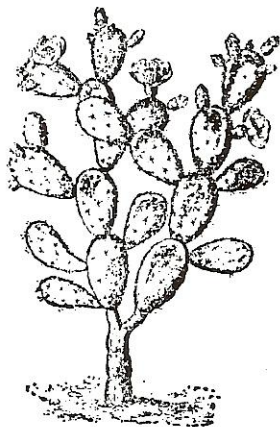


# OPUNTIA

## 53.1B

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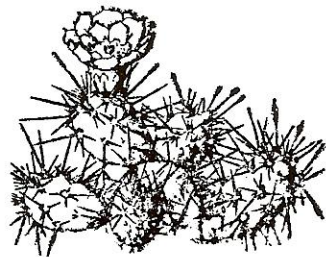
**OPUNTIA** is published by Dale Speirs, Box 6830, Calgary, Alberta, Canada, T2P 2E7. It is available for \$3 cash for a one-time sample copy, trade for your zine, or letter of comment. Americans: please don't send cheques for small amounts to Canada as the bank fee to cash them is usually more than the amount. US\$ banknotes are acceptable in Canada at par value; what we gain on the exchange rate we lose on the higher postage rate to USA. Do not send mint USA stamps as they are not valid for postage outside USA and I don't collect them.

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

**I ALSO HEARD FROM:** Joel Cohen, Anna Banana, Pascal Lenoir, John Held Jr, Chuck Stake, Julie Jefferies, Ficus, R'ykandar Korra'ti, Babynous Cult, Jeanette Handling, Ruggero Maggi, Chester Cuthbert, Robert Lichtman, John Hertz, Billy McKay, DeWitt Young, Milt Stevens, Lloyd Penney

**LETTERS  
TO THE  
EDITOR**

[Editor's  
remarks  
in square  
brackets]



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

2004-02-03

Harlequin [the romance publishers] is significant as a picture of prevailing attitudes. Given that readers will read these in mass quantities, a study of what they appeal to would be useful in understanding human desires.

At convention panels, writers decry the abysmal taste of the reading public that snaps up mass quantities of Piers Anthony, David Eddings, and Robert Jordan. They should be discoursing on "Why do readers read them, and how can better writers use what they have?", but it is more fulfilling to be a starving writer.

-2-

[Don't look at me! I'm an Asimov man myself.

I could never get past the first few pages of Anthony et al, but on the other hand I can't stomach the litcrit crowd either. Heinlein I've only read once because he is so culture specific (U.S. Naval Academy and sad old git fantasizing about threesomes).]

FROM: Sheryl Birkhead  
25509 Jonnie Court  
Gaithersburg, Maryland 20882-3422

2004-01-30

[Re: zinesters of the 1800s] I am assuming the repro method back that far was gelatin?

[Probably some zinesters used the hectograph method (gelatin printing plates) but the initial boom in zines was the result of home printing presses becoming available at an affordable price in the years after the American War Between The States. Hectographs (spelling the word with a 'k' is a trademark) were invented somewhere in German-speaking Europe circa 1860s, based on my research. Typewriters and carbon paper became widespread in the late 1800s and were the PCs of their day. Mark Twain was considered a cutting-edge author because he was an early adopter of the typewriter.]

FROM: Henry Welch  
1525 - 16 Avenue  
Grafton, Wisconsin 53024-2017

2004-03-04

"Cheat The Prophet" was interesting. How about T.J. Watson (founder of IBM) saying: "I can only envision the need for maybe 4 or 5 computers in the whole world."

[As a matter of fact, I've been trying to trace that one to an original printed source. This statement has also been ascribed to Howard Aiken of the U.S. Census Bureau, and William Penney of the U.K. Atomic Energy Authority, all with various dates. A modern variation is Bill Gates saying that no one should need more than a 600-kilobyte computer. Can anyone supply print references? I don't consider any Web site a valid source since they quote without attribution.]

[One of my other hobbies is tracing how anecdotes evolve. An example is Alexander Woolcott's remark that his editor Harold Ross looked like "a dishonest Abraham Lincoln", repeated in various autobiographies of actors about their producers or directors. Or the one about a famous violinist and a pianist at a concert, listening to a new violinist who was a sensation. "Hot in here, isn't it?", said the famous violinist. "Not for pianists", was his companion's reply. I've traced this one to 1919, but I'm sure it probably goes back a century or two further.]

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

2004-02-??

Thanks for OPUNTIA #53.1A. How many issues have you done?

