

OPUNTIA

290

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Opuntia is published by Dale Speirs, Calgary, Alberta.
My e-mail address is: opuntia57@hotmail.com

When sending me an emailed letter of comment, please
include your name and town in the message.

ROCKY MOUNTAIN WAY: SPRAY VALLEY

photos by Dale Speirs

At right is Kent Ridge, one of the Kananaskis mountains
separating the Kananaskis and Spray Rivers, taken from
the Spray River side looking east. On the next page is the
north end of the Spray River road, just above Canmore.
Mount Rundle in the background.





I was thinking of putting this photo in my “Signs, Signs, Everywhere A Sign” section. Avalanches are common enough that the park wardens have ready-made signs for them.

DISCWORLD: PART 1. GENERAL COMMENTS AND RINCEWIND
by Dale Speirs

Introduction.

The Discworld series of novels by Terry Pratchett needs no introduction.

Terry And Me.

Having written that, I'll go on to why I would dare review the books, which as I type this have passed forty titles, not including the guidebooks and sidelights, and have sold tens of millions of copies. Normally I avoid fantasy books, the vast majority of which are quests for the Sacred Knickknack of Qwerty or wish fulfillment about a young farm girl/boy who is the rightful heir to the throne and sets off on a ten-volume journey to reclaim it from the Evil King. Economics and real-life human behaviour are seldom dealt with in fantasies. Instead, these books are all about wars, dragons, and Divine Right. Why should the young hero be entitled to rule as a monarch anymore than the Evil King? Why not a republic? Because that is not what most fantasy readers want, anymore than action-adventure movies show the hero worrying about his mortgage payments, or police officers constantly before review boards because that's what happens when they fire a gun in public for any reason.

THE COLOUR OF MAGIC was Pratchett's first book in what was to become the Discworld series. I bought the hardcover when it first appeared in 1983, and at this distance in time have no recollection why. But as I read it again in 2014 for only the second time, I think I can see what made me carry the book over to the cashier. It was a book that took into account real life. The characters were not on a quest or seeking the throne. There was magic but it had rules and a hand-waving explanation as to how it operated in the universe. It wasn't a medieval world where technology didn't exist.

As the Discworld series progressed, it showed how many technologies came to be born, such as printing from movable type or photography. Characters did things for money, not glory. They went home at the end of the day for a hot meal and put up their feet by the fireplace before going to bed. Bureaucrats had to watch their budgets, and shopkeepers worried about business. Street pedlars viewed major history-making events only as an opportunity to sell hot sausages or souvenirs. It was a real world. And so I kept buying the books.

The Threads Of Discworld.

Pratchett developed several different story arcs as the Discworld series grew. Some were independent books within the series, others overlapped substantially, and many characters who had their own books appeared as walk-ons in other story arcs. The geography and history of Discworld was fleshed out and made a part of the fabric of the whole. The stories are all set in roughly the same time period, with characters making occasional reference that we're not living in the Century of the Fruitbat anymore, this is the Century of the Anchovy and we have to go with modern times. The city of Ankh-Morpork, an obvious analogue to medieval London, dominates many of the books by its size and economic importance, but there are places on the Discworld where no one has heard of it.

As a result of the cumulative buildup of the background, Pratchett spent less time explaining infodumps and could concentrate on the characters and plot. Even the plots are not always important, as most of the novels are rewrites of traditional folklore, older novels, or Shakespeare, and just serve as a setting for the characters. I'm not going to review the books in order of appearance, but rather by each story arc, which I think will make a better narrative.

STRATA (1981) is not part of the Discworld series but it is a predecessor. I reviewed this novel in OPUNTIA #69.1C (2010) so I won't discuss the plot, but it does involve a discworld-style planet. Pratchett undoubtedly used this book to work out some of his ideas. And so to the real Discworld series ...

Rincewind is an incompetent and cowardly wizard but a survivor. It is he who starts off the series in THE COLOUR OF MAGIC, although he disappears from the narrative for long stretches in the Discworld series. He tends to do a lot of shrieking, running away with his robes flapping, and in general behaving like a nerd at a science-fiction convention when a tall blond woman in a battle bikini walks by.

The Wizards arc, excluding Rincewind, is mostly about the Unseen University in Ankh-Morpork and its vicious academic politics, not excluding assassination as a method of creating job vacancies when those tenured old fools won't move aside for the next generation. If you've seen "Ook, ook" jokes and didn't understand where they came from, this is the origin. The Librarian was accidentally turned into an orangutang due to a spill of magic, and decided he liked life better that way.

The Witches story arc includes Granny Weatherwax, Nanny Ogg, and apprentice Tiffany Aching. They seldom use magic, and very little when they do, and are not the stereotypes cackling around a bubbling caldron. In fact, Pratchett follows the true origin of witches in our world, who were herbalists and very good at applied psychology.

Death, as in the Grim Reaper himself, is a skeleton in a black robe who taps people on the shoulder when their time has come. He rides a pale horse named Binky and talks in SMALL CAPS with no quote marks. In the books concentrating on him, his character is fleshed out (figuratively, of course) as he puzzles about the strange behaviour of humans.

The City Watch arc starts with the development of Ankh-Morpork's constabulary, many of the stories being a form of fantasy police procedurals. Sam Vimes is dumped into the job as the chief constable and in the books of this arc he slowly develops the Watch into an efficient police force.

Moist von Lipwig is a newer introduction to the series, a confidence man who was given a choice between execution or doing the dirty work for Lord Vetinari, the Patrician of Ankh-Morpork. Lipwig's tasks, each a book in itself, includes revitalizing the Post Office and the Mint. Discworld truly develops here, unlike many fantasy worlds in permanent stasis, as new technologies are introduced and disrupt society.

Rincewind.

THE COLOUR OF MAGIC (1983), in four parts, introduced us to the Discworld, a flat planet supported on the backs of four elephants, in turn standing on the back of a giant turtle named Great A'Tuin, swimming through space to an unknown destination. A small sun orbits the conglomeration. Rincewind is a failed wizard who was expelled from studies at the Unseen University for trying to sneak a look at a book of magic called the Octavo. One of the great eight spells of magic leaped off the page and embedded itself in his mind, where it lurks with plenty of foreboding that it will be important to the plot some day.

Rincewind meets up with Twoflower, a naive tourist from the far-distant Agatean Empire, where gold is as common as muck is in Ankh-Morpork. Twoflower is an insurance actuary back home, and left on a trip to seek new adventures as a relief from his boring job. He certainly stirs up excitement in

the city, as he hands out gold coins like they were coppers (which they are to him), and seeks out new experiences such as a tavern brawl (whose inhabitants oblige when they start fighting over his gold).

