

OPUNTIA

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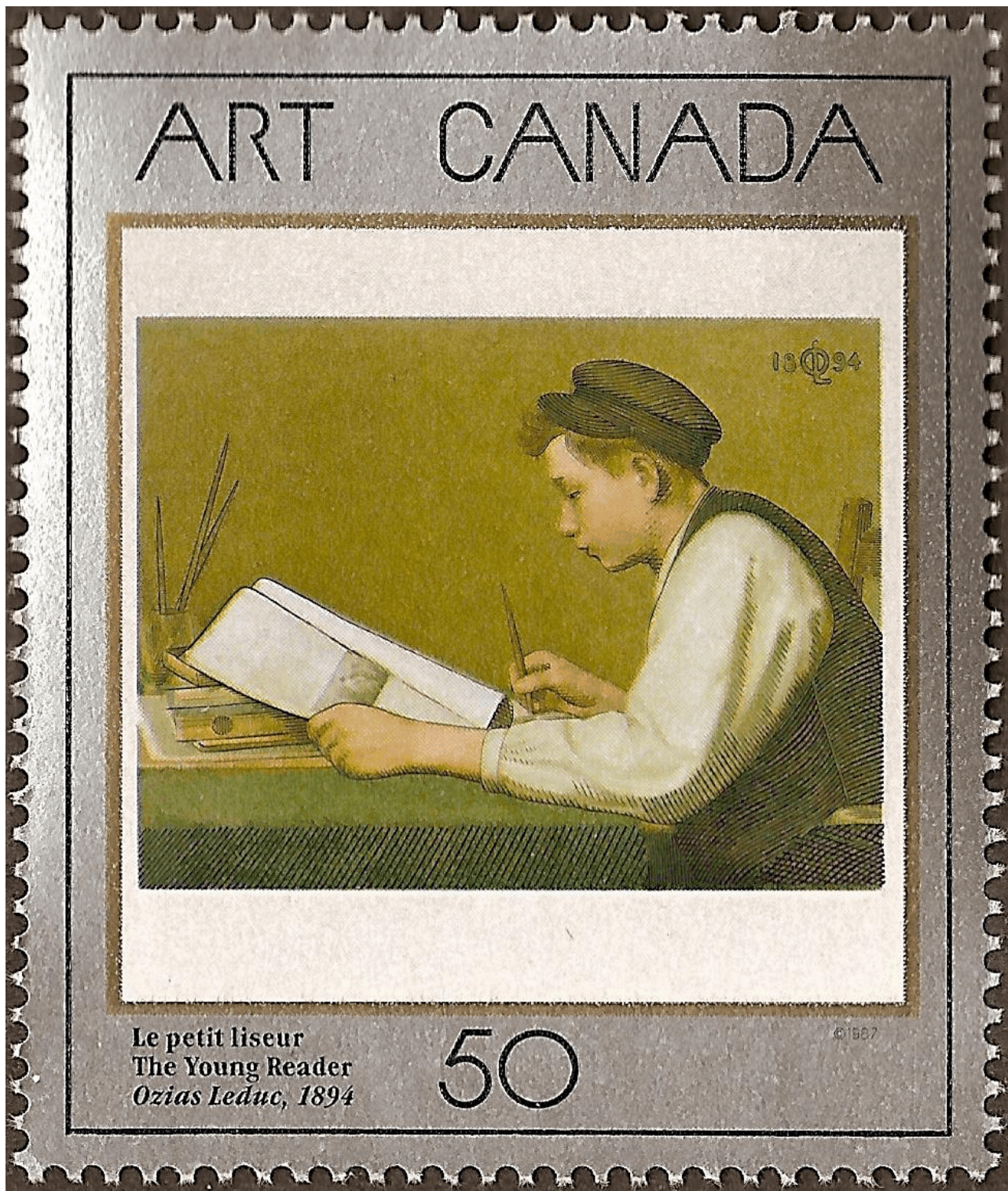
August 2014

Opuntia is published by Dale Speirs, Calgary, Alberta. Since you are reading this only online, my real-mail address doesn't matter. My eek-mail address (as the late Harry Warner Jr liked to call it) is: opuntia57@hotmail.com When sending me an emailed letter of comment, please include your name and town in the message.

WHEN WORDS COLLIDE 2014

by Dale Speirs

The fourth edition of Calgary's annual readercon When Words Collide was held at the venerable Carriage House Inn from August 8 to 10. From the beginning it was designed to bring together and mix the genres of science fiction, fantasy, mystery, historical fiction, and romance.



Membership was capped at 400 to ensure WWC was a convention and not a mob. Readers, editors, publishers, and authors met as equals, without any overweight Klingons roaming the aisles. I always look forward to it and have never been disappointed.

Rather than a chronological report, I'll sort the panels out by theme. And no food reports, blaming hotel problems on the concom, "And then I met ...", and the ultimate in tediousness, a dealer whose convention reports always complain that the hotel or concom should supply her with a dolly to unload her van. Since I no longer have to worry about keeping within 16 print pages, I'll also add the programme book blurb in italics for each panel I went to so that you can compare how far off track, or on, the panelists went.

Caveat Vendor.

"Novel Marketing "
with Kate Larking
To sell books, you need to market your fiction. But you don't want to market if you come off like a smarmy used-car salesperson. What is the best way to market your fiction? Relationship and content marketing. When should you start building your fiction marketing platform? ASAP! Let's talk author branding, professional networking, and platform building.

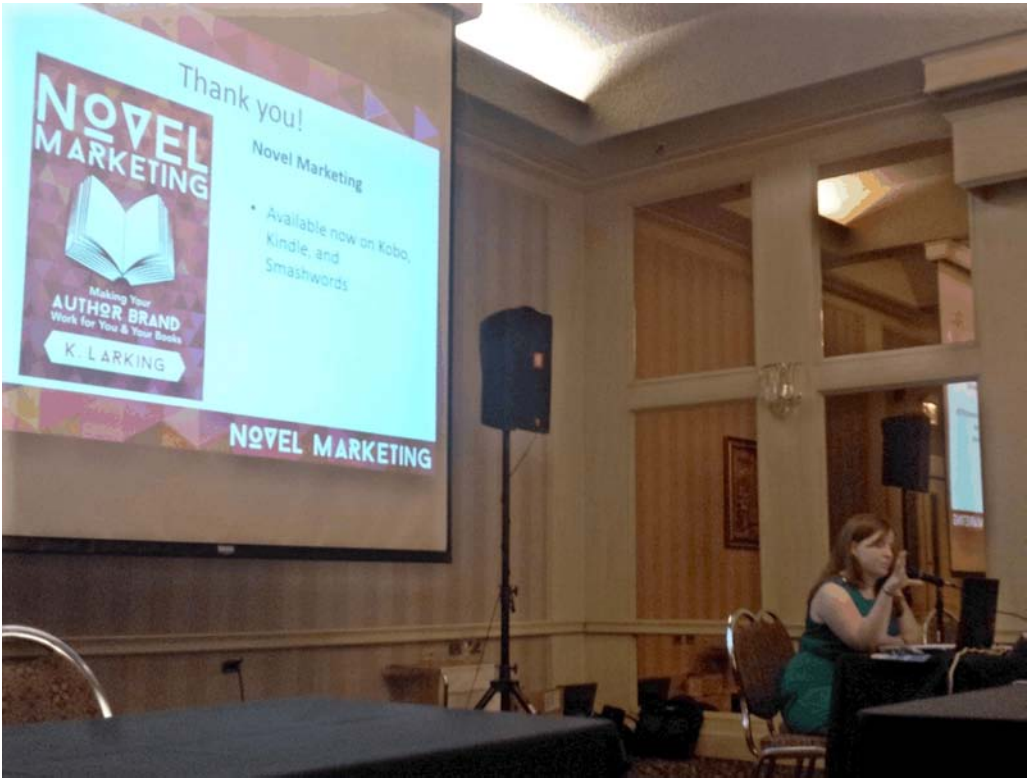
The good news is that anyone can bypass publishers and produce a book directly on the Internet. The bad news is that you have to do the work yourself in marketing, not so easy as one might think. Larking had a well thought out slide presentation, she being a professional marketing director, and spoke to an 80%-full ballroom. Her talk concentrated on strategic focus and author brands. Authors have to distinguish themselves from the rest of the herd. A brand is not a persona you put on when in public or an infomercial personality. It is a subset of your personal self that you are comfortable with, not a mask you put on at conventions. Know what themes you write and why, not just because you want to make money.