[#53.1B is the 146th issue of OPUNTIA, which began in March 1991. I have published 274 zines and chapbooks as of SANSEVIERIA #60. This works out to about 1.7 issues per month over the long run. It is what I do instead of watching television.]

[Re: Ficus's SPOILATION REPORT] When I get mail solicitations with one of those "no postage necessary" envelopes, I often clip the material into confetti and mail it back to them. On average I guess I do this once a week, usually commercial junk or politicians but sometimes unusually persistent charities.

[I either send them some underground propaganda (humourous, so the mailroom clerk will keep it and put it up on the company bulletin board) or else recycle it as mail art. Also, my house has a fireplace, and I can always use scrap paper to get the blaze going. That's the advantage of junk mail, as opposed to Internet spam, which is actively harmful.]

## CHEAT THE PROPHET

G.K. Chesterton, in the opening paragraph of his 1904 novel THE NAPOLEON OF NOTTING HILL, writes about a game called 'Cheat the Prophet': *"The players listen very carefully and respectfully to all that the clever men have to say about what is to happen in the next generation. The players then wait until all the clever men are dead, and bury them nicely. They then go and do something else. That is all. For a race of simple tastes, however, it is great fun."*

The Great Depression began with the stock market crash of October 29, 1929. On September 6, 1929, Prof. Irving Fisher (Yale University) was quoted in the NEW YORK TIMES (page 12) as saying:

*"Stock prices are not too high and Wall Street will not experience anything in the nature of a crash. ... There may be a recession of stock prices, but not anything in the nature of a crash. ... The margin of safety between high-grade bonds and common stocks is rapidly being equalized both in actuality and in the popular mind. The future, I am convinced, will see this margin completely removed, with the result that common stocks will be regarded as decidedly safe forms of investment."*

Now re-read this and imagine the date Fisher said this was late 1999 or early 2000, just before the dot.com boom went bust. Not one word would have to be changed.

Incidentally, the day after the October 29 crash that triggered the Great Depression, the stock brokers Gilbert Elliott & Co. ran a display ad with the simple text: *"In our opinion the present affords a favorable opportunity to acquire the stocks of banks and insurance companies for long-term investment."* Just how long the term was hadn't been specified.

## MAIL ART LISTINGS

**The Penguin:** (Jeroen ter Welle, Boeninlaan 393, 1102 TL Amsterdam, Netherlands) Theme on the penguin, size A6 (14.8 x 10.5 cm). Send 16 originals or copies, documentation to every 15 contributors. No deadline.

**Collage d'aujourd'hui:** (Dianne Bertrand, Art terre, 9109 Deschambault, Saint Leonard, Quebec, H1R 2C6) Mail art collage.

**Brain Cell Fractal:** (Ryosuke Cohen, 3-76-I-A-613, Yagumokitacho, Moriguchi-City, Osaka 570, Japan) Send 150 stickers or some other type of small mail art image. These are collated into a collage on an 11" x 17" poster, and a copy sent back to each contributor, along with a list of names and addresses of those participating.



**Postcard Mail Art Project:** (dott.ssa Tiziana Baracchi, Via Cavallotti, 83-B, 30171 Venezia-Mestre, Italy) Technique: free. Size: 15 cm x 10 cm. No deadline.

**The Tree Of Poetry:** (dott.ssa Tiziana Baracchi, Via Cavallotti, 83-B, 30171 Venezia-Mestre, Italy) The Tree of Poetry is a very uncommon species of plant; it is an American maple which is in Venezia-Mestre in 83/B Cavallotti Street, Itinerari '80 Centre. Giancarlo Da Lio dedicated this tree to poetry in a lot of artistic performances. Below its fronds, sheets with verses, in plastic envelopes to preserve from rain, hang down. The poets read their lines in the shade of the tree. Painters and sculptors put their works on walls and grass. Moreover, as well as they work, they must manage their work making use of everything and everywhere. Well, it is necessary to show works not only in the official galleries, but above all in the alternative art spaces: where people go and come, on the road, in the shops, in the gardens too; so the Tree of Poetry was born and is growing. Do you want to send your mail art or mail poesy?

**Comforters:** (Lois Klassen, Box 74540, Vancouver, British Columbia V6K 4P4) Send me quilt squares (6" x 6") to be used on the top of comforters that I am making for displaced people (refugees). The comforters, also known as blankets or quilts, will be distributed by the Mennonite Central Committee, the Red Cross, and the Red Crescent societies. The squares can

incorporate artwork but they must be washable and durable; poly-cotton is the best material. Send as many as you want because each comforter needs 130! I will return photos and periodical documentation about the project.

