, I dropped by one of my favourites, Spell Bound Books. Doug Edgington's store is no longer around, but that is where it all began. Spell Bound was on the north side of 17 Avenue SW, near 4 Street. On that fateful day, Doug proposed it would be nice to do a convention with lots of programming. Being young and foolish, I agreed and said it would be nice. He said that he would allow us to use space in the back room for meetings if I would round up people.

So blame me. I asked Stephen Johnson, Cris Stroup (now Cris Hall), Arthur Taylor, Katherine Jepson, and Gord Johanson. They too thought it would be fun. Oh how young we were. Of course, to get back at Doug, we made him the first Chairman.

Meetings were totally disorganized and chaotic but they created the foundation for a new convention. The convention name comes from two ideas: "To convert people to enjoying SF and fantasy" and "Our version of a convention". At the time we had

no money. Cris and I each donated \$300 to get us going. We printed everything at various persons' offices and got a great deal on hotel space at the Port O' Call Inn. We were lucky to choose guests that allowed us to pay them back when they got to Calgary. Our attendance was only just over 200 people. The amazing thing was, we actually made money.

In those days, we did a Sunday brunch with Guest-of-Honour speeches. At the end of it I was presented with a pale blue T-shirt with a Superman iron-on emblem. This was the start of the Superfan Award. It was for a committee member who had done work above and beyond the call of duty, ie., they were crazy. I still have the shirt but there is no way I can fit into it now. Even though the award is not always presented, it was given out annually for over ten years.

Guests have always been a very important part of Con-Version. We knew we had to pick the right people. Doug had a favourite author and because it was his store, we let him choose. So our first guests were L. Sprague and Catherine Crook de Camp. They were the perfect guests. They let us pay them for the airfare at the convention, and they did lots of panels and enjoyed talking to the fans. We did a very important thing. We treated them like family. And they loved it. We also asked them who they thought would make good guests. From their suggestions we asked Poul and

Karen Anderson to come for our second year. With the rave reviews from the de Camps, they said yes.

The second year found us at the Carriage House Inn. The Port O' Call had problems with our midnight skinny-dipping party. We had warned them, but they still freaked out. The move was probably for the best. The new hotel had better room layout, better bus service, and there were lots of restaurants in the area. This proved to be right, and our membership jumped to 525. We made lots of money and put it back into the convention with more and more guests.

The largest Con-Versions happened at the Carriage House. Year three our GoH was Jack L. Chalker and for year four we invited Joan Vinge. Year five was going to be a special year. We had Robert Silverberg as the Guest of Honour. We brought back the de Camps as our Special Guests, William Gibson as our Canadian Guest, and Rose Deagnan from ILM was our Media Guest. Our Toastmaster was Ed Bryant. Membership reached its peak that year with an amazing 730 people. That was the only year we had to put a cap on attendance.

Ed Bryant was very helpful in telling us about authors who would make the best Toastmasters. We found that a Toastmaster can make or break a convention. From his suggestions we brought in people like Mike Resnick and George R.R. Martin. At the time

George was doing a lot of Hollywood stuff like BEAUTY AND THE BEAST. He had written some wonderful novels but this was before his fame for the "Song of Ice and Fire" series.

At this point we thought that Con-Version would only get larger. We decided to move downtown to the Westin Hotel. The hotel was great and the space worked well. Little did we know what would happen outside the convention. Oil! The Crash! People found themselves out of work or with less free cash. Hotel rooms became too pricey for some, and some people decided they could not go. We stayed at the Westin for three years, but by Con-Version VIII our membership numbers began to really drop. From there the convention moved to a number of hotels, the Coast Plaza (then the Marlborough Inn), the Carriage House again, and now the Metropolitan Centre.

We all have some great stories, like the year we did T-shirts with a stainless steel rat done in silver foil. We had heads turning at ST Con [a now-extinct Star Trek convention in Calgary]. Or the year we had J. Michael Straczynski as Special Guest and we had to double the programme room size and get a large screen TV, since the entire convention wanted to see the Babylon 5 bloopers.

Con-Version has shaped all our lives. Each of us remembers events in our own way. This is how I remember Con-Version.