Twoflower is accompanied by his Luggage, a large chest made of sapient pearwood which trots along on hundreds of little legs. Luggage carries Twoflower's gold and does his laundry. As would-be thieves find out, it is also carnivorous and likes nothing better than to bite off any hand or arm that reaches into it for the gold. Luggage is extremely loyal, following Twoflower no matter what or where, and taking out anyone who would harm its master.

Twoflower inadvertently creates real excitement when he finds out that Ankh-Morpork citizens have never heard of insurance, so he sells a fire insurance policy to an innkeeper who decides to collect on it that night. The city is mostly wooden buildings leaning against each other, with cellars full of wine or heating oil, thatched roofs waterproofed with tar, and interspersed with livery stables full of hay. When the innkeeper torches his tavern, the result is inevitable and Ankh-Morpork has its Great Fire, not the first and probably not the last. The greed and other normal behaviours of its citizenry are believable, as any insurance adjuster in our world will agree.

While the ashes of the city are still cooling, Rincewind and Twoflower, accompanied by Luggage, set out on a grand tour of Discworld, or at least a small part of it. The next three parts of the book are chapters of that trip, parodying well-known fantasy stories.

They start with a side trip to the temple of Bel-Shamharoth, an encounter with a dryad, Hrun the Barbarian and his very annoying talking sword Kring, and the first appearance of Death. Bel-Shamharoth, a cthulhuian monster not unlike the ones seen in Lovecraft's works, makes an appearance but is driven back into a bottomless pit by accident. Pratchett gets in an explanation of how magic works, based on crystals of octiron and its formation from octarine, the eighth colour of the spectrum emitted by Discworld's sun.

From there to Wyrmburg, an upside-down mountain a few metres wide at the base and broadening out at the top to a large verdant plain. There are magic dragons, and dragon riders, Hrun is there, and the queen who would rule them all. Nothing at all to do with the Pern series, I'm sure. The parody takes a bad turn when Rincewind winds up in an alternative universe where people fly in metallic tubes with wings, a bit jarring to the reader even though it is

handwaved away as a break in the space-time probability. It could have been done better, and served only to propel Rincewind and Twoflower into their next adventure.

Which is in the kingdom of Krull, perched on the Rim, where the waters flow over the edge down to the giant elephants and Great A 'Tuin. Much to-ing and fro-ing by Rincewind and Twoflower of only minor interest and humour, but it is redeemed as Pratchett shows how the economic system of Krull made it a rich kingdom on the basis of salvage, and how the ecosystem works at the edge of the waterfalls. The Krull economy is well thought out, showing how they built a fence along the Rim to catch things that might be valuable. There are species of birds that flutter beneath the Rim and snatch up any fish that are swept over the edge. Death is chasing Rincewind but can't seem to get him. Rincewind and Twoflower ultimately fall over the edge and at that point the book abruptly terminates with an untold tale.

Pratchett was still feeling his way here. Well written enough, and certainly a rare thing among fantasy in the way he treats how ordinary people in such a world would live. He does over-parody a few things and occasionally cuts off the narrative too soon, but he would improve as the series grew. Already he was head-and-shoulders above all the other fantasy writers churning out quests for the Sacred Knickknack of Qwerty. This book convinced me to keep buying the rest in the series because it was so different from other fantasy novels.



THE LIGHT FANTASTIC (1986) is the second book in the Discworld series and the sequel to the first. It picks up directly where Rincewind and Twoflower are tumbling over the Rim into space and then just as abruptly tumbling into safety on the

Discworld as if by magic. It was, of course, magic, for it seems that Rincewind cannot be allowed to die, as the powers that be know he is needed to handle the impending collision of Discworld with a red star two months hence. Only the eight spells contained in the Octavo can stop the end of Discworld, but one of those spells is now hidden in the recesses of Rincewind's mind.

As Rincewind and Twoflower bumble about the magic forest they now find themselves in, other wizards elsewhere hear the news and begin scheming to get the spell out of Rincewind for their own purposes. They are hampered because Rincewind and Twoflower keep going off on various excursions, with or without alarums, and it is difficult to hit a moving target. The duo have adventures in various locales, and meet up with Cohen the Barbarian, the legendary hero who is now 87 and not the fighter he used to be. There is a side trip to the House of Death, which sets up a foreboding for a future novel about Death and his adopted daughter.

Looming over each adventure, not just figuratively, is the red star. It is first a red spot in the night sky where none existed before, then a red disc visible by day, and finally an obvious omen that frightens all the inhabitants of Discworld. Great A 'Tuin is swimming directly to the red star. The cities empty out as their people flee to the mountains, and the mountain folk run for the safety of cities. And the rock cried out there's no hiding place here.

Rincewind and Twoflower make their way into Ankh-Morpork with Cohen and company. Religious cults have taken over, preaching doomsday and not without good reason. In the midst of the riots and confusion, Great A 'Tuin swims close to the star. There are eight spheres orbiting the star, which, while the stunned populace watch the skies, hatch out into miniature turtles with elephant calves on their backs and proto-discworlds in a primitive geological state. Great A 'Tuin observes its hatchlings, and with them following behind, turns about and begins swimming back into the realms of the universe where magic holds sway, not quantum mechanics and relativity. Twoflower decides to return to his homeland, and as a parting gift, gives the Luggage to Rincewind. The ending is a bit of an anti-climax, even if it does neatly explain a lot of things.

The next two Discworld novels were in different story arcs. Rincewind doesn't reappear until the fifth novel SOURCERY (1988), where he is an assistant librarian at the Unseen University. The Small Gods' Eve banquet, which this time also serves a second function of anointing a new Archchancellor, is

disrupted when a new candidate barges in and appoints himself. He is but a ten-year-old boy named Coin, with a magical staff (which contains his father's soul to guide him), but a boy who is the eighth son of an eighth son of an eighth son. That makes him a sourcerer, with powers far above the sum of all the wizards at the Unseen University. He usurps the Archchancellorship with a display of magic beyond what the wizards can muster.

The problem is that Coin cannot officially assume the title without the Archchancellor's Hat, something like a crown but with its own magical powers. And the Hat is in the custody of sneak thief Conina, daughter of Cohen the Barbarian and just as much trouble. She has taken Rincewind and Luggage along with her, the Hat having instructed them (see, I told you it was magical) to make a journey across Discworld to a place of safety until Coin can be dealt with. Meanwhile, back at the UU, Coin has brought all the wizards onside by proposing that they take over Ankh-Morpork and indeed the world, and rule it in the manner to which wizards would like to become accustomed.

