

# OPUNTIA

## 43.1A



O! PUNTIA!  
OUR ROAMIN' NATIVE PLANT!  
TRUE PRICKLY PEAR,  
LET ALL THY SONS NOW CHANT!  
WITH GROWING PARTS,  
WE SEE THEE RISE,  
GREEN CACTI STRONG AND FREE!  
O! PUNTIA!  
WE STAND ENBARBED FOR THEE!  
O! PUNTIA!  
WE STAND ENBARBED FOR THEE!

John  
C. 1906

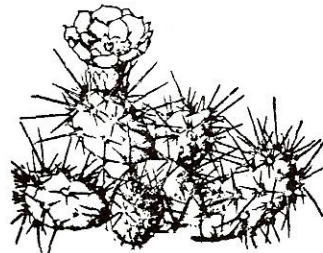
**OPUNTIA** is published by Dale Speirs, Box 6830, Calgary, Alberta, Canada, T2P 2E7. It is available for \$3 cash for a one-time sample copy, trade for your zine, or letter of comment. Americans: please don't send cheques for small amounts to Canada as the bank fee to cash them is usually more than the amount. US\$ banknotes are acceptable in Canada at par value; what we gain on the exchange rate we lose on the higher postage rate to USA. Do not send mint USA stamps as they are not valid for postage and I don't collect them.

Whole-numbered OPUNTIAs are sercon, x.1 issues are reviewzines, x.2 issues are indexes, and x.5 issues are perzines.

**ART CREDIT:** The late Ian Gunn did a cover for OPUNTIA #28.1B which I enjoyed so much I asked his permission to have it made into a rubber stamp. I've been using it since on envelopes. A memorial volume to Gunn has now been published (see page 6), and by way of further tribute I am using the actual rubber stamp for this issue's cover.

# LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

[Editor's  
remarks  
in square  
brackets]



FROM: Brant Kresovich  
Box 404  
Getzville, New York 14068-0404

1999-07-11

Lloyd Penney is right when he says that zinemakers may unintentionally hide their work when they publish exclusively on the Web. When I briefly did an e-zine, the response went to zilch. If Lucy Huntzinger doesn't want feedback about her writing, she made a wise move by publishing solely on the Internet. It's a struggle for me to understand why a writer doesn't want response. I would not willingly forego the sense of connection that a letter of comment stimulates. Also, response keeps me honest.

It's easier to publish a zine when the zinemaker has a purpose and sense of direction. I've put my zine on hold while I think about why I do it. One purpose is simply to participate in the Papernet, like coming to a party with my special dish. Another purpose was to add laudable stress to my life. That is, the pressure to produce

copy for the zine made me analyze what I read, watched, saw, or heard more deeply, wondering if I could turn it into an article. That is why the topics got so diverse; nothing held them together except that they attracted my attention for a little while. Maybe I should narrow my focus to books and writers that deserve a second look.

With millions of Websites, the mass of material has already turned the Internet into a wasteland similar to television. The problem with e-mail is that it is too easy to send. We've all heard stories about people getting burned because they sent an angry e-mail in the heat of the moment. With site creation software and ftp, even those of us who have only a vague notion of the process can make and post a Website. Because of the ease, it's no wonder many Websites are half-baked.

I liked e-mail letters of comment because I was never troubled to log on, sort through two or three messages, copy them to disk, and edit them so they would segue neatly for the letter column. Trouble, to my mind, was typing a paper letter in and running the risk of making a typo, twisting the writer's words, and incurring wrath.

[One can, however, make typos just as easy with a computer, such as pasting in text out of sequence or duplicated.]

FROM: Joseph Major

1999-07-12

1409 Christy Avenue

Louisville, Kentucky 40204-2040

SF will have the problem that the writers cannot make inhabitants of a different society comprehensible to the reader unless the society is cast as a contemporary society, slightly retouched. Which is to say that many still fail at John Campbell's dictum about "show me an alien that thinks like a man, but not the same as a man", even when the alien is a human being, just of a different era.