**Think Here:** (Jose Roberto Sechi, Av. M29, N° 2183, Jd. Sao Joao, Rio Claro SP - 13505 - 410, Brazil) Mail art magazine. Drawing, design, painting, engraving, gluing, rubber stamp, writing, poetry, visual poetry, photograph, etc.. In black and white, please, maximum 13 cm x 8 cm (horizontal format). Theme free, no return, no jury, no deadline, documentation to every 18 participants.

**Artist Trading Cards:** (Chuck Stake, 736 - 5 Street NW, Calgary, Alberta T2N 1P9, Canada) ATCs are works of art created on 64 mm x 89 mm card stock. They are the same size as hockey trading cards, but the similarity stops here. Cards may depict anything, be 2-D or 3-D, they may be original, a series, an edition, or a multiple. Cards are signed on the back by the artist and, if necessary, an edition number is included. ATCs are paintings, drawings, collages, photographs, rubberstamp works, mixed-media, etchings, found images, recycled works of art, assemblages, etcetera. The only stipulation is that the card fits in the standard plastic sheets that hockey cards are normally stored within.

## ZINE LISTINGS

by Dale Speirs

[The Usual means \$3 cash (\$5 overseas), 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 (the bank fee to cash them is usually more than the amount) or mint USA stamps (which are not valid for postage outside USA). US\$ banknotes are acceptable around the world.]

**DSAME** ("Sorry, please do not invite/tell anyone to submit zines or material to us, because we do not accept 3-D zine reviews or profiles from anyone who has not received an invitation.") Not to worry, as this is a KTF review, and I don't recommend this group of vanity publishers. KTF = Kill The Fuckers. I almost never do such reviews but sometimes the target is just too, too tempting. I got the DSAME flyer which is published by a non-profit group which wants people to submit reviews of their own zines. They themselves don't trade zines, which is a violation of the gift economy of zinedom. "Unfortunately, we cannot afford to send free copies of our zine ... " but if you're a Canadian it will only cost US\$19 to get it, about C\$25 to \$30 depending on the current exchange rate.

*"Our zine review and profile section is unique in that we request the creator of the zine to review or profile their own zine by writing about their zine from a different perspective, a different dimension, or as if they were a different person, place, or thing."*

I'm at a loss as to how a review can be written by a place or thing. I don't think the Petro-Canada skyscraper in downtown Calgary can offer much of an opinion about OPUNTIA. Writing from a different perspective while still creating a positive review sounds like one of those training courses that managers go to, that teach how to turn low-wage, no-benefits, part-time temps into highly productive employees.

*"One of the reasons that we created 3-D zine reviews and profiles is so that zine creators all over the world can receive positive reviews, and promote their zines (thereby promoting independent forms of media) worldwide without having to pay expensive postage to mail their entire zine all over the world."* What do you mean "so that zine creators ... can receive positive reviews"? They're writing their own reviews, so of course they're positive. But that's like being voted Best Reggae Band in Pangnirtung, Nunavut; nobody will take it seriously. Promoting one's zines does take a bit of cash in postage for mail-outs. If you haven't got the cash, then set up a Website and try to be heard over the cacophony on the Internet. But don't expect to masquerade self-advertising as a "positive review". Zinedom is not for wimps who crumple into tears at the first suggestion that their zine is crap. If you can't take the heat, then stay out of the copy shop.

*"Perhaps someday the idea of a 3-D zine review or profile will be used by other publications all over the world."* Also variously

known as vanity publishing or puff-piece advertising, depending on the format. It's been done and found wanting in the balance.

*"There is a chance that you haven't yet published some of the zines we mentioned ... it is important that you do a 3-D zine review only of the specific issue number(s) of the zine(s) that we mentioned. All of our 3-D zine reviews are on an invitation-only basis."* I was asked to review my issue of OPUNTIA 52.1A, which was published in April 2003. Since that issue is long out of print, there doesn't seem much point in reviewing it, especially since the x.1 issues are mostly zine listings of ephemeral interest. The invitation-only criteria appears to have been by skimming through some other zines that had reviews. I wonder how many zines received this invitation?