The problem is that Coin is bringing so much magic into Discworld that it leaks all over the place. The wizards take advantage of the leakage, and since every wizard feels he should be the one to rule the world, it isn't long before a multi-sided war begins. There are lots of civilian casualties since the wizards aren't very good at aiming their spells, and they're not concerned about collateral damage. Rincewind and his party are caught in the crossfire as they head back to Unseen University. The UU is completely converted to new buildings by magic, and out in the mountains of the Hub, the Ice Giants are released and begin racing their glaciers to the Rim, covering the world in ice.

Alas, the ending wimps out. This is a zero-reset story. In the last few pages, Coin is dealt with and everything is set back the way it was. The UU has its buildings restored as they were, and the Ice Giants are driven back into the mountains. The last third of the book was noise and confusion but to no purpose in the face of a comforting ending that keeps things the way they were instead of advancing the story arc. Rincewind is apparently gone for good but we know he will return.

Which indeed he does in ERIC (1990), about Eric Thursley, a young demonology hacker dabbling in magic. The boy calls up a demon to grant him three wishes but instead, probably due to a parsing error, he gets Rincewind and the Luggage. Rincewind, much to his surprise, finds he is compelled to do magic, although he can't grant the three wishes Eric asks for in the way he

wanted. They begin the usual sort of meandering across Discworld, but Eric finds out that if he were the ruler of the world, it wouldn't be as enjoyable as thought, and his request for the most beautiful woman in the world in history reveals a middle-aged housewife with eight children. (Andy Griffiths did a comedy routine about Cleopatra being ugly but remember that Julius Caesar and Mark Anthony were soldiers and overseas.) Along the way they end up in Hell, where a bureaucratic demon has ascended to the fiery throne and is now torturing everyone with vision statements and memos. The story ends as a zero-reset, with Eric presumably somewhat wiser about wishing for things and the reality of getting them.

INTERESTING TIMES (1994) opens with a demand to the Patriarch of Ankh-Morpork from the Agatean Empire on the Counterweight Continent on the far side of Discworld. The demand is for a wizard to be sent them, which the Patriarch and the Unseen University agree should be Rincewind, a disposable person if there ever was one. The empires of the Counterweight Continent are powerful enough to eradicate Ankh-Morpork should they be troubled to do so, and both the Patriarch and the Unseen University agree that it would be best if the empires were not troubled. This novel gets off to a slow start, dawdling at the UU where the wizards first try to find Rincewind and then debate how to get him out to the Agatean Empire on the far side of the disc in an expeditious manner. Finally Rincewind is sent out by magical teleporting and the plot begins in earnest.

It seems that Rincewind's traveling companion Twoflower had written a book on his return home about the wonders of Ankh-Morpork, including plentiful food and the right to take up any occupation. The Agatean Empire is a thinly if not completely undisguised analogue of the declining years of the Chinese Empire, when peasants were peasants and would always be peasants if they knew what was good for them. The Twoflower's book stirred up lots of trouble, including a nascent Red Army, and Rincewind is right in the middle of it. Cohen the Barbarian and his fellow geriatrics have also infiltrated the Agatean Empire in search of gold, unaware that it is so common that even the poorest peasant uses it as an equivalent to copper coins.

Three main plot lines alternate through the novel. Lord Hong is scheming to take control of the country and, if necessary, the throne. Cohen et al take over the Empire and he becomes Emperor. This is a task made easier because only a few Agatean courtiers were allowed to look upon the visage of the Emperor, so when Cohen and his gang wave swords at them and ask "Who's your

Emperor now?”, they quickly agree on an answer. Rincewind is dealing with the Red Army, a group who think that putting up posters and holding secret World Congresses (five men and two women in the basement of a bookstore) will kickstart the revolution. The peasants don’t seem especially interested in starting a revolution, knowing as they do that in a war they will have to do the fighting and see their houses and crops burned, while the Red Army cadres urge them on from the sidelines.

Rincewind does his usual share of fleeing the scene while bit players scream “There he is! Grab him!”. These scenes would be monotonous but Pratchett uses them to fill out Rincewind’s character. He emphasizes that cowardice is a survival trait, and the reason that Rincewind has survived so many disasters is that he knows when to start running.

The ending is a bit of *deus ex machina*, as Rincewind inadvertently finds a magic helmet, boots, and gloves, and a terra cotta army to protect him. The various messes are cleaned up. The wizards at Unseen University teleport Rincewind back but make a mistake, sending him to XXXX, a land not unlike Australia. For a fantasy world that seems well thought out initially, Pratchett keeps ruining the suspension of disbelief by mentioning Earth-specific details that don’t fit in well with Discworld. The novels are still readable but nonetheless the problem keeps shaking readers out of the story.

THE LAST HERO (2001) is a coffee-table book illustrated for those who don’t have the imagination to think what the creatures and characters of Discworld might look like. Cohen the Barbarian and his elderly friends known as the Silver Horde have left the Agatean Empire on a bucket-list journey. They are headed for Cori Celeste, the spindle of Discworld and the home of the gods. Cohen knows he is of an age where he doesn’t have long to live, and wants to go out in a blaze of glory. Specifically, he intends to go out in a blaze of glory using a keg of Agatean Thunder Clay to destroy Cori Celeste, which would collapse the magic field that holds Discworld together. If he dies, so does the world.

Lord Vetinari, the Patrician of Ankh-Morpork, has learned of this. Naturally he objects to the destruction of the world, and enlists the help of the wizards of Unseen University. Rincewind has by then become the Professor of Cruel and Unusual Geography chair, his predecessor still not having been found nor his bones. Vetinari mobilizes an expedition to go to Cori Celeste to stop Cohen and the Silver Horde. Rincewind is shanghaied into the job. A ship/aircraft is

prepared that will float off the edge of the Rim into a slingshot orbit that will take it underneath Discworld past the elephants and Great A’Tuin, and lift it high above the other side of Discworld. From there, it will just be a matter of dropping down onto Cori Celeste and taking out Cohen before he destroys the world.

Armageddon is averted as you knew it would be. Cohen and the Silver Horde ride off, not into the sunset, and Rincewind finds his way back to Ankh-Morpork. For although everything must come to pass, the End Times are not yet here.

[to be continued]

GESTURES AND LANGUAGE

by Dale Speirs

My father once remarked that the best method of silencing a Québécois was to tie his hands so he couldn’t move them. That was condescending, and the implication it carried was untrue, for anglophones use gestures as much as any other language group. Gestures are seen by most of the populace merely as an adjunct to verbal language. Sign language, of course, is outside the realm of a ‘real’ language, just as braille would not be thought of as a typeface.