Selling your book should not be more important than connecting with readers who like your style. It is easier to establish a small stable of core readers and then slowly expand by word of mouth or email. Don't blast "BUY MY BOOK!" on Twitter or other social media. You must target your book because it will not be for everyone. Trying to get a mass audience will also get you bad reviews online from non-core readers and set you back when potential readers

search Google for your name and find the reviews instead of the friendly talk about you from core readers. You need to find out where your target audience hangs out in the social media. Space opera can be aimed at SF gamers, and most romance readers are college-educated women. Check out the readership of other authors whose style is comparable to you.

Find the sites you enjoy and which don't take your time away from paying writing. Don't let Twitter and blogs run your life. You do not have to be posting every day, nor on every single social media site. You don't have to be everywhere and comment on every single topic.

Publishers have been demonized for Lo! these many years, but authors are now starting to realize that perhaps they do some good. If you are starting out in this brave new world, getting the book written is only the first step.



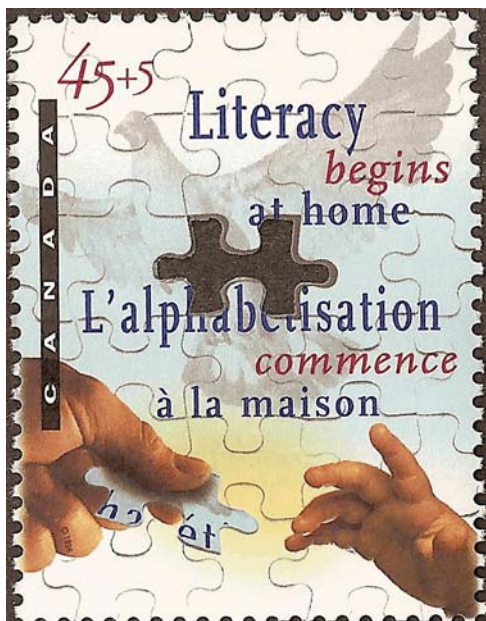
“Prim and Proper: Online Etiquette”

with Justyn Perry, Nola Sarina, Greg Bechtel, and Angela Ackerman

How to properly have an online presence without angering your readers/fans. What you should and should not do online in terms of writing reviews, posting on Facebook, Goodreads, Twitter, Pinterest, Google+, etc. With Amazon now censoring reviews and the Goodreads review attacks on authors, how do you respond properly to these "reviews" or do you? And how to avoid "haters".

Ackerman said newly published authors don't realize they are now different people online. They can't make sarcastic remarks like they used to and still keep an honourable reputation. Authors have to learn to tolerate bad reviews online in a way that didn't happen with print reviews. The latter fade away but the former are always there on Google under your name. If a bad review has a major error of fact, such as the author being blamed for high book prices, a calm, non-emotional reply restricted only to the facts will often solve the problem. Always remember that lurkers are watching you and will respect a quiet posting in response to a troller.

Sarina remarked that a newly-published author can no longer carry on like a fan but must behave like a pro. Avoid fighting in every flame war. Resist a flippant remark that is okay in personal conversation where people can understand it is good humour from your body language but online it looks cruel because the words stand there with no context. Emoticons do not help.



The general consensus of the panel was that the moment you become a published author, you step into a new world and must leave the old one behind. You now have a reputation to uphold.

“The Marketing Marriage: Creative Social Media Solutions To Help Your Self-Published Book Get Noticed”

with Angela Ackerman

Struggling to be heard over the white noise of "buy my book!" promotion? Angela Ackerman discusses how to create online events that will help you stand out and engage your readership.

Self-publishing is very difficult when trying to be noticed amidst all the spammers shouting “BUY MY BOOK!”. Ackerman's advice is first to understand what makes your novel different from everyone else's, not just its genre.

She spoke specifically to planning a book launch. Such an event must entertain, not just be a dull recitation of the ordering information. It should have something to provoke a positive response, give buyers something to be involved in, and provide extra value such as fun or freebies.

Genre Miscellanea.

“Is Chick Lit Dead?”

with Victoria Smith, Jillian Long, Linda Kupecek, and Jessica L. Jackson

It's fair to say that chick lit hit a boom with shopaholics and loveable, weight-obsessed girls taking over both print and film. But has chick lit gone bust? Authors talk about reviving the genre with strong, sassy, independent characters that readers can aspire to. Agents and editors tell us what the trends are for chick lit, and what authors need to do to stand out.

Long said there seems to be a shift from action-adventure chicks to women who have more fully developed characters and face more complex situations. This attracts readers interested in their lives, not just the plot.

The subject of S*X came up (pardon the pun). Jackson said that sex scenes should be rare if not at all, and should flow naturally from the plot. They should not be wedged in to make the story seem sophisticated.

The consensus of the panel was that there is some sort of sea change underway in chick lit, sometimes with contradictory undercurrents, but it seems to be moving from ideology to characterization.

“Write to Fright: How to Write a Horror Novel”

Acclaimed horror novelist Craig DiLouie (*SUFFER THE CHILDREN*, Simon & Schuster) will take you on a tour of the horror genre, covering why horror is a popular genre, elements of a successful horror novel, plot structure, characterization, finding the right creature element, and creating suspense and chills. If you enjoy reading horror fiction or ever thought about breaking into this genre as a writer, this session is a must.

DiLouie says that when he tells people that he is a horror novelist, they react as if he were a registered sex offender. But to the theme of his talk, he says you should first choose what sub-genre you want to write: thriller, psychological, apocalypse (zombies et al), or splatterpunk. The unknown is scarier than the known, so don't show the monster in detail but let the reader imagine it. If using familiar tropes, try to present them in a new way. Put characters far outside their comfort zone, but give them hope of survival. If everyone dies, why bother?



