

# OPUNTIA

## 321

Middle September 2015

**Opuntia** is published by Dale Speirs, Calgary, Alberta. It is posted on [www.efanzines.com](http://www.efanzines.com) and [www.fanac.org](http://www.fanac.org). My e-mail address is: [opuntia57@hotmail.com](mailto:opuntia57@hotmail.com) When sending me an emailed letter of comment, please include your name and town in the message.

### FESTIVAL SEASON IN CALGARY

photos by Dale Speirs

Calgary is a city of immigrants, and between Stampede and Labour Day most of the ethnic groups have some sort of parade or festival in the city. The third weekend in August is the city's annual Carifest. The Caribbean parade along Stephen Avenue pedestrian mall in the downtown core is always very colourful.



There were a number of krewes in the parade, each with their own colour.



Without a doubt, the largest and most spectacular group was De Water Krewe.



The pièce de resistance of De Water Krewe was this woman. Her wings were so wide that I and other spectators had to step back a bit as she went by.



# THE CALGARY SKYLINE

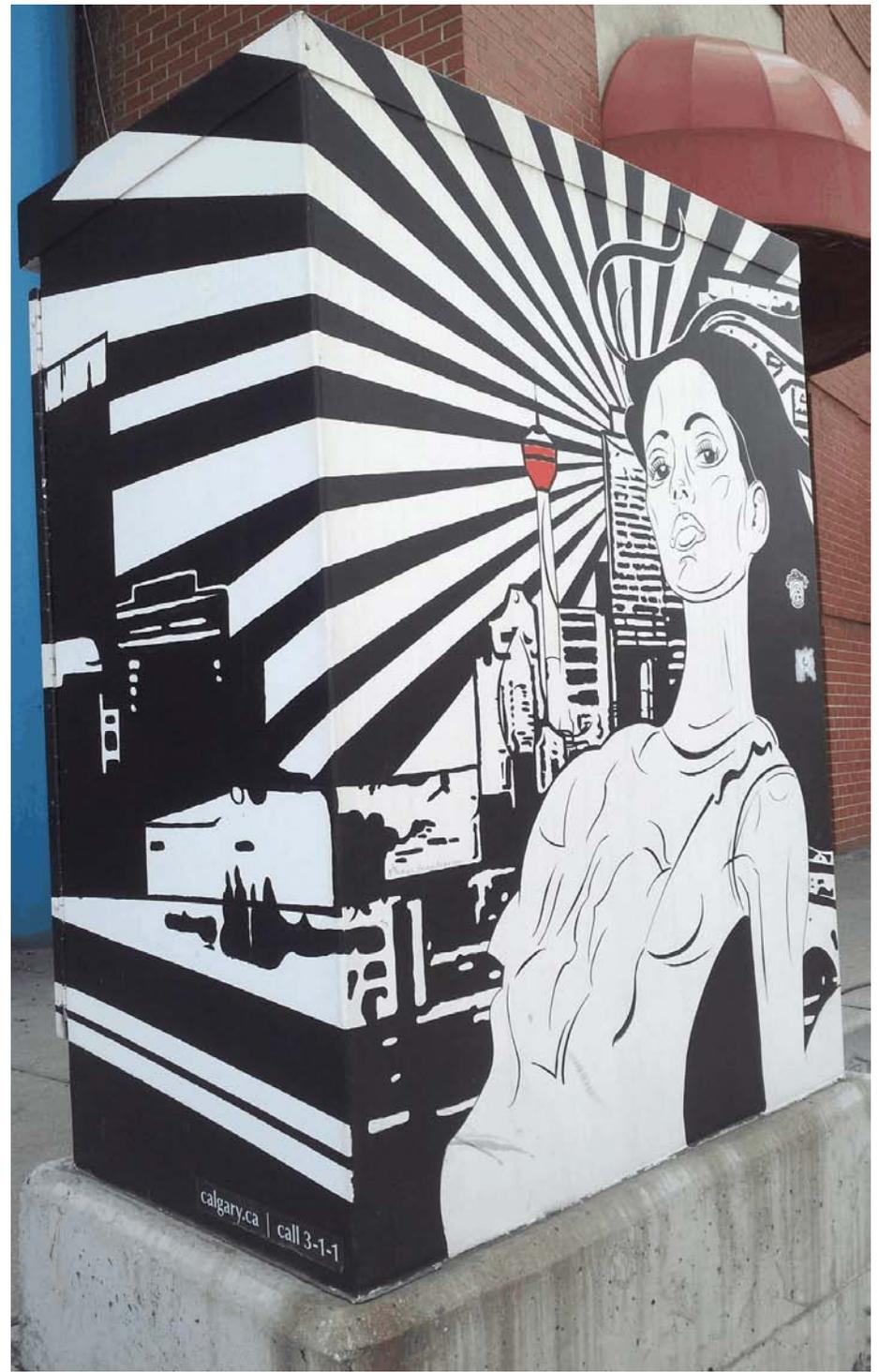
photos by Dale Speirs

A few days after I took the Carifest photos, the wind shifted to the southwest and began pumping forest fire smoke from Washington State into southern Alberta. The top photo below is what Calgary normally looks like (taken on 2012-10-07). I took the bottom photo 2015-08-26, from the same viewpoint.