“Try To Remember” is a short story by Frank Herbert in the October 1961 issue of AMAZING. The aliens have landed and sent a message to the world’s leaders that human must be able to decipher their language as a test of ability. If not, then Earth will be cleared of sentient life. The aliens demonstrate their strength by removing all satellites around Earth and by the destruction of an island. The humans have no choice but to attempt to pass the test of being able to communicate in the alien language. The story’s heroine is a recent young widow, Francine Millar, one of a large group of linguists, psychologists, and anthropologists attempting to figure out the language. There are gung-ho military minds who believe the aliens are the vanguard of an invasion. The soldiers want to kill all the aliens and let God sort them out.

The linguists are unsuccessful at learning the language until they realize that the sounds are emotional intensifier and flexuational elements, not the actual language. The real language is in the gestures and body movements of the aliens, who only use sounds as modifiers and not the main text. This story is typical Campbellian fiction, where scientists are faced with a technical problem and solve it after the usual false leads and dead ends. The stuffy establishment types get their comeuppance, and there is a resolution. I suppose not all readers might not catch on that the gestures were the language and sounds the supplement. Well okay, I didn't catch on. I kept expecting a cliché such as dance being the form of communication and an ode to emotions. But I'm not a trained linguist. Such people could have caught on faster, but then that would eliminate most of the plot.

From there to a scientific paper I came across on gestures as the origin of speech [1]. M.C. Corballis starts off by defining terms, with a distinction between animal communication and language. Animal communication, while transmitting information, has a limited number of signals, which are used only in the context of a situation. Language has generativity, displaying unlimited ideas in sentences we have never heard before. Language allows reference to other places or times, something animal communication does not.

The thesis of Corballis' article is that gestures triggered the evolution of language. Gestural communication prevents alerting prey or predators, and after that primitive beginning is still a large part of human language today. It seems congenital, as sign languages are known to develop spontaneously in groups of deaf people not formally trained in it, much as groups of immigrants will develop creole or pidgin languages. The congenitally blind use gestures, a strong suggestion that such are hardwired into the human brain. Certain sounds would become associated with certain gestures, and from there words became dominant.

Speech would then evolve at an advantage, because it does not require a line of sight. There are always situations where gestures are still needed, so they would not be rendered extinct by speech. Sort of like computer users still using the MS-DOS underneath Windows. From there, tribes with a spoken language would displace speechless hominids due to better co-ordination in warfare, hunting, herding, and tribal organization [3].

The great fun about discussing the origin of spoken language is that there are no physical traces, as with written language. One can therefore build hypotheses

without any facts getting in the way. Archaeologists keep coming up with ancient records that constrain speculation on the origin of writing. Speech originists can build theories on ur-languages by comparing word groups or reconstructing a few ancient hominid skulls to see if their original owners could physically speak, but the evidence is as much one way as another.

In reviewing some of my references about language origins, I saw one paper [2] that hypothesizes spoken languages developed about 1,000,000 years ago in several places at once with *Homo erectus*. About the same time that paper was written, another author declared that languages could not be more than 100,000 years old and began in *Homo sapiens sapiens* [3]. And that's all I'll say on the subject.

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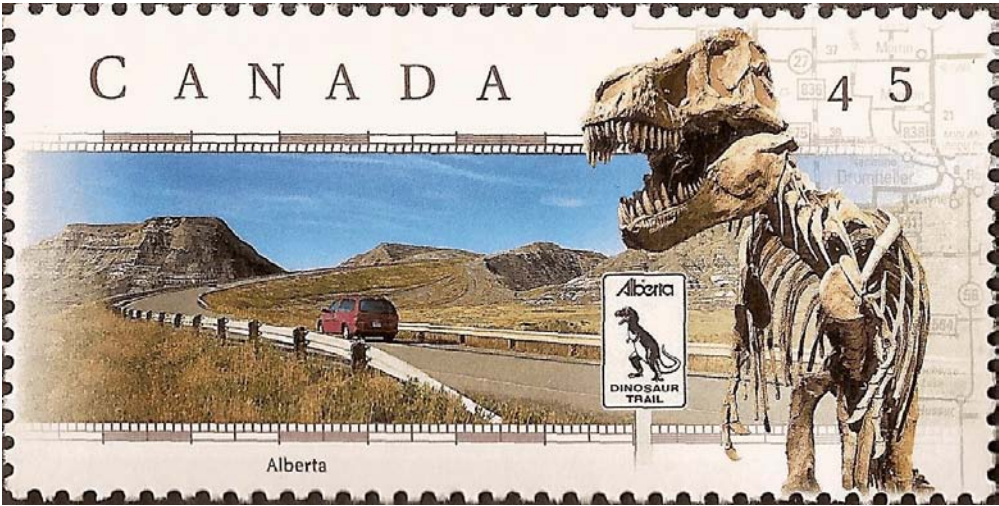
A GOOD DAY IN THE BAD LANDS

by Dale Speirs

I was eastbound into the rising sun in September 1999, on Highway 9 as it zig-zagged towards the Drumheller badlands. Harvesting was general throughout southern Alberta, and every few kilometres I saw a combine or swather. There was a constant flow of pup trailers on the highway, hauling wheat to the grain terminals. The treeless prairies gave way to shallow but broad glacial meltwater valleys. After them Highway 9 was lined with caution signs for truckers to test their brakes.

The badlands are cut deep below the surface of the prairie steppes by the Red Deer River. There is no warning for the first-time visitor. The highway suddenly drops 100 metres down into the badlands. It is an impressive sight to crest the edge and see the badlands spread out below. It would be even more impressive if the advertising billboards could be removed.

The strata of the Red Deer River badlands are multi-coloured horizontal stripes, like a giant torte cake. The red layers are ironstone, white is sandstone, grey is volcanic ash, blue is clay, and brown is mud. The sedimentary deposits are the record of the deltas and estuaries that existed 65 megayears ago and straddle the Cretaceous-Tertiary boundary. Below the boundary is the richest deposit of Late Cretaceous dinosaurs in the world. Above it the dinosaurs are gone and the new world was being born.



I drove through the Drumheller city core, out the other side onto Dinosaur Trail, and a winding road to the Royal Tyrrell Museum of Palaeontology, set into the badlands. For a post-tourist season Tuesday, there were a fair number of cars in the parking lot, about two dozen. I had the only Alberta plate; most of the vehicles were British Columbia, Ontario, and Manitoba plates, but I also saw Montana, Nova Scotia, and Tennessee.

What Was, Was.

