

OPUNTIA

62.5B

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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, x.3 issues are apazines, and x.5 issues are perzines.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

[Editor's remarks in square brackets]

FROM: Steve Jeffery

2006-08-12

44 White Way

Kidlington, Oxon OX5 2XA, England

[Re: cowboys eating a lot of Chinese food because their cooks were Chinese immigrants left over from the railroad construction] Now that you mention it, it makes sense that traditional cowboy food might include a lot of Chinese cuisine although I suspect it would have been a very improvised form of Chinese food, given the supply of available ingredients. How easy would it have been to come by such things as water chestnuts, ginger, spring onion, and anise/five spice on the range? But mostly I suspect it would have involved a lot of readily cooked staples, like rice and noodles, possibly with bits of meat, and rather low on the exotic vegetables.

[Spices and onions would be easily obtainable at any country general store, although I'm not sure about water chestnuts. It is said that ginger beef was invented by a Calgary Chinaman and is not a dish originally from China. Beef and chicken were, of course, readily available to any cook on a ranch.]

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

2006-10-24

The fanzines I receive are part of the gift economy. Once the average person perceives a gift economy as part of an activity, they may not be aware of what currency drives that economy. When I received my first fanzines, I didn't know what to do with them, except give a puzzled thank you to the editor. It took a while to find out what currencies were good, and those who did send me zines were patient with me. E-zines that are downloadable by anyone can be ignored by those who do, but then if they don't care to respond, they probably wouldn't care to download in the first place. Downloads by those who do not respond do not cost anything, and those who do respond give all the currency required to keep the gift economy going.

FROM: Jerry Kaufman
3522 NE 123 Street
Seattle, Washington 98125

2006-09-04

Probably over the course of 62 numbered issues and many times that with all the fractional issues, you've considered simply waiting until all fractions of a single number were published, and then mailing them all in one bundle. It seems to me, ignorant of

your practices and purposes, you'd save a fair amount of work and money. So why don't you mail them all at once in one envelope? -2-

[If I accumulated all the fractions for mailing, then OPUNTIA would only come out about three times a year. When I started up this zine in March 1991, I had some specific ideas in mind, one of which was that I would rather do a small and frequent zine instead of a large but occasional zine. (Issue #62.5A was the 178th OPUNTIA, and the 317th publication I have produced out of all my zines and books.) I have therefore always kept OPUNTIA to a maximum of 16 pages. I have seen too many zines start out small, grow like Topsy, slow down their frequency, and then collapse from overload.]

[As far as the work is concerned, since it is a hobby I don't consider it work. The zine is printed, collated, and stapled for me in a print shop for about \$45 for a hundred copies. It costs about \$50 for envelopes and mailing. I spend more in a month on candy bars and fast food. Since I don't drink or smoke, I consider zines to be my replacement vice and a very affordable hobby.]

FROM: Henry Welch
1525 - 16 Avenue
Grafton, Wisconsin 53204

2006-09-11

[Re: book reviews about petroleum] I find it very distressing that there does not appear to be any viable alternative to petroleum and other fossil fuels. I hold out some hope for bio-diesel, but given the shaky state of food production in much of the world, it doesn't make much sense to further impact this distribution apparatus. Only time will tell as to whether there is a good answer.

[At \$50 to \$60 per barrel, oil is still cheaper than it was in the early 1980s, once inflation is taken into account. Therefore there will be little incentive for massive conversion to other fuels, although some progress is being made with ethanol. But for now and years to come, it will be the usual mess.]

FROM: Sheryl Birkhead
25509 Jonnie Court
Gaithersburg, Maryland 20882

2006-07-22

People don't seem to realize the flaw in the increase in a home's value. To realize the value, you have to sell, and hopefully find another at a lower price. It seems kinda nice to know the house has gone up in value, but knowing the property taxes have

doubled in the last six years since I've lived here only makes the annual expenses list take huge jumps.

[As the old saying goes, when you're rich, it's on paper, and when you're broke, it's in cash. My property assessment went up \$50,000 this year, and I will be surprised if it isn't the same increase again next year.]

FROM: Franz Zrilich
4004 Granger Road
Medina, Ohio 44256-8602

2006-08-03

Calgary should build new expressways first, before rebuilding old ones.

