

OPUNTIA

276

May 2014

Opuntia is published by Dale Speirs, Calgary, Alberta. Since you are reading this only online, my real-mail address doesn't matter. My eek-mail address (as the late Harry Warner Jr liked to call it) is: opuntia57@hotmail.com When sending me an emailed letter of comment, please include your name and town in the message.

WE'LL ALL GO TOGETHER WHEN WE GO: PART 2

by Dale Speirs

[Part 1 appeared in OPUNTIA #249 in 2012.]

Asteroid impacts are a popular sub-genre of disaster fiction, and I have been accumulating a number of DVDs on them as a sideline collection, strictly from the bargain bins. Herewith are a few more, from the Christian apocalypse subgenre.

And The Rock Cried Out "There's No Hiding Place Here"

THE APOCALYPSE (2007) is unusual among asteroid movies. It begins with the traditional opening sequence of the sacrificial lambs, in this case a group of happy campers oohing and aahing over a meteor shower. The oohing and aahing abruptly stops when it transpires that some of the meteorites have the campers' names written on them. The meteorites are the harbingers, as they always are in such movies, of a Big Ugly Rock trundling its way to Earth.

The movie initially follows the regular script. There is the introduction of the characters, most of them dysfunctional, and the standard sub-plots are introduced to fill in the spaces between the SFX. Realization slowly dawns among the characters that there's something happening here but what it is ain't exactly clear. People rush to be with their loved ones, setting off on odysseys through apocalyptic landscapes. Lots of cellphone conversations so that the characters can explain the plot to each other, which also saves money on camera set-ups. Crazy gunmen threaten supporting characters. People in the south rush north to safety, and people in the north rush south to safety. Half of them must be wrong.

So far, an average disaster movie. But then it takes an interesting twist. People start vanishing into thin air. Not figuratively but actually. Someone sitting on a couch, poof! A man steps through a door and never sets foot on the other side of the threshold. It is the Rapture. With death and destruction raining down, the other characters are too busy trying to survive to do any investigation or even notice. The mass media are completely unaware. The afflictions of the world make no sense to anyone who hasn't read Revelations or the Book of Daniel. Cities flood, earthquakes rend the ground, and tornadoes demolish southern California, none of which are caused by meteorite strikes. That the Rapture would go completely unnoticed is a new idea in cinematography.

This movie skips many cliches. There are no scenes of the President of the USA sitting at a warboard room table, with beribboned USAF generals telling him the nukes are standing by to stop the Big Ugly Rock. No man-of-the-hour mad scientist with a crazy plan that just might work and does, with two seconds to spare. The movie ends with the asteroid entering the atmosphere. No salvation except for those gone in the Rapture. A refreshingly different movie.



A Star Called Wormwood.

METEOR APOCALYPSE (2010) starts where other such movies end, with the nations of the world uniting to send their nuclear missiles to break up a Big Ugly Rock inbound for Earth. The nukes succeed to some extent but the calculations were wrong. Instead of Earth being destroyed by a rifle shot from the heavens, it will be obliterated by a shotgun blast, as all the fragments stay clustered on the incoming trajectory. The SFX may have been state of the art in the 1980s but not in 2010, and all the explosions look suspiciously like fuel-vapour detonations. A pity, because the subplots are the usual turgid melodramas, and one relies on the SFX to redeem the movie in such cases.

When the first meteorites splash into water reservoirs, people who drink the city water become seriously ill. The cause is ambiguous, because the cure is some sort of antibody serum. This makes no sense because meteorites would not be carrying pathogens that instantly spread across southwestern USA and swamp the hospitals with patients. Nor can antibodies for a new disease be cultured within a day or two. The hero's daughter is one of the first victims, who is taken off to hospital while Dad does his heroics down at the water treatment plant. His wife is played by Claudia Christian, presumably hired because of her previous credits and not because of her surname. If you thought her acting was wooden in BABYLON 5, in this movie she defames the lumber industry with more of the same. Fortunately she doesn't appear in too many scenes.

There are the usual personal odysseys and bad guys filling in the gaps between the SFX. An obligatory pit stop is made in a church where some of the characters can emote about God's will, and assure the viewers that while this may be a bad movie it's a bad Christian movie. Car chases begin on paved roads but for no apparent reason veer off-road into chases through the sagebrush desert. Because the drinking water system was contaminated, many of the characters are motivated by the search for bottled water, all of which was from one of the product placement sponsors of the movie. It is a good plot point though, as the action takes place mostly in the desert, where clean bottled water is worth its weight in gold.

The meteorites appear at intervals when the pace needs speeding up. The meteorite strikes are amazingly specific, hitting buildings or vehicles the hero has just vacated and not a second earlier. Las Vegas gets powdered but only the high-rise casinos, while the suburbs, which present a greater target area, barely get their hair mussed. In the final scene, Los Angeles is cratered by the

biggest and final fragment. The explosion looks like it wants to be the Bikini Atoll hydrogen bomb test but the shock wave wimps out quickly and the fireball doesn't raise much of a dust cloud. The SFX show the big fragment falling out of space and it is evidently an extinction-level event size, but it does little outside the Los Angeles basin.

No sign of the Rapture though. While some Christians might be pleased that Los Angeles and Las Vegas got it, the modern-day Babylons that they are, they may be disquieted by a church full of believers being demolished by a meteorite. The meteorite strikes do not appear to hit Washington, D.C., probably because the movie was filmed in southern California and the budget didn't allow travel. You'll use your fast-forward a lot while watching this movie.