The Royal Tyrrell shows its exhibits as a progression of life from the Precambrian to the Pleistocene. I won't bore you with a litany of fossil names. The museum has some very impressive dioramas and simulations, and dozens

of dinosaur skeletons and fibreglass reconstructions. The centerpieces were the Burgess Shale Cambrian fossils from just over the border in British Columbia, and the Alberta dinosaurs, of course, many from the vicinity of the museum. The visitors were hushed, as if in church, although the effect was spoiled by the constant blare of interactive video terminals. The personal highlight for me was the Tertiary exhibit, where Palaeocene (immediately after the dinosaurs) fossil plants collected by my mother were on display. I resisted the urge to grab the couple gazing into an exhibit case at the far end and drag them over to these fossils: *"Hey, look! My Mom collected these ones!"*.

The only exit from the museum is via the gift shop, designed to lighten wallets of visitors as much as possible. I only spent \$22 on postcards. Dropping my loot in the car, I took an hour to walk one of the simpler trails in the badlands surrounding the museum. Up and down gullies, over the benchlands, past the sagebrush, creeping juniper, and pricklypear cacti, and, surprisingly, some purple aster in full bloom despite hard frosts.

Long Ago And Far Away.

It was a nostalgia trip to stroll through this particular stretch of badlands. When I was a university student in the early 1970s, I made dozens of fossil collecting trips down here, some to the very spot where I walked today. In 1978, the provincial government passed a law declaring title to all Alberta fossils would remain with Her Majesty the Queen In Right of the Province of Alberta. I didn't see the point of spending gas money and time collecting for her. She's a pretty nice girl but she can get her own fossils. So I gave up palaeontology as a hobby. My mother collected for the University of Alberta (my alma mater) and had no trouble getting permits.

Drumheller, like too many other Alberta cities, has sprawled. Once it was possible to sweep the horizon and see nothing but sedimentary strata, sagebrush, and the occasional mule deer. Now the suburbs are reaching the museum area along the valley escarpment, and the horizon is littered with suburban boxes. The valley floor and badlands are now part of Midland Provincial Park, established with the museum in the 1980s. Where once I scrambled up slippery slopes there are now graveled footpaths with interpretive signs. One thing remains constant, the wind whistling in my ears. It never stops in southeastern Alberta, blowing down from the mountains over the horizon.

Downtown Dinosaurs.

Back when, there were two life-size sculptures of dinosaurs in Drumheller’s downtown core. Now they are everywhere, some as public projects, others as private advertising. Every other business has ‘dinosaur’ or ‘fossil’ in its name. I have no doubt there are lots of fundamentalist Baptists in the area, but they keep quiet while stacking their tourist money.

I picked up a copy of THE VALLEY TIMES newspaper, subtitled “*Drumheller and area’s news source for the new millennium. Serving Drumheller, Nacmine, Rosedale, East Coulee, Fenn, Finnegan, Dalum, Hussar, Standard, Rockyford, Carbon, Rosebud, Munson, Morrin, Delia, Craigmyle, Rumsey, Big Valley, Hanna, Verdant Valley, and Dorothy*”. They forgot Bleriot Ferry. Most of those places are hamlets at best, sometimes nothing more than a crossroads general store.

Two big stories on the front page. “*Baler sparks grass fire near Carbon*” hardly needs explaining. This included a breathless report from the farmer about how he noticed the baler was gittin’ hotter than blazes and then the stubble suddenly went whoosh! “*Airport closed due to filming*” was about a movie called KNOCK AROUND GUYS being filmed at Drumheller Municipal Airport. I doubt many travelers were inconvenienced; the airport is a collection of leftover WW2 aircraft hangers and a few single-engine bush planes sitting about. John Malkovich and Dennis Hopper were the stars of the movie. 57 extras were needed locally. The movie bombed and you are better off not having seen it. The story mentioned that the camera crew had just recently filmed a commercial for Washington State apples at the hamlet of Dorothy, just south of Drumheller in the heart of the shortgrass prairie. I’m curious to know why a state covered with trees would pick a venue where there are none.

Palaeowars.

I have been reading two novels by Brett Davis that mix palaeontology and aliens. There aren’t too many genuine palaeontological SF books that I am aware of. By this type of story I mean fossil digging for Earth critters, not hack-written stuff about finding alien bones or time-traveling Great White Hunters who want a *T. rex*. Davis mixes real field collectors with alien field collectors, in a mad and often violent scramble for dinosaur fossils in Montana. Even the real history of fossil collecting is bizarre enough, so adding aliens doesn’t stretch credibility too much.

“Publish or Perish” Meant Something In Those Days.

There may be some people who think that university academics are naive, mild-mannered Casper Milquetoasts. Woodrow Wilson ran up against this belief during his presidential campaign when opponents charged that a college president such as him did not have practical experience of deadly politics. Wilson replied wryly that federal politics would be a walk in the park after academia.

Field palaeontology was and still is not a game for polite society. Today the dark side mostly involves illegally digging and exporting fossils, but a century ago it involved sabotage, theft, fist fights, and intercepting communications. The epitome was the feud between Othniel Charles Marsh and Edward Drinker Cope, the two greatest palaeontologists of the late 1800s. Both used spies on each other’s digs, bribed telegraph operators for news or to stop news as the case may have been, diverted shipments of fossils, and could teach any secret police agency how to do things.

Fossils In Them Thar Hills.

Brett Davis sets his first book BONE WARS (1998, mass-market paperback) in Montana when Cope and Marsh were both active in the field in 1876. The end of the collecting season is approaching with the impending snow, and Cope and Marsh are having problems finding bones. It seems someone else is also there before them, someone who doesn’t have to labouriously dig out bones but cuts them out of the rock as if by magic. The unknown collector carries them in a magic metal tent. (The term ‘UFO’ would not be invented for decades.) The collector also has a ‘ghost wall’ to protect him, as good a name as any for a force field, especially to people for whom electricity is still cutting edge technology.

To complicate matters, the natives are restless. Sitting Bull is alleged to be heading this way, fresh from his victory over Custer, but now fleeing vindictive U.S. Army troops. Both Cope and Marsh are having trouble with their hired help. Marsh in particular, who can’t figure out Al Stillson, a young man he hired to spy on Cope, and another acquaintance George Burgess, who turns out to be a Sioux named Sitting Lizard who also happens to be a Yale man.

In their competition against each other, Cope and Marsh eventually discover that they have mutual competitors, not one but two different alien species, each

of which are competing against each other. One of the alien group were paying a return visit after 70 megayears or so. They had been doing some illegal biological experiments on dinosaurs and were seeking the bones to eliminate the evidence. The other group was a gene-engineered result of those experiments, lizard men who venerated the bones as their ancestors and wanted them for religious purposes.