CON-VERSION 18

by Dale Speirs

Calgary's annual gencon Con-Version had its 18th edition on the weekend of August 10 to 12, 2001, in beautiful downtown Cowtown. Well, it was downtown anyway; like every other large city in the world, its downtown core is generic skyscrapers and car parks.

While waiting for the Opening Ceremonies on Friday evening, I wandered into the Dealer Bourse to kill a bit of time and lighten my wallet by buying pulps. I got into a conversation with Cliff Samuels, a founder and a past just-about-everything of Con-Version, not to mention this year's Toastmaster. I asked him about rumours of a Calgary Worldcon or Westercon bid. He said that the idea had been floated out into the ether, but while there was lots of enthusiasm, there was a lack of local volunteers who were both serious and competent, so the idea was left to float onward out to wherever it is that Pioneer 10 is nowadays.

The Opening Ceremonies were brisk and efficient as always. The Guests of Honour were invited to come forward and briefly mention what panels they would be on. Author GoH was David Drake, Science GoH was Dr. Bill Brooks, Media GoH was Dirk Benedict (who played What's-his-name the fighter pilot on BATTLESTAR GALACTICA; the convention couldn't afford a

Trekkie actor), Artist GoH was Jean-Pierre Normand, and Writers Workshop GoHs were Patrick and Honna Swenson. And from there to the first panel.

Robots In Space.

This panel carried on the old debate of whether we should put our money into robot probes or International Tin Cans, pardon me, International Space Stations. Dr. Brooks, an associate of the Canadian Space Agency, said that robots are essential to lead the way for humans so the first explorers know what to expect. Entrepreneurs will wait for robot pathfinders to go first at government expense. Private industry will only take humans into space if the money is there, such as tourism (already done once by the Russians but as a government agency) and mining.

Another panelist, Blair Petterson, noted that remote probes needed intelligence to respond to unforeseen events. We cannot take direct control due to the long lag times for command responses, even at light speed, and even in our humble stellar system. Humans will always have the ability to deal with unforeseen events better than advanced robot probes. Someone said that it is better to sacrifice a robot's life than human lives, which brought up the Challenger and other space tragedies. The discussion then

went into the details of the trouble and expense of maintaining human life in space, and the amount of work that goes into designing a spacesuit. Audience members remarked that excessive use of robots will make people lazy, at which point the panel veered off topic to discuss the influence of automation and television on us.

The Truth Is Out There.

This was the conspiracy panel, which was also the last panel of Friday evening and therefore allowed to run longer when it went into overtime. Advice to convention programme schedulers; this is not a one-hour panel, as it doesn't take much to get everybody het up about their favourite conspiracies. This panel was dominated by Blair Petterson, whose day job is a barrister in Edmonton (200 km north of Calgary). As a consequence, he spends a lot of time in Court of Queen's Bench dealing with the aftermath of unsuccessful conspiracies. He said you never hear about the successful conspiracies. Conspiracies require complete trust among its members, a rare thing anywhere. What usually exposes most conspiracies is a disgruntled employee, ex-spouse, or jealous neighbour or friend. SF novelist Leslie Gadallah was on the panel, and noted that the only way two people can be absolutely certain a secret is kept is if one of them is dead.

Many paranoids confuse low-probability but actually occurring

events (such as Lee Harvey Oswald's lucky shot) with conspiracy and refuse to accept that random events do happen. An audience member remarked that some conspiracy theorists are in it for fun, while someone else said it was just an advanced form of gossip. Gadallah said that many people would rather think their lives are a mess because of a conspiracy by government or multinationals instead of admitting personal responsibility. A new motivation for believing in conspiracies that I hadn't heard before is that it is part of the innate human pattern recognition. Under this proposal by Petterson, conspiracy beliefs persist for the same reason that visual pattern recognition persists in humans. False alarms (is that a tiger over there ready to pounce on me?) are better than false complacency (naw, that's just a shadow, GROWL, CHOMP, CHOMP). Thus they persist in humans even though the evolutionary need for them may not be there anymore.

International Space Station.

"Is it worth it?" was the question put to the panel. The consensus was that yes, it was worth doing, and yes, it is overpriced and serves no useful purpose. Dr. Brooks, said the best thing about it was that it has fostered international co-operation and provided valuable lessons on how people behave both on the ground and in space. Blair Petterson mentioned the Apollo/Soyuz rendezvous as the predecessor to the ISS.