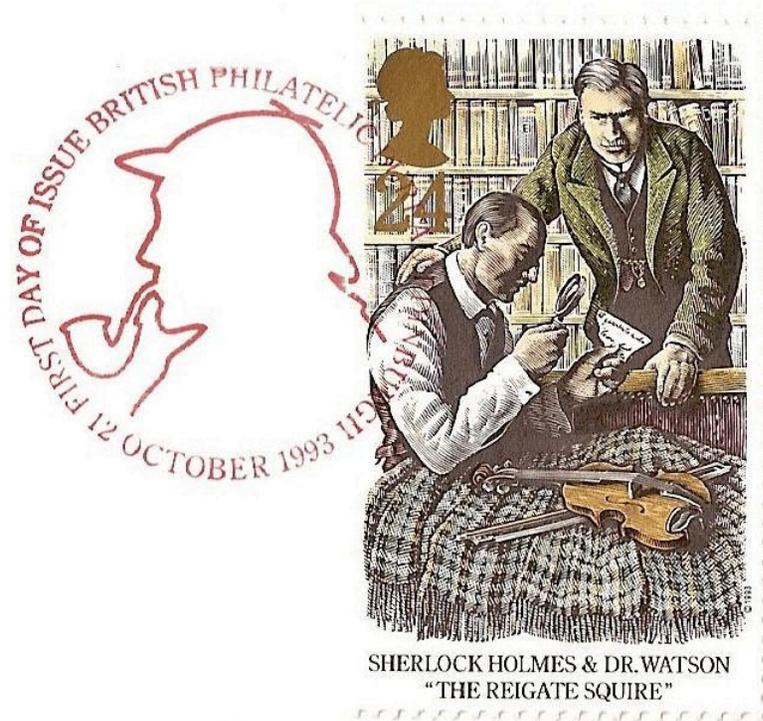
WORLD WIDE PARTY #21

2014 will be the 21st annual World Wide Party, held every year on June 21st at 21h00 your local time. It was invented by Benoit Girard (Quebec) and Franz Miklis (Austria). The idea is to get a wave circulating the planet as zinesters and science fiction fans toast each other. At 21h00, you are requested to raise a glass to fandom. Do a one-shot zine or some mail art, have a party with fellow fans, or whatever else you can think of to celebrate our connections. Let people know how you celebrated by writing it up.

SHERLOCKIANA: PART 15

by Dale Speirs

Fanfic writers who think it began with Star Trek should be aware that fan fiction and shared worlds in the sense we know them today go back to Sherlock Holmes. There are some other story series of that era who had fanfic writers, but nothing like the thousands about Holmes. The original stories by Doyle are referred to as the canon, while the fanfic stories are known as pastiches.



Pastiches: Short Fiction From Magazines.

The February issues of ELLERY QUEEN MYSTERY MAGAZINE traditionally carry pastiches. Sherlockians celebrate the great detective's birthday on January 6, the date based on a close reading of the canon stories by people with entirely too much time on their hands. Newsstand magazines such as EQMM are dated one month ahead of the distribution date so that retailers don't remove them prematurely, therefore the EQMM issue appearing in January is dated February.

Three short pastiches from the February 2013 issue of EQMM are as follows. "Attar Of Roses" by Howard Engel has Holmes investigating the case of stolen love letters used to blackmail a promising young actor named Maurice Blythe. The man holding the letters is lured to Baker Street for a buy-off. Holmes creates a diversion and gets the letters while switching the envelope of ransom cash for one filled with blank paper. The actor decides to start afresh in the USA under the name of Barrymore, where he married into the Drew family. In our timeline, the English actor Herbert Blythe used the stage name Maurice Barrymore and had three children who were famous stage actors in their prime: John, Ethel, and Lionel. His great-granddaughter is the present-day actress Drew Barrymore. This story doesn't have much detecting by Holmes, and would be better described as a secret history.

The next pastiche is by Terence Faherty, which is a purported first-draft version of Watson's story which he decided to re-do. The premise of Faherty's stories is that his pastiches are the original manuscripts by Watson, which tell the truth that could not be published as is and had to be sanitized for publication. The pastiche "manuscript" includes side comments by Watson, such as a reminder to make Holmes's "three pint problems" into something more dignified, so as not to disillusion readers by revealing that Holmes was a drinking man.

"A Scandal In Bohemia" starts off with the King of Bohemia, not a monarch but an eccentric artist whose real identity, closely guarded, is that of Sir Horace Ormstead, distinguished landscape and portrait painter By Appointment To The Queen. In his disguised identity, he churns out Impressionistic art to pay the bills of his manorial lifestyle. (Classical art takes too much time to do.) Sir Horace is being blackmailed by an artist's model named Irene Addleman, who threatens to expose his dual identity. Queen Victoria would not be amused by having one of those Bohemian artists in the palace. Holmes manages to sneak into Irene's residence, where the evidence is discovered and stolen back. However, Irene is one step ahead of Holmes and escapes. This story is a rather good rewrite with enough difference in plot to make it worth reading.

