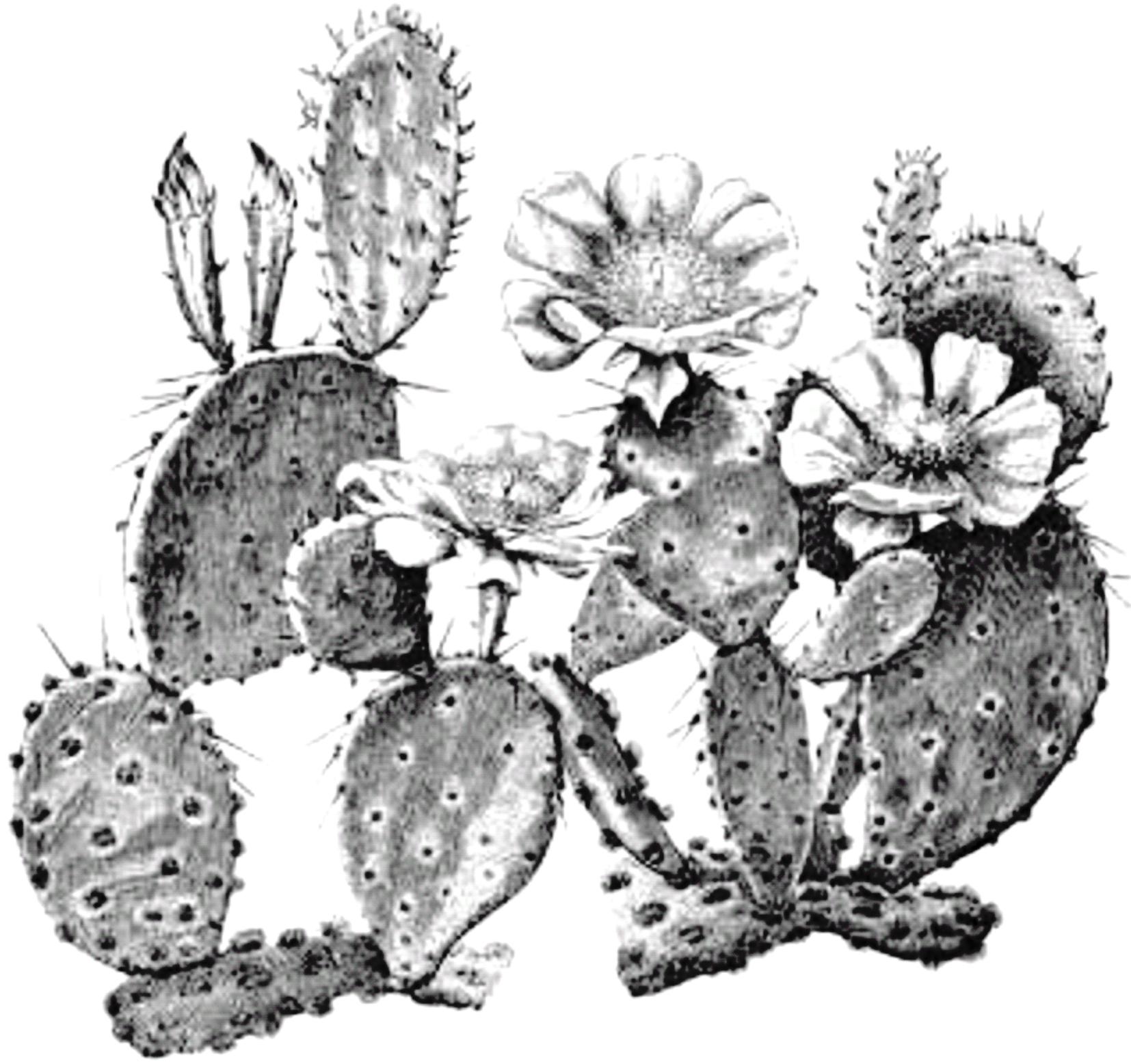


# OPUNTIA 410



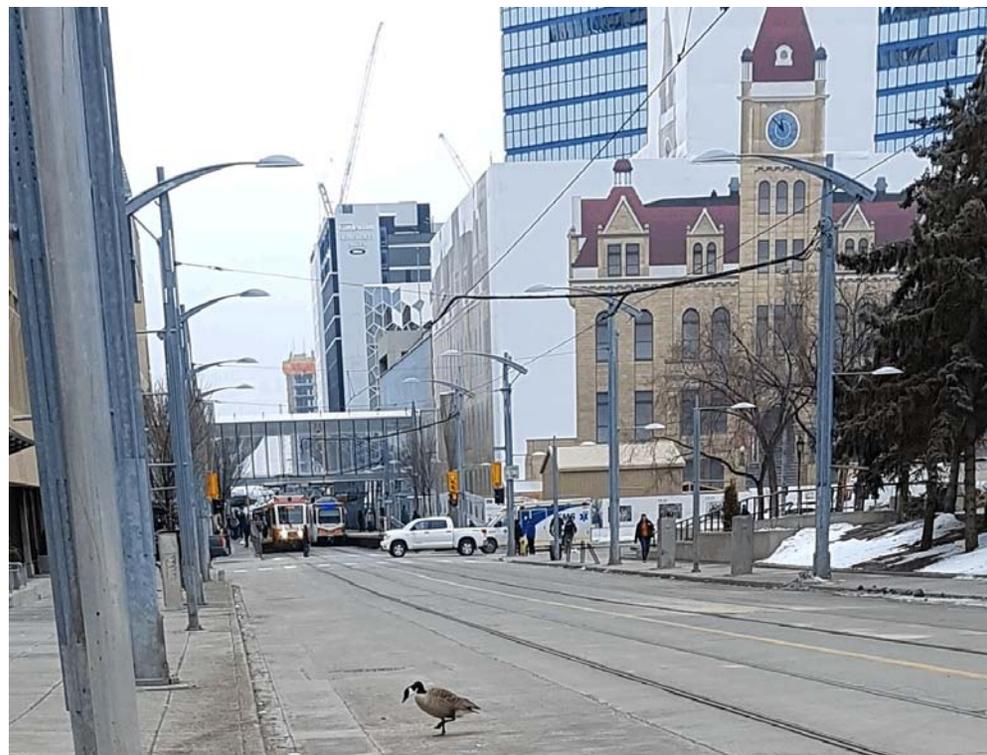
**Middle April 2018**

**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.

**ABOUT THE COVER:** Many long years ago, for about the first 50 issues of this zine, I used as covers various line drawings photocopied from old botanical texts on the genus *Opuntia*. Those being the pre-Internet days, I eventually used up the resources of the University of Calgary Library and the series came to an end. Now I am mining [www.gutenberg.org](http://www.gutenberg.org) for books not in the library system.