[Developers are required to build freeways in the new suburbs of Calgary, so the traffic flow is relatively easy out there. The problem is that all those freeways funnel into the older ones in the central part of the city, such as Glenmore Trail or Macleod Trail. Most of the older freeways still have some level crossings, or are four-lane roads built decades ago. Thus they have to be torn up to replace the level crossings with interchanges. The LRT train system soaks up a lot of commuters, but a high-density downtown core still requires lots of delivery trucks to survive.]

FROM: Brant Kresovich
Box 404
Getzville, New York 14068

2006-11-11

[Re: the gift economy and trading zines] Every culture values reciprocity, and sub-cultures like the Papernet especially appreciate it. Being a member of the Papernet involves time and effort. The zinemaker has to write or create, copy it, pay postage, stuff and stamp envelopes, and mail them. The responder has to write a letter of comment that really adds something special to the conversation of the letter columns. This time and effort are barriers to entry by trolls and other anonymous creeps on the Internet. In the Papernet, mean people are avoided by not sending them a zine and ignoring their missives.

[Re: the Bowling Alone syndrome] The increased hours that people have to put in at work and commuting have cut into family life, volunteerism, community activities, and civic responsibilities. Until toilers wake up and start telling bosses "No overtime for me", they will live to work. Flextime means being available to work 24/7, as does carrying the symbols of drudgery of the 21st Century, the laptop and mobile phone.

2006-08-12

When I think of life on the farm, I think of being at the mercy of the weather, prices, animal diseases, injury owing to accidents,

and broken equipment. I've never been a guy that -4-
was romantic about the simplicity of country life. I could never do it, even at a subsistence level, because I'm useless when it comes to being handy. If my machinery goes on the blink, it's broke and it's time to call the repair guy to fix it. I figure there's no way to live in the country if you can't rely on your skill to repair stuff.

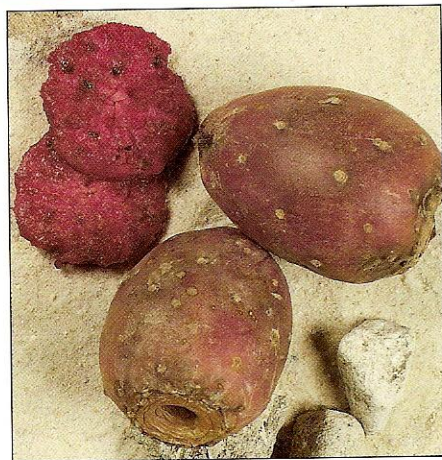
[The problem these days is that a lot of new farm tractors and equipment rely on computer chips to control the engines just as cars do. If the chip goes, you sit in the field until the mechanic comes out, at \$75/hr plus travel time, plus \$250 for a new chip.]

[Re: my remark that sheep judging would never be on television] I'm not sure about sheep judging never being on TV. The other day I saw a Dominoes championship on TV. If that and poker is possible, people will watch anything.

[The comedy troupe Royal Canadian Air Farce used to have a running joke about the Northwest Territories tiddlywinks championship.]

I Also Heard From: John Held Jr, Chester Cuthbert, Jeanette Handling, Elaine Rounds, Ficus, Jae Leslie Adams, Terry Jeeves, Phlox Icona, Don Mabie, John Adams, C.Z. Lovecraft, Kris Mininger, Krin Pender-Gunn, Murray Moore

Cactus Pear



Cactus Pear

also called: cactus fig, prickly pear,
Indian fig

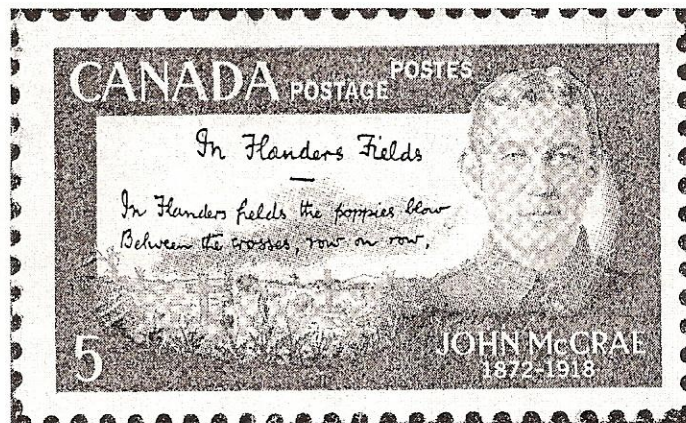
This exotic desert fruit is actually a berry from the cactus *Opuntia*. Popular in the Mediterranean, the cactus pear is quickly gaining popularity and can be found often in many supermarkets. The pear looks a bit like a cucumber, barrel-shaped and ranging from green to magenta in colour. But the taste is more like a mild watermelon—with the seeds.