The final pastiche is "The Case Of The Nobel Imposter" by Amy Meyers, about a 1904 case where Lady Alice Otterden is impersonated by a murderer and Rembrandt thief. The true Alice is now accused of the crime. Except she isn't the true Alice. There are several twists and double-twists as the imposter is everywhere, sowing confusion among Holmes and the police. But in the end she does one impersonation too many and is caught.

From the February 2014 issue of EQMM are another three pastiches, two of which are by Terence Faherty. He continues his series of “original manuscript” rewrites using the titles of canon stories. “The Red Headed League” starts off as per published plot but soon does a 180° turn as one might expect. The rascals tunneling into the bank vault weren’t trying to steal anything but to prove that the bank’s gold wasn’t there, and had been embezzled by the bank president. There are humorous remarks throughout, particularly as Holmes keeps making deductions about people that both Watson and everyone else can see. A man wearing a watch chain with a compass and square ornament is deduced to be a Mason, to which, instead of being amazed, the client testily rebukes Holmes for stating the obvious.

“A Case Of Identity” by Faherty is another supposedly unedited manuscript beginning with a young woman with independent means asking Holmes to find her missing fiancé. He turns out to be part of a plot to latch on to her inheritance, with a subsidiary plot involving a love triangle between her mother, a factory foreman, and the stepfather. The stepfather’s motives are not entirely unjustified.

The third story from the February 2014 issue is “Skyler Hobbs And The Smarter Brother” by Evan Lewis. This is a series in contemporary USA about a man who thinks he is the reincarnation of Sherlock Holmes, if a fictional character can be said to have a reincarnation. Hobb’s brother Malachi works at the local post office, and his co-worker is worried that he may lose his job because someone is framing him on a sexual harassment charge. It turns out that Malachi is unknowingly in the way of a gang stealing the mails for identity theft. They want him out of action so they can infiltrate the post office and continue their operations. They are foiled by a sneak raid on their home, where all the evidence was conveniently on one laptop.

“The Preservation Of Death” by Andrew Lane (STRAND MAGAZINE, June 2013) is a short story meant to be a puzzle piece but which every reader will guess as soon as the vital clue is mentioned. Since the author apparently realized this, he withheld the information until the last half page. The story is about the death of a restaurant owner by a disgruntled chef who uses an ingredient in a signature dessert of the restaurant to kill the victim and make it seem the death occurred at a different time than it did, thus giving him an alibi.

Pastiches: Short Fiction From Anthologies.

ENCOUNTERS OF SHERLOCK HOLMES (2013, trade paperback) is an anthology edited by George Mann. The lead-off pastiche is “The Loss Of Chapter Twenty-One” by Mark Hodder, about an apparent murder and the theft of a manuscript of Sir Richard Burton. (The real one, the explorer, not the alcoholic Welsh actor who changed his name from Richard Jenkins and diddled Elizabeth Taylor.) But was it murder or was it a heart attack re-staged as murder to cover up the theft by an insider? Neatly done story that ties in well with real-world events and people.

“Sherlock Holmes And The Indelicate Widow” by Mags Halliday is certainly one of the more original plots among pastiches, involving a conspiracy to smuggle criminals and fake deaths for life insurance by slipping the victims out of London in coffins. The plot is exposed, with one chilling afterthought by Watson.

“The Demon Slasher Of Seven Sisters” by Cavan Scott has Holmes investigating a slasher terrorizing Tottenham. The story is narrated by a newspaper reporter and Watson is absent from the scene. The slasher has been attacking women with a knife but leaves no clues. Holmes deduces that he doesn’t exist and that a pulp magazine publisher (penny dreadfuls they called

them back then) was behind the scheme to boost sales. Not ethical but neither was it illegal. At least until panicky mobs kill an innocent man they thought was the slasher.



“The Post-Modern Prometheus” by Nick Kyme starts off with Holmes investigating a decapitation murder in the London slums. There is a monster afoot, who turns out to be the one created by the late and unlamented Dr. Frankenstein. The creature fled to London. At that point, the story seems to be a routine crossover pastiche, but the plot then takes an interesting turn when the monster tells Holmes it is hunting another tormentor by the name of Dr. Jekyll. It makes perfect sense because both Frankenstein and Jekyll were experimenting on human physiology in ways that were far from the ordinary.

“Mrs Hudson At The Christmas Hotel” by Paul Magrs has the dear old lady visiting her sister in Whitby and getting mixed up in the occult and attending bawdy shows. There are stolen jewels from Finland after which everyone is scrambling. Fraudulent occultists throw suspicion about like salt. In the denouement, Holmes makes a surprise appearance in disguise and the jewels are recovered.

“The Case Of The Night Crawler” by George Mann is a crossover with his alternative history series Newbury and Hobbes, the first novel of which was THE AFFINITY BRIDGE, which I reviewed in the October 2012 OPUNTIA #255. Holmes is searching for a missing British spy and shows no interest in sensational stories about an eldritch but not squamous monster shambling the dockside lanes in the small hours of the morning. Watson does, meets up with Newbury and Hobbes, and the three of them run the creature to ground. It proves to be an amphibious submersible operated by the missing spy, who has his reasons. Holmes, having spent the time on the sidelines, is rather embarrassed when Watson solves the case.