This issue begins a new series of covers, which will not necessarily be consecutive, of botanical drawings. The downloaded book is *CACTUS CULTURE FOR AMATEURS*, published in England by W. Watson in 1889. At that time he was Assistant Curator at the Royal Botanic Gardens in Kew, London. The cover of this issue depicts *Opuntia macrorhiza* from that book.

**COWTOWN BIRDING**  
photos by Dale Speirs



Above: A Canada goose crosses the LRT tracks along Olympic Plaza, which is behind the spruce trees.

At left: Seagulls on the plaza. Guess which way the wind is blowing.

## IF YOU AREN'T SQUAMOUS, THEN WHY ARE YOU TRYING TO BE ELDRITCH?: PART 7

by Dale Speirs

[Parts 1 to 6 appeared in OPUNTIA #298, 333, 340, 352, 365, and 395. Issues #22 and 63.1A have related articles on H.P. Lovecraft.]

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### Pastiches: Short Stories.

“Calamari Curls” by Kage Baker (2012, in her posthumous collection *THE BEST OF KAGE BAKER*) is set in the California seaside village of Nunas Beach, which peaked in 1906 and hasn’t been much since. The village is just about to be gentrified.

The only restaurant is a clam chowder joint, run by Pegasus Bright. A new restaurant opens up across the street, with a view to attract yuppies from the nearby big city. It also attracts the locals because it has far better food at only a modest price advance. Bright loses customers and closes his restaurant.

He wants revenge. Bright visits a local madman who will take action for a fee. What he does is a dance in front of the competitor while chanting gibberish that includes words such as Nyarlathotep, Cthulhu, and R’lyeh. Giant tentacles rise from the ground and pull the restaurant, its proprietors, and unfortunate customers down below. That’s one way to compete in a capitalist society.

“The Gift” by Steve Diamond (2017, from the anthology *THE MONSTER HUNTER FILES*, edited by Larry Correia and Bryan Thomas Schmidt) is about a case dealt with by the Vatican’s covert agency, the Knights of the Secret Guard of the Blessed Order of Saint Hubert the Protector. The narrator is Fedele, who has been sent to Mexico with his comrade Michael Gutterres to investigate a suspicious church congregation.

Their suspicions are confirmed, and they arrive just in time. Cultists have been kidnapping people as incubators for tentacled beasts. They also opened a portal inside the church to another dimension where the Old Ones are waiting to enter. Fedele and Gutterres do battle and stop the invasion amidst blood, gore, and severed tentacles. And you thought the Spanish Inquisition was rough.

### Pastiches: Anthologies.

*SHOTGUNS V. CTHULHU* (2012) is an anthology edited by Robin D. Laws. In his preface “Save A Barrel For Yourself”, Laws introduces fifteen Cthulhu Mythos pastiches, written in the style of action-adventure stories. Nevermind Lovecraft’s mood pieces, here is where people reach for their shotguns when they hear the word Cthulhu, however it may be pronounced. I won’t review all the stories, but for readers who like slam-bang action, these pastiches will certainly provide it.

“Infernal Devices” by Kenneth Hite opens with a feud over whether or not a Montana veterans’ club has on display the earliest known shotgun, dated 1531, or if it is just a 1930s replica. The story flashes back to Europe of the 1500s, with the man using the shotgun against witches. He had surprised a coven as they were chanting “*Iae! Iae! Shub-Niggurath!*”. The battle of spells versus shot takes an unexpected twist when the man reloads with sacred knucklebones, relics of a saint, and aggravates an Elder God enough to throw him forward into the Battle of the Bulge.

“Welcome To Cthulhuville” by Larry DiTillio is a fresh look at the End Times a la the Mythos. The struggles of the hero, and the rise of the city of New R’lyeh culminate in an unexpected battle between Cthulhu and all the other Elder Gods, Old Ones, and assorted hangers-on. The battle of the gods, fought across the skies of Earth in full view of humanity, is won by Cthulhu.

LOVECRAFT’S MONSTERS (2014) is an anthology edited by Ellen Datlow. The 18 stories are based on the bestiary of the Mythos or, as HPL liked to call it, Yog-Sothothery. Some stories are only vaguely related to the theme.

The lead story is “Only The End Of The World Again” by Neil Gaiman. The protagonist is a werewolf who has to face the end of days in Innsmouth as the Elder Gods prepare to arrive. He disrupts a ceremony intended to call forth the gods, at which point the story peters out with not much more to say. Salvation of the world is an anti-climax.

“I’ve Come To Talk With You Again” by Karl Edward Wagner takes place in a London pub where a group of Lovecraftian fans and pastiche writers are gathered. One of the writers is remarkably young for his 64 years. He tells people that he has this portrait in his attic, which always gets a laugh. The truth is with a ghostly figure only he can see, one with tentacles on its lower face.

A very useful item is the appendix “Monster Index” by Rachel Fagundes. It lists the assorted Lovecraftian critters, not all of them from the Mythos. Each monster has a basic description, citations of story appearances, and extracts from the original texts about them.

THE ARKHAM DETECTIVE COLLECTION (2017) by Byron Craft is a collection of four novellas about a nameless police detective in Arkham. He works in the Mythos Division, handling complaints about anything squamous or eldritch. The stories are set during the Great Depression, written in the noir

style and yet with a mild leavening of humour. Said the detective: *Some cities grew; Arkham just festered.*

The four stories read reasonably well, what I would call workmanlike. If you don’t like Lovecraft, then they’ll do nothing for you. If you are a fan of the Mythos, then they’re worth reading.

The first story is “Cthulhu’s Minions”, which introduces the detective and his grim life on and off duty. The police are hampered by budget cuts and the general malaise of the hard times. Something is biting people’s faces off, and he goes looking for the critters. They are Pilot Demons, Cthulhu’s entourage if you will. He tracks the entire gang to its lair, which happens to be underneath his house.

The story seems a little too mean-streets. The detective goes for days without sleep or food, shreds his suit into rags fighting the demons, and makes use of a contrived and conveniently placed gasoline tanker truck to destroy the lair.

“The Innsmouth Look” takes the detective to the decaying town where everyone looks fishy. Not figuratively, but with bulging eyes, scaly skin, and the smell of fish. He is looking for the kidnapper of a young girl named Allison, who also murdered a policeman and Allison’s mother.

The denizens of Innsmouth are preparing for their big event. The planets are aligning and the populace will join in chanting the rituals to bring the Old Ones up from the ocean floor for the first stage of takeover of Earth. Agents from the U.S. Navy are working the case, and a warship is waiting offshore with instructions to plaster the town at 03h00 with the big guns. The detective has until then to find the murderer and dispose of him and rescue Allison.

