

OPUNTIA

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ALTERNATIVE HISTORY REVIEWS

by Dale Speirs

STEAMPUNK II: STEAMPUNK RELOADED (2010, trade paperback) is a follow-up anthology to the first volume which I have previously reviewed. The editors are Ann and Jeff Vandermeer. A few of the stories are reprints from other AH or steampunk anthologies which I've already reviewed, so I won't mention them here. Most are either new or from very obscure sources such as fiction Websites.

The Vandermeers start off with a brief discussion of the history of steampunk. Like many literary fields, it can be traced back centuries depending on the definition you use, but as a self-aware field it really only goes back a couple of decades. The field is split into several eras with large lacunae between them, and continued to wax and wane until a few years ago. There were many who wrote steampunk stories in the late Victorian era. The field revived in 1971 when Michael Moorcock began writing his Nomads of the Air series of novels. The word "steampunk" was coined in the April 1987 issue of LOCUS magazine by K.W. Jeter. It waned for a while in the form of written stories but developed in graphic novels before blooming again as written fiction. Many steampunk fans came into the field via graphic novels rather than SF magazines or novels.

“The Gernsback Continuum” by William Gibson hovers on the edge of steampunk. A photographer is hired to photograph Art Deco buildings and other impedimenta of the Great Depression era that would have been at home on the cover of a 1930s SF prozine. He immerses himself so totally in the project that soon he begins hallucinating and sees flying wings, gleaming cities with 200-story skyscrapers, aircars, and utopian people walking about in togas. Eventually the real world brings him back to our mundane reality. A nice psychological study.

“Great Breakthroughs In Darkness” by Marc Laidlaw is written in New Wave style (for those who remember that long-vanished relic of late 1960s SF) with the story being told as glossary entries for words beginning with the letter A. Professor Aanschultz is searching for a method to photograph thoughts. He finds instead an eldritch horror that would have done Lovecraft proud.

“Dr. Lash Remembers” by Jeffrey Ford involves a disease sweeping a nation caused by spores that are only activated by steam. Of the 60% who survive the initial infection, all suffer from a brain condition that causes them to hallucinate they are in different worlds. You can’t have airship pilots who think the best way to fly is to pull levers randomly. City life comes to a crashing halt as many flee to the countryside where only mechanical devices are used. (And why? Farmers were among the first to mechanize and adopt steam.) The story reads well but

ends abruptly. I got the idea it is a novel in progress.

“The Steam Dancer (1896)” by Caitlin Kiernan is about a nightclub dancer in the Old West who is part steam cyborg, and kept in good repair by her mechanic boyfriend. A pointless dream sequence is added to pad out the story.

“The Cast-Iron Kid” by Andrew Knighton is an ingenious story about a resident gunfighter in an Old West town who happens to be a steam-powered automaton. It is finally brought low by a smart kid with a big magnet to gum up its internal workings.

“The Unbecoming Of Virgil Smythe” by Ramsey Shehadeh is basically “Murder On The Orient Express” with time paradoxes. It is set in a Victorian era where time bubbles exist, disrupting causality and throwing people in grey nothingness at random. The story doesn’t go over well. Like most such stories, if anything can happen at random, then why bother reading it?

“The Mechanical Aviary ... “ (title is longer) by Shweta Narayan is about a Persian king with a mechanical aviary. Both the title and the story are interminable, written in florid prose. The Shah-en-Shah commands his artificer to build an extra bird better than the rest, but its perfection breaks the hearts, or clockworks rather, of the other birds. Interspersed with this is another fable, about clockwork people, that eventually fits into the story.

“O One” by Chris Roberson is set in an AH where China conquered most of the world back in the zenith of the emperors. Tsui is the Chief Computator of the Imperial Court, who supervises a battalion of clerks using the abacus to carry out whatever calculations the government needs done. Many of these calculations are for the Emperor’s dream of a spacecraft, so that he can commune with the gods. An emissary from the province of England arrives bearing a mechanical device called an Analytical Engine, which will speed up the work. The Emperor pits Tsui and his abacus against the Engine, and while Tsui is deemed the winner, he knows that the Engine was the better. He gets his revenge, but he can see the future.