“The Adventure Of The Locked Carriage” by Stuart Douglas is a well-written pastiche about a young woman found dead in a train compartment, sitting upright apparently untouched. Everyone but Holmes proceeds on the false assumption that the compartment was locked, when in fact it was not. The murderer is sussed out by Holmes in a railroad tunnel, and it turns out a potential inheritance was at risk. If you know how the British train system works (or worked; it may be different today) the complexities of who did what in what compartment will not be a problem. It may confuse North American readers where train cars have a central corridor, not the outside-only access type used in Britain.

“The Tragic Affair Of The Martian Ambassador” by Eric Brown is a sequel to the Martian invasions. The first war of the worlds being a failure, the Martians studied microbiology to gain resistance to Earth bacteria. The second invasion, well in the past in this pastiche, was not really a war, but a diplomatic negotiation to let Martians carry out trade with Earth. The tripods now stroll peacefully, in this case down Baker Street to 221B. The Martian ambassador is dead in suspicious and embarrassing circumstances after a visit to a bordello (it turns out that Martians are compatible with Earthlings in one biological respect.) Holmes and Watson are summoned by Martian embassy staff to do quick and discreet sleuthing. H.G. Wells and Rebecca West are dragged into the story, he for no good reason, and she as a woman done wrong by the deceased.

“The Adventure Of The Swaddled Railwayman” by Richard Dinnick begins with reports of a ghost in the tunnels of a new underground railway system being dug in London. When the navvies start dying from a mysterious disease, work comes to a stop, so the contractors consult Holmes. There is no supernatural cause, just a protestor campaigning against the line with a little more lethality than he intended. A routine pastiche whose ending can be guessed, but it reads well.

“The Pennyroyal Society” by Kelly Hale has Holmes assisting suffragists, some imprisoned for their protesting, and one falsely accused of murder. Despite his lack of sympathy for their actions, he runs interference against Scotland Yard and solves the case. Dr. Watson is portrayed entirely too unsympathetic, and it doesn’t seem believable. Many pastiches are based not on the canon but on other pastiches, which leads to a drift away from the baseline. In particular, I’ve noticed that many pastiches portray Watson as a man easily shocked by gory deaths or violent crimes, when in fact he was a military surgeon who served under enemy fire. Further, he wasn’t the complete bumbling fool that Nigel Bruce made him in the 1940s movies. This is similar to modern vampire stories, which are not based on the original Bram Stoker book, but on movies based on older movies, making the modern vampires almost unrecognizable compared to the original source. Now that the copyrights have come off Doyle’s books, so has any semblance of fidelity to the original texts.

“The Persian Slipper” by Steve Lockley is a well-written pastiche, not so much for its murder mystery but because it explains why Holmes kept his pipe tobacco in a Persian slipper. As he tells Watson when he asks why, the correct question is what happened to the other slipper. The case is a locked room death

of an old man, done in by one of his twin sons. The deceased had a lot on his conscience, but one of the sons was looking to the future and an inheritance of the family business. The other slipper was held by that family as an assurance that Holmes would come to their help. The plot is routine but the slipper element is nicely thought out.

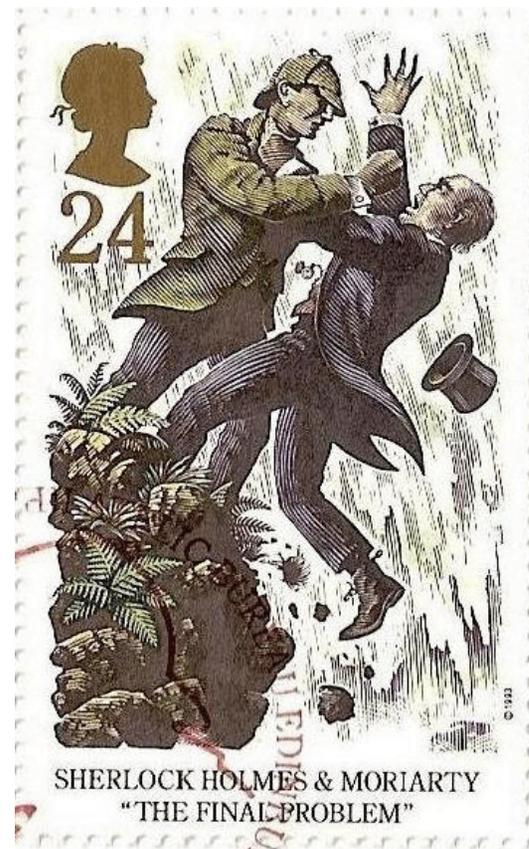
“The Property Of A Thief” by Mark Wright is a crossover with the Raffles stories, about an amateur cracksman who also dallies as a gentleman cricketer. Watson has been invited to a weekend in a country manor house, and the following day Holmes is invited when a diamond tiara goes missing. Among the other guests for the weekend are A.J. Raffles and his sidekick Bunny Manders. No prizes for guessing who opened the safe, but the trick is figuring out how the tiara was smuggled out. Holmes and Raffles play turnabout several times before the tiara is returned to its rightful owners.

“Woman’s Work” by David Barnett belongs to a sub-genre of Sherlockiana where Mrs. Hudson does the detecting. In this story, Holmes and Watson are incompetent fools, and their landlady has to figure out how a group of stolen gems ended up in the belly of a fish bought at Billingsgate. The gems were stolen in France and were smuggled inside the fish, only at the receiving end someone beat the thief to the loot. The story is a tad too much of a parody and would have read better if that element had been toned down.