“The Devil Came To Arkham” in the next in the sequence. The detective has adopted Allison and with the help of his landlady is raising her. Arkham has a new mayor, Corvus Astaroth, who rolled into town out of nowhere and managed to take over the economy, what there was of it, and the people’s minds.

Astaroth is a devil in disguise, one of the minor creatures from Cthulhu’s dimension. He, or it, has been moving from town to town, sucking the life energy out of the populus. The weather changes with him as well, with uninterrupted drought and heat.

The detective has to work within the law but has to prove a case against Astaroth that will hold up in court.

The detective has one advantage, access to the librarians at Miskatonic University and their English translation of the NECRONOMICON grimoire. The only clue is vague, that iron can bind the devil. Events build to a climax when Astaroth comes out into the open as a devil. Lead bullets do nothing against him, but the detective finds an old iron sword and resolves the matter.

“The Dunwich Dungeon” is the final story in the collection. The detective not only has an adopted daughter but has now married and acquired a dog. Positively suburban, he is. The story switches back and forth between him and Ian Woodhead, a federal agent who is trying to contact him via dreams.

Woodhead is trapped in the dungeons underneath Dunwich, where Lovecraftian things are happening. Randolph Carter, from HPL’s Kadath story, is in the plot for a cameo appearance, as are some people who have the Innsmouth look.

The detective is on the trail of Francisco Sayter, a half-breed man who is the spawn of human and Old Ones hybridizing. Sayter is trying to rescue his mate from their spaceship that made a bad landing in the Miskatonic River. If he succeeds, they will then turn their attention to letting in those who lurk on the threshold and conquer the world.

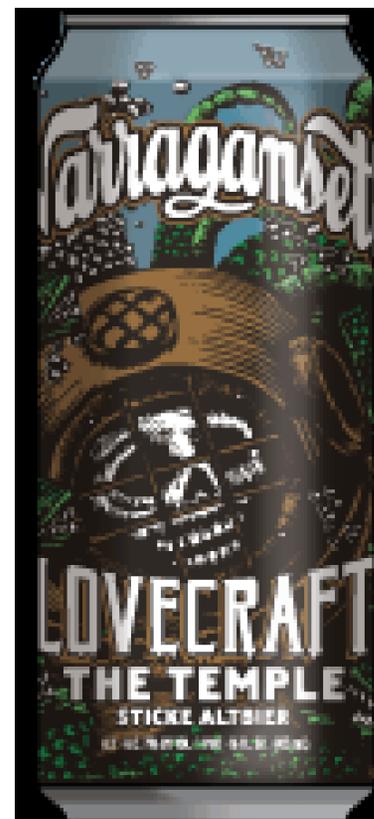
Woodhead has his own problems, still trying to make the detective understand via dream telepathy, but also dealing with tentacled things in the catacombs. In the end, he is rescued and all turns out well. Sayter is stopped the fatal way, and both Arkham and Dunwich can sink back into their stupor.

THE CACKLE OF CTHULHU (2018) is an anthology of 22 humorous Mythos pastiches, edited by Alex Shvartsman. Humour is the most difficult form of fiction to write. Most of these stories provoked wry grins or the occasional chuckle, but were not funny enough to be worth noting. Don’t get me wrong; the book as a whole is good reading. You do not have to be an acolyte, although the humour is funnier if you know the basics of the Mythos.

The lead-off story is “The Shunned Trailer” by Esther Friesner. It is about a Harvard man who by mischance ends up in a trailer park whose occupants are batrachian half-breeds worshipping Cthulhu. Friesner writes a perfect imitation of HPL’s verbose style; the man himself might have written it. The trailer park

folk are rednecks in the figurative sense, albeit none of them have necks. A hilarious story that blends the Mythos with Jeff Foxworthy’s crowd.

“Explaining Cthulhu To Grandma” by Alex Shvartsman is about Sylvia, a pawn shop operator who loans on a pocket dimension containing the dreaming Cthulhu. In practical terms, it looks like a snow globe. Word gets out, and soon acolytes appear at the shop offering bids on their idol. Sylvia does some fancy negotiating with all the factions to cancel them out against each other, while managing to hang on to the sleeping Cthulhu and promising to guard it. For a fee, of course.



There are two stories in a row which consider how modern tourist resorts might handle the Mythos. “The Call Of The Pancake Factory” by Ken Liu and “The Innsmouth Of The South” by Rachael K. Jones take different approaches to the same subject.

The former story recruits the big guy itself for Cthulhu World, and the latter is set at R’Lyeh Funland, where the concession stand serves calamari and sashimi. Jones tells her story better, an account of how downtrodden workers deal with management by summoning one of Lovecraft’s giant worms.

### **Pastiches: Novels.**

DEPARTMENT ZERO (2017) is a novel by Paul Crilley. It is about Harry Priest, a crime scenes cleanup worker who stumbles through a multiverse gate while attending to a routine death scene. He gets into an argument with the police at the crime scene on the other side of the gate, the Interstitial Crimes Department.

Things go wrong for everyone, not just Priest. It transpires that H.P. Lovecraft was writing non-fiction. Cthulhu et al exist in every parallel universe, all of which were created by the Elder Gods.

Havelock Graves is the ICD man who guides Priest through the dimensions, teaching him how to use the Elder Gods technology, some of which has buggy software. (Remember Clarke's Law: Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.) Graves and his team are demoted to Department Zero for botching the crime investigation that also brought Priest into the mess. Department Zero does the scutwork that no one else in the ICD wants to do.

Someone is going about altering the timelines, trying to release Cthulhu and the Old Ones, and having a bit of success. Nyarlathotep tangles with Department Zero, but he is rather inept and not so fearsome as everyone had been led to believe. He has problems with his employees and could use a management training course.

From there, the buildup begins to the ultimate battle. Shoggoths undulate across the landscape. Assorted creatures shamble by, some of them squamous, some tentacled, some dripping with ichor, and some all three. Nyarlathotep reaches Cthulhu's chamber and wakes him. In turn, Cthulhu summons Azathoth, Dagon, Shub-Niggurath, Yog-Sothoth, and the rest of the gang.

Priest, however, saves the day and the multiverse by taking down Cthulhu. And so to the epilogue. You don't have to know much about the Cthulhu Mythos but it is funnier in the details if you do. A good-humoured novel well worth reading.

## 25TH ANNUAL WORLD WIDE PARTY ON JUNE 21

Founded by Benoit Girard (Quebec) and Franz Miklis (Austria) in 1994, the World Wide Party is held on June 21st every year. 2018 will be the 25th year of the WWP. At 21h00 local time, everyone is invited to raise a glass and toast fellow members of zinedom around the world. It is important to have it exactly at 21h00 your time. The idea is to get a wave of fellowship circling the planet. Rescheduling it to a club meeting or more convenient time negates the idea of a wave of celebration by SF fans and zinesters circling the globe.