Cactus Pear and Halibut Recipe

IN CALGARY'S FIELDS, THE POPPIES BLOW.

by Dale Speirs



The busiest day of the year for me at work is Remembrance Day, when I drive about the city lowering flags in parks in the morning and raising them again at night. Because of the city's rapid expansion, this has started to take longer and longer over the past few years. This year I decided to get a head start by lowering the flags (15 of them) at Confederation Park the previous evening. It was a foretaste of what was to come, because the locks on the flagpoles were mostly iced up from an ice storm we had a few days ago.

What would have normally been a 10-minute job took me about an hour. Where the key wouldn't go into the lock, I had to heat the key. Where the key did go into the lock, I had to hammer the lock to get the bolt to turn. The flag stand is on a slight slope, and the locks of the lower flags were above head height. This made it exhausting work pounding away with my arms above my head, and my fingers freezing in the cold. But finally I got it done.



Between The Crosses Row On Row.

-6-

The morning of Remembrance Day I headed out to Battalion Park, so called because it was the site of an army training camp during World War One. It drops down off a steep escarpment, and has a very long staircase connecting the upper and lower halves of the park. There are four flags at the top and four flags at the bottom,

a diabolical plan thought up by a landscape architect who never stopped to think that someone would have to go up and down those stairs to look after the flags. Here again, the flagpole locks were iced up, as were the stairs. I was still struggling with one flagpole at the top of the hill when people began arriving for their ceremony. One of them had a blowtorch in his truck, so we worked the lock together but still couldn't get it to turn. We gave up when I broke the key off in the lock.

Their ceremony had to go ahead with the Alberta flag still high at full mast. I drove back to the depot to get a replacement key while they set up rows of crosses to mourn Canadian soldiers killed in Afghanistan and the Balkans. Each cross had the name, rank, and date of a Canadian soldier killed in action this year.



When I returned, the ceremony was over, and 44 crosses lined the edge of the escarpment.

Until a couple of years ago, Remembrance Day was for the old men who had survived combat in the two world wars and Korea. Now, as casualties mount in Afghanistan, the younger generation is suddenly taking to heart the purpose of those mournful ceremonies held at 11-11-11h11.

We Are The Dead.

From Battalion Park, I went to Central Park in the downtown area, where the cenotaph is. This park had a Parks Dept. attendant assigned to it to look after all the Remembrance Day ceremonies, so I only went by to see how everything was going. Battalion Park is in a new suburb of the city, populated by young families, and thus concentrates on the modern wars. Central Park is the oldest park in Calgary, with memorials for the Boer Wars, the World Wars, and Korea. The ceremony there is attended by old men. The WW1 veterans are gone, and the WW2 veterans have dwindled to a few handfuls. My generation never knew the former, but we did know the latter, since every family had someone who died or came home from that war. Central Park is scheduled for re-development as a more actively used park, and I suspect that in another decade it will no longer be a focus of mourning for the war dead.

LIFE IN A BOOMTOWN.

Meanwhile, the oil boom continues in Alberta. The oil companies developing the Athabasca Tar Sands did and still do budget the multi-billion dollar extraction projects based on \$40 oil and a 200-year lifespan, so the recent plateau in price won't affect them. The big problem is escalating costs due to the labour shortage,

which has already caused some projects to be postponed because there aren't enough tradesmen to build them. Anyone with a journeyman certificate in the construction trades has a licence to print money.