“The Fallen Financier” by James Lovegrove has Holmes investigating a woman’s concern that her husband did not commit suicide by flinging himself off a cliff at Beachy Head. It turns out that her suspicion was correct, and the errant husband is discovered attempting to elope with a music hall actress. The ending was a bit blah. A routine pastiche.

Professor Moriarty.

“From A Detective’s Notebook” by P.G. Wodehouse is a departure from his usual output, 99% of which was about upper-class Edwardian twits getting in and out of trouble in their romances. This story is from the 1935 anthology THE WORLD OF MR. MULLINER, and concerns a nephew of Mulliner who is a private detective. He points out that Holmes’ stated income could not possibly have paid his living and professional expenses, and that no one had actually seen Professor Moriarty. The conclusion is that Holmes was the Napoleon of crime and used a fictitious crime lord to put others off the scent.



Fannish Pastiche.

Even within the canon, Holmes had his fans, who awaited Watson’s latest story in the STRAND MAGAZINE. There is no doubt that there were a few nutcases wandering about in the Victorian era who could match our modern fanboys at any comic convention. While we think of Sherlock Holmes fiction as period pieces today, it must be remembered that the stories were originally published as contemporary fiction.

From the anthology MORE HOLMES FOR THE HOLIDAYS (1999, hardcover) comes “The

Human Mystery” by Tanith Lee, concerning the case of the Caston Gall. Eleanor Caston has inherited a manorial estate, complete with a curse that any unmarried woman cannot live on the estate for the five days prior to Christmas. Holmes and Watson visit her to investigate. It turns out that Eleanor was a fan of Holmes, having read the stories of Watson, and wanted to persuade him to marry her. So you see, lunatic fandom is no new thing.

HOLMES ON THE RANGE (2006, hardcover) by Steve Hockensmith is the first in a series about two red-haired cowboy brothers in the American Old West of the 1890s. Otto “Big Red” Amlingmeyer is Dr. Watson to his brother Gustav “Old Red”, who is the Sherlockian fanatic. They first heard of Holmes out on the Montana range one night when they were sitting around the campfire with other cowboys on the trail. One of the drovers read out loud “The Red-Headed League” to the rest of them, chosen for obvious reasons. Old Red got religion and thereafter began practicing deduction like his hero.

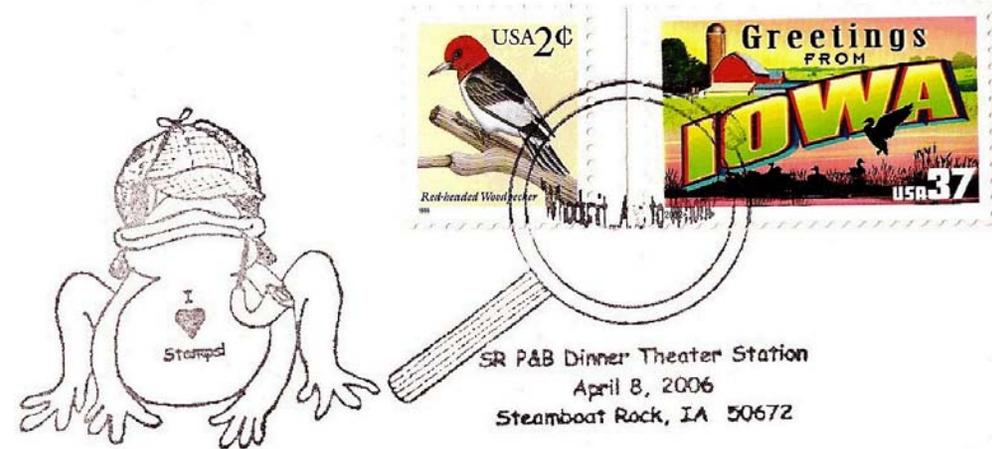
The novel opens with the Amlingmeyer brothers signing up to work on the Bar VR ranch. The management of the ranch is unorthodox to say the least. The ranch is owned by an English syndicate, who sent out a man named Perkins to keep an eye on things. For good reason as it turns out, because the foreman and leadhands are fiddling the books. Perkins has the honour of being the first corpse, supposedly trampled to death by a cattle stampede. Old Red is suspicious though, and puts his detectifying skills to work.

The plot thickens. The English owners show up, are not particularly perturbed by Perkin's death, and settle in like gentry in a manor house. The second body, this time one of the hired help, is found dead in the outhouse, shot through the head. Old Red is in his element, using his skills learned from Holmes. Unlike Miss Marple and all those cozy-mystery women, who in real life would be run in for interfering with police investigations, there is no law in the territory, so Old Red can detectify to his heart's content.

Taking centre stage is the clash of cultures between the English aristocrats and the unschooled cowboys. There are misunderstandings because the two groups are separated by a common language. The novel represents accurately the daily life of cowboys, which was not gunslinger fights and evil bankers waving mortgage papers but the tedium of dipping cattle for worms and baling hay for the winter. (I baled tens of thousands of hay bales when I was a teenager, which is why I became a city slicker. There is no other job as boring.)

Like any good mystery novel, everyone has something to hide, so suspicion is strewn about like cow patties on the rangeland. The ranch's financial books are not what they should be, and the Englishmen are not as stupid as they look. They may not know how to brand and castrate a calf but they do know how to audit financial statements. There is the traditional J'accuse! meeting in the ranch house, shots are fired, and the culprit is identified, not the one suspected.