At 21h00, face to the east and salute those who have already celebrated. Then face north, then south, and toast those in your time zone who are celebrating as you do. Finally, face west and raise a glass to those who will celebrate WWP in the next hour. Raise a glass, publish a one-shot zine, have a party, or do a mail art project for the WWP. Let me know how you celebrated the day.

## FAR SPEAKING STORIES: PART 7

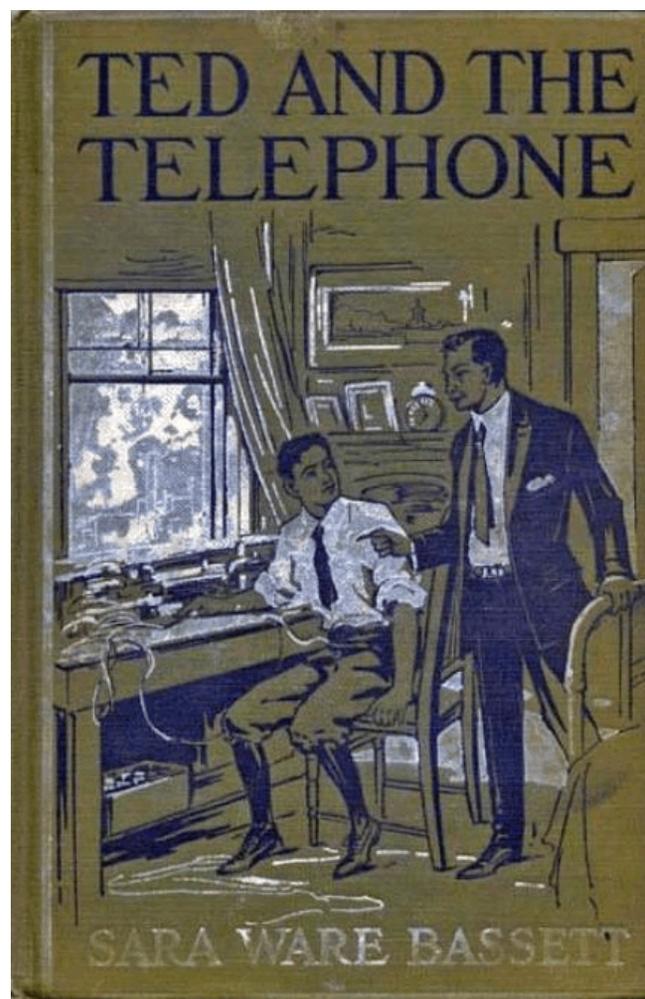
by Dale Speirs

[Parts 1 to 6 appeared in OPUNTIA's #313, 327, 337, 361, 372, and 389.]

The most science fictional device ever invented is the telephone. I say no more.

### The Dawn Of Telephony.

TED AND THE TELEPHONE (1922) by Sara Ware Bassett is available as a free download from [www.gutenberg.org](http://www.gutenberg.org). It is about a plucky young boy named Ted Turner arising from poverty in a factory town and making his way in the world. He is a gadgeteer fascinated by electricity, particularly, as the title of this novel suggests, the telephone.



No, he doesn't invent it. Midway in the book is a hagiography about Alexander Graham Bell and Thomas Watson.

Once that infodump is out of the way, the real excitement begins. Ted overhears some anarchists talking about bombing the factories and the rich folk.

He dashes to the telephone and uses it to warn the police, who in turn capture the bad guys. Just think! A telephone saved lives and, more importantly, property.

The mill owners are so impressed that they reward young Ted and decide to refurbish the company houses. That takes up several chapters until the next crisis arrives. The river is flooding and bids fair to destroy the company town. Once again Ted rushes to the telephone and uses it as an early warning device. The dam has busted, run for your lives!

Sadly, not everyone is on the telephone, and along the river banks the wires go down. After the recovery and cleanup, Ted gets an idea. What if they were to use wireless telephones? But that, evidently, was to be a sequel.

### **Telephonic Time Travel.**

“Sam, This Is You” by Murray Leinster (1955 May, GALAXY) is about Sam Yoder, a telephone lineman. One day, July 2 to be exact, he is out working on the lines and plugs in his field telephone to check a dead line. Instead a voice calls him, saying that it is Sam on July 12. It makes some predictions for him to convince him the voice is not a hoax.

Future Sam leads Past Sam around by the nose with assorted predictions, as well as advice for the lovelorn, the two of them courting Rosie of whom there is only one. The time paradoxes are straightened out somehow, although if the reader thinks about it, there must be a loop.

The future-to-past telephone conversations are possible because Sam (doesn't matter which one) had been building a gadget to convert telephone party lines into private lines. The gadget instead created a temporal break along the telephone wire. The two Sams have only ten days to sort out how to make money quick, so they have to settle with betting on local sports games to build a nest egg.

It ends well, with no tears, presumably because there was no physical time travel and because the distortion was only local, both in time and geography. A mildly amusing story that was later produced as a 1956 episode of the old-time radio series X MINUS ONE.

### **Accessory Items.**

Every device comes with accessories. Take the telephone directory. There was a time each year when men would lug bundles of directories about and distribute them door to door for free. In the rural areas where I grew up, each household

got one, a combination of White Pages (telephone subscribers listed alphabetically by surname, with street addresses included) and the Yellow Pages (display advertising by businesses, sorted by type of goods or service). In the cities, the two were separate volumes by necessity of their bulk. They began fading out as cellphones came in, and, in Calgary at least, are unknown to the younger generation.

This brings me to the old-time radio series MR KEEN, TRACER OF LOST PERSONS, a popular mystery show which ran from 1937 to 1955. (This and other OTR shows are available as free mp3s from [www.archive.org](http://www.archive.org).) It was rather unusual in one respect, being written in soap opera style. Not surprising, because it was produced by Frank and Anne Hummert, who dominated soap operas with a fiction factory of work-for-hire writers. It was estimated that at their height they owned 12% of all radio shows being broadcast in North America.

Like other soap operas, characters constantly addressed each other by name and often added their occupation or relationship. The plot so far would be summarized by one of the characters several times in a show. The OTR comedians Bob Elliott and Ray Goulding later parodied the series as MR TRACE, KEENER THAN MOST PERSONS. They didn't have to exaggerate much to do it.

“The Telephone Book Murder Case” was a 1950 episode of MR KEEN, written by Lawrence Klee. Brad Andrews, a wealthy oilman about town, is shot to death in his New York City mansion. He was about to wed but never made it to his bachelor party.