Canada's share of the ISS is 3%, mostly for the Canadarm 2 that is used to construct the space station. This is not enough for politicians to do any serious thinking about why Canuck astronauts are roaming around in low orbit. Brooks said the timidity of the space bureaucracy is not due to fear of another Challenger incident but rather accusations of wasted money by opposition parties. The demand for accountability in spending \$100 million forces the creation of paper trails, so that if the matter erupts during Question Period in the House of Commons, then the CSA officials have themselves covered.

An audience member suggested that a lunar colony was more important than a tin can in orbit, to which Brooks responded that we should go to Mars before we return to the Moon. Someone remarked that zero-G space stations are evolutionary dead ends, since they will be of little help in designing long-term space habitats such as space arks or Mars ships. In the present day, they are poor experimental platforms due to vibrations and noise.

Extraterrestrial Cataclysms.

Dr. William Serjeant (University of Saskatchewan) started off his presentation on this subject by saying that people use the term 'mass extinction' loosely. He applies it only to where a great diversity of taxonomic groups become extinct, not localized extinctions. The first real mass extinction was at the end of the

Permian age about 250 megayears ago, when 97% of all life forms became extinct from an unknown cause, probably not an impact. Serjeant concentrated on the more famous Cretaceous extinction. He pointed out that most of the dinosaur groups faded out at various times before the termination of the Cretaceous 65 megayears ago, and a few persisted briefly into the following Palaeocene period. The Cretaceous extinction was not an abrupt termination but an inconclusive ending.

Writers At The Improv.

One of my favourite events at Con-Version is this annual improv staged by the Imaginative Fiction Writers Association. A panel of IFWA members, this year augmented by SF novelist Ed Willett, is given a word by the audience, and have sixty seconds to create a sentence using it. When time is called by moderator Tony King, the sentences are read out and the audience votes their favourite. In this way, a short-short story is built up, and none too serious it is. This year's deathless prose is as follows, with words suggested by the audience underlined. Where the writer used a pun not immediately obvious, I include the actual suggested word in square brackets.

Peter never really appreciated centrifugal force until the day the lid came off the blender, splattering blood and bug juice on the

console. He was appalled; the blood and bug juice completely obscured the graphic of Thal's mat orgy [thaumaturgy] so he searched frantically for Windex. "Guard!", Peter called, "Bring Con Version 6.2 from his cell and tell him to lick that off!".

Con Version 6.2 appeared moments later, spluttering in outrage. "A plethora of pustules plaster your posterior, puling pile of putrefaction!"

"In Candesence, we have more respect for our superiors", blustered Peter, "and please don't mention my pustules in front of the guard; you know the secret blender recipe was my only hope to rid myself of them."

"Whereas, in Quisition", said Con, "we don't allow wombats to be used in a cornucopia of corpuscular cures, you crud-caked canker!"

"Spare me your elocution", Peter snarled. "Get licking!"

"I don't understand", said the guard. "This isn't Quisition or Candesence. This is the Deto nation. Our declaration of rights make cruel and unusual licking illegal. You'll never see that orgy again, sir."

"Fecal matter!", swore Peter. "The gods are fickle with their

favours. Without the comfort of Thal's artistic masterpiece representing the four-breasted whore of Babylon, my pustules are unbearable!"

"But sir", cried the guard, "I have the solution. You must ... ". Just then, Version 6.2 leapt out and crushed the guard's skull with his heretofore hidden Fist of Death.

"My revenge is complete", said the con, "so there!"

The Future Of Monsters.

Panelist Dr. William Serjeant, whom we last saw speaking as a professor of geology in the Extraterrestrial Cataclysms panel, changed hats and identities, and spoke at this panel under his pen name of Anthony Swithin, with which he writes his fantasy novels. The question put to the panel was "What makes a scary monster?". Swithin said words suggest horror better than pictures because the former allow a reader to visualize his own worst fears, whereas a picture loses impact. Paula Johanson (TESSERACTS editor) agreed, saying that wet, messy scenes cannot be as monstrous as what is not seen but only implied.