Calgary is adding 25,000 people a year to the city, and the unemployment rate is below 3%. Some chain stores which had been contemplating opening new stores in Calgary have cancelled their plans because they can't get enough clerks for their existing stores. Almost without exception, every retail storefront in the city has help-wanted signs on the front door. Chinook Centre is the largest shopping mall in Calgary and the most profitable in Canada on a sales dollars per square-metre basis. They recently held an all-day job fair on behalf of their retailers, and didn't get a dozen applicants for jobs paying \$11 per hour plus benefits plus retention bonus. This in a city of one million inhabitants. Full-serve gas stations are almost extinct because pump attendants are not available. The Calgary Police Service has been recruiting most of its new constables from Scotland. If you get pulled over for a speeding ticket, it is not uncommon for the constable to walk up to you and say "Och, mon, wha's the hurry noo?".

It All Ended In Tears.

In an earlier issue of OPUNTIA, I mentioned that you should never buy commodities directly in the futures market. They are too

volatile to trust and betting on them will inevitably end in tears. Much better to invest long-term instead in reliable, old-line petroleum or mining companies that produce or use commodities, and to keep a diversified portfolio of bonds, stocks, and cash equivalents.

As proof of this, the hedge fund Amaranth Advisors LLC crashed and burned in September 2006 when \$6 billion in bets on petroleum futures went the wrong way. Amaranth, a Connecticut-based company, lost 70% of its total value and is struggling for survival. The class-action lawyers are already circling the courthouse, and investors in Amaranth will be lucky to see pennies on the dollar.

What impressed me about this crash is that apparently all the futures bets were made on behalf of Amaranth by a Calgary energy broker. If your boss yelled at you because you were fifteen minutes late for work, then stop and think about this guy, a man who bet \$6 billion of other people's money and lost it. Maybe you dented someone's car while backing out of a parking stall, but at least your name wasn't in every newspaper's business section around the world.

CON-VERSION FINIS

by Dale Speirs

Con-Version 22, Calgary's annual science fiction convention was held August 11 to 13, 2006, at a new location, the Best Western Hospitality Inn. The hotel, in the time-honoured fannish tradition, was under renovation, which had reduced the function space available to the convention. This was to prove significant, as mentioned below.

The hotel is more convenient than some other past venues of the convention, as it is on Macleod Trail, the main drag in south Calgary, with several bus routes, and an LRT station nearby, but also good parking. I had to park about twenty metres from the hotel lobby door, but I was prepared to sacrifice for the cause. My car has the licence plate OPUNTIA (the scientific name for pricklypear cacti, which I have published papers on, as well as being the title of my zine). As I got out of my car, I noticed the van parked next to me had the plate DALEK. Out of curiosity, I walked about the parking lot and found the plates ELEMENO, DEEK, and SKIFFY.

The function space, mostly in the basement of the hotel, was cramped. This caused a traffic jam on the Friday night as people registered at a desk blocking the intersection of several narrow corridors.

In some ways, the crowded facilities made the convention seem livelier, as everyone was in one place or seemed to be, and the site was always busy or seemed to be. On the one hand, it is nice to have a roomy hotel, but on the other hand, sometimes vast open spaces reduce a convention to small clumps of people roaming about at random. It did cause problems for panels held in a boardroom which attracted more than twenty people, leaving not even standing room.

The con suite was on the other side of the street in a hotel annex, a long hike up one set of stairs, across a pedestrian bridge, and thence through another set of corridors. I visited it a couple of times but each time only found some Farscape fans gazing at a television set and no one serving at the food services, although it must have been open at other times. There was no 24-hour video room, which I missed, because it was always a nice place to kill time between panels. The volunteer who had been doing it for twenty years retired from the job, and no one took over. Of greater concern was the Art Show, not in a lockable room as is the standard, but in the basement lobby with no security. I came into the hotel Saturday morning at 09h00 and was the only person in the lobby. I could have walked out with an armload of art, except there wasn't an armload of art worth taking. I later heard from someone that the hotel had suddenly eliminated the space it was to have been in, but still I wonder if better arrangements could have been made.

Opening Ceremonies.

The ceremonies started off with a shock announcement from the Toastmaster that this would be the last Con-Version. The shock was moderated somewhat by saying that there would be a new series of conventions called Nexus, with a new mandate, whatever that meant. After the convention I picked up rumours that Nexus would be a media convention.

The Toastmaster said that an SF convention was like a family reunion, where people picked up conversations from a year ago. Some of the Guests of Honour gave rather boring speeches; Larry Niven even did a reading from his latest book. The Fan GoH was John Hertz, who gave a rather more lively speech, a sermon really, on why fans should be generalists. He pointed out that we should go to a convention partly to meet people we didn't know we wanted to meet, and discuss topics we didn't know we were interested in.