“Wild Copper” by Samantha Henderson is not steampunk but pure fantasy. The faeries of England have been exiled onto a reserve in the Pacific Northwest, the protagonist is a woman who becomes a helpless ninny at the mercy of Oberon, and the legends of the native tribes are mixed in to help save the day. An uninspired mashup that doesn’t belong in this anthology.

“The Bold Explorer In The Place Beyond” by David Erik Nelson is an extract from a series of stories about an AH where the Union won the Civil War by using clockwork soldiers made in China. The soldiers actually play little part in the story, which is about a squid who wonders what the world above the waterline is like. It builds a mechanical suit filled with seawater and goes exploring

inland. The suit fails and starts leaking. The squid’s rescuers cannot think of anything better than to drop the suit into a deep well, not knowing of the difference between seawater and fresh water. Lots of pathos.

“Lost Pages From The Encyclopedia Of Fantastic Victoriana” by Jess Nevins is an extract from an ersatz encyclopedia about steam-powered war machines used in various wars. Whether tanks at Balaclava or armoured walkers during the Boxer Rebellion, they all seem to have a bad habit of blowing up and doing as much damage to the user as to the enemy. Quite funny actually, and certainly more realistic than stories where all the machines work perfectly and can be quickly repaired with duct tape.

”Tanglefoot” by Cherie Priest is about a young boy in an orphan home who spends most of his time with the resident mad scientist, and on his own builds a clockwork boy which eventually gets out of control. That’s the trouble with machines; they develop a mind of their own and refuse to obey orders. The story, while reading well, is a routine plot that has been done since the pulp era.

“A Serpent In The Gears” by Margaret Ronald is about attempts by outsiders to penetrate a forbidden valley. Their airships are attacked by cyborg flying serpents, the cyborg part being gears rather than electronics. The aerial battle is one of desperate derring -do, and

secrets revealed and re-concealed. The story is obviously part of a longer arc and concludes with a foreboding scene and some loose threads.

“The Strange Case Of Mr. Salad Monday” by G.D. Falksen looks at how blogging might have developed if it was all done on fanfold computer printouts, with the better letters of comment compiled into fanzines published daily or even several times a day for sale on the streets. Ah, what a world that might have been!

“The Persecution Machine” by Tanith Lee has the narrator telling the story about his uncle who imagines being pursued constantly by a steam engine that no one else can see. Eventually the nephew starts seeing it as well, and solves the problem by launching a real-world steam engine at it and smashing it to bits. Well told except for the fact that even for fantasy there are too many internal contradictions in logic that prevent the reader from suspending his disbelief. Unfortunately too many fantasy writers (and their editors) get sloppy in these details, and fall back on the excuse that the readers are too dumb to notice and that it’s only fantasy anyway.

“Balfour And Meriwether In The Adventure Of The Emperor’s Vengeance” by Daniel Abraham reads exactly like a Sherlock Holmes pastiche. Indeed, the story could be easily edited into one by just changing the character names. Be that as it may, the two

men are called into action by Scotland Yard after an ancient Egyptian sarcophagus has been opened and an ancient automaton released. The clockwork man disappears into subterranean London, where it begins building more automatons with which to overrun the world. The von Neuman machines are stopped in the nick of time by flooding the Underground line where they have their lair. Well written, in the style of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle when he was at his best.

“As Recorded On Brass Cylinders ... “ by James Grant and Lisa Mantchev is essentially a spy-versus-spy, goth-meets-clockwork man, alternative timeline Out West in America. Fairly mundane plot but unusually for most steampunk, the story specifies in detail how the cyborg clockwork man’s brain works, without any annoying info dumps. This is something that few authors seem to be able to do nowadays, to work in details of the world without bringing the plot to a dead stop for an “As you know, Professor” explanation.

“Flying Fish Prometheus” by Vilhelm Bergsoe is an 1870 story translated here into English from Danish for the first time. The translation is well done and the story is quite humourous. It is about the final ill-fated voyage of a steam-powered aircraft that flies by flapping its wings and makes its launch and landings in water like a flying fish. Although reliable enough for round-the-world flight, this particular aircraft runs into trouble while trying

to fly over a thunderstorm. There is a mid-air collision with another airplane, and things really start to go wrong.

“The Anachronist’s Cookbook” by Catherine Valente points out that a steampunk world would not be without its Luddites. The story chronicles a pamphleteer who does her best to rouse the rabble, with no more success than Ned Ludd.