I liked this book because it correctly portrayed the ranching way of life. I grew up on a ranch in west-central Alberta and herded my share of cattle. I dislike the standard western novels because they are all the same plot, about a gunslinger riding into town to save everyone from the evil banker and/or gang of black-hatted cowboys. That wasn't true in the American Old West, and certainly not the Canadian prairies.



Non-Fiction.

THE PHILATELIC ADVENTURES OF SHERLOCK HOLMES (no date given, trade paperback) by Larry Dodson is a handbook published by the American Topical Association cataloging postage stamps depicting or related to Sherlock Holmes. Price US\$12 from ATA, Box 8, Carterville, Illinois 62918-0008. Among stamp collectors, topical collecting means to collect stamps not by country but by a topic such as cats on stamps, or in this case, Sherlockiana. This catalogue starts off with stamps specifically depicting Holmes et al. The first such stamp was issued by Nicaragua in 1972 but British Post didn't get around to it until 1993. The catalogue also lists stamps not directly about Holmes but which depict people, places, and events mentioned in the stories, then tertiary stamps such as those honouring actors who played Holmes or Watson.

DOWNTOWN COWTOWN: THE CORE

by Dale Speirs

I visit the downtown core of Calgary almost daily, always going by bus since parking is impossible. (In North America, only New York City has higher parking rates than downtown Calgary.)

I took the photo below looking south at the core from an escarpment on the opposite side of the Bow River, which forms the northern boundary of downtown Calgary. It was, incidently, taken during the great flood of June 2013, which closed the core for a week. If you look closely in the foreground, you can see all the streets are flooded.



Most of the skyscrapers are connected to each other by second-story enclosed pedestrian overpasses, enabling one to walk around the core in shirtsleeves without having to go outside. The network of overpasses is known as Plus 15, since they are 15 feet above ground. The network began as just a few connections before Canada went metric in 1971, hence the name. Today one can walk kilometres through the system around the core through dozens of skyscrapers. Hundreds of office workers do so on their lunch hour as exercise. The majority of the skyscrapers have retail stores and/or a food court on the second floors connected to the Plus 15 system.

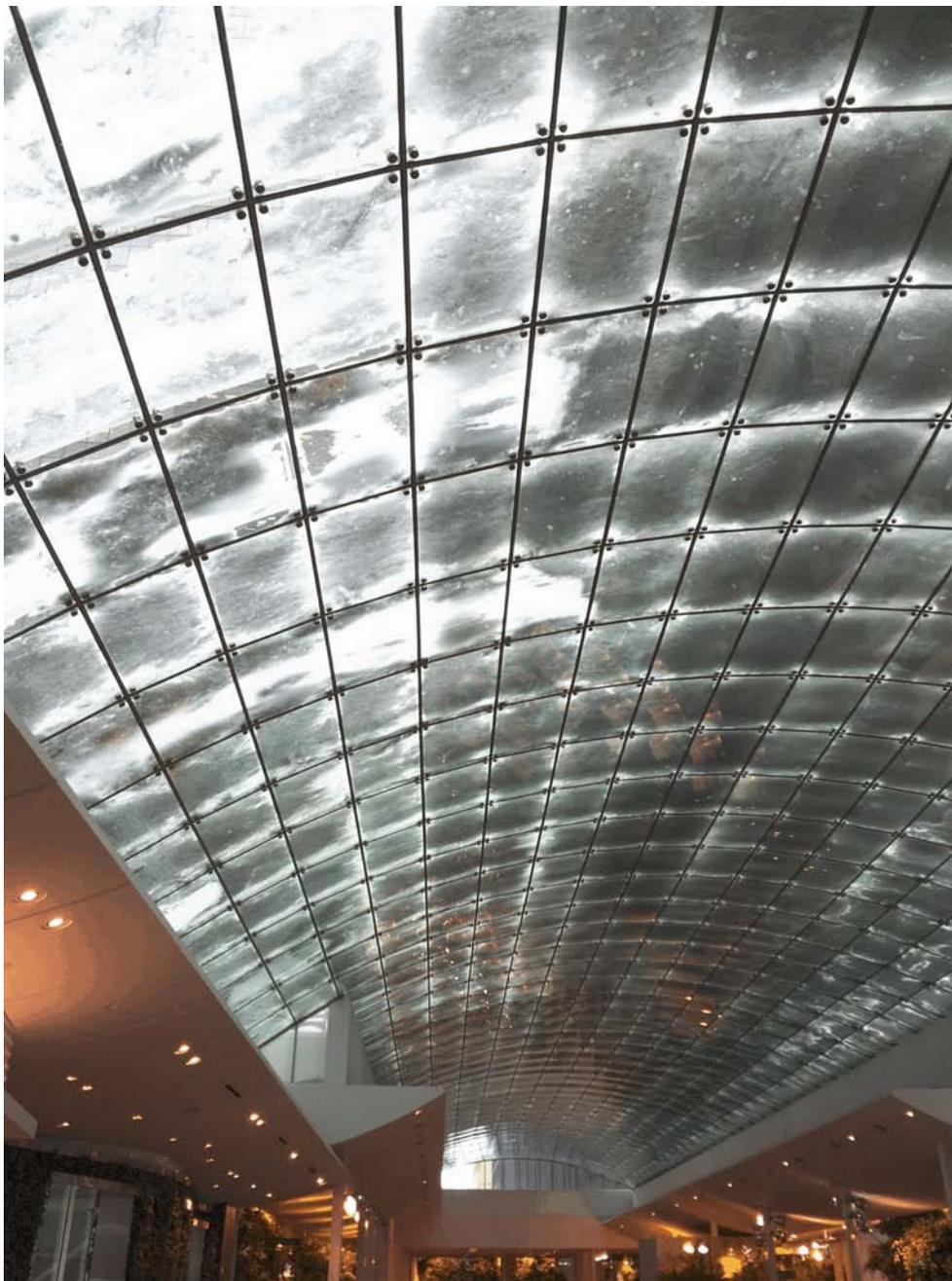
The most elaborate is a four-story atrium built between several skyscrapers in the very centre of the core. The top floor is the food court, where I eat frequently and take advantage of the free public wifi. Adjacent to the food court are the Devonian Gardens, Calgary's only indoor public park, operated by the Parks Dept. The photo at right was taken from the food court level looking east, with the Devonian Gardens a city block away at the far end. A sample view of the gardens is shown below. Very popular with the public in winter. The gardens themselves are a city block long.