Alternate History.

Blair Petterson was the speaker at this one, which was held in a boardroom. Instead of the usual arrangement of chairs in a row, we all sat around a very long boardroom table, with the head of the table left vacant for the moderator. Blair was the last to arrive and, instantly sizing up the situation, began a mock sales talk on

the latest quarterly results and how well the new product line was doing. This type of location for a panel wasn't so bad, as everyone could see and hear each other without microphones. For small topics, I would even recommend such a venue over the usual ballroom with ten people at the front, five at the back, and a vast desert of empty chairs in the middle.

The exact topic of this AH panel was "What if Bush had been elected in 2000 instead of Al Gore?" For starters, Bush wouldn't have invaded Canada when the softwood lumber dispute got ugly. The idea of double-reverse scenarios such as this is that AH teaches the point that history is contingent on specific events, and that the effects of events are not always anticipated. There was also considerable discussion about the atomic bomb attacks on Japan versus the alternative of a massive invasion with a million casualties on the Allied side and 40% of the Japanese population.

BRING THE JUBILEE was one of the first mass-market AH fictional narratives, as opposed to speculative essays. In the define-your-terms category, fiction is AH, while speculative essays are called counterfactuals. I put in my usual lost-cause plea to call it alternative, not alternate, history. Bad AH is that which drags in magic, space aliens, or other fantasy elements. Another sign of bad AH is where the lead character meets most or all of the famous people in that timeline. In real life, one would be lucky to meet and deal with as an equal just one famous politician or

celebrity. Such people have bodyguards to keep the lumpenproletariat away from them. A farm boy would never be admitted into the presence of a king, anymore than a parish priest could drop in unannounced on the Pope.

The 404's Improv Comedy.

If you don't know what a 404 is, ask your local computer network specialist. This amateur group not only performs improvisational comedy but also dragoons audience members into the skits. I didn't stay for the whole two hours but did catch "A Day In The Life" where the actors selected an audience member dressed as a vampire and were guided by her buzzer (if they were off track) or bell (if going in the right direction). Much to everyone's surprise, the vampire let by the ad libber who talked about how he ate flapjacks for breakfast. Possibly she was a Calgary vampire just back from the Stampede rodeo.

In the "Every Other Line" sketch, they borrowed two books from audience members (you can tell this is an SF convention because attendees carry books to read in spare moments). One was a David Weber military SF novel and the other was a short story anthology. Three actors were on stage, one of whom could ad lib as he pleased, and the other two only able to respond by reading lines from their books. The ad libber had to make the segues between the two books.

This idea works best when the books are very disparate and contrasting. It also requires good ad-libbing skills, so don't give the part to the quiet guy who usually sits in the corner at the con suite and listens while everyone else talks.

Science Fiction Classics I: Isaac Asimov.

This panel was devoted to Asimov's novel *THE CAVES OF STEEL* (1953). I was sure that the panelists would outnumber the audience, and the audience, such as it was, consist of greying Baby Boomers. I was pleasantly surprised at how the room filled up with several dozen people, mostly Boomers to be sure, but with a fair number of GenXers.

John Hertz moderated the discussion, starting off by defining a classic as a book that survives the test of time and is re-read by its owner. *CAVES* wasn't chosen at random; it is an SF mystery, a very difficult form to write well. One cannot just take a detective story and change the antagonists into aliens and the murder weapon to a ray gun. The mystery story must be possible only in the SFnal society of the characters, not transplanted from our society to one where gangsters use ray guns instead of 9 mm Glock pistols.

Blair Petterson noted that SF is a relatively new art form, founded within living memory, but some classics are starting to be evident,

such as the Asimov novels. Classics are worthwhile re-reading because while the text doesn't change, the reader does. Life looks different at 50 than it does at 14 or 25, and a reader's interpretation changes with age. -12-

Jennifer Kennedy said that Asimov also got the humanity right, the way that people would think in a future society where robots are slaves who do as they are told, and if they talk back would be considered as uppity niggers. She said Asimov basically wrote novels about thinking. *CAVES* is a novel about two detectives, one human and one robot, and how they think their way through the case.

