

In this issue: **Review of mystery novels set in ancient Rome** (See page 3)

# DAGON

#697, APA-Q #608

April 2018

## THE MINISTRY OF MISCELLANY

This is **Dagon**, a monthly fanzine of commentary on science, science fiction, fantasy, mystery novels, comic art, role-playing games (RPGs), and anything else that seems like a good idea at the moment, is published by **John Boardman, Room 108, 2250 S. Semoran Blvd., Orlando, FL 32822. (Note new address.)**

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#2232

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**This is my first mailing of Dagon from my new Florida address (see above).** Contrary to my worry in the March issue, I will not miss any issues because of my move. And don't get upset because it's in the same state as the Parkland massacre. That was about 100 miles (160 km.) from Parkland. By contrast, in February it was discovered that a student named Alwin Chen had brought a loaded pistol to Clarksburg High School and had many more guns at home. He also had with him a list of names of other students and his grievances against them. This strongly suggests that he was bullied at school, and planning a military revenge against his enemies. Actually, I was also bullied in elementary school, but found a way to stop it that was much simpler and didn't involve firearms. If I was bullied, I simply responded by biting my tormenter. This caused them to leave me alone, which is exactly what I wanted.

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The empires that ruled the Balkans and adjacent regions at the beginning of the twentieth century have ceased to exist, and where they used to be is a horde of mini-states, mostly Slavic. Where Yugoslavia used to be are now, in alphabetical order, Albania, Bosnia and Hercegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Makedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, and Slovenia. There are still further complications. Bosnia and Hercegovina (sometimes spelled "Herzegovina" or "Herzegowina") are not two nations, but one nation with a double name. If you spell the name of Croatia "Hravatska" you will come a little closer to the way most of its inhabitants say it. Albania, understandably, has an

Albanian majority, mostly Muslim, and a few of the others have large Albanian populations, also mostly Muslim. Russia regards itself as the patron of the Slavic nations in the Balkans, and in some cases does not recognize nations with large Albanian populations. There is a possibility that Turkey might develop into the patron of their Albanian fellow Muslims, but Turkey has other fish to fry with its Kurdish minority, and on their frontiers with Syria, Iraq, and Iran. The names of some of these countries might be a little confusing. Do not confuse Slovenia with Slovakia, which is a country further to the north, between Hungary and Poland. Do not confuse it with Slavonia, which is not a country, but a region of eastern Croatia. Do not replace the “k” in “Makedonia” with a “c”, because it is likely to be pronounced with a soft “c”, and none of the country’s inhabitants do that. Voivodina with its variant spellings is not a nation but a part of northern Serbia, but that may not be a permanent situation. I use variant spellings for the names “Türkey”, “Makedonia”, and for that matter “Müller” (see below), because that gives a clearer idea of how they are actually pronounced in their countries of origin.

All this international confusion is often the prolog to a war, and in that case American participation can be taken for granted. (Well, it *is* a war, isn’t it?) Most Americans don’t seem to know it, but in recent years the United States has fought a rather bloody war in the Balkans, including some of the above-named countries, pseudo-countries, or crypto-countries.)

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In the last issue of **Dagon**, I misprinted the name of the deputy attorney general who was appointed by Attorney General Jeff Sessions to appoint and supervise the investigators headed by Robert S. Müller III, who are to look into allegations that Russian agents influenced the nomination and election of President tRump. The name of that deputy attorney general is actually Rod Rosenstein. For concise details on these appointments and their aim, see the 2018 *World Almanac*, p. 4, where it is #3 on “Top 10 News Stories of 2017”. I expect that their findings will be, that Russians *tried* to affect the 2016 presidential election, but that they were unable to have any significant effects upon it.

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Until recently, I was reading two newspapers a day, and sending selected clippings on various topics to people whom I knew were interested in those topics. However, I suspended reading those papers when preparations for moving demanded all of my time. My subscription to the *Washington Post* expired during that period, and I intend to renew it only when I get settled here in Florida. This will explain why large manila envelopes full of newspaper clippings will finally resume going out to various **Dagon** readers.

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The surviving players in the Calhamer Memorial Postal Diplomacy Game have unanimously

(continued on page 5)

## WHO IS TRYING TO KILL JULIUS CAESAR?

This review of mystery novels by Steven Saylor or Lindsey Davis, and set in ancient Rome, is reprinted from **Dagon** #612 (October 2010). A review of Davis's *The Ides of April* has already been reprinted in **Dagon** #693 (December 2017). I continue to solicit reviews of historically set crime novels from **Dagon** readers.