“In Love With the Past: Historical Fiction”

with Jack Whyte and Adrienne Kerr

From ancient times, to the Victorian era, to the roaring 20's, readers love stories set in the past. Is it merely an escape from today's fast paced stresses, a longing for simpler times? Or is there something about our past that speaks to us?

Kerr, an editor, said she doesn't have any preferences in historical fiction. Certain types such as Celtic, Arthurian, and Roman are most commonly submitted as stories but the demand is there for them.

On the issue of accuracy, Whyte said it is easy to write Arthurian fiction because there are no records of that era, but more difficult to write about better documented historical figures without being tripped up by nitpickers. He is a Scotsman and said that Scottish history is now undergoing major revisions as new methods of enquiry are applied, which makes it difficult to keep historical fiction accurate. Whyte is concerned that too much current historical fiction is applying 21st Century sensibilities to ancient stories and making them politically correct. Kerr said that a common mistake she sees in manuscripts is when a writer insists on relocating an historical person to the wrong place just to benefit the plot.

Whyte transfixed the audience with the story of how he came to write Arthurian fantasy after he realized how the sword-in-the-stone trick was done as an actual factual event. He had been visited by two Roman Catholic priests who were carrying with them an altar stone, used to sanctify any non-church dwelling in order to host a Mass. The stone had a slot in it to hold a large crucifix. The table upon which the altar was set up would be draped with a grey cloth. He realized the historical Arthur would have asked a priest for a blessing upon taking the throne. Everything was set up before the audience arrived, using a sword as a cross. Arthur first laid his hand on what appeared to be a cross set in a stone and swore allegiance to God and country. He then reversed his hand and pulled the sword out, waving it above him as a sign. The audience was not expecting this and so began the legend of the sword in the stone.

Arthur took over as the Romans withdrew. The sword was a magical one that could cut ordinary swords in half. Whyte's research showed that in Roman times, metallurgy was very inconsistent because the source of iron used to forge swords was variable. Some of it was bog iron, most of it was nuggets or mined from rocks, but some of it was from meteoritic iron. Meteorites contain

molybdenum, which today is essential for high-quality steel. The swords forged with meteoritic iron were the best quality swords and could even cut poorer quality swords in half. Thus the legend of the magic sword.



Whyte wandered far afield from the blurb’s stated purpose of the panel, but no one complained. He is an excellent storyteller and had the audience alternating between laughter and awe as he told the stories in his strong Scottish burr.

Genre Fantasia.

“How to Build a Consistent and Original Magic System”
with Brandon Sanderson, S. G. Wong, Sandra Fitzpatrick, Edward Willett, and Nola Sarina
What are the important elements to a convincing magic system for your fictional world? How can magic help or hinder the development of your story?

Fitzpatrick set the theme when she said she was very annoyed by inconsistency in magic systems of fantasy novels. As an example, shapeshifting must follow the law of conservation of matter. What happens to the extra mass when a

shapeshifter changes into a small bird? Conversely, a human can’t turn into a building-sized dragon. Willett said consistency improves the story, rather than anything can happen.

Sarina said it bogs down the reader if too much magic is introduced at once. That magic which is introduced later in the story should flow in a logical manner and be evident. This prompted Sanderson to remark that if the author can handwave anything, foreshadowing is needed to improve consistency. If magic is only a small part of the story, authors can get away with some inconsistencies.

Wong said that limitations on magic are necessary. Fitzpatrick agreed and said that if magic was unlimited, then every problem could be solved in the first chapter. She steps up the limits on magic depending on her characters.

This was one of the last panels of the convention and filled a ballroom. I’m sure 90% of the audience had an unfinished novel on their computer.



"A Game of Gods: Mythological Mayhem in the Fantasy Novel"

with Constantine Kaoukakis, Barb Galler-Smith

Today, there are a myriad of novels with mythological mayhem and monsters. The gods of the ancient world still inhabit our collective consciousness. They are as popular today as they were millennia ago. Their modern incarnations exist in Rick Riordan's world of modern demigods like Percy Jackson. Why is there still a need to keep these magical entities alive in contemporary fantasy? How do authors alter them to fit them into our world? Perhaps as Shakespeare put it, "Playthings are we to the Gods: they kill us for their sport?" (King Lear) The gods influence our literature as they do our destiny.

Stories of the ancient gods allow people to transmit warnings of how not to do things without getting into personalities if the stories were based on next-door neighbours. Kaoukakis said that ancient myths have been constantly rewritten over the centuries to reflect the current society, which is why there are so many versions of each myth. The Greek and Roman gods were more human compared to the single Judeo/Christian/Islamic god.

"Blending SF and Fantasy"

with Nina Munteanu, Greg Bechtel, Ian Alexander Martin, and Stacy Dooks
The world of Science Fiction is one extended from the principles of known science; the Fantasy world is based in unknowable magic. There was a time when never the twain could meet, but writers love to break down this barrier. Can they? Should they? Are there examples where this hybrid has worked? Are there spectacular failures?

Martin, who is a publisher, said he has trouble accepting a sharp division between genres because he has published books that don't fit easily in one category for his catalogue. He cited one of his books with characters using magic to solve a murder a la police procedural. He ended up filing it under mystery.

Dooks said blending is nothing new because categories have been blurred for decades. Part of the reason is that our modern technology is indistinguishable from magic. Star Wars was cited by him as an example of blending magic (the Force) with SF (spaceships). Bechtel said that if you are changing a fantasy world within a novel or series to an SF world, you have to play fair and give clues ahead of time to the reader. Authors have a responsibility to help the publishers tag the book with a one-line description and elevator pitch for booksellers and libraries.

Munteanu pointed out that categories of genres are insisted upon by publishers so readers can find books they will likely enjoy. When a book is a blend, it will lose readers if placed in the wrong category just to make it fit. She had a novel published that was romantic SF but it bombed because the publisher filed it as a romance. She said her mistake was not fighting hard enough with the publisher to have it marketed as SF. Sometimes it doesn't matter because readers search for a particular author whose previous works they enjoyed.

Auctor! Auctor!

"Spark up Your Story: Adding Tension, Suspense And Intrigue"

with Jodie Renner

We all know that thrillers and other fast-paced popular fiction need lots of tension, conflict, suspense, and intrigue to grip readers and provide a riveting, satisfying reading experience. But so does any other compelling story that will create a buzz and take off in sales. No matter what genre you write, it's all about hooking your readers in, engaging them emotionally, and ensuring they keep eagerly turning the pages. Editor and author Jodie Renner presents a checklist of essential elements and effective techniques for ratcheting up the "wow" factor of any novel or short story.

Adding tension and suspense depends on the characters, what motivates them, and what they are afraid of. Not every character in a novel should be fully developed at once. Renner didn't use the term "infodump" but that's what she was talking about when emphasizing that the back story should not be overdeveloped. A common mistake of authors is to put all their research into a story. Don't explain every detail of a universe. Not only does it slow down the narrative, but it may constrain sequels to the story because you specified technical details that may become obsolete or contradict a future line of thought in your writing.

When writing a novel, you may know what is to happen but be careful not to inadvertently telegraph the ending to the reader. Foreshadowing is very useful in making subsequent events look natural rather than seem a random plot device. It also helps with continuity.