The anthology finishes up with a dog’s breakfast of AH comics, an unreadable round-robin story by multiple authors, and trite essays that contribute nothing new. These items could well have been replaced with some other steampunk story instead of being used as filler.

BOOK REVIEWS

by Dale Speirs

The Fallen Towers.

ON TOP OF THE WORLD (2003, hardcover) by Tom Barbash tells of the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks as seen from the point of view of the survivors of one company, bond trader Cantor Fitzgerald, who lost 658 employees in Tower One. The book provides a useful example of how people deal with catastrophe, when communications break down because cellphone networks are

jammed, the Internet fails, and nobody knows anything. The experience of the 9/11 disaster is instructive to those of you who live in California and may have to deal with an earthquake, or Gulf Coast readers who may find a hurricane homing in on them.

The Cantor Fitzgerald offices were on the 101st to 105th floors when the hijacked passenger jet slammed into the 93rd floor. There was no chance of escape. The CEO was Howard Lutnick, who lost his brother in the tragedy. The company, despite being a billion-dollar brokerage, was in many ways a family business. There were almost twenty sets of siblings in the tower offices, and many others were childhood friends. 955 children lost a parent from Cantor Fitzgerald. Some employees survived by random chance. Lutnick had been delayed while taking his son to kindergarten. Another employee had gone downstairs to meet a client on the ground floor, and a couple of traders had left on business trips. Another worker missed her morning train and was late for work. She arrived in time to see the second impact, and then to watch her fellow employees jumping to their deaths because it was better than being burned alive. Cantor Fitzgerald had a branch office in London, England, which quickly took over the business side. Lutnick had the worst part of it. He set up a command post in his apartment, and began assembling the few survivors. Someone had a year-old list of employee home phone numbers, and they began the lengthy task of phoning wives and asking “Did your husband make it out?”.

Wall Street was shut down for days. Too many brokers, sales agents, technicians, and accountants were gone. Billions of trades vanished into thin air as the computers that recorded them were crushed in the rubble, and few people were left who knew how to operate the backups elsewhere. The London office began working around the clock, and the few New York survivors of Cantor Fitzgerald found a temporary office on the New Jersey side. Staff were pitchforked into jobs they knew little about and struggled to keep the business going.

A hotel ballroom was rented as a contact point for families. Bulletin boards were set up for “Missing” posters. The boards were quickly filled and the posters spread outside to the streetlamp poles, bus stops, and construction hoarding. After a few days, the families began changing tack. They started asking about death benefits and how to file a missing-persons report. Four notaries were hired to produce death certificates based on affidavits because there were no bodies to confirm the death. Many took their anger out on Lutnick; how come he survived and their loved one didn’t? He found out that in a catastrophe such as this, people would lash out in their pain and shoot the messenger.

Competing brokers on Wall Street showed no mercy. Some ran ads saying they were unaffected, even if they were and their offices were gone. Others began hustling Cantor Fitzgerald customers. None of the other companies phoned to ask if they

could help out. Surprisingly though, some ex-employees showed up to assist, including one who had been laid off September 10 for lack of work and might have been in the tower in a different timeline.

Lutnick also ran into bad publicity when he cut off the paycheques of the dead on September 15. Family members were told they would receive death benefits and life insurance payouts, but they were angry. They were still in denial, and refused to admit their loved ones were dead, hoping against hope that they were in a hospital somewhere. The mass media simplified the story to Cantor Fitzgerald cutting off the families without a dime, making Lutnick look like a cold-hearted bastard. He learned the hard way that in a disaster, one must communicate well and often. He was ambushed by television interviewers such as Connie Chung and Larry King. The worst damage control he had to do was not the business interruption and physical recovery, but dealing with mass media looking for the easy ten-second sound bite.

Then there were the memorial services, an endless string of them. Since few bodies were recovered, there were few funerals in the true sense of the word. Once those were out of the way, the claims came in, not just from the immediate families, but parasites pushing to get to the money tree. Lutnick had to deal with fathers-in-law wanting benefits (only beneficiaries named in the will or insurance policy could get them) or cousins claiming

emotional trauma (so sue the terrorists, not Cantor Fitzgerald). The company made a recovery over the next year, but they and many others discovered that the physical cleanup was the least of their problems.