**I ALSO HEARD FROM:** Ronald Tobin, Robert Lichtman, Harry Andruschak, Chester Cuthbert, Silvano Pertone, Anna Banana, John Hertz, William Breiding, Sherry Thompson, Joseph Nicholas, Lloyd Penney, Scott Crow

## ZINE LISTINGS

by Dale Speirs

[The Usual means \$2 or \$3 cash, trade for your zine, or letter of comment on a previous issue. Americans: please don't send cheques for small amounts to Canada or overseas as the bank fee to cash them is usually more than the amount. US\$ banknotes are acceptable around the world.]

**Marktime #57** (The Usual from Mark Strickert, 300 South Beau Drive #1, Des Plaines, Illinois 60016) Perzine with trip reports about a voyage through deepest northeast USA and a brief excursion into the wastelands of Toronto, plus letters of comment.

**The Leighton Look #I Hate Spring** (The Usual from Rodney Leighton, R.R. 3, Tatamagouche, Nova Scotia, B0K 1V0) A cross between a zine and a letter substitute, with the contents ranging from personal accounts to reviews

**Ethel The Aardvark #85** (The Usual from Melbourne Science Fiction Club, Box 212, World Trade Centre, Melbourne, Victoria 3005) Clubzine with news of Australian Sfdom, reviews, and letters. Also the Darwin Awards, for which I'd like to see documentation, as at least one of them is a familiar urban legend revised for an Internet download.

**Covert Communications from Zeta Corvi #3** (The Usual from Andrew Murdoch, #508, 6800 Westminster Highway, Richmond, British Columbia V7C 1C5) SF awards listings, reviews of older books, a V-Con convention report, and letters.

**The Anti-Backuouos Vaclash #1** (The Usual from Vicki Rosenzweig, 33 Indian Road, 6-R, New York, New York 10034) This is published by an editorial collective, one of whom an American, the other two Englanders Bridget Bradshaw and Amanda Baker. Articles on how to be a cheerful accounts auditor, the thrill of completing a run of SF magazine back issues, a conversation on how men and women handle stress, and convention reports on Intuition.

**Barmaid #7** (The Usual from Yvonne Rowse, Evergreen, Halls Farm Lane, Trimpley, Worcestershire DY12 1NP, England) A report on the Intuition SF convention, followed by musings on changing careers, indecorous women, and letters of comment.

**Raven Skies Zine #3** (\$1 from Tazim Damji, 206 Pinestream Place, Calgary, Alberta T1Y 3A5) A spirituality issue, with discussions of the major religions of the world, emphasizing the Asian and Arabic ones (the editor is Muslim). Viewpoints from feminists about re-interpreting the Bible or Reform Judaism.



**Psyche Out** Summer 1999 (US\$2 from Silvano Pertone, via G. Gallesi, no. 20/32, 16163 San Quirico, Genova, Italy) In English, with reviews of European zines and band interviews. Scene reports that mention trying to publish or play music in former Yugoslavia despite 'economic crises', which whiney zinesters in North America should read to put themselves in perspective. *"Distributors here cherish the real non-profit spirit because they don't own some great sums of material ..."* is a considerable understatement. This zine is very useful for those wanting to spread their contacts in the Papernet and punk rock music to the parts of Europe we don't ordinarily hear about.

**Erg #146** (The Usual from Terry Jeeves, 56 Red Scar Drive, Scarborough, North Yorkshire YO12 5RQ, England) A history of SCOOPS magazine, unmanned aerial vehicles (the originals from 1914 onward), and various other items, along with reviews and letters.

**File 770 #131** (US\$8 for 5 issues from Mike Glyer, 705 Valley View Avenue, Monrovia, California 91016) Newszine of SF fandom, ranging from who's in hospital to convention reports to goings-on in fandom, plus letters of comment.

**For The Clerisy V6#35** (The Usual from Brant Kresovich, Box 404, Getzville, New York 14068-0404) Thoughts on words and fun with definitions (as a pest control man I particularly enjoyed

his alternative definition of 'vespacide'), advice to expatriates living in Latvia, how to read books, Marlowe, book reviews, and letters.

**The Royal Swiss Navy Gazette #4** (The Usual from Garth Spencer, Box 15335, Vancouver, British Columbia V6B 5B1) Starts off with commentary on the problem of communicating with people when you don't have the ability to infer or interpolate what they are asking from the context of the sentence. On from there to a humorous look at conspiracy theorists, then risk assessment of all the threats Earth faces from avalanches to firestorms to asteroid impacts. Also letters and reviews.