An audience member commented that Asimov was famous for his clear prose, while other authors now forgotten engaged in verbal pyrotechnics that dated poorly. Examples of dated sub-genres of SF that have not survived are the New Wave of the 1960s and 1970s (where form took precedence over content, no matter how much it confused the reader), and the cyberpunk (which was too topical, where unemployed punks would bust into giant supercomputers with 10 megabytes of memory).

Science Fiction Classics II: Ray Bradbury.

This was the second part of a series by John Hertz that is to be continued at the Worldcon. The selected Bradbury novel was

FAHRENHEIT 451, and Hertz was the sole panelist. The audience was about one-third the size of the Asimov panel, which proves, I guess, that Calgary is an Asimov town. Bradbury is a poetic writer, the opposite of Asimov. That style carries the book.

Hertz remarked that FAHRENHEIT 451 is commonly taught because it is a subject near and dear to librarians and teachers because of its book-burning storyline. As it turned out, most of the audience were teachers, and we heard from them the different ways how they taught the book. What was interesting to me was that after the panel ended, I saw the teachers in the hallway discussing the book further.

Film Making From Scratch.

This was a talk given by a film producer whose name I don't know, since he wasn't wearing a badge, didn't have a name card on the dais, and wasn't listed in the programme schedule. I was a few minutes late getting to this talk, so I missed his introduction, but he was apparently an experienced professional video producer doing commercial jobs.

He outlined the basics of film production, which is more complicated than it seems. The director and the special effects technician need to communicate well, so that the techie can replicate the image that the director has in his mind. Storyboard

artists are used as go-betweens, so that everyone can visualize what is to be done, whether the techie doing the FX or the actor standing against the green screen. A good cinematographer and lighting man can make a \$1 million film look like a \$100 million production, and incompetents can make it look like a student class project. Organization is very important, with proper timelines and schedules. Film crews are paid whether they are working or standing about waiting for the director to plan the next shot. And, very important, everyone has be fed well by a good caterer.

Do's And Don'ts Of Fan Vidding.

I always try to attend at least one panel at each convention on a subject I know nothing about, and this was it. The presenter, whose name I didn't get, was a GenXer talking to a mostly GenX audience. She emphasized that sampling videos or mash-ups are not genuine creativity, and one must create their own world. Notwithstanding that, she then presented a video of Farscape clips set to borrowed music. Indeed.

She did mention some common-sense items. If you insist on using copyrighted material, then use a pseudonym and non-traceable address. Adding a disclaimer "No infringement intended; for personal use only" is waving a red flag at lawyers, who will use it as proof in court that you knew what you were doing was wrong.

Editing videos is where many fans go wrong, much like cruddy fanzines. Pacing is essential, rather than continuous jump cuts. A storyline is every bit as important as special effects.

Fanzines.

The presenter was John Hertz, who explained the basics of fanzines in the boardroom to a group of eight novices, plus myself as a second example of a real live zinester. He brought along samples for show, and I had put a batch of zines on the freebie table. As far as I know, I'm the only Calgary zinester on the Papernet, but hope springs eternal.

Hertz discussed a bit of the history of fanzines, what First Fandom was, and the characteristics of modern zines. I mentioned to the novices the hazards of blogging and e-zines; the boss or the police can Google you at random. On the Papernet, however, fishing at random is not possible; they have to know who you are and what your address is in advance.

Is Space Opera Out Of Tune?

Evidently not, because there was a full ballroom for this panel. Blair Petterson started off by defining terms: SF is the literature of ideas, fantasy is the literature of characters, and space opera overlaps between the two. Space opera is about things that matter,

on a galaxy-wide scale where people do things, as opposed to modern litcrit novels where the main character spends 400 pages agonizing over whether he should commit adultery or suicide, or perhaps both.

Larry Niven said that space opera has changed since its origins in the 1930s, when it was basically westerns where the cowboys carried ray guns instead of revolvers. It is still flamboyant but better written. David Weber remarked that space opera can get away with a poor storyline if it has good characterization. It is essentially a morality play of good versus evil.

Tapestry, Tapestry, Eunuch.

Don't ask me where they got this title for a panel, but it was about whether or not excessive description, or infodumps, can slow down the story and cause the reader to give up. Novelist Scott Bakker pointed out that in movies, there is always an establishing shot to show the scene before zooming in on the characters. Novelists also have to establish the scene before zooming in, but they have to do it with words instead of a few seconds of video.