How The Mighty Are Fallen.

Human nature being what it is, we always slow down and rubberneck driving past a fender-bender, or read with avid interest about some Hollywood starlet who is, as the saying goes, known to police. Financial wrecks are also entertaining, assuming that you don't have any of your money involved, as limo-riding CEOs suddenly find themselves answering uncomfortable questions at a committee hearing.

The Germans have an excellent word for this, *schadenfreude*, or taking joy in other people's misfortune. After such an indulgence, one should also look for the lesson that comes after, and learn from the mistakes made by others. Don't tailgate the car in front of you. Young actresses should not go nightclubbing every night of the week. Invest carefully and walk around the plane for a visual inspection before you become a financial high-flyer.

THE BILLION DOLLAR MISTAKE (2010, hardcover) by Stephen L. Weiss looks at some of the bad bets in the investment world by big-time operators who got careless or too optimistic and came

crashing back down. He presents a series of case histories from the recent past, and concludes each one with an analysis of what the fatal mistakes were. The same sort of mistakes are made over and over, but perhaps the reader of this book can learn from these failures, even if the next generation repeats the mistakes of their grandparents. That is why long-term economic cycles tend to move in 50 to 60 year cycles, what are variously referred to as the Kondratieff long wave or the two-generation cycle. I won't review every case history presented by Weiss but will look at some of the more entertaining ones.

Kirk Kerkorian was a self-made man who built himself up to a billionaire by buying distressed companies, fixing them up, and then selling them at a profit. In the 1990s, he did that with Chrysler, selling out to Daimler Benz for \$2.7 billion profit. He decided that this success made him an auto baron, and if there is one thing the automobile industry had, it was lots of distressed auto manufacturers. In 2005, Kerkorian tried to do the same thing with General Motors, but had to settle for a piddling \$112 million. Unfortunately he didn't stop to ask himself why that deal never really succeeded, and he completely missed the sea change that was occurring in the industry.

The problems with General Motors were that it was burning cash due to grossly overpaid autoworkers with gold-plated pensions, and complacency by management.

These problems also applied to Chrysler and Ford, but were submerged in the good times before the Panic of 2008. Kerkorian made a good deal with Chrysler because the 1990s were prosperous, and just scraped by with General Motors because the sea change was only starting to be felt. Undeterred, Kerkorian began buying Ford shares in early 2008 but ran up against the Ford family, which still owned 40% of the voting stock. The dust flew between them over the summer of 2008, and then suddenly settled as the panic took hold and everyone scattered for shelter. Kerkorian ended up losing \$700 million on his shares when he conceded defeat. He thought he knew the industry and didn't pay attention to changing conditions, such as the sudden collapse in SUV and recreational pickup truck sales, where the companies make their money. (Economy cars are loss-leaders in Detroit.)

David Bonderman was a private equity investor who wheeled and dealt in just about everything out of his Texas office, mainly through his company TPG. His investments did very well, and he saw no reason to change. During the 1980s Savings and Loans crisis, he successfully revived a dying credit union that had been caught out during the collapse of real estate prices back then. In early 2008, he was offered a chance to buy into Washington Mutual, a bank that specialized in subprime mortgages and high-risk credit card customers. Bonderman thought he could do the same as with that credit union, but this was a new world of liar loans and mortgage-backed securities with an intrinsic value of

zero. On September 25, 2008, the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation seized Washington Mutual as the financial panic went from bad to worse. TPG lost \$2 billion in its investment. The lesson was much the same as Kerkorian had received; just because you did it before doesn't mean you will always be able to do it.

Aubrey McClendon was a specialist in leverage, the use of borrowed money to buy assets and then sell them later at a profit as the market rises, or get enough income from them to service the debt. The problem is that while it allows you to make a profit from other people's money, it puts you in serious debt if the market reverses. These are recourse loans, meaning that if the creditor doesn't recover the full value of the debt from a forced sale, then he can come after your other assets, such as other stocks you own, your house, or your car. Leverage specialists are always convinced that they will beat the market, just as soldiers going into battle are convinced that they will survive and it will be the other guy that takes the bullet.