**Grammar Q and A #17** (The Usual from Misti and Scott Crow, Box 445, Clements, California 95227) Single-sheet zine that is an FAQ for the Papernet on proper spelling and grammar. This issue has answers on accent marks, British spellings (Canucks can get away with them but it's pretentious for Americans), a neat little trick for proofreading, and through versus thru.

**Popular Reality V436#1** (US\$1.50 from Susan Poe, 1116 Shepard Street, Lansing, Michigan 48912) Cut-and-paste edited newsprint tabloid with essays, fiction, radical rants from both ends of the political spectrum, poetry, and newspaper clippings.

**The Knarley Knews #76** (The Usual from Henry Welch, 1525 - 16 Avenue, Grafton, Wisconsin 53024-2017) Genzine, with articles on why some zines win Hugos and others don't, travel reports, electric cars, and a lengthy letter column.

**Vanamonde #308 to #317** (The Usual from John Hertz, 236 South Coronado Street, #409, Los Angeles, California 90057) Single-sheet apazine, but since it is issued weekly the cumulative effect is the same as a regular zine. Convention reports, discussion about book lists, letters, and miscellany.

**Sailing** (US\$2 from Alden Scott Crow, Box 445, Clements, California 95227) One-shot zine which is a brief children's story about a boy who goes flying just by spreading his jacket out as an airfoil.

**Plokta #V4#2** (The Usual from Alison Scott, 42 Tower Hamlets Road, Walthamstow, London E17 4RH, England) Genzine with personal accounts, convention reports, and letters.

**Out Of The Kaje #4** (The Usual from Karen Johnson, 35 Mariana Avenue, South Croydon, Victoria 3136, Australia) A tourist's guide to Australia in this issue, with trip reports and what to see Down Under.

## BOOK REVIEWS

by Dale Speirs

### TIE ME WONDER FERRET DOWN, SPORT

Badly-drawn comics are pretty much standard in zinedom. A few redeem themselves with sparkling wit that manages to overcome the chicken scratches that passes for artwork. Most are as forgettable as all the poetry and short fiction published in zines.

A few artists in zinedom stand out though. One of them was Ian Gunn of Australia. Taken from us by cancer last year, he was only forty. If there was any justice in the world he should have lived to give us another forty years of his well-drawn and witty cartoons. Like other zine artists, his work was widely scattered around the world in numerous obscure and unobtainable zines. However, his widow Karen has collected into one book his continuing series **Space\*Time Buccaneers**, a 100-page odyssey that cheerfully trashes time travel stories by chronicling the voyages of a group of oddballs collected from throughout history and crewing a timeship. (Available for US\$10.50 from Teddy Harvia, 701 Regency Drive, Hurst, Texas 76054-2307)

One thing I always liked about Gunn's cartoons was his habit of adding in filler details and background jokes (much like the English editorial cartoonist Giles). First you read the panels over for the main item, then you go back and look at the little details that are the hallmark of a craftsman. In one panel, for example, there is a computer board; closer inspection reveals that it is labeled "Acme Flashing Light Panel".

His wit was enjoyable. I particularly liked Muto the Wonder Ferret, a shapechanger who disguised itself as a variety of animals but normally preferred being a cat because humans "*... would hardly ever give me any orders.*" One can then "*... sleep all day, all the fish you can eat, lots of attention, and no heavy lifting.*"

This book compiles his largest series of cartoons, but it would be nice to see another one of his other works. Well recommended.

### NEITHER SNOW NOR RAIN NOR BOOZE ...

**Post Office** by Charles Bukowski. Originally published 1971, 36<sup>th</sup> printing in 1997 by Black Sparrow Press, ISBN 0-87685-086-7, trade paperback.

This is a novel about working for the United States Post Office in the 1960s and early 1970s. The narrator is Henry Chinaski, an

alcoholic womanizer whose incompetence at organizing his life leaves him drifting from one bottle to the next and one woman to the next. Drunks have to get their money from somewhere, so Chinaski ends up holding a variety of jobs in the Post Office. He starts off as a substitute letter carrier, beginning with the Christmas rush season, then eventually getting on permanent. Later he gets on as a mail sorter, where he spends more than a decade slotting letters into cases.