Robyn Herrington (short story writer whose day job is an editor at the University of Calgary) said the most frightening monsters

are those roaming typical suburbs that we can relate to, the stereotypical “But he was a quiet man!” interview that neighbours give to the news media after the serial killer is arrested. Monsters in some fantastical background such as a pseudo-medieval place or another planet are competing with the background, which distracts the reader from the monster. An audience member mentioned that frightening monsters are those which act with intelligence, not just blindly roaring about but cold and calculating and out to get you personally rather than as collateral damage. Rebecca Bradley (fantasy novelist) said monsters of the future will be tiny things like viruses or nanotechnology, such as an airborne Ebola-type virus with a long latency period.

New Planets.

Con-Version always has a strong turnout for science panels, and this presentation by local astronomer Roland Dechesne was no exception. He presented a colourful slide show on the 80 or so extra-solar planets currently known. Random motion of gas clouds in a galaxy will always have some angular momentum, and the cloud will therefore eventually flatten into a disk. The cloud diameter is greater than our solar system in most nebula. Planets are hard for astronomers to separate from the disk of the parent star; spectral methods are most commonly used to do this. Only Jupiter-class or greater planets are found, since the technology does not yet exist to identify smaller planets. The searches are

emphasizing Sun-type or red dwarf stars, as there is not much point in checking pulsars or obviously unstable systems. Astronomers are not just looking for planets per se, but planets nearby that may have life. Gas giants could have life on their satellites.

Conventions Past, Present, And Future.

This panel started off with a discussion about the ideal type of chairman. A dictator who runs the show efficiently makes for a well-remembered convention by the general membership, as much as he may be detested by the tiny clique of SMOFs and BOFs who think they are true fandom. The genial chairman who gets on well with everyone but can't or won't hold the committee chairmen responsible is the one who produces disasters.

It was asked from the audience if there is any future for conventions in this Internet age. The answer was a resounding yes, on the premise that SF conventions are the only place where geeks can socialize on equitable terms. Other benefits of conventions are a place for editors and publishers to gather for deal making, and as a place for awards such as Hugos and Auroras.

The most disquieting moment of Con-Version came when a neo

arrived for this panel a bit late and the panelists had to not only explain basic terms to him such as 'Worldcon', but also explain that most SF conventions emphasize literary SF. This neo was used to the idea that an SF convention was something you paid admission to and sat back to watch bit-part actors do a question-and-answer session. Most frightening was to have to explain the concept of volunteerism to him, a typical 'fan' not of the future but of the present.

Gigantologies.

"Why do book series go on forever?" asked moderator Tony King at the start of this panel. He then mimicked a televangelist, pointing at panelists David Drake, Dave Duncan, and Ann Marston, and shouted "Do these sinners repent?". The answer, as it turned out, was 'No' from all of them, all three of whom have SF novel series. Duncan said that endless serials are a time-honoured tradition thousands of years old. Ancient bards didn't recite entire epic poems in one sitting, but told such favourites as THE ILIAD and THE ODYSSEY in installments. Conversely, many epic poems were stretched out from their shorter, original versions because the audience wanted more.

Drake said he found it was better for him to write non-series stories in between installments of his series, for otherwise the labour dragged on him.

Some authors want to stop a series, but faced with a \$3 million contract for more of the same they can't refuse. He said he sets up his own series so that he is comfortable with himself artistically if he goes on longer than intended. Marston said it is difficult for writers to break loose, while Drake said that a successful author shouldn't force a publisher to take a non-series if it leads to bad feelings.

The consensus of the panel was that gigantologies exist because they sell, no matter that a few fans might complain.

E-Publishing.

It used to be that aspiring small-press authors would print off chapbooks of sample chapters of their latest novel and give them away at SF conventions. Nowadays it's floppies. I have no intention of reading any of them in my computer but I took a sample floppy from the freebie table as a new type of collectible.

Meanwhile, at a panel, David Drake mentioned that he thinks too many authors are fretting needlessly about fiction posted on the Web, or people charging for Website access. He said it was a form of road rage not worth it to get excited over. "Walk away", he said. Life is too short to be consumed by anger over minor things.

The Shire.