Two authors are currently writing series of murder mysteries set in ancient Rome: Steven Saylor and Lindsey Davis. Each author has made the hero an informer, or *delator* as the Romans called them. This presents a bit of a problem, since *delatores* are given a bad name by authors who follow the leads of those who follow the leads of the historians of antiquity. This is because most such historians, whose works have survived, came from the senatorial aristocracy, and wrote scathing condemnations of the men who reported to the emperor what Grandfather or Uncle Marcus was up to. But the authors we now deal with regard their *delatores* somewhat more accurately as “detectives”.

One of these authors, Steven Saylor, is writing a series of books about a *delator* called Gordianus the Finder, who was born about 110 BCE and who had his first big opportunity doing leg-work for the attorney Cicero, who needed his help in a major legal case in 76 BCE. This was related in *Roman Blood*, the first book of what is now twelve in his series *Roma sub Rosa*. The other, Lindsey Davis, sets her books about 150 years later in the reign of Emperor Vespasianus. Her hero, Marcus Didius Falco, comes from Rome's lowest freeborn class, and has cases that range from sordid divorces to, sometimes, an assignment from the emperor himself. Davis has written at least twenty books about Falco's cases. Books by both authors have been reviewed in **Graustark**. I would appreciate it if readers would let me know what books by Saylor and Davis I have already reviewed in my gaming fanzine **Graustark**, as I do not have my **Graustark** files handy.

*The Triumph of Caesar*, the twelfth book in Saylor's series, begins in 46 BCE or, as Romans would have called it, DCCVIII AVC. As the story begins, Julius Caesar is returning to Rome in triumph over both Roman and foreign enemies, and is about to celebrate four triumphal processions on four days. But Caesar's wife Calpurnia calls in Gordianus, convinced by the dubious advice of a soothsayer that there is a plot against Caesar's life. However, by now Gordianus is 64, and largely retired from his detective business, most of which is now being handled by his son Eco.

We know little about Caesar's last wife Calpurnia, and so authors from Shakespeare to Saylor have limned her character to suit themselves. (I do not know whether her grumpy Uncle Gnaeus, a priest, is even a historical character.) And an additional complication comes in with the murder of Hieronymus, whom we met in *Last Seen in Massilia*, the modern Marseilles. This popular raconteur and party guest had been using his contacts as a source of information for Gordianus, until he was found stabbed to death in an alley behind Calpurnia's residence. In searching Hieronymus's

library of scrolls, Gordianus finds information he had gathered for Calpurnia about the people she suspected of plotting her husband's death.

At first, Gordianus cannot believe that Caesar is in danger, since he has won major military victories and presumably killed all his rivals. Much of this has already been written by Meto, another of Gordianus's sons, who has ghost-written "Caesar's" history of the Gallic War through which I struggled in high-school Latin. But at least one rival is still alive - the Gallic chieftain Vercingetorix, now in a Roman dungeon awaiting execution as the climax of Caesar's Gallic triumph. Gordianus interviews Vercingetorix but learns nothing. An interview with Cicero is conducted in much more comfortable circumstances, with an apparently casual visit from Brutus, but is just as uninformative.

More in an attempt to solve the murder of Hieronymus than to investigate a plot against Caesar, Gordianus interviews other people mentioned in the notes left by Hieronymus. These include Cleopatra, who is living in Rome and conducting an affair with Caesar, by whom she already has a two-year-old son. They also include Cleopatra's rebellious sister Arsinoë and her surviving general, now imprisoned and awaiting execution after Caesar's Egyptian triumph. And even Caesar's seventeen-year-old grandnephew Gaius Octavius, Caesar's most probable heir, has to be checked out. (We know him as Augustus Caesar.)

From time to time there is a mention of Caesar's attempt to reform the Roman calendar with the aid of Egyptian astronomers. That calendar, founded several hundred years earlier by a Roman priest-king, was used to determine the dates of religious festivals, but it proved to be extremely inefficient, and had to be adjusted by adding an extra month every few years. Calendar reform seems to be irrelevant to the plot, but in the end we find that it is very relevant indeed. The new Julian calendar, as it is called, is essentially the one we use today, with the addition of the originally Jewish seven-day week, and some minor revisions introduced in the 16th century CE by the German astronomer Christoph Schlüssel (Christopherus Clavius) and promulgated in 1582 by Pope Gregory XIII, whence the name "Gregorian calendar".