Along the way there are boss-from-Hell stories, although given Chinaski's behaviour and absenteeism, one is inclined to sympathize with the boss. But not entirely, for Chinaski is kept partly on the booze by the bureaucratic procedures he must put up with. Working 12-hour shifts every day, but expected to do training on one's own time. Being required to sort a tray of mail in 23 minutes, regardless of how much mail is in the tray. Having a stopwatch held to him for breaks and washroom visits and being written up for being a minute over.

I would be inclined to consider some of these stories as exaggeration, except that I have an acquaintance who works for the U.S.P.S. these days, and the stories he tells indicate that little has changed. An example is the use of decks of test letters to verify the sorting accuracy of the machines. Some supervisors used the test decks so much the test letters began to be damaged



from wear and took down the accuracy of the results. The supervisors therefore had any rejected test letters discarded, thus maintaining the results at 99+%. In the real world, lots of letters are rejected because they are non-conforming in size or postal code. The discrepancy shows up in the daily workload statistics, of course, as a result of which the heat comes down on the workers for not keeping up to standards.

Bukowski writes from the rowdier side of life, so this novel is not for those with delicate tastes or to be given as a Christmas present to that 10-year-old niece who you want to encourage to collect stamps. The book flows along in an episodic narrative flow that is quite readable, and quite funny in places.

**The Chalon Heads** by Barry Maitland (Orion Books, 1999, ISBN 0-75282-470-8, trade paperback). Most philatelic fiction uses rare postage stamps as what Alfred Hitchcock referred to as the McGuffin, an object sought by the protagonists but which could be anything. Most novels involving stamps use them in this way, and with a click on the find-and-replace tab in the spellchecker, the stamps could be replaced by coins, Ming vases, or an alien artifact without altering the story.

THE CHALON HEADS makes better use of philately, as stamps are a major part of the plot, set in London, England. Eva, a young woman, has been kidnapped. Her elderly husband Sammy

Starling receives a ransom note franked with Chalon heads, stamps of the Queen Victoria era. He collects them; Eva strongly resembles the young Victoria depicted on the stamps. An unusual ransom is required, with payment demanded in the form of a rare Chalon cover coming up at auction. Starling must liquidate his entire fortune, including his stamp collection to buy that cover. The ransom payout goes wrong, Eva is murdered, and Starling's unsavory past is illuminated in detail that leaves him humiliated and vengeful.

No one is surprised to learn that Eva was not a faithful wife. It turns out she was a cocaine addict, and paid for the habit by arranging for a master forger to sell Starling fake Chalons of excellent quality and taking a commission. Stamp dealers and auction houses are dragged into the mess. What goes on in the upper-class auction houses and dealer shops will not surprise any experienced philatelist, just as the behaviour of art galleries brings a cynical smile to the lips of a Neoist.

The police investigation reveals a link to a past murder. The usual suspects are set up and knocked off in the traditional manner of police procedurals. This murder mystery reads quite well, with a deft bit of mis-direction about who murdered Eva. The slowly-revealed history of the Chalon head forgeries subtly distracts the reader from the murderer's trail.



## DON'T FENCE ME IN.

**They Went Thataway** by James Horwitz (Ballantine, 1978). This is a history of the Hollywood cowboy from the silent movies to the fadeout after 1950s television. The first American movie to tell an extended story (as opposed to brief flicks and newsreels) was a cowboy movie. "The Great Train Robbery", was filmed in 1903 on location near Dover, New Jersey, not the last time one location would make do for another. In the same spirit was the first Hollywood cowboy hero, G.M. Anderson, who rode a horse only with difficulty.

He was soon dethroned by a new cowboy hero, and, like sports players, they followed one another in succession, rising and falling like empires as public tastes changed. Some never made it into talkies, their squeaky voices abruptly terminating their careers. Others wore out their welcomes and faded away, some into alcohol and drugs. Hopalong Cassidy mortgaged everything he had to buy the rights to his movies and relaunched his career on television. Singing cowboys like Gene Autry and Roy Rogers disgusted the genuine cowboys who worked the ranches before show business roped in easier money.