His valet Edwards approaches Keen and partner Mike Clancy because he fears the police will suspect him. Edwards's wife Lyla is a maid for Andrews's fiancée. The soap opera dialogue is hilarious. Keen is introduced to people as: “*This is Mr Keen, Famous Investigator*” or they ask him “*Are you Mr Keen, Famous Investigator?*” You can hear the capital letters.

A sharp-practice man named George Temple inserts himself into the plot, along with several other plot complications, each re-explained several times in case any listener tuned in late to the show. Temple had sold Andrews some oil stocks that turned out to be worthless. Meanwhile, Lyla had been seen in an expensive nightclub with Andrews, wearing a gown she stole from his fiancée.

# Voice visits that vanquish her loneliness

"Our home seems deserted these days with Tom at work and the children back at school," Mrs. Yuxton was saying. "But thanks to our telephone I'm not lonely. For whenever I feel the need of company, I can lift the receiver and chat with a friend."

Mrs. Yuxton, like many more housewives, gets rid of that "cut-off-from-the-world" feeling by using her telephone. She makes voice visits that vanquish loneliness.



## B. C. Telephone Company

Andrews had discovered that Temple was using an alias, and was wanted for murder elsewhere. As part of his research, he had an old telephone directory with Temple's alias listed. He circled it in ink, which Mr Keen noticed.

As you know Professor, in those days one couldn't just Google something. Research required paging through directories and indexes at libraries. There is a confrontation, gunplay, and Temple is killed, saving the D.A. the expense of a trial.

*from WESTERN  
CANADA RADIO  
NEWS, 1936-09-20,  
page 13*

## SHERLOCKIANA: PART 27

by Dale Speirs

[Parts 1 to 26 appeared in OPUNTIA's #63.1B, 63.1C, 63.1D, 67.1D, 68.1C, 69.1E, 70.1A, 71.1B, 251, 253, 256, 261, 269, 270, 276, 288, 309, 333, 340, 348, 356, 359, 365, 370, 383, and 397.]

### Pastiches: Radio.

Sherlock Holmes was a success for decades in old-time radio, both as adaptations of the original stories (known as the canon) and as pastiches (new stories not by Doyle). Hundreds of episodes under various series titles were aired, many of which are available as free mp3s from [www.archive.org](http://www.archive.org). Life is too short to listen to every single one, unless you are a Sherlockian who has already memorized the all stories in the canon.

Nigel Bruce is the best-remembered Watson, so much so that his portrayal shaped the public's image of the character. He did a large number of the radio shows, carrying on as an old duffer as he did in the movies, not the image that Doyle created in the original canon. His portrayal of Watson as a doddering fool warped the public perception of the character, nothing like the younger, certainly more intelligent Watson of the canon.

"Adventure Of The Horseless Carriage" (1947) was a radio pastiche set in 1903 at the dawn of the mass-market automobile era. No writer credits are given but probably were Denis Green and Anthony Boucher. Holmes and Watson have been called in to help Austin Grearson, a wealthy machine manufacturer who wants to get into the horseless carriage business. He is entering his revolutionary new car, which has two cylinders instead of one, into a 40-mile endurance race over the roads of England.

Someone is attempting to sabotage his automobile. That someone finally succeeds in murdering Grearson. Competition in the auto manufacturing was apparent vicious in those days, although the culprit's motive turns out to be something unrelated.

Grearson had been diverting large sums from his company into the new business of horseless carriages. He had also refused substantial offers from a buyer willing to pay a good sum for his automobile patents. This alarmed other family members, who didn't want to see their inheritances lost.

Holmes identifies the murderer who had clean hands despite supposedly working on the horseless carriage. The guilty man had forgot himself and cleaned his hands with petrol to get off the dirt and grease.

From the beginning of the episode, Watson is constantly complaining about how horseless carriages will never replace the horse and that the old ways are the best. One funny aspect of this episode is that Nigel Bruce can be heard grumbling many times in the background while the other characters talk overtop his voice, completely ignoring him. He is a fool but a loveable old fool, the kind that friends and families tolerate because they know he will ultimately come round.

“Adventure Of The Innocent Murderess” is another 1947 episode, also uncredited for writers. 221B Baker Street is visited by a man named Prescott, from Groznia, who is a supporter of the People’s Party. An international commission is trying to decide whether the legitimate government is them or the Royalists, who currently control the Groznian embassy in London. Prescott begs for asylum in 221B, and Holmes and Watson agree to please Holmes’s brother Mycroft, who is something in Whitehall.



*Seen in downtown Calgary. A possible Sherlockian?*

Several days later, a bottle of the native Groznian wine is delivered, ordered by Prescott. Just as he takes a sip, a young woman bursts into 221B and shoots him dead seconds after he takes his first sip. Holmes and Watson have no choice but to testify at the trial that they saw the murder.

The defence barrister is a clever dick, and just before the trial concludes, asks for the coroner to examine the stomach contents of the dead man. It wasn’t done previously because it seemed unnecessary, but when it was done, the results show that there was cyanide in the wine. The woman is acquitted on the grounds that Prescott was already dead before he was shot.

The international commission rules in favour of the People’s Party. The woman marries the new ambassador and settles into the London embassy. Holmes has been publicly humiliated. He tracks down the delivery boy, who will testify that the woman supplied the wine. A final confrontation takes place at the embassy.

She points out that at the time of the trial she had no diplomatic immunity but does now, in addition to the double jeopardy law of Britain. Her husband is shocked that she is a murderer. It is pointed out that Groznia has no double jeopardy law, and further that she can be tried a second time for murdering a fellow Groznian, even if it was on foreign soil. She will hang, and Holmes salvages his reputation as a detective.

An interesting twist, and best of all, Professor Moriarty is nowhere to be seen. He was trotted out as the villain so many times in the series, always escaping in the episode, that it was rather tiresome.

### **Pastiches: Movies.**

SHERLOCK HOLMES AND THE SECRET WEAPON (1943) is available on the Mill Creek DVD box set 50 Mystery Classics. Set during World War Two, it was just barely possible that Holmes and Watson were still alive, although they would have been in their 80s by then. Basil Rathbone and Nigel Bruce are the players, in their middle age during the movie filming, not their 80s. They are generally recognized as the best pair portraying Holmes and Watson, notwithstanding the faults of Bruce.