McClendon co-founded Chesapeake Energy, a natural gas supplier that constantly borrowed money to buy mineral rights and drill for more natural gas. By the end of 2007, it owed \$47 for every \$53 of assets it owned, assuming, of course, that the market value of the assets stayed up. McClendon himself used borrowed money to buy shares in Chesapeake Energy, which steadily increased in

price. Then came the Panic of 2008. All stock prices fell, and McClendon was issued margin calls by his creditors, that is, demands to pay off enough of his debt so that the market value of the shares was more than he owed. He had to sell off all his investments at market price and lost \$2 billion. Chesapeake Energy itself, although hurt by the panic, was fundamentally sound and is still in business, but McClendon lost two-thirds of his fortune betting with borrowed money. The lesson was not to invest with borrowed money, something that people have to learn over and over again.

Nick Maounis was the founder of Amaranth Advisors, an American investment firm well known to Calgarians because it was one of us who brought it down. Maounis hired native Cowtowner Brian Hunter as an energy trader. Since Calgary is the petroleum capital of Canada, Amaranth set up an office here for him.

Hunter specialized in natural gas spreads, a type of over/under bet based on futures contracts. He scored big in late 2005 after hurricanes Katrina and Rita sent natural gas prices soaring by knocking out the Gulf Coast wells. By April 2006 he was booking \$800 million profit per month. The summer of 2006 proved to be a quiet hurricane season, and natural gas prices began falling as supplies came back on line. Another contributing factor was that it was a cool summer in much of the USA.

American power companies burn natural gas to produce sudden peak-demand electricity for air conditioners, so the demand wasn't as strong. Hunter had locked in many of his natural gas spreads for the long term, which pays off with higher profits in a rising market, but increases losses if the future price falls. Amaranth suddenly found itself on the wrong side of the playing field, and the rest you can guess.

Hunter lost \$6 billion on the natural gas spreads and put Amaranth out of business. The lesson was that he had failed to hedge his bets and went in all on one side, which is why investors are always recommended to stay diversified. Hunter made the international news. Next time your boss chews you out for a mistake, be grateful that it was a private matter and not a lead item in the mass media.

SHERLOCKIANA: PART 8

by Dale Speirs

[Parts 1 to 3 appeared in issues #63.1B to #63.1D, Part 4 in #67.1D, Part 5 in #68.1C, Part 6 in #69.1E, and Part 7 in #70.1A.]

Among the Sherlockians, the original stories by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle are known as the canon, while stories written by others are called pastiches.

Fan fiction was not invented by Trekkies. In the century since the canon was published, thousands of pastiches have been published about Holmes and Watson. Who knows how many pastiches exist today; book-length bibliographies have been published cataloguing them.

I don't pretend to be a completist nor am I interested in being one, but my collection of pastiches is about two metres of bookshelf space, excluding commentaries and, of course, my set of the canon. There are many who measure their collections by tens of metres, and some collectors have rooms full.

Fandom.

Doyle's creation originated a fandom that has grown over the past century into one of the most extensive ever devoted to a single character. The Baker Street Irregulars (BSI) of New York City were an early fan club that spurred the formation of others. Several authors have written fiction in which the fans themselves become detectives, taking the Master's advice "*You know my methods. Apply them!*"

THE SHERLOCKIAN (2010, hardcover) by Graham Moore begins with Harold White being inducted into the BSI for honourable cause. The chapters set in the here-and-now alternate with flashbacks to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle in 1893, who had just killed

off Holmes in "The Final Problem" and found himself taking abuse, sometimes physical assaults, from angry fans. Trekkies who were upset at Spock being killed in one of the movies and forced Paramount Studios to bring him back were nothing new; several years later Doyle was forced to bring Holmes back.

A Sherlockian named Alexander Cale announced that he had discovered a missing diary of Doyle that would shed some light on the canon. The diary would be revealed at a fan gathering, but when the moment comes, Cale isn't there. Where he is, as Harold and others find out, is in his hotel room, lying dead on the floor. With the plot thus set in motion, the Sherlockians decide they, not the police, will solve the crime. White is put in handcuffs by the police, who didn't appreciate him crawling all over the crime scene. Whether or not he solved the murder with Holmesian methods is immaterial; if he contaminated the scene it would be a walk in the park for the defence lawyer to have the culprit acquitted.