Continuing the theme of Calgary's skyline, here is some utility box art, all of it from 16 Avenue North, where, strangely, there is no view of the skyline because of the buildings blocking it. Note the Calgary Tower in all the views.





View of a typical Alberta skyline, from wheat fields to mountains.



## LIFE ON THE PAPERNET

by Dale Speirs

In 1979, Allan L. Steinhart published *THE POSTAL HISTORY OF THE POST CARD IN CANADA 1871-1911*, a look at the advent and spread of the PaperNet's version of email. Originally both post offices and philatelists used the terms "postal card", "post card", and "postcard" interchangeably. The modern usage is that a postal card is issued only by a post office and has the postage imprinted on it, so that no stamp is necessary. A postcard can be issued by a post office but is more commonly privately produced, and requires that a postage stamp be added.

Heinrich von Stephan first proposed the idea of a postal card in 1865. Germany did not exist at that time; it was a collection of quarreling principalities and minor states, and there was no unified postal system. The idea did not succeed because of that problem, but von Stephan is recognized as one of the two fathers of the postal card. Dr. Emanuel Herrmann, an economics professor in Austria, later took up the idea, and by constantly nagging the Austro-Hungarian Postmaster-General, was able to have the world's first postal card issued by Austria on 1869-10-01.

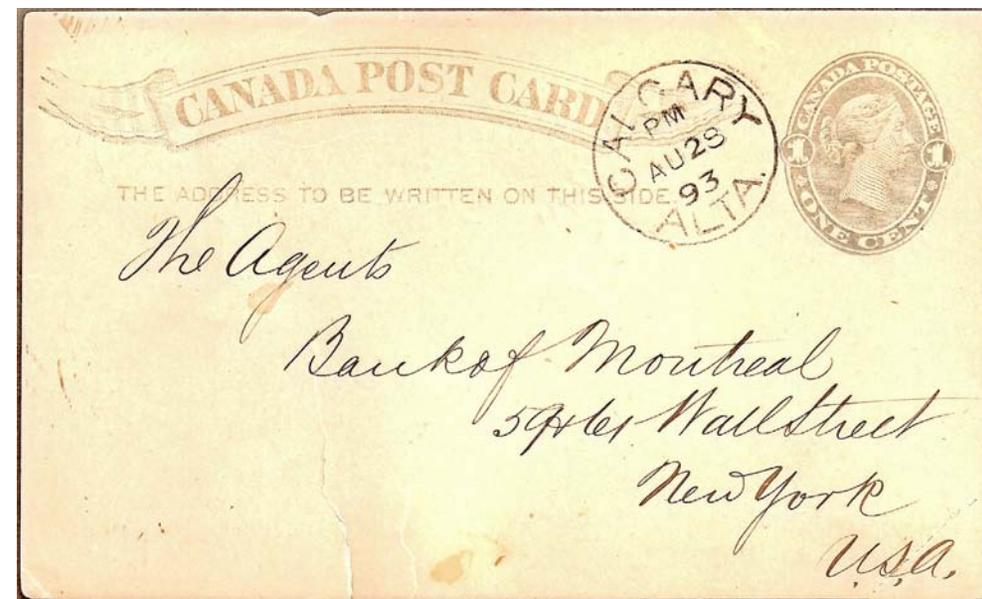
The idea was an instant success, and within a few years there were hundreds of millions of postal cards used in dozens of countries. The postage rate was the cheapest in every country's postal tariff, usually one cent or the equivalent in other currencies. Postal cards were fast and easy to use. Address on one side, a quick message on the other. No having to fold paper, stuff envelopes, or stick stamps on. In those days, most large cities had several mail deliveries per day, so one could send an enquiry in the morning and get an answer back that afternoon. The killer app was advertising. Businesses could buy sheets of uncut postal cards, have advertisements printed on them, then cut to size, and mass-mailed. Countless clubs and churches used them for meeting notices.

In 1870, Bulgaria, France, Britain, and Switzerland adopted postal cards. Canada and many European nations, including the newborn Germany, took up the idea in 1871. The USA began producing postal cards in 1873, and by the end of the decade very few countries did not have postal cards.

Steinhart begins his book with the spread of the postcard idea to Canada. The Canadian Post Office (as Canada Post then was) began considering the idea in 1870, and on 1871-06-01, the first Canadian postal card was issued. Canada

was the first nation outside Europe to produce postal cards. Like most countries, the Canadian postal card had official text and a one-cent stamp imprint on one side, where the address was to be written, and a blank reverse side for the message. View cards, with a pretty picture on front, were decades into the future and had to wait for advances in printing presses.

Initially the postal cards were only valid for domestic mails, but over several years from 1872 were allowed for international mail if additional postage was added. In 1877, a two-cent postal card was issued for mail to Newfoundland (then a separate country) and Britain. Strangely the 1877 rate to Germany was 2½ cents, although that only lasted sixteen months before it conformed to regular rates. In 1878, Canada joined the Universal Postal Union, which standardized postage rates in a wide variety of categories, including postal cards at the 2-cent rate. Because of the cheap rate for postal cards, they could not be forwarded free like letters.