*"Q. I do not want to fill out the checklist. Is it ok if I include no contact information on the checklist? A. Yes. We will still publish your 3-D zine review or profile. Your zine will still encourage others to lift up their independent voices."* So you write a positive review but don't tell anyone how to get a copy of your zine. If they can't examine a copy, then they'll have to take your word for it that it is a wonderful zine. I doubt that a true zine publisher needs encouragement to publish. Yes, some people are encouraged by others, but they are followers. If the fire is within you to tell the world about your political cause, or share your timeless poetry, then you will publish in spite of everything. That

is the true spirit of zinedom, ever since it began in the late 1800s.

The DSAME people don't seem to understand how zinedom operates or why it evolved the way it did. I hope this is just some naive kids who think they are doing nice. Mail art is occasionally plagued by such people, who want to set up official museums of mail art. SF fans had to put up with Trekkies publishing \$15 per issue fanzines. Mercifully though, these outfits are a small minority. The vast majority of zinesters publish because the urge is within them and damn the critics. They publish within the gift economy of The Usual, which is zine trade, a few dollars cash for a one-time sample, or a contribution of art, letter of comment, or article. They understand that zinedom is not a Mutual Admiration Society, and you have to earn respect with a quality zine, not manufacture it with puff pieces.

**Tortoise #18** (The Usual from Sue Jones, Flat 5, 32/33 Castle Street, Shrewsbury SY1 2BQ, England) Genzine with various reviews, a biography of Mrs. Delaney (an English noblewoman, Brian Eno (a musician), and other assorted heroes. Lots of letters of comment.

**Vanamonde #528 to 537** (The Usual from John Hertz, 236 South Coronado Street #409, Los Angeles, California 90057) Single-sheet weekly apazine with brief comments on a wide variety of subjects.



**Musea #129** (The Usual from Tom Hendricks, 4000 Hawthorne #5, Dallas, Texas 75219) Commentary on the art scene, and the homogenization of mass media and rock music. There is a rather naive proposal that a golden age of art could be launched with a reviews-only site that would enable new talent to be discovered. The problem is that such a Website would be lost in the cacophony of the Internet.

**PCM#16 and #17** (The Usual from PefProjects, 196 High Road, London N22 8HH) Collage zine with poetry embedded within.

**Shouting At The Postman #52** (The Usual from Ken and Mary Miller, Box 101, Newtown, Pennsylvania 18940-0101) An in-depth review of an in-depth (3-D) children's book on shapes.

**Plokta V8#2** (The Usual from Alison Scott, 24 St. Mary Road, Walthamstow, London E17 9RG, England) Jolly good fun, including how to keep the kids out of trouble for hours by attaching a camera to the telly and let them wave and point at themselves. Also Brits in America, Americans in the London subway system, and letters of comment.

**Statement #314 and #315** (The Usual from Ottawa SF Society, 18 Norice Street, Ottawa, Ontario K2G 2X5) SF clubzine with news and notes about fandom, letters of comment, media reviews, and convention reports.

**Probe #122** (The Usual from Science Fiction South Africa, Box 781401, Sandton 2146, South Africa) Clubzine with news and notes, convention reports, essays, short fiction, and letters of comment. Nicely produced digest-size with card covers and good artwork.

**The Thought #137** (The Usual from Ronald Tobin, Box 10760, Glendale, Arizona 85318-0760) Lots of American political commentary, a continuing series on the latest in astronomical thought, and assorted rants.

**Alexiad V3#1** (The Usual from Lisa and Joseph Major, 1409 Christy Avenue, Louisville, Kentucky 40204-2040) Lots of reviews of the more obscure books, remarks on this and that, and letters of comment.

**Murderous Signs #8** (The Usual from Grant Wilkins, Box20517, Ottawa, Ontario K1N 1A3) Literary zine with mostly poetry but some interesting literary commentary from the TORONTO GLOBE newspaper of 1892.

**Xerography Debt #13** (US\$3 from Davida Gypsy Breier, Box 963, Havre de Grace, Maryland 21078) Nice thick reviewzine, using multiple reviewers. This is also a valuable resource for zine historians because it runs histories of the more obscure parts of zinedom.



**Warp #56** (The Usual from Montréal SF and Fantasy Association, Box 1186, Place du Parc, Montréal, Québec H2X 4A7) Clubzine of media SF fans, with convention reports, club activities, model building, and SF-related essays. This issue includes a segment on local wildlife such as the nearly extinct Klinton. It's nice to know that the extirpation of Trekkies hasn't been confined to Calgary.