Meanwhile, in the flashback sequence, Doyle becomes embroiled in solving a murder, with no help from Scotland Yard. He enlists the help of theatre manager Bram Stoker (who is thinking of writing a novel about vampires), and off they go. Doyle quickly finds out that Holmes's methods do not necessarily work in real life. He perseveres though, and finds that the old-fashioned

Policeman Plod work gets better results, paging through files and knocking on endless doors. He establishes that there must be a serial killer on the prowl.

Back in our timeline, Sebastian Doyle, the author's great-grandson, shows up to ask White to investigate. Since the crime was committed in New York, they naturally conclude that the place to start investigating is London, and off they go to track down how Cale managed to find the diary. They take along with them Sarah Lindsay, a news reporter who was covering the Sherlockian convention and got a better story than she anticipated. White finds out that Holmes's methods do not, etcetera etcetera. Both Sir Arthur and White struggle through their respective investigations and find they cannot edit real life as if it were a manuscript. There are numerous twists in the plot, and the reader is led up more than one garden path. It is more realistic than most Miss Marple-style stories. White et al are constantly under threat by the police of both London and New York City, for good reason, and the cops are not as incompetent as Sherlockians might assume.

Pastiches: Novels.

THE GIANT RAT OF SUMATRA (2011, trade paperback) by Richard Boyer begins with a murder on Baker Street, of a sailor recently returned from Sumatra and apparently on his way to

221B to ask something of Holmes. The dead man is traced back to his ship recently arrived in London, and a shipmate advises them that it brought a cargo including something very heavy guarded by a rat the size of a calf. There is also a second case to deal with, that of Lord Allistair's daughter, who was kidnapped in Bombay while on a grand tour of India. Eventually a ransom note is received and it is evident that she must have been brought back to England as a hostage.

The two storylines are merged when a man is found dead on the Allistair estate, apparently killed by the giant rat. The ransom is paid, and it turns out that one of the kidnappers was Rodger Baskerville of the hound fame, who has been presumed dead. This is an unnecessary cheat, but the story rolls on nonetheless. In the denouement, Baskerville is sent to Bedlam, the girl is reunited with her family, and the giant rat dispatched with gunfire. It is not a convincing ending, particularly because Holmes acts out of character. The last chapter, after all the shouting is over, takes up a fair number of pages to explain away all the loose threads.

Pastiches: Fiction Crossovers.

DR. JEKYLL AND MR. HOLMES (2010, trade paperback) by Loren Estleman, is Watson's account of the events he was familiar with and which Robert Louis Stevenson later made famous in the guise of fiction.

Watson and Holmes were visited by Mr. Utterson, solicitor for Dr. Henry Jekyll, who had requested him to make his will leaving everything to an Edward Hyde. The latter was a coarse, brutish man who Utterson suspected of blackmailing. The great detective takes the case, and soon tracks Hyde to his lair but other than him being a boor and no gentleman, has little to go on.

Some time later Hyde is suspected of the murder of Sir Danvers Carew by both Scotland Yard and Holmes, but no one can find him and Jekyll is little help to them. Sir Danvers was a favourite at Buckingham Palace though, and Queen Victoria desired that a better investigation be undertaken by Holmes, at which he cannot refuse her. There is an hilarious chase scene as hansom cabs clatter after each other through London, strewing chaos in their wake, which had me laughing out loud. Step by step, the mystery of Jekyll and Hyde is gradually uncovered by Holmes and Watson, and the miscreant meets his fatal end.

THE ANGEL OF THE OPERA (2011, trade paperback) by Sam Siciliano is narrated not by Dr. Watson but by Holmes' maternal cousin Dr. Henri Vernier. L'Opera de Paris is having problems with a blackmailer threatening damage to the opera house and its denizens unless his demands are met. Holmes is summoned to assist, bringing along Vernier. After the grand tour of the opera house and meeting the characters, the story gets into gear.

The Phantom of the Opera, for it indeed is he, is at first elusive, but Holmes finds him in the underground lake beneath the opera house. The plot mostly follows the original story, save that Holmes and Vernier are inserted into the story. The chandelier is sawn down onto the terrified audience, the young ingenue sings her way to instant fame, and the management are anxious to have the Phantom despatched, as long as it doesn't cost them too many francs. The novel reads well and maintains the ambience of that era. Since the plot is entirely predictable, it is the milieu of the story that carries the reader's interest.