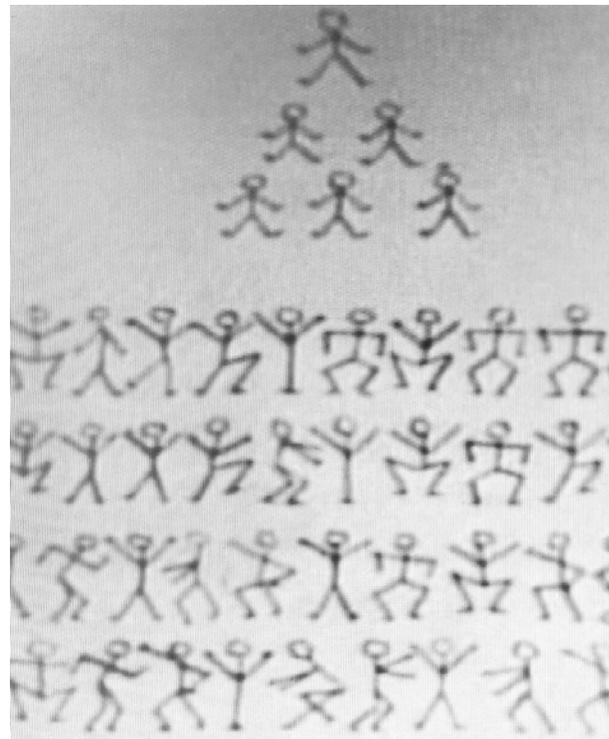
The screenplay was by Edward T. Lowe, W. Scott Darling, and Edmund L. Hartmann. It is supposedly based on the canon story “The Dancing Men” but

the plot is quite different. The dancing men were stick figures used as a substitution code in both the story and the movie, but that is the only carryover from one to the other.

The dancing men from the canon story are shown below, and a screenshot from the movie at bottom.



Holmes. 'Excellent! Pray continue.'  
On the copy I rubbed out the marks; but then I appeared. I have a copy of it here':



The Nazis are seeking a new bomb sight invented by Dr Franz Tobel of Switzerland. Holmes helps Tobel escape to England with the bomb sight, but the plot is only just rolling. Tobel has his own plans and wants to build the device himself. He disassembles it into four pieces, then takes each piece to a different engineer for mass fabrication. Professor Moriarty appears with his nefarious plans; he wasn't in the original story.

Much chasing about and kidnapping ensues. The dancing men appear in secret messages. Watson mentions he saw them before in a previous case, so he must be citing the canon story. Holmes and Moriarty race each other to recover the four pieces of the bomb sight. Holmes uses an ingenious method of tracking Moriarty's car by putting a blob of paint on a tire, which then left little dabs on the asphalt for convenient tracking.

Moriarty is disposed of, but we never see his actual death, the better to leave room for a sequel. A fair movie, if not canon.

From the same Mill Creek DVD set is the 1933 movie A STUDY IN SCARLET. That title is a story in the canon, but other than borrowing the title, the movie has nothing to do with the original beyond using Holmes and Watson as characters.

Reginald Owen was mis-cast as Holmes, possibly the worst performer of that role, which was also the reason that it was his only performance in the role. Holmes is described in the canon as a tall hawk-face lean man. Owen was a plump man with a double chin, and Watson was played by an elderly man.

The opening credits list the screenplay by Robert Florey, "as suggested" by the story, but one doubts he even read the original. The original novel was a disjointed work, about revenge being taken by someone with just cause against several people. Right smack in the middle of the story, Doyle sandwiched in an anti-Mormon diatribe that was inserted to provide a motive for the revenge killings, with a display of prejudice that is breath-taking. It was not one of his better efforts.

It would be understandable if the movie had deleted the anti-Mormonism and used the rest of the plot as is, with a slightly different motive. Instead, the whole plot is jettisoned. Substituting for it is a criminal gang called "The Scarlet Ring", who expect to come into £1,000,000 in a few days from the sale of loot, to be equally divided between them.

Make that “between the survivors”, as members of the Ring are departing this world sooner than they expected or hoped. The Ring has become a tontine. Holmes is hired by the widow of one of the suddenly departed. Each murdered member got a little note just before death.

The scene shifts to the manor house of another widow of the Ring, Mrs Pyke, who is Chinese. The house has secret passageways, priest holes, and escape hatches, of which good use is made in the subsequent tumult.

By now, the viewer has an idea who the murderer is, but a twist ending reveals one of the dead wasn't. He and his wife did the killings but are stopped just in time from finishing off the remaining members of the Ring. The obvious suspect, however, is arrested as an accessory.

The plot is average for a mystery. Had it been sans Holmes and Watson, with another detective instead, it might have been a reasonable B movie. The attempt to mask it with Doyle's name is risible.

**Speculative Non-Fact.**

SHERLOCK HOLMES: THE UNAUTHORIZED BIOGRAPHY (2005) by Nick Rennison uses the comments and clues from the canon to piece together the life of Holmes. Where gaps exist, and there are many, Rennison creates the material to fill them. Interesting reading, and sometimes at variance with the accepted thought of Sherlockians. Not quite a novel, but neither non-fiction literary criticism.

In the canon story “The Greek Interpreter”, Holmes tells Watson: *My ancestors were country squires, who seem to have led much the same life as is natural to their class.* From there, Rennison follows on and builds up an interpretation of Holmes's origin in the family seat near the Yorkshire Moors. Holmes stated that his mother was a sister of the French artist Vernet (there were several by that name), which allows more background to be filled in.

Holmes attended Cambridge University to study science, and on the side took up amateur dramatics. He left for London after his second year, and set himself up as a consulting detective. His brother Mycroft was by then something in Whitehall.

Watson's biography and his familial antecedents are next discussed. It is a necessary prelude to that day at St. Bartholomew's Hospital when he met Holmes for the first time. Holmes uttered the famous phrase *You have been in Afghanistan, I perceive.* on first meeting Watson.

Next, Rennison discusses the Irish troubles and the Fenians, which insinuated themselves into several of Holmes's cases. They also gave rise, late in the canon, to two nasty Irishmen, Professor Moriarty and his righthand man Col. Sebastian Moran.

Over the middle third of the book are discussed the various cases and their associated real history. Today the canon stories are viewed as period pieces from the gaslight era, but when published they were contemporary fiction. Those who read the stories on first appearance knew and recognized the background. Modern readers must learn some Victorian history to understand the subtler points.

The final chapters hypothesize on Holmes's retirement and death, about which little was mentioned in the canon. By then he had passed into eternal fame.