Horowitz has little new to add to the history of movie cowboys, so he pads this book extensively with his nostalgic reminiscences

of his heros, supplemented by accounts of his road trips in search of old movie stars gone to ground. Unfortunately his personal viewpoints are no more interesting than an SF fan's convention report listing all the restaurants they ate in and who they met. I skimmed the first quarter of the book before reaching the historical accounts, where the cowboys lives are interesting in spite of Horowitz's leaden prose.

Not a few of the cowboys were city slickers from back East, and their self-supplied biographies are highly suspect. Tom Mix, one of the superstars of the cowboy movie, claimed to have been in just about every war going when not actually out west riding the range as soon as he was old enough to sit up straight in the saddle. Truth was more prosaic, as he hailed from Mix Run, Pennsylvania. But the movies made up for fictional biographies, keeping the action going as much as possible. When in doubt, have a posse chase someone through a California gully or past an Arizona mesa. Throw in a romantic interest but keep it chaste and brief, for the 12-year-old boys who made up the major portion of the viewing audience resented any slowdown in action.

Economics had as much as anything to do with in the decline of the cowboy movie. The endless supply of B-movies required for theatres could be cranked out quickly and cheaply up until WW2. After though, the cheapness disappeared, and so did the audience,

drawn to television. Any cowboy movies made thereafter had to be big budget efforts, which required a different approach. Television supplied a brief revival, but its small screen eliminated the vast panoramas, and the characters spent most of their time talking in saloons or sheriff's offices instead of chasing stagecoaches past that mesa.

## RANDOM FANDOM.

**Transmitters** by Damien Broderick (Ebony Books, 1984). This trade paperback is out of print but the author advised me that remainders were to be distributed to attendees at the 1999 World SF Convention in Australia. This novel covers the years from 1969 to 1984 in the lives of some Australian SF fans. The changes from the Vietnam era of protest to the early 1980s despair are illuminated by the personal odyssey from gawky fanzines to dysfunctional families. Broderick exactly catches the embarrassing style of crudzines and the stench of cat-lovers drifting through life without much apparent purpose.

The book is written in a multiple-point-of-view style that starts out choppy but smooths out once the reader memorizes the cast of characters. It is in the New Wave style but without the carelessness that passed for art in that long-dead subgenre. The lifestyles of SF fans are caught with accuracy, much as years later

Sharyn McCrumb would do the same in her infamous novels on SF fans. Where McCrumb failed, however, is where Broderick succeeds. McCrumb was able to get the details correct in her portrayal of fandom, but went on to completely mis-interpret their lifestyle, apparently unable or refusing to acknowledge that fandom is a hobby. Broderick is more sympathetic, and shows his fannish characters as having more than just cardboard motivations behind their behaviour.

## OTHER CANADAS.

**Tesseracts 7**, edited by Paula Johanson and Jean-Louis Trudel (Tesseract Books, 1998, ISBN 1-895836-58-1) Trade paperback, annual anthology of Canadian SF, the eighth in the series (there was a #Q for Quebec SF). I found the highest proportion of readable stories to date in this series, more than the prozines yet.

When reading fiction, I quickly give up on stories that begin with the character waking up in confusion and keeping reader the same, stories with narrative threads jumbled back to front, or cyberpunk cities that make a Los Angeles ghetto look like a Calgary suburb. It is the responsibility of the author to start off with a catchy first page to make the reader keep going to find out what happens next. It is the responsibility of the author to write a clear straightforward narrative, not distract the reader from the plot or characters with

literary pyrotechnics. I have no patience with the Canlitcrit crowd who drone about textual density, deconstruction, and all the other pretentious academic babble that keeps the small presses small. There is no problem with Canadian literature that couldn't be solved by firebombing the Canada Council offices.