Pastiches: Sherlock's Smarter Brother.

The short story "The Lowther Park Mystery" (THE STRAND MAGAZINE, 2011 February) has Holmes attending a high tea at a manor house at the request of his brother Mycroft, a high-level functionary in Whitehall. Mycroft has his suspicions about a junior bureaucrat, Damien Kenworthy, who he recommended for a promotion but who presented him with a falsified report on a matter of national security. It would be unseemly for Mycroft to investigate the young man himself, so Holmes and Watson are despatched to do the job. At yon stately pile, one of the guests declares that a briefcase of his filled with thousands of pounds of money (back when a pound a week was a good wage) had been emptied while kept in a locked room. The great detective is asked

to investigate, but doesn't believe there was a theft in the first instance. The suspect is confronted, makes a run for it, and is brought to ground. It was all a set-up so that Kenworthy could claim the thief, who was supposed to get away cleanly, had stolen military documents. In reality, he arranged the theft for money, what with being short of ready cash, as so many young noblemen were in those days. This story was a fairly straightforward pastiche with a predictable plot, but it read well.

"The Death Of Mycroft Holmes" comes from the Ted Roccardi anthology BETWEEN THE THAMES AND THE TIBER (2011, hardcover, to be reviewed in a future issue). Mycroft dies of a stroke in the summer of 1914 at the age of 73, to no one's surprise because of his corpulence. Sherlock is, of course, the executor of the estate. Mycroft being of some importance to the Foreign Office, Sherlock naturally checks his brother's diary to see if there is anything important and discovers that Mycroft was investigating an anarchist group called Die Tote Stadt (The Dead City, in English) at the time of his death. Sherlock takes up the case, which soon transpires to be an assassination attempt on the Austrian Archduke during his visit to Sarajevo. The Foreign Office warns the Archduke but he will not cancel the visit, and the rest of it you know. Mycroft's death changes the course of history.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

[Editor's remarks in square brackets.]

FROM: Catherine Groves
Box 276
Clifton, New Jersey 07015-0276

2011-04-06

[Re: the \$20 billion bet and the Panic of 2008] In my very simplistic way of thinking, much of the economy is a juggling of the tangible and fantasy. Until money again represents an exchange of real value, the mess won't go away.

[True money is a store of value and currency is a medium of exchange, but people often mistakenly use the two words interchangeably. In 5,000 years of human history, countless types of currency have come and gone (seashells, beads, tally sticks, base-metal coins, paper banknotes, electrons) but only two forms of money have ever succeeded, gold and silver. When circulating coins were actually made of silver or gold, this didn't matter. Now that the majority of circulating currency is made of electrons in a computer, it is important to recognize that only gold and silver are true money, and to keep some of it as physical coins for your old age. The electrons won't be worth as much.]

FROM: Lloyd Penney
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2011-05-04

Re: polywater. I do not believe in fictional science but it is fun to read about it. Polywater was just one of those bits of fictional science that inspired thought if not confidence, and cold fusion was another. True, we wanted to believe and we hoped that new aspects of reality would intrigue us, and something that sounded so science fictional would actually be science fact, but wanting to believe does not make such things so.

What do you think of these commercials that urge you to bring in or send in your gold for instant cash? These people rely on the foolishness and desperation of people to do just that, and they must make a fortune. If I did have gold jewelry I wanted to get rid of, I certainly wouldn't sell it to a huckster on television.

[The road shows and telehucksters pay about 10% of the true value of any gold jewelry bought, which is quite legal since you can refuse the offer and go somewhere else. I recommend that anyone wanting to sell old jewelry should get at least three offers from local storefront dealers who have been in the community for years, not hit-and-run road show promoters. Gold jewelry is a very poor investment because you have to buy it at very high markups and sell it at low offers since the dealer has the expense

of melting it down. It is better to buy
gold and silver for investment as coins; Maple Leafs
if you are Canadian, Eagles if you are American, and sovereigns
if you are British.]

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Re: the history of handwriting. I am realistic enough to see that these arts die because they lose necessity. Literacy is endangered at the best of times, numeracy even more so, and handwriting is being replaced with typing.