Cope and Marsh combine forces against apparently invincible foes, on the time-honoured principle that one should take care of mutual enemies first before turning on each other. Both are patriotic men who do not want to see the bones leave the country, much less the planet.

Al Stillson is revealed to be Alice Stillson, a naive young writer who wants to write pulp Westerns and came out west for research, not to mention escaping a flabby, boring fiancé she doesn't want to love, honour, and cherish. She/he was shocked to learn on arrival that the pulp writers of the day never went west of the Mississippi and their only research might be a few lurid travelers' tales in some old magazines. Naive she may be, but not so much that she isn't aware of the hazards of the Old West. She knows a young woman wandering around by herself on the Great Plains is just asking for it, so she assumes the identity of a young man. She is undone, both figuratively and literally by Sitting Lizard, who becomes her lover.

The aliens are defeated, not so much in outright victory, but in the same way that a hive of bees can drive off animals many times larger than they. The aliens are trying to quietly get in and out. They are under deadlines, but the pesky humans keep stinging them here and there, stealing back the bones, and finding ways to circumvent the ghost walls.

Even if I didn't already have the sequel volume TWO TINY CLAWS at hand, it would have been obvious there was to be a sequel. Cope and Marsh return back East with their bones. Neither will say a word about the aliens for fear of ridicule from the public or each other. But the aliens are obviously unsatisfied and will just as obviously return.

The book is marred somewhat by sloppy proofreading. I can understand an American editor missing the reference to Sitting Bull crossing the border into Canada and dealing with the Canadian Army. Even most Canadians wouldn't know the Canadian Army wasn't created until 1885, and that Sitting Bull actually met up with the North West Mounted Police, as the Mounties were

called back when they were a paramilitary force, not the police of today.

But errors such as “ ... its walls were, two, and ... “ instead of “ ... its walls were too, and ... “ trip up even the reader with no knowledge of Canadian history. There are passing mentions of trilobites throughout the book, made even more glaring by the fact that this error is also repeated in the sequel. The correct spelling ‘trilobite’ is in my spellchecker (WordPerfect) and I would be surprised to learn that it wouldn't flag on anyone else's computer. Sounds like a delightful software term though.

TWO TINY CLAWS (1999, mass-market paperback) picks up three decades after BONE WARS. Cope and Marsh are long gone, and the great palaeontologist at hand is Barnum Brown. He and his assistant Charles Sternberg would later in real life collect along the Red Deer River badlands between Bleriot Ferry and Dinosaur Provincial Park where I was to walk fifty years after them. Now they are back in Montana. There is no feud between bone diggers, but there is a mob of bounty hunters underfoot looking for Luther Gumpson, one of the last gunfighters in the Old West, almost extinct in 1907. Both groups of aliens pick this inopportune moment to return, and a three-way scramble for bones begins anew. It is made worse by trigger-happy drunks and lynch mobs looking for glory and reward money in the badlands of Montana.

Much to-ing and fro-ing as in the first book. One of Brown's diggers is Sitting Lizard Burgess, the son of the late Sioux and Alice Paul (nee Stillson). Alice is now a published author in WILD WEST WEEKLY and constantly afflicts Brown with her demands that he investigate the cold trail of the aliens. Brown, of course, is skeptical, as who wouldn't be in 1907 about stories of flying metal tents and ghost walls.

Both books do capture the feel of bone digging in the badlands, something that I can relate to personally. Scrabbling up the slopes, which are slippery with pebbles when dry and slippery with mud when wet. Taking stupid chances inching along a cliff face to see closer what those objects are sticking out of the cliff over a 20 metre drop. The dry vegetation, the clumps of spikegrass and sagebrush relieved only by the occasional cactus. (I once tripped as I was jumping across a gully, instinctively put out my hand to break the fall, and drove it with my full weight into a pricklypear pad; the spines were driven a centimetre into my palm.) Dealing with suspicious locals who think palaeontologists are actually hunting for gold. The ability to look at a layered hill and see ancient river deltas and lakes instead of just a bunch of rocks.

Dem Bones Gonna Roll.

BRING ‘EM BACK PETRIFIED (1956, hardcover) is non-fiction by Lillian Brown, whom Barnum met and married in India. The honeymoon was spent digging for fossils in the Siwalik Hills, from which experience Lillian wrote her first book I MARRIED A DINOSAUR. Her other previous book is CLEOPATRA SLEPT HERE, not set in India obviously (Greece actually).

PETRIFIED is the account of the Brown’s search for Ice Age fossils in the Pleistocene deposits of El Peten province in Guatemala, near the village of Santa Amelia. Barnum was hunting for the migration route of the great faunal interchange that occurred during the Pleistocene when southern hemisphere glaciation forced giant marsupials north into Central America just as the northern ice sheets were forcing North American placentals south into Central America. The latter won out over the former.

The book is mostly about being an expedition wife rather than the palaeontology. There are some “As you know, Professor, ... “ conversations supposedly between Barnum and Lillian, which I don’t believe happened. When I went fossil hunting in the Red Deer River badlands, my compatriots and I did not pause while clinging to a cliff face for this sort of conversation. Never was heard “As you know, Dale, this is the tooth of a hadrosaur, a herbivorous dinosaur about the length of a semi-trailer truck and two stories tall.”. Nor did I reply, “As you know, Susan, this piece of petrified wood was deposited in a river delta backwater about 65 million years ago and is of an extinct conifer most closely related to swamp cypress.”. However, I can tolerate these conversations between Lillian and Barnum since the average reader would not be familiar with palaeontology, and the woman had to get those expository lumps in somehow if the story was to make any sense. It was the cutesy style that irritated me, such as Barnum calling her Pixie all the time.

Besides the search for fossils up and down the river, Lillian provides a plot in the life of the villagers and her feud with Kaa, the local witch woman. The Barnums return from one dig to find their laboratory (a grass hut) burned down. A race develops between two medical healers, Kaa with her herbs and magical spells, and Lillian with her pills and hygiene classes. Other hazards included an iguana storm, which occurred when they were paddling upstream underneath overhanging trees. One of the native bearers spotted an iguana sitting on a branch overhead and tried to catch it (they are good eating). There was an entire herd of iguanas in the trees. When the alarms and excursions began, the

panicky iguanas dropped straight down into the river, splash, splash, splash. But they were big, heavy buggers, a metre long with spiny tails, and to have them dropping on one’s overloaded canoe was no laughing matter.