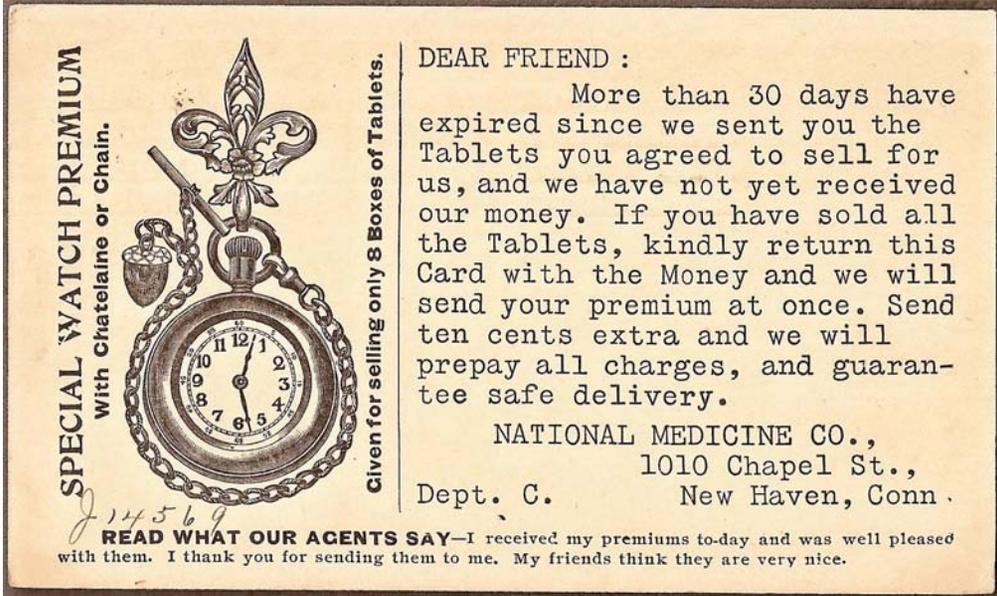


*Postal card sent in 1893 from Calgary to Manhattan.*

A variation of the postal card that began in 1872 was the international reply card. Canada issued its first reply postal card in 1882. This consisted of two postal cards hinged together, one for the initial message, and the other to be separated and used for the reply. The idea was that people could use them where they did not want to inconvenience the recipient for postage costs. They worked fine in the gold-standard era when international exchange rates and

costs were relatively stable (excluding war or disaster). When the world went to fiat currencies after 1971, currencies became so volatile that it was difficult for postal administrations to settle accounts with each other. The increasing use of telephones as international calls became cheaper, followed by faxes and finally emails, killed off reply cards.

From the very beginning it was illegal to send postal cards with obscene, libelous, or dunning messages. Postal staff were not supposed to read messages because it wasted their time but at the same time were required to catch illegal messages. The January 1894 POSTAL GUIDE issued the following rule, which makes perfect sense to anyone who has worked for a bureaucratic organization. "Postmasters are not intentionally to read Post Cards passing through their offices, but cards which are so conspicuously improper as to arrest attention, or the dunning character of which has been intentionally made prominent, are to be stopped and sent to the Dead Letter Office." I published a history of libel on postcards in OPUNTIA #59.



Dunning postcard, designed to embarrass the recipient into paying.

Private postcards were not permitted until 1895 at postal card rates; they had to be paid as letters. Initially they had to be in the same format as postal cards, with one side for the address and stamp only, and nothing else. The message or advertisement had to be on the back. The first crack in this policy was the following year when postcards were allowed to have the return address on the

same side as the addressee. Little by little the rules were amended until December 1903, when the modern form of postcard was allowed, the divided back, with address, stamp, and message on one side and a view or advertisement on the other.

Another problem with private postcards was that people were mailing them without a stamp, then blaming the post office when they didn't arrive or were assessed double-deficiency postage due. This led to postcard printers putting a small vertical rectangle in the upper right corner with a text reminding users to add a stamp. During the gold standard days when rates seldom changed, they often specified the amount of postage to be paid.



1917 view card of Shaunavon, Saskatchewan, near where my grandfather homesteaded.

In the first decade of the 1900s, view postcards became extremely popular, and billions were sent around the world. It was the Golden Age of the postcard. View postcards were a cheap and easy method of sending images of "We are here", often in colour. Even the humblest village would have a general store (where the post office usually was) selling a view of Main Street or an adjacent lake or mountain. Resorts went all out with scenery views, and big cities liked to show off their skyscrapers and monuments.

## LET MARS DIVIDE ETERNITY IN TWAIN: PART 2

by Dale Speirs

[Part 1 appeared in OPUNTIA #310.]



### Mars Of Olden Times.

The Mariner space probes put the final nail into the coffin of the idea that Mars may have once had an ancient civilization with canals. For SF writers, it was fun while it lasted. There were all sorts of variations on a theme when it came to Martians and herewith are a few from that pre-NASA era.

“Don’t Come To Mars” by Henry Hasse (1950 April, FANTASTIC ADVENTURES) is about Dr. Wesley Rahm, a rocket scientist who wakes up one morning to find a Martian has arrived on Earth and then swapped bodies with him. His struggles to deal with the situation are eventually resolved when the Martian warns him not to attempt space travel and then sabotages the Earth space programme. (That is, the American space programme. Every American in 1950 knew the Soviets were too primitive to get a rocket into space.)

The problem is that on Mars, one of them developed a method to absorb the minds of its fellow Martians and killed off the entire civilization except the refugee. If it realizes there is intelligent life on Earth, it will travel here and do the same thing. By stalling the Earth space programme for a few years, the refugee knows the Martian supermind will die of starvation since it destroyed its own civilization without thinking about the consequences. The story has one editorial problem! Too many exclamation marks! Narratives should seldom, if ever!, use them!