“World Creation: Climate and Geology”

with DK Snape, Ronald Hore, Ann Marston, and Barb Galler-Smith

Our panel discusses the foundation of creating a Fantasy or Science Fiction landscape.

Galler-Smith said the easiest method of world building is to simply to take a map of your area or wherever else you want and change the names. De novo worlds require more work. Snape writes urban fantasy using Calgary as the base map. Marston said world building from scratch is complicated because a change in one component sets off a chain reaction.

Hore created his worlds on the fly as he typed but ran into problems when the sequels expanded beyond the mountains of his first novel. World building, as he learned from experience, makes for a better story because it improves continuity. The author should not use everything at once but keep back info and let the characters discover it. Little details help make the world real. Research is needed to avoid nitpicking or even serious errors that destroy the credibility of the novel. For example, if you create a world with giant moons in close orbit, it will have 500-metre-high tides and constant vulcanism as the crust flexes. For a fantasy novel, this means no lords and ladies strolling through green forests with ye long walks of cool and shade.

“Top 10 Mistakes New Playwrights Make”

with Caroline Russell-King, Trevor Rueger, Thereasa Maillie, and G.J.C. McKittrick

Thinking of writing for the stage? This panel discusses common newbie mistakes and how to avoid them.

I don't think anyone counted to verify there were ten, but these playwrights discussed from personal mistakes what not to do. Russell-King said that people who want to write plays should attend lots of plays in the theatre and analyse for themselves what works and what doesn't. She said many would-be playwrights she dealt with never finished their plays. Often one reason was that they would compare their first draft to the completed plays of big-name playwrights, an unfair comparison.

Stage directions should be minimized and not included unless necessary to the plot. Let the director block out stage movements; that is part of his job. For example, in a scene where Lord Jones is drinking with guests in a manor house, the director will tell the actor how to move to the sideboard and freshen up his

drink. However, if the drink is poisoned and Lord Jones will be dead in ten seconds, then the playwright should specify how the scene is done.

Learn the difference between conversation and dramatic dialogue. The latter is what forwards the plot and helps establish the mood. There has to be conflict in the plot, no matter what the genre is.

McKittrick emphasized from his career that stage theatre is a collaborative effort. A playwright must be able to work together with the director, actors, and crew. It is not a business for loners, unlike being a prose author. Be careful of putting too much of your heart into a play. He once wrote an autobiographical play which tanked, and that really hurt.

Maillie said she knew lots of playwrights with MA degrees who had never had a play produced, unlike novelists, who at least can get their book self-published if nothing else. Before sending plays to a theatre company you're not familiar with, research them. She got careless and sent a play off to a contest in Scotland, where someone substituted his name for hers as the playwright. She is still trying to get the play back. When she belatedly went online to check out the company, it turned out that the people involved were accused of shady deals in the past.

Scientia.

“Universe Theory”

Join Ed Lukowich, author of the SF novel The Trillionist, for an alternative to the Big Bang Theory.

I had the strangest feeling I'd seen Lukowich's name before but just couldn't place it. The penny dropped when he mentioned in passing during his presentation that he was a champion curler from a few decades ago. He won the Canadian Brier twice, the World Championship once, and a bronze medal in the 1988 Calgary Winter Olympics. He published four bestselling manuals on curling. When he saw my membership badge, he told me that he was born in Speers, Saskatchewan. No connection of course.

As to what he has been up to lately, the story veers away from sweeping the ice. The Big Bang Theory of the universe's origin was proposed in 1927. Lukowich is widely read and an autodidact, and in 1998, he had a revelation about the universe. He noted that we currently demonstrate the age of the universe by

looking for the oldest stars. But forests are not measured that way. There are numerous forests around the world known for a fact to be millions of years old by core samples of fossils underneath them. Yet individual trees only live for a few centuries at most, and we do not say the forests are only a few centuries old. This led Lukowich to develop his Trillion Year Universe Theory, on the basis that the stars we see are recycled from earlier stars long vanished and far older than 37 billion years. He has published an SF novel THE TRILLIONIST (under his pen-name Sagan Jeffries) and a non-fiction book TRILLION YEARS UNIVERSE THEORY to illustrate his idea.

Lukowich accepts most modern physics and astronomy but challenges the idea that the Big Bang was billions of years ago rather than trillions. He also believes that black holes do not suck in matter indefinitely but eventually fill up. They then become the cores of stars and planets because the black hole gravitational attraction still exists but doesn't draw matter behind the event horizon. If a star goes supernova, it blows away the matter surrounding the black holes of its planets, who then begin accruing matter again and slowly build new planets and stars with time. The spinning of a black hole is what causes a planet or star to spin. One important fact we do know is that most black holes are microscopic and do little damage, and are not the star-swallowing monsters commonly depicted.

He also thinks that with time, the black holes may come alive as life develops inside them in the matter that stays behind the event horizon. Not life as we know it, he said, but life of some kind. Lukowich admits he won't be considered anything but a crank, but I have to say that the story ideas that could be developed from his concept would certainly be interesting.



"Military Evolution And Revolution"
with Lt.-Col. (Ret) David Laderoute

As soon as man began to walk upright, he started to fight: for territory, for resources and, later, for ideas. As time went on, he refined that ability to fight, developing ever more sophisticated technologies and systems to wage war. This session will focus on the key changes to armies through time, from the adoption of the stirrup to the deployment of drones, showing that the trend has been to make the battlefield larger and "emptier". At least half of the session will be devoted to Q&A, so that participants can tailor what they take away to their own needs.

Lt.-Col. Laderoute served in the Canadian Forces Reserves and did a tour of duty in Bosnia during the Balkan Wars of the 1990s. His theme was that over time the battlefields have expanded. Battles were originally fought face-to-face on foot, and are now global with no personal contact. The first major innovation was the invention of the stirrup for horses, which enabled soldiers and archers to fight from the top of a mobile platform without falling off. The second innovation was chain-of-command, organized supply lines, and sophisticated tactics, systematically employed by the Romans. Prior to them, a commander's influence in battle was limited to his line of sight and how loud he could shout orders. Gunpowder, once firearms got past their beta tests, enabled soldiers to be taught to shoot easily, as compared to bowmen, who needed years of experience to hit targets during the confusion of combat.

Industrialization allowed mass production of standardized quality weapons with interchangeable parts. World War One was so bloody in the trenches because the generals didn't understand the efficiency with which one machine gun could wipe out hundreds of soldiers. Air power introduced the third dimension of war, not just for projection of power but for intelligence gathering. World War Two had the first sea battles where the opposing sides' ships never saw each other, and fought with their aircraft, not their guns.

Governments and military commanders lost control of information in the television era without realizing it at first, when the Vietnam War was brought into American living rooms. The Internet has accelerated the problem exponentially, as almost everyone has a cellphone with a camera and can transmit photos of a combat zone in seconds. It also affects the morale of the soldiers, since they can see what the public thinks of them.