Better yet are some of the famous stories of palaeontology, such as the “How To Barbecue A Mastodon” epic, reconstructed from a 1920s Ecuador dig. About 2,000 years ago, a group of primitive hunters managed to bring down a mastodon and decided to cook it on the spot. Putting the defunct animal on a spit was obviously out of the question, and for some reason the humans did not want to cut it up.

Based on the fossil site evidence they apparently: “ ... built a lot of bonfires around the carcass, browning the outside flesh to a turn. Those who had staked claims to that portion of the animal fairly drooled at the mouth in anticipation of the feast. But those partial to inside cuts saw that the beast would be burned to a crisp before their parts had even begun to cook. The problem seemed insoluble. Finally the brains of the group proposed roasting the animal’s insides in an oven consisting of its own chest cavity. Picking up his stone ax, this intellectual hacked his way into the stomach of the sizzling behemoth. From there he tunneled a passage into the roomy chest, tore out several ribs, called for firewood, and in no time had a roaring blaze going inside the beast.”

I decided to verify that story by locating the original scientific paper, so I did a search at the University of Calgary Library. For the record the citation is: Spillman, Franz (1929) Das sudamerikanische Mastodon als Zeitgenosse des Menschen majoiden kulturkreises. PALAONT. Z. BERLIN 11:170-177.



What's Worse Than Trying To Remember Where You Parked Your Car At The Shopping Mall?

Trying to remember where you parked it in the badlands. I never got lost in the Drumheller badlands because they are a narrow strip on either side of the Red Deer River. The river flows north-south, the sun is to the south, and you can see the escarpments, so one could never get totally lost.

I did, however, get turned around once and realized I had spent the last hour walking away from my car instead of towards it. The standard practice on leaving the area of the car is to look back at it, and fix it in relation to at least two topographical features along the escarpment. Not on the valley floor, since the landmark would soon be hidden, but up high where one can see it from anywhere. Two or more features so one could triangulate them. My mistake that one time was to reverse the two landmarks in my mind, but once I realized this it was just a matter of turning around and retracing my steps.

Even supposing one did get hopelessly lost, it would not be a life or death matter. The river would never be far away, so dehydration in the heat would not be a problem. Villages in the Drumheller area are about every 15 kilometres or so, a reasonable walking distance, assuming no broken legs. That might kill, for how would you improvise a crutch or splint in treeless terrain and unfenced rangeland?

What reminded me of all this was a letter to the editor in the 1999-10-08 issue of SCIENCE. Gene Ciancanelli was responding to an earlier issue where the GPS rollover problem (a.k.a. mini-Y2K) was being discussed. The GPS satellites were rolling over to a new start sequence which would make old GPS receivers inaccurate in determining position. The author in that earlier issue used an example of a geologist mapping in the field who needed GPS to determine the shortest distance back to his truck. Ciancanelli sensibly pointed out that anyone who had spent the day reading topographical maps would not need GPS. Unless of course, it was a technonerd in line for the Darwin Awards.

WHAT'S WORSE THAN SNOW?
photos by Dale Speirs

Snow falling on you from 50 stories up. It is a common hazard in downtown Calgary where skyscrapers are designed by architects who don't think about practical matters such as that. In OPUNTIA #275 were photos of the standard "Danger Falling Ice" signs that the skyscraper building superintendents set out on the sidewalks to relieve themselves of legal liability. There are variations on a theme, such as the one below. There is no snow on the ground in this and subsequent photos because it was all removed after the snowfall.



Calgary is in the rain shadow of the Rocky Mountains, so we don't get that much snow, seldom more than 15 cm at a time. Since I moved to Cowtown in 1978, the record was a single 42-cm snowfall, which paralyzed the city for days. This is laughable in eastern Canada along the Great Lakes or the Maritime provinces, but we're not used to it. The photos on this page were taken on my smartphone while I was waiting for a bus across the street. The slabs of snow on the ledge had partially melted and then refrozen into ice.



In the photo below, you can see falling slabs about one-third down the side of the building. Notice their shadows on the building.



SEEN IN THE LITERATURE

Tipler, F.J. (1989) **The Omega Point as eschaton: Answers to Pannenberg’s questions for scientists.** ZYGON 24:217-252

This is an attempt to prove from first principles that God exists, using only scientific and mathematic principles without need to appeal to human mythology or unsupported faith. Tipler calculates that if life expands to envelop all the universe before entropy runs its course, then the result will be a single omnipresent and omniscient organism. In short, God. God would then replay all possible variations of history in order to identify a perfect personality, hence the existence of evil is necessary. Once the perfect personality is selected, all others are deleted.. The focus of this article is on theology, but what caught my eye was the passing mention that every possible timeline would have to be simulated in order to select the perfect personality and that the simulations would not know they are simulations. To be facetious about it, if God exists, then so do all possible alternative histories.

Valentine, D.L., et al (2014) **Fallout plume of submerged oil from Deepwater Horizon.** PROCEEDINGS OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES USA 111:15906–15911

Authors' abstract: *"Following the sinking of the Deepwater Horizon in the Gulf of Mexico an unprecedented quantity of oil irrupted into the ocean at a depth of 1.5 km. The novelty of this event makes the oil’s subsequent fate in the deep ocean difficult to predict. This work identifies a fallout plume of hydrocarbons from the Macondo Well contaminating the ocean floor over an area of 3,200 km2. Our analysis suggests the oil initially was suspended in deep waters and then settled to the underlying sea floor. The spatial distribution of contamination implicates accelerated settling as an important fate for suspended oil, supports a patchwork mosaic model of oil deposition, and frames ongoing attempts to determine the event’s impact on deep ocean ecology. ... The sinking of the Deepwater Horizon in the Gulf of Mexico led to uncontrolled emission of oil to the ocean, with an official government estimate of about 5.0 million barrels released. Among the pressing uncertainties surrounding this event is the fate of about 2 million barrels of submerged oil thought to have been trapped in deep ocean intrusion layers at depths of about 1,000–1,300 m. Here we use chemical distributions of hydrocarbons in >3,000 sediment*

samples from 534 locations to describe a footprint of oil deposited on the deep-ocean floor. Using a recalcitrant biomarker of crude oil, 17a(H),21β(H)-hopane (hopane), we have identified a 3,200-km2 region around the Macondo Well contaminated by about $1.8 \pm 1.0 \times 10^6$ g of excess hopane. Based on spatial, chemical, oceanographic, and mass balance considerations, we calculate that this contamination represents 4–31% of the oil sequestered in the deep ocean. The pattern of contamination points to deep-ocean intrusion layers as the source and is most consistent with dual modes of deposition: a “bathtub ring” formed from an oil-rich layer of water impinging laterally upon the continental slope (at a depth of about 900–1,300 m) and a higher-flux “fallout plume” where suspended oil particles sank to underlying sediment (at a depth of about 1,300–1,700 m). We also suggest that a significant quantity of oil was deposited on the ocean floor outside this area but so far has evaded detection because of its heterogeneous spatial distribution."