**Challenger #19** (The Usual from Guy Lillian, Box 53092, New Orleans, Louisiana 70153-3092) Doorstop-sized zine of 78 pages with several reports on the 2003 World SF Convention in Toronto, several essays on Victorian SF, miscellany, and letters of comment.

**Word Watchers (2004 Winter)** (The Usual from Jeanette Handling, 2405 Sanford Avenue, Alton, Illinois 62002) Devoted to that harmless drudgery known as lexicography, this zine looks at modern words and phrases that are still being added to the English language.

**For The Clerisy #53** (The Usual from Brant Kresovich, Box 404, Getzville, New York 14068-0404) Reviews of older books, this time around of some self-help books that demonstrate that each generation's dogma is the next generation's comedy. Various other books and zines are reviewed, and there are letters of comment.

**Leeking Ink #28** (The Usual from Davida Gypsy Breier, Box 963, Havre de Grace, Maryland 21078) Perzine with a job-from-Hell story which fortunately ends well when Breier finds a better position. Also a bit about the messier side of keeping pets, some reviews, and letters of comment.

**Knarley Knews #104** (The Usual from Henry Welch, 1525 - 16 Avenue, Grafton, Wisconsin 53024-2017) Genzine with personal comments, an account of a pipe bomb found in a school, and lots of letters of comment.

**Zine World #20** (US\$6 cash only from Box 330156, Murfreesboro, Tennessee 37133-0156) 64-page reviewzine in the style of FACTSHEET FIVE, along with some commentary and zine-related reprints. SF fans will particularly enjoy the account of the time a zine publishers convention was booked in a hotel at the same time as the Crossknit Crocheters. Writes Cristoph Meyer, who was working a summer job at the front desk: *"Attendees of both conferences came up to me and asked 'Who are those other people?' When I told them, they would just shake their heads knowingly; that other group was bad news."* It reminds me of the time Calgary's SF convention was booked simultaneously with rodeo cowboys attending the Stampede, and European NATO troops on training exercises in southern Alberta.

**Door Knob #80 to #82** (The Usual from Robert Lichtman, Box 30, Glen Ellen, California 95442) An apazine with a wide variety of comments on an equally wide variety of topics.

**Ethel The Aardvark #109** (The Usual from Melbourne SF Club, Box 212, World Trade Centre, Melbourne, Victoria 3005, Australia) Clubzine with news and notes, reviews, and convention reports.

## **OUT FROM THE FLATLANDS.**

by Dale Speirs

### **Introduction.**

A decade ago, it was no particular problem to keep up with the output of Canadian SF. If even three novels or anthologies were published in a calendar year, that was a big year. Canadian SF writers were scarcer than socialists in Alberta. To be named a Canadian Author Guest of Honour at an SF convention was a matter of default, there were so few Canuck authors. Since then, Canadian SF has grown to the point where it can be difficult to keep up with the field.

The subject of this review is an example. **land/space** is a new anthology of SF from Tesseract Books (published 2003, edited by Candas Jane Dorsey and Judy McCrosky). I spotted it by accident at the Indigo superstore, and what fascinated me was the subtitle "An anthology of prairie speculative fiction". I hadn't thought Canadian SF had grown to the point where people were now subdividing it.

In this anthology, Judy McCrosky writes in her foreword that the great open spaces of the Canadian prairies, the American western plains, and the outback of Australia share a great deal in common. We can slice up the land with roads, but the vast open spaces remain. Humans strut about proudly bragging of how they have conquered nature, but the blizzards, cold-front storms, droughts, -40°C polar fronts, and tornadoes that regularly sweep across the prairies (not all at once, God forbid, although Calgary once had a hailstorm during the middle of a blizzard) remind us of how impotent we are in the face of nature.

From Calgary to Winnipeg is 1,500 km on the Trans-Canada Highway without leaving the shortgrass prairie. One can drive it at high speed in a long day of about 16 hours or so during the summer. In winter, to attempt the feat during a blizzard is to risk your life, a heart-pounding realization that the best automotive technology is still no match for nature.

The wide-open spaces can't help but shape one's outlook to life. It has been observed that a Calgarian has more in common with a Denverite than with a Torontonion. Someone born and raised in Denver will more easily fit in with Calgarians, but not without trouble in New York City. Coming as I do from a family where each generation has died in a different country or province than the one where they were born, and where a square mile of land is considered a smallholding, it is difficult for me to understand people who have not budged from their ancestral house for generations. I am used to living in a land where cities of 100,000 or more are a half-day's drive apart at 120 km/hr, not cheek by jowl as in eastern North America or Europe.