Automation is depersonalizing warfare via drones and spy satellites. Laderoute said his biggest concern is that there is too much distance between the decision to kill and the actual attack. The people who carry out the attacks are no longer personally affected; the drone operator attacking a target in Iraq is sitting in a hanger at a New Mexico airbase. The great difficulty is that it promotes asymmetric warfare such as terrorist attacks. The Islamic militants know they could never stand up in a direct fight with the USA, so they intermingle with civilian populations. Al Qaeda never went toe-to-toe with American forces but instead went around them with the 9/11 attacks.

“Poisons”

with Dwayne Clayden and Aaron Kite

From traditional herbs to modern medicine, poisons of various varieties have played a role in many a mystery novel. Our panel discusses some of the more novel uses of poisons in various works such as Umberto Eco’s The Name of the Rose.

Clayden is a paramedic and Kite’s latest novel is A TOUCH OF POISON. Taking the practical side of the panel, Clayden said that up until the 1900s there were no tests for poisons admissible in court. Forensics then developed a plethora of lab tests and it became a cat-and-mouse game between police and murderers. From the 1980s onward, forensics steadily developed the upper hand because Olympic anti-doping rules spurred a major increase in technology.

Kite did a lot of research on poisons for his latest work so that he could write with confidence, even though most of the information wasn’t used in the novel.

In discussing poison murder novels, Clayden said that the best way to poison someone and get away with it is to give them an overdose of medication that they are already taking. Nothing waves red flags better to a forensic examiner than the sudden appearance of a new compound in the victim’s post-mortem, whereas police are too overworked to bother about accidental overdoses unless suspicion has been aroused elsewhere.

Kite said that natural plant substance poisonings require some practical expertise and are not that easy to use as some novelists portray. Unlike synthesized chemicals, extracts are variable in quality and concentration, and the murderer may get the dose wrong.

“After Petroleum”

with Jean Maxwell, Stacy Dooks, Ron Friedman, and Howie Erickson

What will civilization look like as petroleum and other fossil fuels become more scarce and expensive? What are the practical energy alternatives? Will there be sufficient affordable alternatives to go around? Are there power requirements that don't lend themselves well to alternative energy, such as jet airplanes? Will the future be utopian, dystopian, or just different?

I am a confirmed Peak Oiler, so this panel naturally caught my attention. All but one of the panelists were employed in the petroleum business. (Spot the outlander in the photo below; answer at the end.)



Friedman said a critical factor is to develop better batteries for everything from smartphones to electric cars. Erickson remarked that this pointed out the main problem with most alternative energy sources, that they are diffuse, not concentrated like petroleum. Electricity is very inefficient to produce, especially when the capital costs are taken into account. Maxwell’s company is involved in trying to find commercial alternative energy. She said there is a lot more going on behind the scenes than people realize in the search for compact portable energy.

The panel agreed that the main problem is getting from here to there. If we run out of cheap petroleum before new portable sources are available, the cities would starve because all their food is trucked in. The awkward part is convincing the general public to make the change in advance when they can’t see any reason right now. We are using millions of years of stored energy in one century.

(The man on the far right isn’t in the awl biz.)

Caveat Lector.

“Character Death Match”
with Hal J. Friesen, Eileen Bell, Billie Milholland, and SG Wong
Join four authors for a sampler-version of the Lucha-Libre-inspired battle royale between characters! In this unique take on book readings, the audience will be given trading cards and the ability to vote on who they think would outsmart/outlast the other. With Luchadore masks, jeers and taunts, this session is guaranteed to excite.

In this audience participation event, four authors started out reading extracts from their latest publications. It was a two-tier round-robin event. In the first tier, the audience voted out the two least popular characters (not the authors but their characters). In the final tier, there was a tie, much to everyone’s surprise. The prize was a large wrestling belt with ceremonial buckle. The female winner conceded her half to the male author.



Vendor Calgariensis.

The dealer bourse was top quality, with books only and not a button maker or T-shirt vendor in sight. It had two book dealers, and the rest were small-press publishers and authors’ associations. The Canadian SF and Fantasy Association table was very popular with male customers for some reason.



The bourse was crowded whenever I stepped in, and people seemed to be buying. Incidentally, I saw some teenagers and tweenies in there, the first time in a long while. The average age of the convention seemed to be in the late 30s or 40s, so WWC is attracting a younger audience than many traditional SF conventions I’ve seen. It bodes well for the future.

More views of the bourse on the next page.



Schmoozing (Nec In Latin, Paenitet Me).

I didn't go to any of them but there were numerous private functions for authors to meet publishers and editors. These were advance sign-up only and were booked up a week before the convention started. The Blue Pencil Café was a chance to meet for 12 minutes with an editor and have a short sample of one's priceless words examined from an editing viewpoint. The Pitch Sessions were one-on-one for an author to bring along a manuscript or query for a 15-minute pitch to a publisher or editor to buy it. The Live Action Slush meetings were in front of an audience. Writers submitted the first two pages of their novel for reading out loud by the moderator and subsequent commentary by a panel of editors.

The popularity of these events confirm what most of us know, that the Internet is a boon to authors who want to be published but still doesn't help them that much in being published the traditional hard-copy way. Yes, you can use print-on-demand via Amazon or Lulu or a thousand other such sites, but until the

bookstores finally fade away (about a decade from now by my reckoning), there will still be interest in the old ways. Online a prospective author is drowned out by the cacophony and is just another email submission to an editor, but if the author can arrange face-to-face time with an editor or publisher, then there is a better chance.

In Secundo Autem Anno Calgary.

When Words Collide 2015 will move to a new hotel a few blocks south of the Carriage House Inn. The facilities are bigger and will allow the membership cap to be increased. It goes August 14 to 16, and I have already bought my membership. More info at www.whenwordscollide.org. You can subscribe to an automatic email notification service for updates.

Finis.

At the start of their talks, some authors gave out their Twitter hashtag in case anyone wanted to Tweet about it. It got me thinking that perhaps the convention report will soon die out. I know from searching blogs that most attendees to conventions nowadays only have a paragraph or two, usually gushing or hypercritical depending on if they had a good time or a bad one. Few people are left who will report on the actual programming. Most so-called convention reports are trip reports, about the airline, the hotel, And-then-I-met, and the food outlets. Any future fanhistorian will have a hell of a time trying to find anything substantial about many conventions.

One oddball note that I'll insert here. The panelists used up-to-date laptops and electronic projectors for their slide shows. But always, without fail, every projector had a book or wad of newspaper jammed under the front end to make the image display high enough on the screen. So you see, printed books can never die because then how else could people do their Powerpoint presentations?

In Tantum In.