[I hark back to junior high school when we used slide rules, logarithmic tables, and mental arithmetic (ex. $95 \times 2 = ?$, start with $100 \times 2 = 200$, and subtract $2 \times 5 = 10$, therefore $200 - 10 = 190$). But when pocket calculators came in, none of us mourned the loss of analogue devices to do math. I keep my old slide rule as a memento but long ago chucked out the logarithmic tables.]

This past weekend was the first Canadian National Steampunk Exhibition in Markham, Ontario, and it was a fun time for all, about 400 in attendance. [My wife Yvonne and I] ran the green room, with mixed results, but overall a well-run convention. It even got good press, which is rare these days.

FROM: Franz Zrilich
4004 Granger Road
Medina, Ohio 44156-8602

2011-05-03

Re: tsunamis. I think the construction of new structures in hurricane-, flood-, fire-, earthquake-, volcano-, and tsunami-prone areas ought to be curtailed. Or at least discussed.

[I don't see it happening. People insist in living in places like, for example, Vancouver, British Columbia, which is overdue for a big earthquake and tsunami. In my home province, the town of Slave Lake was burned down by a forest fire but they will rebuild and let the trees grow back without a fireguard. Calgary's rich folk live on the Elbow River floodplain, and when their houses went under a couple of metres of water in 2005, they blamed the government. People still live in New Orleans despite being below sea level with a giant lake behind the city and in a hurricane zone.]

There is a theory put forth in the USA that we do not need Arctic oil, that the oil firms already have lots of oil and are sitting on it, waiting for prices to rise more. I merely report this to you, though I have not looked into these claims in more detail.

[No petroleum company will sit on reserves if it can make money at \$85 per barrel, and no petro-executive is going to lose his bonus and let some future CEO take credit for saving reserves. The

problem is not that we are running out of oil, but that we have used up most of our cheap, easy-to-get-at, light, sweet (low-sulphur) oil. Now companies have to mine the Athabasca Tar Sands, drill in the Arctic, and go offshore at great expense.]

FROM: Murray Moore
1065 Henley Road
Mississauga, Ontario L4Y 1C8

2011-05-03

Re: the \$20 billion bet article chapter heading "Saepe Mendosus, Nunquam Dubius", Google Translate produces "incorrect often, they would never in doubt"

[Actual translation from the Latin is "Often wrong but seldom in doubt", which describes Paulson, who lost money for three years betting against the American housing market before scoring \$20 billion during the Panic of 2008.]

Re: tsunami reviews. Rouge tsunami? Rouge scientist? Once is a typo, two is a mistake, he typed, being very careful that this letter of comment is free of typos.

[When you pointed out the mistake, my cheeks blushed red, the colour of rouge.]

FROM: Sheryl Birkhead 2011-10-01
25509 Jonnie Court
Gaithersburg, Maryland 20882

Any idea where Benoit Girard [the founder of the World Wide Party] is or what he is doing? I think fondly of his zine THE FROZEN FROG.

[So do I, but he appears to have gafiated from zinedom, although I have read occasional reports that he attended SF conventions. Can anyone advise?]

FROM: Ned Brooks 2011-10-11
4817 Dean Lane
Lilburn, Georgia 30047

The 50th anniversary mailing of SFPA came out to 471 pages; a number of ex-members got zines in. Nothing like the 1700+ pages of the 100th mailing in 1981, but the difference is probably not as large as it looks in terms of word counts. The 100th mailing was mostly printed from mimeograph stencils cut with a monospace typewriter at 10 or 12 characters per inch, while the 471 pages of SFPA #283 are mostly done with desktop-publishing software in proportional fonts.

[I used to be a member of the Calgary Aquarium Society, which has published THE CALQUARIUM since 1959. When I first joined, I heard stories from old-timers about the glory days when the periodical had 70 pages per month. Eventually I bought a collection of back issues at a club auction and discovered the same thing as you note. The old issues were mimeographed in 12-point type with margins wide enough to satisfy even Fermat, but the actual content wasn't any greater than 30-page issues of my era.] -16-

I Also Heard From: Stuart Stratu, Frederick Moe, Theo Nelson, John Held Jr, Henry Welch, Chris Mikul, Theo Nelson, Joel Cohen, James Dawson, Frederick Moe