The question is, does that mindset translate into distinctive fiction? It was with this viewpoint that I read the stories in this anthology and will review them on that basis. There are some poems as well but I will ignore them as I don't like bad free verse that reads like any university press poetry you ever saw. This book could have been proofread better. Capitalization of some words was semi-random, and repeated mis-spellings indicate they were not typos but outright ignorance.

### **The Stories.**

"Mormonism And The Saskatoon Space Programme" by Hugh A.D. Spencer is a story that will be funnier to western Canadians

and less so to outlanders. While quite readable to Americans and overseas, it has many inside jokes about potash, Ukrainians, and Mormons that will probably go past them. (Hints: there are no rats in Alberta, southern Alberta was colonized by Mormons and Saskatchewan by Ukrainians, and Saskatchewan indirectly controls the world's potash supply.) The basic plot is of a confused teenaged boy yanked back and forth between the Mormon church on the one side, and his secular father and uncle on the other. There is a secret space programme in Saskatchewan that has produced faster-than-light travel using a potash/uranium fuel but it is winding down from typical Canadian lassitude. The uncle and boy visit many worlds around our galaxy, and some that are straight out of Mormon theology, indicating that the secret programme is not just opening doors to other planets but other timelines. Scenes from the family life of rural Mormons were very well drawn, so much so that they resembled to an astonishing degree my own family life as a young boy in a rural Baptist home in Alberta.

"Learning The Language" by Ron Collins violates the theme of this anthology in that the story's open skies are those of the Rockies rather than the prairies. It is the opposite of Robert Silverberg's DYING INSIDE (which I think is one of the best novels of our time, not just SF, but of any kind) where the character of that book has telepathy but is losing his talent as he



grows older. In Collins' story, a young man is gaining the ability of telepathy and heightened sensory perception, driving him away from the city into the land of open skies and mountains where he can have silence.

"Fear Of Widths" by David Levine is an angst story of a man returning to his parent's house after their sudden deaths in a car accident. He has been living in Oregon where the volcanoes nicely block the horizon, and finds he can't handle the open lands anymore. He returns to his birthplace on the plains and is literally (in both meanings of that word) sucked into the endless horizon of the flat lands. Speaking as someone who likes the wide-open horizon, I don't have any empathy with the character's wimpyness. This story reads like a typical college small-press story. Much angst, little reason for it, and an overwhelming desire to throw the lead character up against a wall and physically slap some sense into him.

"Fox In The Wind" by Renee Bennett alternates between a young aboriginal girl learning from her uncle the stories of the old days before foxes became extinct, and her older cousin who is a space construction worker dealing with a collision disaster. Presumably space is the open horizon here and the tribal Reserve is the old horizon closing. There are several implausibilities, such as a plague having killed off every fox in the world, and a construction worker in space who chats with his little cousin via a comlink as

he is supervising the movements of spacecraft.

Bennett might have chosen a better species to extirpate since foxes are one of the few species to have increased their ranges after contact with humans, and in any event are too genetically speciose and diverse to be taken out by a plague. Also, I can't see a construction worker making idle conversation with a child while carrying out complex orbital changes between multiple spacecraft. This story doesn't fit the theme.

"All The Room In The World" by Holly Phillips extrapolates the consequences of global warming into a world where Canada is swamped by refugees from countries drowned by rising sea levels or sand dunes. The rest of the world refuses to believe that those vast open spaces of northern Canada aren't habitable, not understanding what melted tundra is like during the blackfly season (there's a reason why the Inuit prefer winter). Checkpoints and refugee camps blend in with angry Customs officers trying to hold back the deluge. People don't understand that open spaces shouldn't necessarily be filled in. This story does fit the theme of the anthology.

"Mir" by Mark Anthony Jarman is a day late and a ruble short, about a female cosmonaut going suicidal on board Mir. The story that ignores the basic fact that space travelers are highly motivated people who aren't going to go insane in Earth orbit because they're homesick.

“Out Of Sync” by Ven Begamudre and “A River Garden” by Ursula Pflug are New Wave stories. They’ll fit Harlan Ellison’s THE LAST DANGEROUS VISIONS, if it is ever published.