Another don’t-come-to-Mars story is the 1960 movie ANGRY RED PLANET. This movie has been the subject of many KTF reviews and for just cause. It does have a few good points, such as outside scenes on Mars being shown in red monochrome, a neat touch I thought. (All the other scenes were in regular colour.) Against that are too many defects, such as a female astronaut who screams or faints at the slightest provocation, a science officer who smokes a pipe on the spaceship, and obvious flat painted backdrops that pass for Martian scenery. Passing meteors in space glow red hot instead of being black rocks.

The absolute worst logical flaw occurs when the crew goes outside the first time after landing on Mars. They see what appear to be trees, and one of the Marsnauts chops off a piece for analysis. The trees come to life and are revealed to be the legs of a giant spider with the head of a bat. Setting aside the square-cube law, which does not allow giant animals with skinny legs, the viewer wonders why the Marsnauts did not notice the spider. The previous screen shot shows the beast was not hidden by foliage and the Marsnauts were actually glancing upward as they approached it. Even if they didn’t look up, their peripheral vision couldn’t be so bad as not to notice the body of the animal.

What I particularly noticed, in my capacity as a professional horticulturist, was the remarkable Martian flora. The Marsnauts stop to admire an exotic alien plant, none other than a cholla of the genus *Opuntia*. Other desert plants such as agaves are intermixed with tropical jungle plants such as *Monstera deliciosa* (split-leaf philodendron). The plants were obviously potted and placed about on a stage.

The expedition to Mars is a failure. The Marsnauts are chased off by assorted giant critters under the control of the Martian civilization. They transmit a message warning Earthlings to stay away or else. The story is told in annoying flashbacks instead of linear narrative. However, it is a fun movie for nitpickers.

“Final Exam” by Chad Oliver (1952 November, FANTASTIC SF) is about a group of tourists to Mars who go out on a guided tour which includes a visit to a reservation where the native Martians dance for them. The Martians are considered slow and stupid, and treated like any plantation Negro in antebellum USA. But they have been watching and learning from the humans, and the tour group finds itself in the midst of a successful uprising. The Martians eradicate humans from their planet, then take the spaceships to Earth because they are tired of living on a dead planet and want to conquer a new and better world.

There have been several attempts to reconcile the older observations of Schiaparelli and Lowell with the photos of the Mariner probes.

“A Martian Ricorso” by Greg Bear (1976 February, ANALOG) begins with a team of Marsnauts on the surface of Mars, the one with craters and rilles, not canals and vegetated areas. They have discovered crumbling artifacts and ruins not visible to space probes. As they explore the sites, aliens begin appearing, apparently having been in hibernation and able to rebuild structures incredibly fast. The aliens overrun the Marsnauts, not from malice but because they are in the way. Only one survivor makes it back into orbit. The planet undergoes changes as the craters are once more replaced by aqueducts and buildings. The story is an interesting concept but takes a long time to get going. It is also degraded by a wimpy Marsnaut who would never have made the cut for space travel in the first place, and whose apparent function is to provide some additional and unnecessary conflict for the story.

“On The Martian Problem” by Randall Garrett (1977 Winter, ASIMOV’S) uses doubletalk algebraic equations to explain how it was that ERB’s heros could travel to Mars and visit a world denied by the reality of the space probes. The various equations demonstrate that the trips from Earth to Mars by bodily teleportation were done at tachyonic speeds, which caused Carter to travel back in time 50,000 years. Therefore, he was visiting a dying world which had since gone kaput. The death of Martian civilization was assisted by an asteroid impact that punched a hole in the planet’s crust, causing Olympus Mons to form and overheat the planet with its massive magma flows. As to why Carter didn’t go another 50,000 years into the past when returning to Earth, this was explained by some handwaving about the differential effect of the two planet’s gravity wells. The story is nicely done, an explanation reconciling the two visions of Mars.

### **The Day Before Their Arrival.**

Frederik Pohl did a series of short stories about the effect of Martians on Earth before they actually arrived. The Martians were seal-like creatures, and some were being brought back by a NASA expedition. I mentioned a few of Pohl’s stories in Part 1 of this column, and now add “Saucery” (1986 October, MAGAZINE OF FANTASY AND SF). The announcement of the imminent arrival of the expedition has ruined the traditional UFO industry. The story is about two UFO nuts who can’t get any interest from publishers or broadcast networks for the usual aliens or interdimensional beings. They have a long

conference to brainstorm ideas about how to work in Martians with the usual Greys and lost civilizations. I’m not sure that genuine Martians would put the UFO nuts out of business. They would just backdate their Websites and claim they predicted it or that the Martians were degenerate descendants or slaves of the Greys. But the story, and its ilk, are a thoughtful consideration of how the impact of such a discovery would play with the general public.

### **The War Of The Worlds Redux.**

In OPUNTIA #289, I reviewed the various WOTW movies and some literary variations. Here are a few more.