Montreal is bidding for the 2017 World SF Convention, according to a flyer I found on the freebie table at When Words Collide. That is also the 150th year of Canadian Confederation, the 375th year since Montreal was founded, and the 75th anniversary of Worldcon. Their Website is at: www.montrealin2017.ca



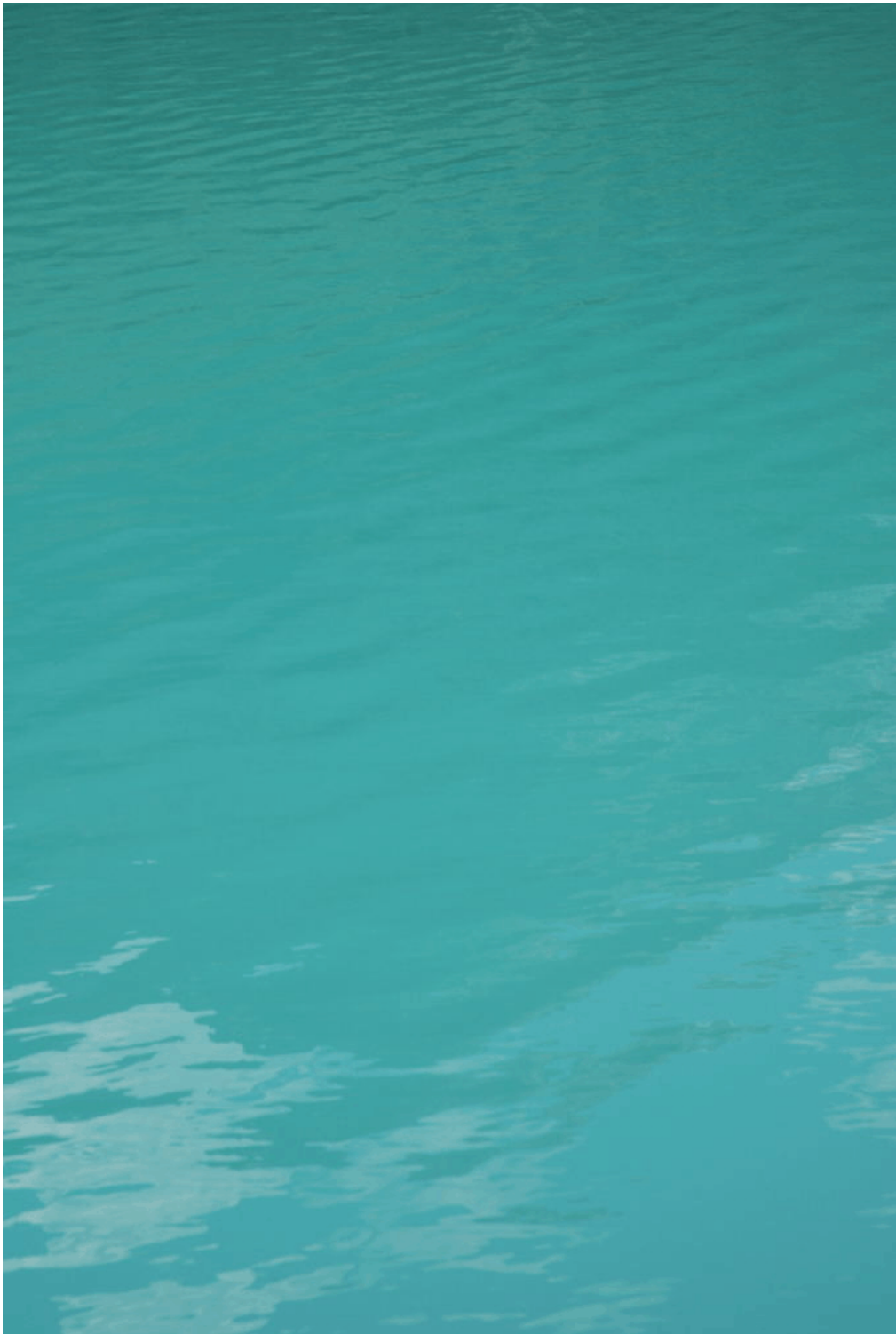
WHAT I ALSO DID THIS SUMMER

by Dale Speirs

It's been several years since I crossed the border into British Columbia and visited Yoho National Park. The view below is looking north across Emerald Lake.



Below is a close-up of the lake.



West of the lake is Hamilton Falls, about a half-hour hike up the mountain.



Takakkaw Falls is fed by a glacier hidden from view on the mountain top.



The falls are 255 metres tall, about the height of an 80-story skyscraper.



A telephoto view. For comparison, notice the spruce trees on the top.



SEEN IN THE LITERATURE

Pedersen, Neil, et al (2014) **Pluvials, droughts, the Mongol Empire, and modern Mongolia.** PROCEEDINGS OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES USA 111:4375–4379

Authors' abstract: "*The 13th-century Mongol Empire was the largest contiguous land empire in world history. Although drought has been proposed as one factor that spurred these conquests, no high-resolution moisture data are available during the rapid development of the Mongol Empire. Here we present a 1,112-y tree-ring reconstruction of warm-season water balance derived from Siberian pine (Pinus sibirica) trees in central Mongolia. Our reconstruction accounts for 56% of the variability in the regional water balance and is significantly correlated with steppe productivity across central Mongolia. In combination with a gridded temperature reconstruction, our results indicate that the regional climate during the conquests of Chinggis Khan's (Genghis Khan's) 13th-century Mongol Empire was warm and persistently wet. This period, characterized by 15 consecutive years of above average moisture in central Mongolia and coinciding with the rise of Chinggis Khan, is unprecedented over the last 1,112 y. We propose that these climate conditions promoted high grassland productivity and favored the formation of Mongol political and military power.*"

Marchi, S., et al (2014) **Widespread mixing and burial of Earth's Hadean crust by asteroid impacts.** NATURE 511:578-582

Authors' abstract: "*The history of the Hadean Earth (4.0–4.5 billion years ago) is poorly understood because few known rocks are older than 3.8 billion years old. The main constraints from this era come from ancient submillimetre zircon grains. Some of these zircons date back to 4.4 billion years ago when the Moon, and presumably the Earth, was being pummelled by an enormous flux of extraterrestrial bodies. The magnitude and exact timing of these early terrestrial impacts, and their effects on crustal growth and evolution, are unknown. Here we provide a new bombardment model of the Hadean Earth that has been calibrated using existing lunar and terrestrial data. We find that the surface of the Hadean Earth was widely reprocessed by impacts through mixing and burial by impact-generated melt. This model may explain the age distribution of Hadean zircons and the absence of early terrestrial rocks. Existing oceans would have repeatedly boiled away into steam atmospheres as*

a result of large collisions as late as about 4 billion years ago. Terrestrial planet formation models indicate the Earth went through a sequence of major growth phases: accretion of planetesimals and planetary embryos over many tens of millions of years, culminating in a final giant impact that led to the formation of our Moon. This was followed by the late accretion of leftover planetesimals that probably contributed less than 0.5% of the Earth's present-day mass."

Sims, D.W., et al (2014) **Hierarchical random walks in trace fossils and the origin of optimal search behavior.** PROCEEDINGS OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES USA 111:11073–11078

Authors' abstract: *"How best to search for food in heterogeneous landscapes is a universal problem facing mobile organisms. Diverse modern animals use a random search strategy called a Lévy walk, composed of many small move steps interspersed by rare long steps, which theoretically is optimal for locating sparse resources. Here, we find the first evidence, to our knowledge, that extinct animals, in this case 50 My-old sea urchins, used a Lévylike search strategy. Our results are important because they indicate Lévy walks likely have an ancient origin and may arise from simple behaviors observed in much older fossil trails. This foraging strategy may have adapted in response to decreased food availability after productivity collapse associated with past climate change and mass extinctions."*

ZINE LISTINGS

by Dale Speirs

[I only list zines from the Papernet. If the zine is posted on www.efanzines.com or www.fanac.org, then I don't mention it since you can read them directly.]