So much for the diatribe, and on to the anthology. Sprinkled throughout the book are short pieces by M.A.C. Farrant. These are press releases and memos from government ministries in a surreal world. The mandarins apologize, complain, dictate ukases, reassure, and threaten in a series of documents that illuminates a country only slightly more bizarre than our own. A country where the government runs Easter egg hunts. A place where they arrange natural disasters, then have them rated by consumer focus groups. A world where the Boring White Woman lobby is denounced as undesirable. A country afflicted by the terrorist group called the Society to Prevent the Eradication of Inner Voices. Most of these documents are humorous but one that I found somewhat frightening was where electronic screens have reduced the demand for paper to the point where no one manufactures it anymore because it doesn't pay. Citizens beg the mandarins for paper, but the bureaucrats don't want to part with any of their own precious supply. I found Farrant's series particularly hilarious because I am a government worker myself, and the memos that cross my desk daily could be integrated into Farrant's writing with minimal change. She has the tone and

vocabulary of the bureaucracy exactly.

Some of the *TESSERACTS* 7 stories are competently written, but suffer from being too topical and will thus quickly date. "Millennium Songs" by Gerald Truscott reads well but will fade from memory as does Year 2000, much like all the post-World War Three stories of the 1950s and 1960s. "Moscow" by Jan Lars Jensen is a futuristic version of corporate warfare, descending from today's news of Russia via Jack Womack's LET'S PUT THE FUTURE BEHIND US, with a nod to THE MERCHANTS OF VENUS. Lively reading today, but passe a few years from now.

"Systems Crash" by Scott Ellis reminds us that those wealthy yuppies of the future who use high tech and clone themselves will not have it as easy as all that. Nothing ever works as flawlessly as WIRED magazine and other futurists imagine. Clones will develop minds of their own, and computer hackers will still rely on 'social engineering' for much of their success. Anyone relying on a combination of both clones and computers to run their life will come to grief sooner than later. On a related subject, Nancy Johnson's "You Are What You Wire" takes a look at the practicalities of cybersex, the things never mentioned by WIRED, such as your virtual reality suit ripping just as you go online, or what happens when you forget the lubricating cream.



The final story of this anthology is "Query" by Bob Boyczuk, a dickens of a story. This is a series of editor's letters to a contributor, which first appears to be the manuscript rejection letter to end all rejection letters, then turns into a lost worlds expedition. A manuscript is lost when the editorial office building is rent by an earthquake. The pages flutter down into a bottomless chasm, but the editor does not give up hope. With a crack team of copyreaders, he descends into the abyss, determined to recollate the pink pages of the manuscript. Obsession meets Dante in Mount Roraima, to produce a story that every editor will appreciate.

**Northern Suns**, edited by David Hartwell and Glenn Grant (Tor, 1999, ISBN 0-312-86461-2, hardcover), is a follow up to NORTHERN STARS, released in 1994. Both are anthologies of Canadian SF short stories, mostly from ON SPEC (fiction digest), TRANSVERSIONS (semiprozine), and TESSERACTS (annual anthology), as well as various francophone translations from Quebec.

Collections of early SF often included marginal stories from famous mundane authors in an effort to dignify the field. In like manner, this anthology also trots out a few big names from the Canlitterit crowd to prove that Canuck SF is so too literature.

Margaret Atwood's "Freeforall"

is a post-Collapse story of an orphanage smugly thinking itself as the last bastion of civilization. In this type of story, done for decades before Atwood in pulp SF, there is always an enclave of Outsiders, the cast-offs of the world. While Atwood writes competently, there is nothing new here to Sfdom, although the university crowd, innocent of real SF from snobbery, will no doubt consider it groundbreaking stuff. The Grand Old Man of Canlit, the late Robertson Davies, is represented by "Offer Of Immortality". His specialty was the ghost story and Gothics, written in a light-hearted manner that rises above Atwood because he at least had a sense of humour. This particular story deals with an unexpected twist to cryonics, when an arrogant corpsicle is mistaken for long pig. W.P. Kinsella's "Things Invisible To See" is an hilarious short story about a man whose job is to vacuum out words from imported Japanese cars sitting on the harbour dock where they have just been unloaded from the ships. Pest control at its funniest.