“Panic” by Stanley Schmidt (1978 Jan/Feb, ASIMOV’S) is told from the point of view of an alien species about to invade Earth. It is 1938 and it happens to be the night of Orson Welles’ famous broadcast of WOTW that caused a panic in the USA. The aliens had been monitoring prior Earth broadcasts and have learned all the languages. Just as they begin the attack, they intercept radio reports about themselves, which touches off a panic within them. They had thought the Earthlings too primitive to detect them, yet the partial intercepts say the planet is mobilizing to meet them. The invasion is called off and the planet put under an interdiction as the aliens zoom away, still puzzled by the unexpectedly advanced abilities of Earthlings.

A humourous short story is “Extraterrestrial Life On The Mississippi” by Gary D. Douglass (1991 May, AMAZING). The place is antebellum Dawson’s Landing, Missouri, a hick town on the river. A couple of Martian cylinders make their crash landings in the Wellsian style. Because Mars is a dry world, the Martians are not prepared for Earth weather such as thunderstorms or how to wade across the Mississippi River and its strong current. The tripod cylinders standing up high on a meadow during a thunderstorm are zapped by lightning. The one that tries to wade across the river collides with a steamboat. A funny story well told as if by Samuel Clemens.

“Secret Of The Death Dome” by Walter M. Miller Jr (1951 January, AMAZING) is about a different type of Martian invasion. They land on Earth in a desert, set up an impregnable force-field dome, and spend their time kidnaping the occasional Earthling for vivisection and experimentation. The crew of the dome are all female except for one male, and there are only two males left back on Mars. The Martians are therefore trying to propagate their species by building a human-Martian hybrid. It all ends badly for the Martians

as one would expect. This story fits into the dying-Mars category, an outgrowth of Lowell's desert canal observations that stereotyped a generation of stories.

### **The Other Aliens.**

It is not necessarily the case that Earthlings would be the first to visit Mars. Larry Niven considers this idea in his story "The Hole Man" (1974 January, ANALOG). The first human expedition orbiting Mars discovers a gravitational anomaly as they sweep around the planet. It is found to be an abandoned alien base on the surface of Mars, left behind with all its equipment running on automatic. The base had a communications device that used gravity waves to send its messages. Engineers studying the device, that is, men flipping a switch to see what would happen next, conclude that the communicator uses a black hole inside it to generate the waves. (Black holes can have electrical charges and thus be held in an electromagnetic cage from a distance.) One man flips one switch too many, causing the electromagnetic field to shut off. The black hole drops through the floor into the core of Mars, where it will eventually eat away at the planet over a few centuries and swallow it up. As a result of human interference, in not too long a time there will be a black hole orbiting the Sun where once was a planet. Niven was one of the best hard SF writers when it came to using cutting-edge physics and astronomy.

"Solstice" by Bill Johnson (1986 July, AMAZING) takes place on a Mars still being colonized. Evidence has been found of an advanced civilization which abandoned not just Mars but the rest of the Solar System, leaving behind tools and equipment that humans are scavenging and reverse-engineering. The aliens apparently colonized the system and then suddenly abandoned it millions of years ago. The story is about an exploration team heading to a natural laser that they think the aliens may have modified into a more powerful one to propel starships via light sails.

The natural laser occurs on dayside Mars when light reflected back from the surface is partially intercepted by dust high up in the thin carbon dioxide atmosphere and some of it reflected back to the ground. Enough light is continuously bounced back and forth that it becomes a CO<sub>2</sub> laser. It is a very weak laser to be sure, detectable only by scientific instruments, but a natural laser nonetheless. Such a thing could not exist on Earth because moisture would scatter the light, but the extremely dry Martian atmosphere allows it to function.

The team find a building at the base of the laser. The aliens could control the laser and use it to drive light sail starships, as the humans find out when they inadvertently trigger the laser into a concentrated full-power beam that fires into the constellation Leo. That provides a clue as to where the aliens went, and the heat from the concentrated laser will melt some of the Martian permafrost and thicken its atmosphere. A good story based on speculative science.

### **The Rise Of The Robots.**

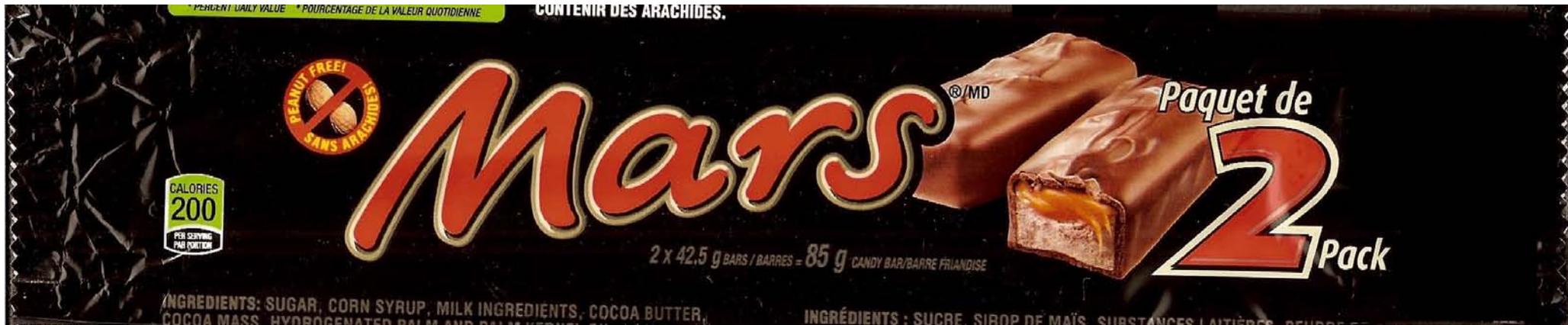
Mars fiction almost entirely seems to deal with aliens or human colonists, but not too many are about space probes. "A Flash Of Darkness" by Stanley Schmidt (1968 September, ANALOG) is about a robot probe on the planet called Mars Rover, very prescient for 1968. It is, however, an articulated upright robot, not whirring about on wheels or treads. The story bothered me because the premise was that the robot used holographic vision with scanning lasers and rotating mirrors, rather than cameras. This was necessary because the plot was about the robot's struggle to overcome something blinding it at intervals as it walked along. Eventually it discovers that an ancient alien beacon, too small to be seen from orbit, is flashing a light at it. This triggers excitement back on Earth and so ends the story. I found it difficult to believe that the robot's builders had no plan for it to deal with bright light.