“A Good Day” by D.K. Latta is a western with aliens substituting for gypsies and a bizarre farming economy where androids drive combines but the farmer takes his crop into town on a wagon drawn by braggas (read ‘oxen’) and barter for trade goods. Just to top off the smorgasbord of illogic, time flows variably on the planet, and the farmer returns to an elderly woman instead of the young wife he had when he left in the morning. I would not have been surprised if a blue-skinned, six-legged alien child had gone running after him shouting “Shane! Shane! Please come back, Shane!”. Having said that, the story is slightly redeemed by its evocation of endless open space of the farms, amplified by the long journey of the farmer in both time and space. The basic idea was good, but the author could have used something more original for a farm background and definitely should have created a more plausible economic system.

“Horsepower” by Judy McCrosky extrapolates the merger of biotech with computer chips into new inventions where cars have horse behaviour hardwired into them by genetic chips. The advantage is that sometimes the horse is smarter than the driver. (My grandfather, a homesteader from southern Saskatchewan, once told me how the village barkeep would load drunks into their

buggies, slap the horse on the rump, and let the horse take the unconscious drunk home unaided.) The disadvantage is that horses are skittish, stupid herd animals given to bolting or bucking. The advent of biocars with horse programming results in herds of cars fleeing their owners for the wide open spaces of the grasslands, where they can roam freely in herds. Sounds like something Robert Sheckley would have written.

“Baruch, The Man-Faced Dog” by Steven Berzensky is exactly what the title suggests. Baruch speaks English, although not to the public who gawp at him in a sideshow. Off duty, he keeps house for his trailer-court white trash parents and reads philosophy, particularly Spinoza. Baruch yearns for the freedom of open spaces but is realistic enough to know he could never survive out there. So he seeks freedom in his head, a contemplation of philosophy and Spinoza’s remark that if men were triangles, they would see God as a triangle. Strangely enough, I consider this one of the best stories of the anthology in keeping with the theme.

“Those Who Remember” by Martha Bayless is a story told over several generations of people who discover a cave in a bluff out on the American plains and end up crazed from memories of their dead family members and friends. As one rancher says, “People get out on the plains, out by themselves, sometimes they think too much”. That sentence triggered a memory for me, of when I was



fossil hunting in the 1970s in southeastern Alberta near Dead Horse Creek. Without exaggerating, I was the only person within 100 km on the treeless prairie. I shudder to think in retrospect what might have happened if the car had engine trouble or I had slipped and twisted an ankle (with nothing to make a crutch from; no fence posts or trees). Digging out the Cretaceous era fossils of the long-extinct Bearpaw Sea, which vanished about 85 megayears ago, I remember looking at the shells and thinking too much about the passage of time. You can't think in noisy confines of a city, or you get to thinking humans have conquered everything in sight, but out on the plains you realize how impotent civilization is against time and space.

"Little Sister" by Donna Bowman is a far-future dystopia of confined life in a privatized prison camp excavating landfill sites for antiques using prison labour. The prisoners are slaves in the heart of the open prairie but are kept under control by electronic implants; they might as well be in a dungeon cell. Some succeed in escaping, but a life on the run is not freedom. Sort of on theme.

"Of Bone And Hide And Dust" by Carole Nomarhas is a story of Australian angst in the outback as a couple take the grand tour of the desert while the ninny of a wife becomes hysterical at the dust and emptiness. It doesn't take much to set some folks mad. The land segues into a ghost land of a parallel universe, where the desert waits to kill. I was at first tempted to write this story off,

but it provoked me into thinking about how people view the flat lands, whether the Nullarbour desert of Australia, the tundra of Nunavut, or the prairies of western Canada. Farm folk (myself included, I suppose) take the land as a given. The land is neutral; it does not kill. The weather is a different matter. I never feared being out in the empty quarter of southeastern Alberta, but living in the middle of Calgary I've had heart-thumping moments during a cold-front storm. Other people, as little as I understand them, may fear the land itself. I suppose that is what some of this anthology's authors were trying to communicate.

"Flatlander Pro Tem" by Geoff Hart tells of a spaceship crewman who is stranded by a crash on an unknown planet. He has spent his life in space, and his actions to survive are hampered by vertigo induced by the sight of wide open horizons, and only secondarily by vicious biting insects that make mosquitoes and blackflies seem soothing by comparison. The requirements of survival force him to adapt to the situation if not the vertigo of open horizons.

"Summer Ceremony" by John Baillie chronicles the decline and fall of a rural area where horses are penned for equine urine to be used in treatments of menopausal women, where the grain supply is the exclusive product of a gene engineering company, and a strange woman disrupts the lives of the farmers. No one seems to



have any freedom on the open land, which doesn't surprise me. Too many farmers today that I know are trapped in what are essentially factory operations (a feedlot is a beef and manure factory) instead of being the independent businessmen they should be.