Ed Willett, a novelist who specializes in young-teens SF, said that details are needed but only if they advance the story. Description can also be used to pace the story, to provide a brief calm between two flurries of action. Carrying this point further, David Weber

said infodumps are needed in some types of fiction, such as the military SF that he writes, because the reader needs to know the technical details. Description is sometimes the only way to open a chapter.

Starship Drives On A Budget.

This would be a big budget, nonetheless. The panel proceeded on the reliable assumption that we will not see faster-than-light drive, no matter how much hand waving the speculative fact writers do. In traveling to the stars, a starship must either bring its energy with it in fuel tanks, which is the expensive way, or pick it up along the route. Astronomer Jim Baerg said that 10,000 kg of fuel will be needed for each 1 kg of payload on a starship, thus the need for external sources of energy.

Larry Niven spoke of the Bussard hydrogen ramscoop, which needs to get up to 1,600 km/sec before it can start scoop up hydrogen from interstellar space and start up its fusion engine. One problem is that hydrogen density is variable throughout the galaxy, and a Bussard ramscoop might be in trouble if it hits a thick patch at speed that acts like hitting water at high speed.

Sailing starships were discussed at great length, where a ship is towed behind a parachute-like sail that is pushed by the solar wind or planet-bound high-powered lasers. These would be one-way

starships, so the destination would have to be scouted out by robot probes to ensure the starship crew have a habitable planet to colonize.

Karl Johanson raised the subject of slingshot orbits, both to boost speeds while exiting the solar system, and to brake the starship on arrival.

End Of The World: Plagues.

Dr. William T. Gibson is a medical geneticist from Vancouver, who was the panelist for this topic (and not to be confused with the cyberpunk novelist). His practical viewpoint, as someone who deals with pandemic threats in his day job, was that the threat to the world population is not some new disease bursting out of a tropical forest, but the old familiar pathogens who are gaining immunity to all our vaccines and drugs. Pathogens such as Ebola that kill their host population faster than they spread will quickly burn themselves out.

Gibson's biggest concern is that many tropical viruses are spread by insects whose range is increasing because of global climate change. Also, there is interaction between two or more diseases and multi-drug resistance, helped along by increasing international mobility. AIDS is hollowing out the heart of Africa, with about 46 million infected,

which leaves infected people susceptible to other diseases, which thus can spread faster.

The most worrisome diseases are those that cause a slow population decline from a relentless pathogen. Consumption is any wasting disease. In Victorian times, consumption was caused by tuberculosis, and in our time by AIDS. In the future, it will be both TB and AIDS. Poor use of drugs, especially antibiotics, is spreading the resistance, because patients only take them until they feel better, then stop even though the pathogen has not been wiped out yet.

From the audience, there was the comment that we cosset our children too much and they live in too much of a clean world, where they can't pick up natural immunity from playing in the dirt and don't get the immunization shots they should. Another comment was that the mass media sensationalize West Nile virus and hantavirus, which are low-risk compared to more important diseases. The general public is bombarded with cries of "Wolf! Wolf!", and as a result, begin to disregard the actual problems.

Epilogue.

Con-Version started out as a literary convention and was subsumed by the media fans. At past Con-Versions, when I walked away on Sunday evening, it was always with regret at how

the time flew and wishing it had been longer.

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This time, the last time, I left early Sunday afternoon with a sense of disquiet, not bothering to stay because there were no topics of even marginal interest to me on the remaining panels and the con-goers were already dispersing. It is a sad way for a convention series to end, an ignoble way. The convention wasn't a horror story, but neither was it a success. It was worse than a failure; it was a dispirited muddle.

I have since heard conflicting rumours about whether Con-Version would revive and co-exist with Nexus. I have no interest in attending media conventions, but would like to see a small literary convention with no more than three tracks of programming, and no sideshows such as an art show or masquerade. It would be a small convention of 100 to 200 people, which would not require expensive facilities. This is a serious matter in a boomtown, where SF conventions of the traditional kind are being priced out of their usual venues.

Calgary recently passed the 1,000,000 mark in population and is currently adding 25,000 people a year. There are another 5,000,000 people within a day's drive of Calgary. One would therefore hope that Calgary could therefore support both a small literary convention and a larger media convention.