NORTHERN SUNS has stories which can be grouped into themes, not classed as such in the anthology, but which I will use as a matter of convenience in reviewing. Alternative histories are noticeable as one theme. Scott Mackay's "The Sages Of Cassiopeia" is an alternative history in which Tycho Brahe's stillborn twin brother Magnus survived, but only as a village idiot. When Brahe discovers his new star, the supernova of 1572, his

brother and mentally-retarded people everywhere experience a burst of intelligence that waxes and wanes with the exploding star. Brahe must not only deal with Magnus' sudden revelation about the nature of the solar system, reacting against him, but turn about and argue in the opposite direction with his Bishop, who, in his capacity as the local leader of the Church, suppresses any newfangled ideas about the Earth not being the centre of the universe. It is in fact a rewrite of "Flowers For Algernon" but done well enough.

Another alternative history is Eric Choi's "Divisions", which supposes that the Pequistes won the 1981 referendum in Quebec. At the negotiating table, the representatives of the Republic of Quebec want a piece of Canada's satellite telecommunications systems. The story reads much like one of Richard Rohmer's plentitude of near-future separation or American invasion novels. Political junkies who actually read subsection 4(a)ii of the British North America Act or who can name all the party ideologists in federal politics will like this story. It reminds one of corporate politics as well, the sort of thing you might read in WIRED, not so far fetched given the blurring of lines between the behaviour of governments and of multinational megacorporations.

"The Eighth Register" by Alain Bergeron, is an alternative history where Rome never fell and Islam never rose. The Roman Empire began settling the new lands across the ocean in the early 1800s,

but the area around the five Inland Seas, called Galactea, was only colonized in the 1890s. By 1994, it was the sixth and still the least populous of the new provinces. The history and culture of this new and alternative Canada is made evident by incidental commentary. The focus of the story is a new device invented by monks which suggests the existence of alternative time lines, with ridiculous alternatives such as Rome losing control of Europe, heretics seizing Constantinople and changing its name, and an American continent with two major countries in a different alignment. The device is denounced by the Church, put out of commission, and murder is done, leaving the protagonist to wonder what might have been.

"Near Enough To Home" by Michael Skeet is another addition to the alternative Wars Between The American States. Louisiana was purchased by Britain after Thomas Jefferson had a failure of nerve, and subsequently became part of Canada. The War Of 1810 was later succeeded by the War Between The American States that began in 1852. By then the Mounties were already in existence, decades before they were formed in our timeline. The story illuminates this history as it follows the progress of Canadian, Federal, and Confederate personnel during the war. Some are prisoners seeking escape, and some are opportunists seeking the main chance. In the midst of it is a lanky colonel who is advised he would look better if he grew a beard.

"Reve Canadien" by Jean Pierre April considers what might have happened if Jacques Cartier had actually discovered the diamond mines of the Cameroons. Naturally he would not want anyone else to know the source of his wealth, so he makes up a wild story about his actual route having been to a cold land that lies behind Newfoundland. No one is more surprised than he when it turns out there really is such a cold land. His supposed treasure land, conversely, turns out to be less than he thought it would be.

Another theme is what I might call the consumer society gone berserk. Jan Lars Jensen's "Domestic Slash And Thrust" mixes electric carving knife technology with beta software, producing bizarre results when the computer testing the safety of the knives develops sadomasochistic tendencies. "The Dummy Ward" by David Nickle considers what might happen if auto manufacturers take the next step in full customer service and provide hospital care for traffic accident victims who were driving their cars. One such victim, a beneficiary of such an extended warranty, wanders by mistake into a ward where the androids used as crash test dummies are recovering. Nalo Hopkinson's "A Habit Of Waste" is about better living through guerilla horticulture in the big city. An elderly man struggling by on his pension demonstrates that you can evade the welfare state and live healthier by paying more attention to your surroundings. Hint: Those flowering kales you see in ornamental beds around skyscrapers are basically a type of

edible cabbage. Every skyscraper has a commissionaire on duty watching for skateboarders and dumpster divers, but they will probably assume that elderly man "weeding" the flower bed is the landscape gardener.