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**SEEN IN THE LITERATURE**

Rautsaw, R.M., et al (2018) **Stopped dead in their tracks: The impact of railways on Gopher Tortoise (*Gopherus polyphemus*) movement and behavior.** COPEIA 106:135-143

Authors' abstract: *Habitat fragmentation is one of the leading causes of biodiversity decline and most commonly results from urbanization and construction of transportation infrastructure. Roads are known to negatively impact species, but railways can often cause similar effects. Certain taxa, such as turtles and tortoises, are more vulnerable to railways than others due to limitations in mobility.*

*We studied the impact of rails on the movement and behavior of Gopher Tortoises (*Gopherus polyphemus*), a threatened, highly terrestrial species likely in frequent contact with railways. First, we used radio-telemetry to determine the frequency of railway crossings and compared this to correlated random walk simulations to assess if tortoises were crossing the rails less frequently than is expected by unconstrained movement.*

*Second, we placed tortoises into the railway and measured behavior for one hour to assess crossing ability. Lastly, we tested whether trenches dug underneath the rails could allow safe passage for tortoises. We found that railways impacted the movement of Gopher Tortoises. Gopher Tortoises crossed the railway less often than what would be expected by unhindered movement for five of our ten tortoises tracked. During behavioral trials, 0 of 24 tortoises placed within the railways were capable of escaping from the rails.*



*a mitigation strategy. Given the thousands of km of railways around the world, we recommend future studies focus on the new field of rail ecology.*

*Using game cameras, we detected tortoises using trenches dug underneath the rails and between the ties 68 times over the course of a single summer. For minimal financial cost, the trenches facilitated tortoise movement across the railway, maintained full rail functionality, and created an escape route for individuals that were trapped between the rails, and thus should be implemented as*

Smith, E.I., et al (2018) **Humans thrived in South Africa through the Toba eruption about 74,000 years ago.** NATURE 555:511-515

Authors' abstract: *Approximately 74 thousand years ago (ka), the Toba caldera erupted in Sumatra. Since the magnitude of this eruption was first established, its effects on climate, environment and humans have been debated. Here we describe the discovery of microscopic glass shards characteristic of the Youngest Toba Tuff, ashfall from the Toba eruption, in two archaeological sites on the south coast of South Africa, a region in which there is evidence for early human behavioural complexity.*



*An independently derived dating model supports a date of approximately 74 ka for the sediments containing the Youngest Toba Tuff glass shards. By defining the input of shards at both sites, which are located nine kilometres apart, we are able to establish a close temporal correlation between them.*

*Our high-resolution excavation and sampling technique enable exact comparisons between the input of Youngest Toba Tuff glass shards and the evidence for human occupation. Humans in this region thrived through the Toba event and the ensuing full glacial conditions, perhaps as a combined result of the uniquely rich resource base of the region and fully evolved modern human adaptation.*

Reali, F., N. Chater, and M.H. Christiansen (2018) **Simpler grammar, larger vocabulary: How population size affects language.** PROCEEDINGS OF THE ROYAL SOCIETY OF LONDON B285:dx.doi.org/10.1098/rspb.2017.2586

Authors' abstract: *Languages with many speakers tend to be structurally simple while small communities sometimes develop languages with great structural complexity. Paradoxically, the opposite pattern appears to be observed for*

*non-structural properties of language such as vocabulary size. These apparently opposite patterns pose a challenge for theories of language change and evolution.*

*We use computational simulations to show that this inverse pattern can depend on a single factor: ease of diffusion through the population. A population of interacting agents was arranged on a network, passing linguistic conventions to one another along network links. Agents can invent new conventions, or replicate conventions that they have previously generated themselves or learned from other agents. Linguistic conventions are either Easy or Hard to diffuse, depending on how many times an agent needs to encounter a convention to learn it.*

*In large groups, only linguistic conventions that are easy to learn, such as words, tend to proliferate, whereas small groups where everyone talks to everyone else allow for more complex conventions, like grammatical regularities, to be maintained. Our simulations thus suggest that language, and possibly other aspects of culture, may become simpler at the structural level as our world becomes increasingly interconnected.*

Speirs: The English language has three grammatical cases (types of inflection), while Suomalais (the Finnish language) has fifteen. I'm glad I didn't bother learning any Finnish from my mother's family.

Baird, D., et al (2018) **Agricultural origins on the Anatolian plateau.** PROCEEDINGS OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES USA 115:E3077-E3086

*Authors' abstract: This paper explores the explanations for, and consequences of, the early appearance of food production outside the Fertile Crescent of Southwest Asia, where it originated in the 10th/9th millennia cal BC. We present evidence that cultivation appeared in Central Anatolia through adoption by indigenous foragers in the mid ninth millennium cal BC, but also demonstrate that uptake was not uniform, and that some communities chose to actively disregard cultivation.*

*Adoption of cultivation was accompanied by experimentation with sheep/goat herding in a system of low-level food production that was integrated into foraging practices rather than used to replace them. Furthermore, rather than*

*being a shortlived transitional state, low-level food production formed part of a subsistence strategy that lasted for several centuries, although its adoption had significant long-term social consequences for the adopting community at Boncuklu.*

*Material continuities suggest that Boncuklu's community was ancestral to that seen at the much larger settlement of Çatalhöyük East from 7100 cal BC, by which time a modest involvement with food production had been transformed into a major commitment to mixed farming, allowing the sustenance of a very large sedentary community.*

Brass, Michael (2018) **Early North African cattle domestication and its ecological setting: A reassessment.** JOURNAL OF WORLD PREHISTORY 31:81-115

[*Bos* is the genus name for cattle.]

*Author's abstract: It is concluded that*

*(a) Bos remains from the early Holocene at Nabta Playa-Bir Kiseiba were those of hunted aurochs;*

*(b) domesticated caprines [goats] were likely present in Northeast Africa before domesticated cattle; and*

*(c) the domesticated cattle spreading across Northeast and northern Africa, including Nabta Playa-Bir Kiseiba, from the late seventh millennium BC or early sixth millennium BC onwards were descendants of Bos taurus domesticated in the Middle Euphrates area of the Middle East.*

Gaunitz, C., et al (2018) **Ancient genomes revisit the ancestry of domestic and Przewalski's horses.** SCIENCE 360:111-114

*Authors' abstract: The Eneolithic Botai culture of the Central Asian steppes provides the earliest archaeological evidence for horse husbandry, ~5500 years ago, but the exact nature of early horse domestication remains controversial. We generated 42 ancient-horse genomes, including 20 from Botai.*

*Compared to 46 published ancient- and modern-horse genomes, our data indicate that Przewalski's horses are the feral descendants of horses herded at Botai and not truly wild horses.*

All domestic horses dated from ~4000 years ago to present only show ~2.7% of Botai-related ancestry. This indicates that a massive genomic turnover underpins the expansion of the horse stock that gave rise to modern domesticates, which coincides with large-scale human population expansions during the Early Bronze Age.