"Lunchbox" by Howard Waldrop (1972 May, ANALOG) is about a Viking lander arriving on Mars in an area where an amoeboid Martian lives. As it goes hunting its regular prey, it comes across the lander and tries to communicate with it. The Viking being a stupid pre-programmed robot, it does not answer, which enrages the Martian into destroying it.

"Plaything" by Larry Niven (1974 July, WORLDS OF IF) isn't one of his better efforts. A robot explorer is landed on Mars, near where some Martian children are playing. Kids being kids no matter what the species, they go over and start poking and prodding it as the robot tries to do its experiments. Needless to say, the data returned to Earth are wildly off the scale.

### **The Explorers.**

"One Step From Earth" by Hank Dempsey (1970 March, ANALOG) posits that the first travelers to Mars will come by matter transmitter. One end of the transmitter is on Earth, and the other is sent by robot probe to land on Mars and thereby open the gate. The transmitter only works one way, so that the first two



men on Mars have to set up a second matter transmitter that will beam things back to Earth. They are by various turns socially inept and just plain incompetent, which makes one wonder how they were selected as Marsnauts. They become infected by some sort of Martian disease, which puts them under quarantine, at which point the story fizzles out. The editor, John Campbell Jr, was nodding when he let this one through.

“Encounter Below Tharsis” by Bob Buckley (1974 December, ANALOG) is about some exploration crews descending into caverns to see what they might be good for. Unbeknownst to them, there is a giant amoeboid creature soaked into the ground and quiescent because it ran out of minerals and water. It is shaken out of its dormancy by the arrival of the metal buggies and the bipeds within that seem to be water and organics. After the initial attack and absorption of an unlucky explorer, it then uses the explorer’s brain and nervous system to advantage. The story was rather cringe inducing at this distance in time when I was rereading it, because the author was one of those for whom men were men but women were always girls.

The sequel to this story was “The Hunters Of Tharsis” (1975 February, ANALOG) whereby the blob continues to fission each time it absorbs another human and has now created an army of assimilated creatures doing battle with the remaining Mars colonists. The blob creatures can travel through the underground fissures of Mars and pop up anywhere to launch a surprise attack on humans. This story would have been at home in any 1930s pulp magazine.

The next installment in this series is “Trans-Figurement” (1976 April, ANALOG) in which humans assimilated by the amoeboid become vaguely

humanoid, with independent thought and action, and are continuing their campaign for recognition and freedom. They can transmute any normal human by touching them, and since they are adapted for Mars without spacesuits and humans are not, the end of the beginning is in sight for the first phase of the war.

One of the worst Mars stories has to be “Martian Walkabout” by F. Gwynplaine MacIntyre (1980 March, ASIMOV’S) about an Australian Aborigine who goes to Mars as part of a spaceship crew. He decides to jump ship and go on a walkabout with no protection from the extremely cold environment and lack of breathable air and yet by some mystical handwaving not only survives but discovers archaeological proof that his ancestors were there. One supposes that because Australia is mostly desert and Mars is all desert, the author had an inspiration, but it should have been stifled.

“The Lost Earthman” by Robert F. Young (1983 November, MAGAZINE OF FANTASY AND SF) concerns a Marsnaut whose fellow crew members were killed in an accident around the planet, leaving him alone. The accident also destroyed the communications system and the man spends sixteen months orbiting all alone with no one to talk to. As he stares down at the planet, he fancies the volcanic ridges are partial thumbprints of God, who gave up on Mars when he realized it wouldn’t be a successful project. That God would be fallible drives the Marsnaut insane, and he is convinced that Earth is also a failure.

## **The Colonists.**

“Hard Sell” by Piers Anthony (1972 August, WORLDS OF IF) is simply a mundane story relocated to Mars. The protagonist, named Fisk Centers, crosses paths with a hard sell salesman who uses all the regular tactics of sharp-practice men throughout history to sell land on Mars to gullible marks on Earth. Centers thinks he knows how to beat him but is rooked anyway for big money on unbuildable lots. Substitute Florida swampland for Mars real estate and the story reads exactly the same. Other than demonstrating that dishonesty will accompany humans out into space, the story is not SF.