[The Usual means \$5 cash (\$6 overseas) or trade for your zine. Americans: please don't send cheques for small amounts to Canada or overseas (the bank fee to cash them is usually more than the amount) or mint USA stamps (which are not valid for postage outside USA). US\$ banknotes are still acceptable around the world.]

[SF means science fiction. An apazine is a zine for an amateur press association distro, a perzine is a personal zine, sercon is serious-constructive, and a genzine is a general zine.]

FOR THE CLERISY #78 to #79 (The Usual from Brant Kresovich, Box 404, Getzville, New York 14068-0404) Reviews of older books and movies.

CHORRADA #3 (The Usual from Kris Mininger, Calvo Sotelo 13B, 4B, Plasencia 10600, Caceres, Spain) The main story in this perzine is about an acquaintance of Kris who lives rough in a cave in Spain and survives on about 150 euros per month. Not much better than the cave was a cheap hotel room in which Kris and his wife Lola stayed while on a weekend trip. Also some letters of comment.

THE FOSSIL #360 (US\$10 annually from The Fossils Inc., c/o Tom Parson, 157 South Logan Street, Denver, Colorado 80209) Zine history journal, this issue mostly about the United Amateur Press Association, founded 1895 and surviving 111 years. The UAPA was constantly riven by factional fighting during most of its history, but still managed to stagger through a century. Often times there were two separate factions, each claiming to be the one true faith and using similar names, something which gives bibliographers nightmares. The greatest claim to fame (or at least one faction of it) is that H.P. Lovecraft was a member during the early 1900s. The final days of UAPA were plagued by member apathy to do the jobs that needed doing, and it faded away in 2006.

OSFS STATEMENT #424 (The Usual from Ottawa SF Society, 18 Norice Street, Ottawa, Ontario K2G 2X5) SF clubzine with news and notes, a few reviews and letters of comment, and as always lots of astronomy news.

XEROGRAPHY DEBT #35 (US\$4 from Davida Gypsy Breier, Box 11064, Baltimore, Maryland 21212) Review zine which uses multiple reviewers to review zines. (Someday I'll figure out how to write up this one as a palindrome.) Also an essay on the evil that is Amazon because of how it bullies publishers. Not that the old system was any better, when publishers had to run the gauntlet of newsstand distributors.

SUGAR NEEDLE #38 (The Usual from Phlox Icona, 36 Huntington Place Drive, Atlanta, Georgia 30350) A zine devoted to candy, not your standard chocolate bar from the local convenience store but the weird and wonderful kinds brought in by importers or made locally by ma-and-pa shops. This issue discusses Shuck-o-lates (chocolate-covered corn kernels) and Sea Glass (crystal candy with jelly interiors), just to name a few. As well, Phlox tours specialty shops selling foreign candy.

FICTION REVIEWS

by Dale Speirs

UNDER THE HAMMER (1994, mass market paperback) by John Mortimer (of Rumpole fame) is a fix-up novel about a high-end London auction house called Klinsky's. Maggie Perowne, just turned thirty, is a good-looking women being pursued by one of Klinsky's art experts Ben Glazier, who is in his sixties and doesn't have a chance with her. She prefers younger men, the Hooray Henry type. The Chairman of the firm, a married man, is trying to keep secret his dalliance with a sweet young thing. Against that story arc, each chapter is an episode in the daily life of the auction house. The overall tone of the book is mild humour and just as mild mystery plots, but it reads well.

The book opens with Sarah Napper bringing in some paintings she inherited from a picture restorer, which makes them suspect immediately. One of the paintings appears to be a previously unknown Bronzino. Glazier and Perowne are highly suspicious, while Napper shrugs her shoulders. The painting is sent off to a scientific laboratory for testing as Glazier confronts Napper. She confesses that she forged the painting, and brags that it is one of the best forgeries ever made. However, the lab tests confirm that the painting is genuine. Napper was in fact an average painter and wanted to establish herself as one of the best by passing off a genuine as a fake done by her. There is a twist ending which wasn't really necessary and doesn't change the story.

Next up is a painting apparently done by an artist who died a decade earlier. The technical details match his work perfectly but the problem is that it shows a bowl of flowers with a variety of flowers that weren't put onto the market until after his death. It eventually transpires that the artist faked his death so that he could do the type of abstract paintings he really wanted to do. Unfortunately, no one would buy them, so he had to keep churning out kitsch paintings under his original identity and pass them off through an intermediary as newly discovered works. The artist is a frustrated man, much like Sir Arthur Conan Doyle who insisted that his historical fiction was his best work, not those detective stories.

Glazier and Perowne then take a trip to Russia as it opens up after the fall of the Soviet Union. They are commissioned to lay the groundwork for a Moscow branch of Klinsky's, but one of their co-workers asks them to keep an eye out for a stolen icon called the Virgin of Vitebsk. Mixed in with the story is a group of teenaged girls on a school trip to Russia, the several histories of the Virgin

icon (one of which must be true), and how it is smuggled out of Russia for auction in London by Klinsky's. A neat bit of misdirection.

Back in London, both Maggie and Ben are trying to verify the provenance of two consignments, one of vintage wine, and the other a Renaissance salt cellar. The two threads of the story eventually merge into the story of a manor house where historically the lords are Cavaliers who keep marrying ladies who are Puritans. The latter are given to housecleaning binges and tossing fine wines and silverware into the lake behind the manor house because they are sinful. The present lord of the manor, henpecked man that he is, manages to find a way around the problem, but not without a few glitches that mistakenly alarm Maggie and Ben. The plot is predictable but it is an easy read.

From there, Maggie and Ben fly to New York where the Manhattan branch of Klinsky's is selling some Old Masters. Ben is asked to authenticate a supposed Titian. He is under pressure to do so by the manager, the owner, and the client, but withstands them and declares the painting that of a pupil. The manager is a sharp-practice man who tries to get even but is undone by Maggie. The ending is telegraphed so there is no real suspense.

The final story has Ben and Maggie visiting a manor house where he is accused of stealing a rare manuscript. The tricky part is figuring out who did it. The culprit might be the greedy son who wants Mummy to cash in while the going is good, a daughter-in-law who wants a share of the money so her husband (the other son) can buy himself a tenured position at a university, an elderly retainer who thinks things have gone downhill since Mafikeng, or Mum herself, who would rather be left in peace by the money-grubbers. There is a twist ending that will pain bibliophiles.

WHY ROCK THE BOAT (1961, hardcover) by William Weintraub is set in Montreal during the 1950s, back when large cities had a half-dozen or more newspapers, and each newspaper occupied a large building because they needed the room for all their editorial staff. Harry Barnes is a 19-year-old cub reporter working for the WITNESS, an anglophone newspaper that tries harder because it has to. The strategy is to cover every big funeral and service club meeting and get as many names into print as possible, the theory being that people will buy the newspaper to see their name.