On the next page is the view looking straight up from the food court.



And here is the view during a blizzard. The snow doesn't melt away from the building heat since the glass is laminated and energy-efficient. Once the sun came out, the radiant heat from above melted the snow off.



The central floor is used for community groups, such as the Calgary Stampede junior fiddlers, shown here last Christmas.



Musical groups seem generally preferred by the building management. The sound wafts up to the food court and provides a pleasant background to all those people up there hunched over their smartphones and tablets, relentlessly texting with one hand and shoveling food into their mouths with the other hand. People sit down in pairs or quartets and instead of talking over the food just stare at their handhelds. Better to look at YouTube instead of their companions.

You'll notice that behind the fiddlers is a giant Christmas tree, three stories tall. The next page shows it being constructed. Plastic and wire frame, of course. At night the building management used a crane so workers could hoist the top into place. You can see the crane at the top of the left photo.



On 2014-04-07, I looked up from the food court and spotted two workmen doing something or other to the glass. The closeup shows one of them carrying a caulking gun, so there must have been a leak. The fact that the glass is carrying the weight of both of them indicates how thick it is. Notice they are attached to the atrium ribs by safety lanyards so they don't slide off the roof.



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

[Editor's remarks in square brackets. Please include your name and town when sending a comment. Email to opuntia57@hotmail.com]

FROM: Ray Palm
Plattsburgh, New York

2014-03-14

I received OPUNTIA #273 and was shocked to see you're dropping the print version. I understand your reason with the price jump with Canadian postage (22 cents domestically!) but your publication was one of the last zines I thought would take the step to online only. No argument here. I'm on a tight budget and if I had many more subscribers/traders with a big postage increase I would also go online only.

As I've said before I hope the Net stays affordable. Decades ago what they charged for cable TV was OK but I dropped it, too much money for so little after a while. I can't believe what some people are paying to watch TV shows. I thought pay TV was supposed to be commercial free but now there are more annoying ads than ever. Me, I'll stick with the few stations I get OTA.

[My smartphone costs me \$68 per month for a gigabyte of data and unlimited text and emails. I use shopping mall wifi or the university computers to stay within that gigabyte, and definitely for heavy downloading.]

I won't be surprised if the greedy corporations to find new ways to milk the Net for all its worth, creating a new digital divide. If the net becomes as expensive as cable TV - well, forget it. I'll make do with visiting a public access computer at the library.

[I've never had a television set. I got out of the habit when I was an impoverished university student, and have never missed it. I do have a standalone DVD player and buy disks from the bargain bins. I have no tolerance for commercials anymore, plus DVDs have the advantage that you can play them when you want to, and pause them to get something out of the refrigerator or go to the bathroom. That's why I haven't set foot in a movie theatre in years, not since it went to \$20 for admission and a large pop and medium bag of popcorn.]

FROM: Ned Brooks
Lilburn, Georgia

2014-03-31

What will happen to the Papernet? Of course anything that can be put on more-or-less flat paper could be scanned and put into a pdf, if you have a graphics software and pdf generator. I'm told that some graphics-handlers now will generate pdf directly, but mine isn't that up-to-date.

[All scanners come with basic graphics software such as cropping or contrast control. I have Adobe Acrobat to compile scans into pdfs. Also, my WordPerfect 12 converts documents to pdfs with a single click, which is how I prepare OPUNTIA now.]

FROM: Sheryl Birkhead
Gaithersburg, Maryland

2014-03-21

I wonder if the new faned feels that same sense of pride in production of an ezine that accompanies the production of the traditional zine? I am worried that if you have never known anything else, you cannot mourn its absence.

[I'm sure many fanzine editors who have only produced pdf zines online are proud of their efforts. Certainly I'm taking just as much care with online OPUNTIA's as I did with the paper ones.]

FROM: Lloyd Penney
Etobicoke, Ontario

2014-04-20

[Re: OPUNTIA going online only] I think we all prefer paper zines, but the costs of printing, envelopes and postage are skyrocketing. This means that only John Hertz and his single-sheet VANAMONDE is the only zine left that requires a paper loc response. I have never minded that at all, but now, he's the only one for me to mail a paper letter.