“Nix Olympica” by William Walling (1974 December, ANALOG) is about the Martian volcano now known as Olympus Mons. It is the tallest mountain known in the Solar System, 25 km high or three times the height of Mt Everest. This short story concerns the Martian colonists who are using its caldera for water capture and storage. From there, the water is sluiced down the slopes in pipelines. One day, however, the volcano sputters back to life. The damage must be repaired by brave engineers who have to make the climb up and down the slope. Remember that 25 km is the vertical height, not the hypotenuse of the slope. Much derring-do and flashing slide rules as they overcome the huge scale of the problem to get those pipelines flowing water again to the colony.

“The Wheels Of Dream” by John M. Ford (1980 October, ASIMOV’S) is a humorous (I assume) story set on Phobos, the larger of the two Martian satellites. There is a settlement on it, whose inhabitants are obsessed with not floating away from its surface since its escape velocity is so low. Everyone goes about tethered. The story is about a scheme to build a steam train around the satellite, sealed against the vacuum of space and with rack wheels to keep it from floating off the rails. Railfans will probably like this story.

“Earthscape” by Robert F. Young (1982 May, ASIMOV’S) is about a construction worker who served on a big project on Mars and is now back home. He drifts through his life uncertain what to do next. His father wants him to get a safe civil-service job with the post office. Restlessness on Earth drives him back to Mars, where he will stay the rest of his days.

Ho hum. The ASIMOV’S editorial staff were among the worst in lecturing potential writers that they didn’t want mundane stories rewritten with a science fiction background just to make it SF. The editor would then publish exactly those kind of stories. Which is why I eventually stopped reading the magazine.

“Epitaph” by Bill Pronzini (1983 March, AMAZING) is about a young man named Craig Dennison who takes the long voyage to Mars to visit his father’s grave. The father had been caught in a sandstorm with two other explorers, had gone crazy, and killed the others before committing suicide. The Martian colonists attributed it to Specters, supposed ghosts that came in the midst of storms and drove men insane. Dennison sees a Specter at the grave in the form of his father, but survives the encounter.

Although the phenomenon is well documented, the colonists haven’t bothered to study what causes it since they are too busy struggling to survive. Dennison vows he will come back and do a proper study in honour of his father. I had trouble with the premise that an ordinary person could make the trip to Mars just to visit his father’s grave, but I liked the idea of the colonists ignoring things on their doorstep because they were too busy. It reminds me of the Kananaskis mountains adjacent to Calgary, which were never properly surveyed until after World War One because homesteaders in southwestern Alberta during the late 1800s had too much else to deal with.

## **Terraforming.**

Mars is an incredibly dry planet with a thin atmosphere that is mostly carbon dioxide, but it has possibilities. “The Weather On Mars” by Alex and Phyllis Eisenstein (1974 December, ANALOG) begins with the initial colony of humans being ordered to return to Earth because the settlement is too expensive. Some return but others go into cryogenic storage deep in the caverns of Mars.

There then follows a long and tedious infodump about how a Mars Foundation kept the faith on Earth by fundraising, how Earth was gradually united in a one-world government, and finally how others went out past Saturn to harvest ice and send it on a collision course to Mars. The cometary impacts produce a breathable atmosphere, the colonists left behind are revived out of cold storage after a century, and a new day has begun. They all join hands and begin singing “*The sun will come out tomorrow ...*” Okay, I made up that last part, but this story is not believable for either the infallible technology or the implausible World Union government. A wish fulfillment story.

## 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](mailto:opuntia57@hotmail.com)]

FROM: Lloyd Penney  
Etobicoke, Ontario

2015-09-04

OPUNTIA #317: [re: giant dinosaur in Drumheller] There are lots of tourist trap-style items across the country where you can climb up high to see the view, and then go to the souvenir shop. East of Toronto, there's the Big Apple. Climb to the top of the Apple, and then buy apple juice, cider, pastries, etc. There are some small dinosaurs in city parks here, mostly by the shores of Lake Ontario.

[A coffee-table book was published a few years ago detailing all the "world's biggest" created by small towns across Canada trying to attract tourists. An episode in the comedy series CORNER GAS had the residents trying to come up with a world's-biggest statue, troubled because all the good ones were taken.]

Utility box art is flourishing in my neighbourhood. From one decorated box, there's now four, two up the street, and two down.

I did like Larry Niven's THE INTEGRAL TREES and THE SMOKE RING. The first book was mostly descriptive to show Larry's smarts in creating such an interesting universe, with a bit of story tacked on the back. THE SMOKE RING was a good story, but I don't think Larry went any further with this detailed universe. That's a shame.

[Niven was very good at creating genuine worlds based on astronomy. The problem was that after a couple of novels, there wasn't much new to write about. This isn't considered a problem in fantasy novels where the hero/heroine can spend three novels on a quest to find the Sacred Knickknack of Qwerty, then have it stolen for another three novels, then have an evil warlord, etcetera.]

OPUNTIA #318: [re: large conventions] What you say about a mob of 100,000. Right now, as I type, DragonCon is on in Atlanta, and Fan eXpo is on in Toronto, and both have similar mobs, and much larger, too. We are at neither, and neither holds any attraction for us. Simply too big, and covers little if any of our interests.

[re: When Words Collide convention] I think I would have liked the panel on Sherlock Holmes in the 21st Century. Beyond that, I am not sure what I could participate in, or engage in. Wish zombies and vampires would return to their deserved limbo.