The first plot to get rolling is Harry falling head over heels in love with a girl reporter from a competing newspaper. There is the usual bumpy road of

misunderstandings, basically like any Jennifer Aniston romcom movie you may have suffered through, but with a twist ending in the last page when Harry doesn't get the girl. In between, Harry covers banquet speeches in exchange for free meals, local junkets in exchange for a good writeup about the travel agency, and other standard business practices that [Irony Alert] the news media would never do today [end Irony Alert]. The newspaper is on an economy drive, and random layoffs are taking place, so all the reporters are nervous.

Harry's editor, Philip Butcher, is a boss from Hell, and Harry idles away his spare time at his desk by concocting fake stories such as *"Denouncing motherhood, Philip L. Butcher yesterday told the Royal Canadian Society for White Slavery ..."* and *"Coming out strongly in favour of the Communist candidate, Philip L. Butcher yesterday said that ..."* He keeps the stories in a locked drawer but someone gets in. One by one the stories start appearing in the newspaper, but without any byline. Butcher starts an enquiry of course, but gets nowhere. The thief kindly switched Harry's typewriter for someone else's so that forensic tests on the originals are not successful. The stories get past the editors because Montreal is a bilingual city and the typesetters are francophones who do not understand English but can still set the type without knowing the meaning of the words. The saboteur is simply slipping the stories directly into the press room, bypassing the editors.

It all comes crashing down in the end when Butcher is fired for not being able to keep control of his newspaper. Harry rebels and instead of writing up a junket as a travel report, describes it for what it really is, an illegal gambling resort. When it is raided by the police, he lists for publication all the names of prominent citizens run in by the Vice Squad. The ending of this novel is not the cliched type that one would expect from a Hollywood movie but a realistic one based on the truth that all actions have consequences. This novel is a good read, with mild but steady humour throughout, punctuated by helpless laughter when reading the fake Butcher stories.

(All right, here's one of them.)

"How do your furry creatures manage to keep cool?"
Your reporter asked that question yesterday at the Montreal Civic Zoo as the thermometer soared over the 95 mark, with the city's worst August heat wave in 12 years showing no signs of abating.
"Animals take it easy. They're sensible about these things", said Dr. Melville G. Melville, director of the zoo, as your reporter mopped his brow. "Of

course", added the director, "some of them are just as silly as humans and simply won't relax. Why, look at that old fellow." He pointed to the trees, where Philip L. Butcher, first Managing Editor to breed in captivity, was swinging heavily from branch to branch.

(And one more, just for the fun of it.)

"This man was corned, loaded, and pissed to the very gills", Judge Elphege Boisvert said in Criminal Court yesterday as he sentenced Philip L. Butcher, local newspaper executive, to two years' hard labour. Butcher, charged with drunk and disorderly conduct, was arrested Tuesday in the lobby of the Imperial George Hotel, where he had climbed up the big Christmas tree and, with obscene cries, was throwing ornaments down on passing citizens.

NON-FICTION REVIEWS

by Dale Speirs

THE BOOK OF LOST BOOKS (2005, hardcover) by Stuart Kelly is by a compulsive list maker who at the age of 15 began compiling a list of lost books, to go with his list "Everyone in Star Wars that wasn't made into a figure" and "Dr. Who episodes lost by the BBC". Some books, rare in ancient times, had all their copies destroyed by disaster. Others were burned by their authors in manuscript. Many were just plain lost, in the house, in the mail, or on a train. Other lost books were never written; their authors announced them but died before putting pen to paper. Religions and dictatorships have been surprisingly successful in eradicating many texts from history. Electronic libraries such as Project Gutenberg are not guaranteed to be any better than paper. In the case of computers, it will not be religions or politicians who wipe out books. It will be hardware and software manufacturers who change the standards and make old files unreadable.

Kelly begins with THE ILIAD and THE ODYSSEY, which are the only surviving fragments of a greater epic poem. Homer also wrote MARGITES, lost to time but for a few lines quoted in reviews by his critics. So you see,

reviewers have their uses. Many lost books are only known to have existed because someone else mentioned them in passing.

The Christian Bible is more properly considered as an anthology rather than a single book. Some books were excluded by early Christian scholars but are still extant as independent books. Others, such as the Book of Jasher, are mentioned but did not survive.

Kelly works his way forward through history, spending most of his time on the ancient and medieval authors. Books made before the printing press are more likely to disappear since hand copying was hard work and few copies were made. After Gutenberg, most lost books actually disappeared at the manuscript or proof copy stage. Kelly concludes by quoting the Percy Shelley poem “Ozymandias”. Very apt; look on the mighty titles and despair.

THE LEAST SILENT OF MEN (2014, trade paperback) by Adel Souto and available from him. (US\$20 from the author at 171 Madison Street #2, Brooklyn, New York 11216) This is the report on Souto’s project to go one month without speaking, while holding down a job and dealing with a social life. The book begins with a general summary of how the experiment went, followed by his notebook that he used to communicate with. He found that people treated mutes as retarded, became frustrated with him quickly, and ignored him if they could. In turn, he had to control his temper and was subject to crying jags. Verbal communication is essential to emotional health, it seems.

HEAVENLY ERRORS (2001, hardcover) by Neil Comins gets its start from a survey he did on the misconceptions about astronomy within the general public. Some of those errors are due to the influence of astrology and UFO nuts, and others are due to the influence of Hollywood sci-fi such as Star Trek and Star Wars.

As one example, the asteroid belt is mostly empty space, and space probes launched from Earth have crossed it without trouble. There are hundreds of thousands of asteroids orbiting in the belt, but the volume of space they occupy is so great that they are spread out over vast distances, like Inuit hunters roaming the Nunavut tundra. Films such as Star Wars depict asteroid belts (in another stellar system, granted) as so dense with asteroids that you could hop from one to another. In actuality, such as dense belt would quickly transform into a dust belt, which in turn would soon coalesce into a planet. The general public, seeing the Star Wars films, now have the idea that our own Solar System

asteroid belt is a moving minefield where a spaceship can only play dodge-em for a short while before being broadsided by a big ugly rock.

The Moon has a far side but not a dark side. The fallacy existed long before Pink Floyd’s famous album “The Dark Side Of The Moon” but the band certainly didn’t help. Because the Moon rotates on its axis at the same speed it revolves around the Earth, it always shows the same side to us. When that side is dark (new moon phase), the far side is lit by the sun. As the Moon revolves around the Earth, the darkness moves across its surface as its angle to the Sun changes. Therefore every part of the Moon has daylight and nightfall.

Comins discusses at length why we err in astronomy. Some of it is childhood inexperience and lack of knowledge, such as stars twinkling, which is due to atmospheric refraction and nothing to do with the stars themselves. Some errors are due to optical illusions, such as the Moon seeming larger near the horizon because there are objects to compare it to but smaller in diameter when up in the sky because it is against a plain background with no reference points. Television and movies propagate scientific errors, and, to a lesser extent these days, religion. School teaching isn’t much better in the hands of time-servers or non-science teachers.



*Rosa
acicularis*

I took this
photo of an
Alberta wild
rose at
Elbow River
Falls.