Anthony Swithin made this presentation, a reconstruction of the geography and socioeconomics of the LORD OF THE RING books. This included geological maps with fault lines and sedimentology, using Swithin's experience as a professional geologist. Not that hard to do either; many people don't realize that every mountain range has its fault lines, and if an author mentions in passing that a character fell off a ledge of limestone, you can immediately identify the past history of that mountain. (Limestones are marine rocks, therefore any cliff of limestone was once a seabed subsequently uplifted by tectonic movements on a geological fault.) From there, Swithin went on to discuss his own books, part of the Rockall series. He based the geography of this series on his native Shrewsbury, England, and his knowledge of geology.

Guest Of Honour Speeches.

The speeches were brief, unremarkable, and not worth reporting. What struck me was that the most science fictional moment of the entire convention occurred at the beginning of the speeches. Toastmaster Cliff Samuels asked audience members to please turn off their cellphones. About half the audience reached for their pockets or purses. Go back to the first SF convention in the world, back in 1936 in Leeds, England, and those attendees would have agreed that pocket-sized communicators were real SF, right

up there with aircars and lunar colonies. Now we take them so much for granted that convention runners everywhere consider them as a part of the mundane world. Cellphones are science fiction!

After The Party.

In a post-con mailing, the concomm reported that Con-Version 18 made a four-digit profit. Attendance was about 350 members. The Con-Version Society is no more; it has been replaced by the Calgary Science Fiction and Fantasy Society. The convention itself will continue as Con-Version, but the society will now open up to general SF club activities, rather than be exclusively a concomm. It will, from the mailing, appear to be dominated by media fans. Not a particular surprise; the media barbarians won the war decades ago.

Things To Come.

Next year's Con-Version will also be Canvention 22, at which the Prix Aurora Awards will be presented. The Auroras are Canada's equivalent of the Hugos. Con-Version 20 will be on the weekend of August 9 to 11, 2002. Two confirmed guests so far are Robert Sawyer and Geoffrey A. Landis.

A VIGNETTE FROM RIVERCON 2000

by Carolyn Clowes

547 Dover Road

Louisville, Kentucky 40206

I always enjoy reports of convention panels, so here's one from the other side of the table, at Rivercon in Louisville, Kentucky, in 2000. Ryck Neube and I did a panel with several others on "Does where you live influence what you write?". Susan Baugh, a local librarian and a wonderful lady, organized it. She was thrilled to have a group of Kentucky writers, and decided to audiotape it for the archives. She made the mistake of telling us that, which is probably what lit the fuse.

It was fairly well attended. The fellow sitting to my left talked about southern writers and that "sense of place" we're all supposed to have. I should mention that the proper subject for southern writers is The South; the proper subject for Kentucky writers is Kentucky, and both presumptions make me snarky. I said insanity runs so deep in the South that where we live influences us whether we want it to or not.

Michael Williams, a fantasy writer, said some learned and presentable things, and then Ryck, who sounds very Kentucky, said, "Hmmm, does where you live influence what you write? I was thinking about that last night! I rolled over in bed, and I said,

"Hey, Mom ... "".

Well. As the hilarity died down, I noticed Ryck's wife Lorraine, sitting dutifully in the second row, roll her eyes and sigh. But we were off and running on fertile ground, recounting tales of Kentucky villainy by inbred nitwits: the yahoos who blow back their electric meters and then get caught, the neighbour who torches a house to settle a score, the hemp-growers who protect their patches with explosives stolen from the strip mine site, the gun-toting sociopaths who shoot plaster deer statues in mountain cemeteries, or, for variety, electrical transformers, usually the same folks who start turf wars in trailer parks. Our fair state passed a concealed carry law; now it's legal to pack a gun in church.

When we'd worked our way down the evolutionary ladder, we fell to trashing the whole concept of Kentucky writers, whining about how badly we've been treated by Kentucky's literati, who ignore us, since we seldom write about Kentucky. It was late afternoon, room parties already under way, and audience participation was surprisingly high, in several senses of the word. We were running a bit long. So I said, "Hey, Susan, did you get enough on tape for the archives?". "Are you nuts?" she gasped, "This goes nowhere near a library!". Poor Susan, but a good time was had by all.