The Bricker/Ibbitson book [review in OPUNTIA #274] I can't dispute that power is shifting, but the transfer of power means that Conservative government have been running the show, but I do think that a good portion of the country wants Harper and his cronies gone. Trudeau needs to grow up somewhat, but many think he'd be a refreshing change from Harper's frosty control.

FROM: Joseph Nicholas
London, England

Commiserations on having to cease paper publication because of the rise in Canadian postage rates. Having many years ago given up publishing a fanzine ourselves, and having no plans (either current or projected) to publish again, we have not been affected by the most recent rises in UK postage rates, which have similarly forced UK fanzine publishers to switch to e-publishing.

Re: Canadian Museum of Caricature. We have a similar museum here, the Cartoon Museum (www.cartoonmuseum.org) with the salient difference being that it has never received any government money at all, but is funded entirely privately (entrance fees, membership subscriptions, private donations and philanthropic foundations). We are members, in part because it's worth supporting and in part because it's near the British Museum, of which we have been long-standing Friends (an annual subscription which permits free entry to the special exhibitions for which everyone else has to pay), and can therefore combine a visit to one with a visit to the other.

I Also Heard From: Rodney Leighton, Anna Banana, Franz Zrilich

WORDS, NOT WORLDS

Calgary's annual readercon is When Words Collide (please note the correct spelling of that middle word), this year to be held August 8 to 10. Memberships are capped at 500 and are 88% sold at press time, so it seems likely there will not be any at-the-door sales. There are no day passes. This is a literary convention that brings together SF, fantasy, mystery, western, and romance writers, editors, and publishers. Very good panels, with cross-fertilization between the literary genres among the panelists. There are numerous workshops, and no overweight steampunks roaming the hallways. Lots of editors, publishers, and professional librarians attend. The bourse has one or two book dealers but most of the tables are taken up by independent publishers selling print-on-demand or ebook editions. There are also a few rooms set aside for wanna-be authors to pitch their manuscripts to publishers; those ones are signed up solid by the time the convention opens. Details from: www.whenwordscollide.org

[Calgary mayor] Naheed Nenshi is someone I'd like to meet, while I'd avoid [Toronto mayor] Ford if I saw him. There's now the official start of the Ford re-election campaign, gaudy and overblown, plus the start of an Anyone But Ford campaign, and many good candidates who could easily split the vote. With so many voting right wing, and so many of those voters fed up with Ford and his antics, a good left wing candidate could easily win, and that candidate would probably be Jack Layton's widow, Olivia Chow. Right now, a large rock would be a better choice than Ford.

Journalism not a career with any good opportunities? I am forced to agree. That's my training, and the story of my life. However, I have tried my best to make a living in other work, and I have been largely successful.

The Hugo nominations final ballot was released about a day ago. We have memberships, and we are eligible to vote, but I doubt we will. With a couple of exceptions, there's no names on the ballot I recognize, so I am an uninformed voter, and I do not believe I should vote.

Ron Goulart is underestimated and possibly unknown by most SF readers, especially the modern ones, but his writing is everywhere. He's been a journeyman writer, and when the TekWar novels came out under William Shatner's name, many saw the quality of the writing, and immediately suspected Goulart as being the true author.

[I'm surprised more of his stories and novels haven't been made into television shows or movies.]

My favorite humourous SF writer was Robert Sheckley, and I had the good fortune to meet and have him sign a few books at Con*cept in Montréal some years ago. A gentle fellow, and I may have been the only member of the convention to approach and greet him.

[Somewhere, someone was complaining that THE BIG BANG THEORY didn't give shout-outs to Asimov, Heinlein, or other literary SF figures, but only mentioned superhero comics, costuming, video games, and media SF. Sadly though, their time has come and gone. To the current generation, I, ROBOT is a Will Smith movie, not an Asimov anthology.]

CALGARY COMIC AND ENTERTAINMENT EXPO 2014 PARADE

photos by Dale Speirs

Just to remind us where lies the real future of science fiction, the Calgary Comic Expo hosts 60,000 fans each year at the Stampede rodeo grounds on the last weekend in April. Friday morning before the convention starts, they have a mini-parade down the 8th Avenue pedestrian mall. I missed the parades in earlier years but this year, on April 25, I happened to be downtown just in time to watch it. Like all the bemused office workers, I took smartphone photos. It was a chilly day, just below freezing, and I have to salute the cosplayers, both male and female, who wore revealing or thin-cloth costumes on such a day. The photo below shows one such semi-clad barbarian at right of photo, although the main reason I took the photo was to show the sunken-chested, watery-eyed Captain America. With sneakers yet. At least the barbarian works out.





In the parade were what I presume are famous actresses, but I can't be bothered to Google their names to find out who they are. (And please don't tell me.)



You don't have to be a costume judge to know that blue jeans, sneakers, and a high-school backpack detract from the rest of the costume. I used to have a bathrobe like that.

She may be within striking distance of her pension, but the woman below shows the young girls how it's done. Very elegant, and it rippled beautifully in the breeze.



You can tell this is a Canadian group of zombie hunters because the woman is holding a hockey stick, with another one racked up behind her.



A couple of aliens, but notice that behind them is a young female photographer on a skateboard. She was using it to stay even with marchers while taking photos. Neat trick.