Non-thematic stories that are straightforward SF include a look at a language war that erupts when the Babel Syndrome infects humanity, in Charles Montpetit's "Beyond The Barriers". It is based on a common occurrence in Canada, where bilingual marriages have the couples blurring each other's language with imported words and phrases from the other half. Montpetit simply extrapolates this into a worldwide conflagration. This story will probably read better for people who have personal experience of bilingual cultures in daily life. Some stories fail not so much from poor writing but from passe topics and styles, such as "Bugtown" by Ursula Pflug. This is just another mean streets story amidst urban decay, the kind of story that declined into cliché after the New Wave SF died out, and was given a temporary respite when William Gibson chrome plated it with cyberpunk. A straightforward extrapolation is "The History Of Photography" by Derryl Murphy, which alternates chapters on the history of photographic film with vignettes of an amateur photographer who has reached that terrible day when Eastman Kodak informs him with regret that they no longer manufacture film. Digital cameras have won the field, just as photocopiers



killed the mimeograph. An illustration of the inevitability of technological progress, against which the neo-Luddites contend in vain. Goeff Ryman is not quite Sharyn McCrumb with his story "Fan", about what happens when media stars use computer simulations to deal with their adoring populace. He does, however, provide one irresistible quote: "*Fans are like seashells. They emerge once the tide has retreated.*". Think about it.

**Crossing The Line**, edited by Robert Sawyer and David Skene-Melvin (Pottersfield Press, 1998, ISBN 1-895900-19-0, trade paperback) This is an anthology of Canadian crime stories which have some element of the fantastic in them, ranging from humorous ghosts of Robertson Davies to the Barking Dog sensors of Terrence Green. They are mystery stories for SF fans, or, in the alternative, SF stories for mystery fans.

Alternative history also creeps in, such as Andrew Weiner's "The Map", about a dead man found with a map of Toronto as it never existed but might have had the Canadian Confederation failed to come about in 1867. The squabbling Dominions never united, leaving the USA to snap up the Canadian prairies, while the eastern provinces devolve into poorer versions of Maine or Vermont. One clanger is a reference to a U.S. Senator from Alberta. The province got its name from Princess Alberta of Queen Victoria's extended family. Since it was not created until 1905, and was named such on the spur of the moment, it is

unlikely that the Americans would pick that name as well decades before the princess was born. James Alan Gardner posits a timeline where Anton Leeuwenhoek is brought before an Inquisition for his studies on blood, and inadvertently sets off an evolutionary chasm between the Roman Catholics and the Protestants when they begin selecting their mates on the basis of blood samples.

William Gibson's "Burning Chrome", about a cyberpunk hacking a computer system, still reads reasonably well but is obviously dating, and illustrates why cyberpunk will fail the test of time. SF originally developed a wish fulfillment system where nerdish boys built computers in their basements and spaceships in their backyard. Cyberpunk's implausible fundament is that punk rockers living in poverty-stricken squats would be master computer hackers. The reality of course is that master computer hackers today are nerdish boys, at heart if not physically.

**Timberjak** by Don DeBrandt (Ace, 1999, ISBN 0-441-00626-4) DeBrandt is a rising SF novelist who avoids the obvious in plotting and always takes time to build characterization instead of using cardboard cutouts. From his initial books **THE QUICKSILVER SCREEN** and **STEELDRIVER**, he quickly outdistanced all those other SF and fantasy writers who plod along with standard trilogies about young village lads overthrowing evil

kings or megacorporations, with a quest for the Sacred Knickknack of Qwerty thrown in to pad out the text.

TIMBERJAK at first glance seems as if it might be a retelling of the Paul Bunyan stories, but it is not, though some of the characters are based on them. Shinnkaria is a planet forested by korala trees, the wood of which generates a bio- force field used by starships. This is the only planet that has the trees, and they will not grow elsewhere. A megacorporation is cutting the trees, in the face of opposition by a DIY environmentalist. But where the average trilogy hack writer would leave it at that, DeBrandt takes it further. The environmentalist is misguided and ultimately destructive, while the corporation wants to maintain an indefinitely harvestable supply. The lumberjack boss has secretly boosted the harvest by 47%, but for good and sufficient reason as it turns out.

Some of the characters are brought over from STEELDRIVER, but TIMBERJAK is not a sequel, and you do not have to have read the previous book (although I would recommend it for the same reasons I recommend this one). The plot and characters have moved on and changed. There is no endless resetting back to Square One as is done in the usual fantasy trilogies. Everyone behaves the way they do as a logical outgrowing of the situation, and there are enough twists and turns in the plot to keep you turning the pages. Well recommended.



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