[When Words Collide is a very successful readercon because it caps its membership at 650 to make it more like a village community, and because it does not let in the cosplay, media SF, and gamer crowds. I'm sure Toronto could support a similar readercon if someone would organize it. I don't mind the comic cons because they divert away the passive "please entertain me" crowd and let the rest of us enjoy ourselves in our own groups. I've said it before and I'll say it again, the success of a convention is not measured by paid attendance, and the big-tent shows are not better because they bring out thousands (SF Worldcon) or hundreds of thousands (comic cons).]

OPUNTIA #319: There is indeed compelling evidence that the great flood changed Calgary's geography. The new pedestrian bridge on page 4 reminds me of the similar bridge that allows runners, joggers and walkers to go across the mouth of the Humber River. You can see stylized thunderbirds in the spans, and there are bronze box turtles embedded in the concrete, but most people refer to it as the Q-Tip Bridge.

Those of us who have been on the radio at some point in our lives rue the day when most radio stations will be taken over by software in their daily broadcast operations, and we also know that day is coming soon.

[Commercial radio has been a lost cause for decades, but I still listen to CJSW campus radio (available online for streaming from [www.cjsw.com](http://www.cjsw.com)) which has good programming by live people who know their subject and no commercials. We don't need most radio stations anymore than we need printed newspapers.]

OPUNTIA #320: [re: Dinosaur Provincial Park] The Cretaceous Cafe? I hope the leftovers aren't that old. I am sure all of the saurian attractions in Alberta will see happier times once the JURASSIC WORLD movie comes out.

[What irritates me about the movie titles is that many of the dinosaurs are are Cretaceous, not Jurassic, such as *Tyrannosaurus rex* (which is found in Alberta). The other annoying plot point (and the Lost World movies as well) is that if pterodactyls are there, as commonly shown, they would have long ago flown away to the outside world to annoy people in the big cities.]

The passing of Ned Brooks was a shock to all of us, especially the sudden manner of his passing. We will all miss his zine IGOTS.

[We are all only one breath from the grave. On a brighter note, “*Litera scripta manet*”. Our publications have a chance of carrying the memory that we once existed to a future generation. More so than the average person, zine publishers have a chance to be remembered.]

## SEEN IN THE LITERATURE

Darimont, C.T., et al (2015) **The unique ecology of human predators.** SCIENCE 349:858-860

Authors' abstract: “*We compared patterns of predation by contemporary hunters and fishers with those of other predators that compete over shared prey (terrestrial mammals and marine fishes). Our global survey (2125 estimates of annual finite exploitation rate) revealed that humans kill adult prey, the reproductive capital of populations, at much higher median rates than other predators (up to 14 times higher), with particularly intense exploitation of terrestrial carnivores and fishes. Given this competitive dominance, impacts on predators, and other unique predatory behavior, we suggest that humans function as an unsustainable “super predator,” which, unless additionally constrained by managers, will continue to alter ecological and evolutionary processes globally. ...*”

“*Emerging evidence suggests that the consequences of dominating adult prey are considerable. For example, human preference for large ornaments and/or large body size has fundamentally altered the selective landscape for many vertebrates. Not only can this rapidly alter morphological and life-history phenotypes, the resulting changes can modify the reproductive potential of populations) and ecological interactions within food webs. In addition, owing to different behavior (e.g., age-class preferences and seasonality of exploitation), hunters likely cannot substitute for carnivores as providers of ecological services [e.g., regulation of disease and wildfire, as well as mesopredator control]. Finally, less explored is the potentially substantial impact of prey biomass removal from ecosystems; global trade and sanitation*

*systems shunt energy and nutrients from food webs of provenance to distant landfills and sewers. These implications, the high exploitation rates that drive them, and the broadest taxonomic niche of any consumer uniquely define humans as a global “super predator.”*”

Goodman, Leslie (2015) **Disappointing fans: Fandom, fictional theory, and the death of the author.** JOURNAL OF POPULAR CULTURE 48:662-676

Extracts (there was no author's abstract): “*Fan studies began as a form of cultural studies in the late 1980s and early 1990s, at the intersection of feminist criticism, queer theory, popular culture studies, and media studies, where the price of admission for attending to a subculture like fandom was, in part, reading it as counterculture, evading and resisting the dominant ideologies of popular media. ...*”

“*The rule-breaking aspects of fandom have thus often been at the center of academic fan studies: indifference to copyright laws and capitalist models of artistic labor, the insistence on representing what the mainstream media refuses to represent (particularly feminine or queer forms of desire), the rejection of the distinction between author and reader—in short, the critique and the punk-like anger. ...*”

“*In this article, I read fan complaints as exemplary of a distinctive mode of interpretation and theoretical approach to texts and authors. Using concepts from fictional-worlds theory, I argue that fans' approach to their source text depends on a distinction between texts and universes; fan interpretation privileges the coherence of the fictional universe while downplaying the authority of the text and insisting that the author is not dead, but a failure and a disappointment. The work of fans, intentional or otherwise, is to converge collectively to a unified fictional universe, despite the divergent tendencies of fan fiction and despite failures of the source text. As I conclude, I place this account of fans' attitudes toward authors in the context of debates about fandom's relationship toward the entertainment industry. Fan complaints do not reveal a straightforwardly pro- or anti-commercialism sentiment; punk critiques they are not, though they often protest against the purely profit-driven.*”

Speirs: Goodman is writing about modern fan-fic fandom based on television series or movies, not the traditional SF fandom or zinedom.