"Here Be Dragons" by Sophie Masson is a horror story of a mother and wicked stepdaughter out in the arid grasslands of Australia. The setting is irrelevant; it could just as easily be, and usually is, an isolated house in the Yorkshire moors or a Maine fishing village.

"Please Keep Off The Grass" by James Hartley is the story of a landing party on a new planet who get turned on and transformed by the local hallucinogenic vegetation. The dialogue between the characters has a phony sound and the transformations are fantasy, not plausible. This is a New Wave story that would have been rejected by Harlan Ellison for his *THE LAST DANGEROUS VISIONS* anthology.

"Lost Road" by Carolyn Gilman is an angst story of an elderly couple in a drought-ridden land. They lose their way home and find themselves in the empty lands. Belongs in a college press anthology where it would be deservedly forgotten like all the other such college press books.

"Grains Of Water, Beads Of Dust" by Alexandra Arruin and "Natural Disaster" by Jill Boettger are mundane vignettes. Not SF, not speculative fiction by even the most watered definition, and nowhere near the theme of this anthology. For a college press anthology.

"Greener Grass" by Anne Waltz is *CITIES IN FLIGHT* on acid, as Minnesota trades St. Paul the city to Manitoba in exchange for Winnipeg. That's a physical trade, as in yanking out the two cities and dropping them into each other's hole. Unfortunately a straight swap messes up things like street intersections, which don't align, not to mention citizens who have to adapt to different ways of life. Readable but not on theme.

"Black Dog" by Candace Jane Dorsey is a mood piece about someone who stays behind on the empty plains after humanity leaves Earth for the stars. "Childhood's End" a la Canuck.

"Waiting For The Zephyr" by Tobias Buckell is a post-apocalypse story of a young woman trying to flee a dead-end village on the dust-blown plains and finally succeeding despite the efforts of her family to keep her down on the farm. She catches a ride on a giant land yacht that uses sails to travel between towns and makes a grand circuit of the plains every few years. The story ends with the promise of freedom, both physical and intellectual, and a life

on the open plains, not confined to a village. This story resonated with me, and I'll interject my biography to explain why. I was born in the village of Eckville, Alberta, in 1955, the population of which is still about the same today as it was then. When I was eight, my father moved his veterinary practice to Red Deer, about 50 km east of Eckville. Still within easy driving distance, about 45 minutes by Highway 11. But our new farm was only a ten-minute drive from the big city of Red Deer (pop. about 40,000 in my day, now about 70,000), so us kids had more opportunities and exposure to other ways of life than we would have in Eckville. At the time, my brother Neil and I didn't really see why our parents made the move, but in later life we understood. My mother's family mostly remained in Eckville; I have about two dozen first and second cousins there. None of them went to university like Neil and I did, none can hold a job for decades like Neil and I have, and none have prospered as Neil and I did. We read good books and discuss the issues of the day intelligently; they watch television and seldom rise above the level of babbity in dinner table talk. We make good money in supervisor-level jobs; they will always be the first laid off in a recession from the packing plant. We own our homes free and clear; they will always be tenants. Village life is stultifying, and it pains me to think of how many bright minds have been condemned to a wasted life for lack of opportunity and initiative. This story illustrates the true potential of freedom, not just liberty, but the chance to grow unhindered.

"Blue Train" by Derryl Murphy is a Bat Durston story with a prospector on a robot mule fighting claim jumpers over a water mine. This one belongs in SPICY WESTERN STORIES pulp magazine.

"Riverboy" by A.M. Dellamonica was so bad I gave up after the first three pages.

### **In Conclusion.**

All told, a disappointing anthology that did not live up to its promise of exploring the idea of life on the open lands, of life where the horizon is infinite. The individual stories were of reasonable quality but it seemed evident that many of them were shoehorned in with only the most tenuous connection to the announced theme. In the afterword, co-editor Candace Jane Dorsey declares that speculative fiction as a literature of ideas is dead, that it is only of interest as a "literature of affects" (her phrase). This would explain why so many stories in this anthology failed the mark for me. Dorsey reminds me of Sharyn McCrumb, who writes mysteries but threatens to sue anyone who calls them anything but regional Appalachian stories. It is the collective of readers who define a genre, and they will be around and reading science fiction long after Dorsey is a minor footnote in the history of Canadian fiction.