A great many characters occur in *The Triumph of Caesar*, and Saylor would be well advised to follow the custom of Davis and list at the beginning of each book a cast of characters, indicating which ones were historical personages. Also, there is a minor problem in Saylor's use of languages. Early in this book, Gordianus mentions to his wife that "a young slave engaged in flirtation with me". His wife Bethesda, a half-Egyptian and half-Jewish ex-slave, replies, "She probably wanted something from you." He doesn't mention to his wife that the slave was male. But presumably this conversation is supposed to have taken place in Latin. In Latin, a male slave would be *servus*, and a female slave, *serva*. So Bethesda would have already known the slave's sex.

Both Saylor and Davis have apparently misunderstood the ancient Roman system of personal names. To take Gaius Julius Caesar as a well-known example, "Julius" was his clan name "Caesar" his family name, and "Gaius" his personal name. So two brothers, or a father and son, ought to have

the same clan and family names. Yet Davis has given us names of related persons where this was not done. Saylor avoids this situation by usually giving us only one of a character's names. Daughters did not have personal names, but were instead numbered in birth order. Had Julius Caesar had two daughters, they would have been "Prima Julia Caesar" and "Secunda Julia Caesar".

This plot has nothing to do with the plot, two years later, in which Caesar was actually murdered, not by a nobody from nowhere, but by several of his respectable fellow senators. This, presumably, will be an event in the next book in Saylor's series.

### THE MINISTRY OF MISCELLANY (continued from page 2)

agreed to end the game as a draw among all six of them. The players were Hank Alme (Turkey), Jim Burgess (France), Melinda Holley (Germany), Harley Jordan (Italy), Douglas Kent (Russia), and Jim O'Kelly (England).

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To judge from public opinion polls, and from the scattered results of the few elections in 2017, this year's mid-term elections for congressional and state legislative seats are likely to result in Democratic gains. We can therefore expect a far different legislative agenda in Congress if its next session has small but workable Democratic majorities in both houses.

However, there is one political arrangement currently that completely mystifies me. On television there is an occasional program of conservative political commentary by Armstrong Williams. These sessions are introduced by a claim that Williams operates in the tradition of "the Republican Revolution of 1994." Well, I follow politics nearly as closely as I follow major-league baseball, but I don't recall anything in 1994 that I would describe as a "Republican Revolution". Can anyone explain what, if anything, it means?

An indication of future political developments is the special election that took place in the 18th congressional district of Pennsylvania on 13 February. The Republican Party gerrymandered Pennsylvania's districts to ensure that most of them would be won by Republicans. This worked so well that the Democrats didn't even nominate a candidate for Congress there in 2016, and Donald Trump beat Hillary Clinton there by 19% of the vote. Then the Supreme Court ruled the gerrymander illegal, and the lines must be redrawn by November. But the Republican incumbent was then forced to resign from Congress for sexual malfeasance, hence the special election to replace him. But in the special election to replace him, the vote was barely equal to a tie between the two major-party candidates. In a total of about 230,000 votes, the Democrat won by a margin of no more than 600 votes, and a recount is now under weigh.

Now guess what this will mean in the congressional elections of November. We can expect many districts in the country to shift from Republican to Democratic - probably enough to give the Democrats majorities in both houses.

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The efficiency and hard work of our move to Florida was mainly handled by my daughter Deirdre and step-daughter Karina. They first made one-week trips themselves, but also the facility to which I was eventually moved, and whose address appears on pages 1 and 6 of this issue. Then they returned to Clarksburg, and we got every stick of furniture and scrap of paper packed, and loaded on rented trucks. Karina drove down another rented truck with the things that wouldn't fit on Deirdre's truck, and also with me. Unpacking involved setting aside all that paper, and dealing with it as soon as I could manage it.

Once we had everything unloaded at Deirdre's and my new residences, there came dealing appropriately with everything - answering letters, getting new address labels printed, and otherwise getting settled. I hope that I can get all this done in a reasonable amount of time. And I will continue to publish **Dagon** on a monthly schedule.

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As we prepared for the trip to Florida, the northeast coast of this country was belabored by the third nor'easter storm in two weeks. This surprised a few people who are not aware that, in the temperate zone, March is the fourth month of winter. This is one of the reasons that took Deirdre and me to Florida. When I lived in that state's capital in 1955-57, There were a few winter days that got a very light snowfall, but this was an exception, greatly marveled at in local media.

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Often I see, on television, advertisements that offer discounts on goods or services to military people, veterans, or "first responders", a collective term that seems to include fire-fighters, emergency medical providers, police, lifeguards, and comparable people. These discounts seem to be a reaction to the low esteem in which soldiers were held during the American invasion of Vietnam, an expensive military action of highly dubious legality, frequently characterized by American atrocities against civilian populations. However, the distinction between military people and first responders is rather more distinct than that. First responders save people. Soldiers kill people. This is not a trivial matter.

**Dagon #697 (APA-Q #608)**

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