Yoshimura, M., and A. Akama (2018) **Elevated radioactive contamination from the Fukushima nuclear power plant accident in aquatic biota from a river with a lake in its upper reaches.** CANADIAN JOURNAL OF FISHERIES AND AQUATIC SCIENCES 75:609-620

Authors' abstract: Five years have passed since the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant (FDNPP) accident occurred. Forests, streams, and lakes remain radioactively contaminated, with slight sign of convergence. The radiocesium concentration of brown trout (*Salmo trutta*) in Lake Chuzenji (160 km from the FDNPP) still exceeds the Japanese regulatory limit of 100 Bq·kg<sup>-1</sup>, likely due to elevated contamination in Lake Chuzenji.

In this study, the concentration of <sup>134</sup>Cs and <sup>137</sup>Cs in algae, litter, sand substrate, and aquatic insects in a river originating from Lake Chuzenji (Daiya site) and in a nearby river (Watarase site) from 2013 to 2015 were compared. At the Daiya site, <sup>134</sup>Cs and <sup>137</sup>Cs concentrations of algae and aquatic insects were high (e.g., <sup>137</sup>Cs in algae: 160 Bq·kg<sup>-1</sup> at the Watarase site and 320 Bq·kg<sup>-1</sup> at

the Daiya site) and still increasing in some groups such as Perlodidae and Heptageniidae, though the mean air dose rate (0.05 μSv·h<sup>-1</sup>) was lower than that at the Watarase site (0.11 μSv·h<sup>-1</sup>).

We attributed this to high flow out of higher <sup>134</sup>Cs and <sup>137</sup>Cs concentration originating from Lake Chuzenji. Thus, lower reaches fed by contaminated headwaters will likely experience prolonged contamination.

Riddle, M.R., et al (2018) **Insulin resistance in cavefish as an adaptation to a nutrient-limited environment.** NATURE 555:647-651

Authors' abstract: Periodic food shortages are a major challenge faced by organisms in natural habitats. Cave-dwelling animals must withstand long periods of nutrient deprivation, as, in the absence of photosynthesis, caves depend on external energy sources such as seasonal floods.

Here we show that cave adapted populations of the Mexican tetra, *Astyanax mexicanus*, have dysregulated blood glucose homeostasis and are insulin resistant compared to river-adapted populations. We found that multiple cave populations carry a mutation in the insulin receptor that leads to decreased insulin binding in vitro and contributes to hyperglycaemia.

Hybrid fish from surface-cave crosses carrying this mutation weigh more than non-carriers, and zebrafish genetically engineered to carry the mutation have increased body weight and insulin resistance.

Higher body weight may be advantageous in caves as a strategy to cope with an infrequent food supply. In humans, the identical mutation in the insulin receptor leads to a severe form of insulin resistance and reduced lifespan. However, cavefish have a similar lifespan to surface fish and do not accumulate the advanced glycation end-products in the blood that are typically associated with the progression of diabetes-associated pathologies.

Our findings suggest that diminished insulin signalling is beneficial in a nutrient-limited environment and that cavefish may have acquired compensatory mechanisms that enable them to circumvent the typical negative effects associated with failure to regulate blood glucose levels.

Munoz, S.E., et al (2108) **Climatic control of Mississippi River flood hazard amplified by river engineering.** NATURE 556:95-98

*Authors' abstract: Engineering modifications to the Mississippi River system have altered the river's sediment levels and channel morphology, but the influence of these modifications on flood hazard is debated. Detecting and attributing changes in river discharge is challenging because instrumental streamflow records are often too short to evaluate the range of natural hydrological variability before the establishment of flood mitigation infrastructure.*

*Here we show that multi-decadal trends of flood hazard on the lower Mississippi River are strongly modulated by dynamical modes of climate variability, particularly the El Niño-Southern Oscillation and the Atlantic Multidecadal Oscillation, but that the artificial channelization (confinement to a straightened channel) has greatly amplified flood magnitudes over the past century.*

*Our results, based on a multi-proxy reconstruction of flood frequency and magnitude spanning the past 500 years, reveal that the magnitude of the 100-year flood (a flood with a 1 per cent chance of being exceeded in any year) has increased by 20 per cent over those five centuries, with about 75 per cent of this increase attributed to river engineering.*

*We conclude that the interaction of human alterations to the Mississippi River system with dynamical modes of climate variability has elevated the current flood hazard to levels that are unprecedented within the past five centuries.*

Seeman, T., et al (2018) **The Great Recession worsened blood pressure and blood glucose levels in American adults.** PROCEEDINGS OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES USA 115:3296-3301

*Authors' abstract: Longitudinal, individual-specific data from the Multi-Ethnic Study of Atherosclerosis (MESA) provide support for the hypothesis that the 2008 to 2010 Great Recession (GR) negatively impacted the health of US adults. Results further advance understanding of the relationship by (i) illuminating hypothesized greater negative impacts in population subgroups exposed to more severe impacts of the GR and (ii) explicitly controlling for confounding by individual differences in age-related changes in health over time.*

*Analyses overcome limitations of prior work by (i) employing individual-level data that avoid concerns about ecological fallacy associated with prior reliance on group-level data, (ii) using four waves of data before the GR to estimate and control for underlying individual-level age-related trends, (iii) focusing on objective, temporally appropriate health outcomes rather than mortality, and (iv) leveraging a diverse cohort to investigate subgroup differences in the GR's impact.*

*Innovative individual fixed-effects modeling controlling for individual-level age-related trajectories yielded substantively important insights: (i) significant elevations post-GR for blood pressure and fasting glucose, especially among those on medication pre-GR, and (ii) reductions in prevalence and intensity of medication use post-GR.*

*Important differences in the effects of the GR are seen across subgroups, with larger effects among younger adults (who are likely still in the labor force) and older homeowners (whose declining home wealth likely reduced financial security, with less scope for recouping losses during their lifetime); least affected were older adults without a college degree (whose greater reliance on Medicare and Social Security likely provided more protection from the recession).*

**Speirs:** It would be interesting if a comparative study could be done with countries such as Canada which have free universal health care for all ages, not dependent on employment health plans.

## **WHEN WORDS COLLIDE 2018**

Calgary's annual readercon When Words Collide will be held the weekend of August 10 to 12, 2018, at the Delta Calgary South Hotel on Southland Drive and Bonaventure Drive SE. This is a multi-genre convention covering science fiction, mysteries, fantasy, romance, westerns, and historical fiction, held for the eighth time. Membership is capped at 750. Each year this convention, and the hotel, are booked up solid by June, so don't delay. Information from: [www.whenwordscollide.org](http://www.whenwordscollide.org)

I've attended every WWC and enjoyed them all. My reports of previous conventions appeared in OPUNTIA's #71, 253, 266, 282, 318, 350, and 387.

**SEEN AT CHEZ OPUNTIA**  
photo by Dale Speirs

Taken April 4 during yet another snowfall. I have a bird feeder over my front steps. Any spillage is quickly cleaned up by squirrels and snowshoe hares.