Fakhar, M., et al (2014) **Lunar crescent detection based on image processing algorithms.** EARTH, MOON, AND PLANETS 114:17-34

Authors' abstract: *"For many years lunar crescent visibility has been studied by many astronomers. Different criteria have been used to predict and evaluate the visibility status of new Moon crescents. Powerful equipment such as telescopes and binoculars have changed capability of observations. Most of conventional statistical criteria made wrong predictions when new observations (based on modern equipment) were reported. In order to verify such reports and modify criteria, not only previous statistical parameters should be considered but also some new and effective parameters like high magnification, contour effect, low signal to noise, eyestrain and weather conditions should be viewed. In this paper a new method is presented for lunar crescent detection based on processing of lunar crescent images. The method includes two main steps, first, an image processing algorithm that improves signal to noise ratio and detects lunar crescents based on circular Hough transform (CHT). Second using an algorithm based on image histogram processing to detect the crescent visually. Final decision is made by comparing the results of visual and CHT algorithms. In order to evaluate the proposed method, a database, including 31 images are tested. The illustrated method can distinguish and extract the crescent that even the eye can’t recognize. Proposed method significantly reduces artifacts, increases SNR and can be used easily by both groups astronomers and who want to develop a new criterion as a reliable method to verify empirical observation."*

Speirs: Lunar crescent detection is important for Muslim holy days, signifying the start or end of an event as the new moon changes. Visual searches for the first fractional image of the new moon crescent can vary depending on the person's vision, hence this paper to put it on a scientific basis.

Godar, J., et al (2014) **Actor-specific contributions to the deforestation slowdown in the Brazilian Amazon.** PROCEEDINGS OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES USA 111:15591–15596

Authors' abstract: *"The Brazilian Amazon is at a critical juncture after the recent stabilization of deforestation rates. We provide the first such assessment, to our knowledge, that reports on two headline findings. First, between 2004 and 2011, areas dominated by properties larger than 500 ha accounted for 48% of the deforestation compared with only 12% for smallholders (<100 ha). Second, the deforestation share attributed to the largest properties (=2,500 ha) declined by 63% from a peak in 2005, whereas that of smallholders increased by 69%. Further reductions in deforestation are likely to require a shift toward more incentive-based policies that are tailored toward different actors."*

Castañeda, R.A., et al (2014) **Microplastic pollution in St. Lawrence River sediments.** CANADIAN JOURNAL OF FISHERIES AND AQUATIC SCIENCES 71: 1767–1771

Authors' abstract: *"Although widely detected in marine ecosystems, microplastic pollution has only recently been documented in freshwater environments, almost exclusively in surface waters. Here, we report microplastics (polyethylene microbeads, 0.40–2.16mm diameter) in the sediments of the St. Lawrence River. We sampled 10 freshwater sites along a 320 km section from Lake St. Francis to Québec City by passing sediment collected from a benthic grab through a 500 micrometre sieve. Microbeads were discovered throughout this section, and their abundances varied by four orders of magnitude across sites. Median and mean (± 1 SE) densities across sites were 52 microbeads/m² and 13 832 (± 13 677) microbeads/m², respectively. The highest site density was 1.4×10^5 microbeads/m² (or 103 microbeads/L-1), which is similar in magnitude to microplastic concentrations found in the world's most contaminated marine sediments. Mean diameter of microbeads was smaller at sites receiving municipal or industrial effluent (0.70 ± 0.01 mm) than at non-effluent sites (0.98 ± 0.01 mm), perhaps suggesting differential origins. Given the prevalence and*

locally high densities of microplastics in St. Lawrence River sediments, their ingestion by benthivorous fishes and macroinvertebrates warrants investigation."

**THERE IS NO NEW THING UNDER THE SUN:
KIDS THESE DAYS**

1925-10-20: *““Gross impertinence and an utter lack of respect for their elders and those in authority seems to be developing rapidly among the youth of the country today”, remarked Chief Ritchie, head of the city police, in a talk on Tuesday morning. “It seems to me that home training is lacking. The boys and girls of today – but, of course, I cannot include all of them by any means – appear to think it clever and smart to show off by acting disrespectfully to their seniors. It is an unfortunate situation, and it certainly does not auger well for the future.”* [Anonymous (1925-10-20) Boys and girls flout authority, outlook is bad. CALGARY HERALD, page 10]

1949: *“High school students graduating now are taught to believe that they ought not to have to do any work. Essays submitted by freshman classes are appallingly bad; the students have no idea of how to express themselves. They have apparently been taught no grammar, no mechanics, no construction.”* [Fremlin, V. (1949) What is in a liberal education? STET 2(3):15 (University of Alberta student magazine)]

1924: *“The most primitive music is not melody but simply noise reduced to time, and when music is produced by a concatenation of symbols, any one of which in itself would be unpleasing to the ear, then we have that music which is the characteristic art of the modern savage. Some people call it ‘jazz’ for want of a better name ... “* [Anonymous (1924) School notes. THE RAMPANT 101:4 (Kent College, Canterbury, England, student magazine)].

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.]

CHORRADA #5 (The Usual from Kris Mininger, Calvo Sotelo 13B, 4B, Plasencia 10600, Caceres, Spain) Perzine of an American expatriate in Spain. He and his wife Lola returned to California for a family visit. Also letters of comment and an interview with the editor of OPUNTIA.

FOR THE CLERISY #81 (The Usual from Brant Kresovich, Box 404, Getzville, New York 14068-0404) Reviews of older books and the more obscure parts of the Papernet, plus letters of comment.

OSFS STATEMENT #427 (The Usual from Ottawa SF Society, 1568 Merrivale Road #304, Ottawa, Ontario K2G 5Y7) SF clubzine with news and letters of comments, and the usual big helping of astronomy news.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

[Editor's remarks in square brackets. Please include your name and town when sending a comment. Email to opuntia57@hotmail.com]

FROM: Lloyd Penney
Etobicoke, Ontario

2014-11-19

The pressures of work are a pain these days, and retirement sure looks good. Unfortunately, it's 12 years away for me. While a big snowstorm dumps its load

on the city, I will stay in where it's warm, and get caught up on three issues of OPUNTIA, #287 to #289.

OPUNTIA #287: I'd wonder if THRILLING TYPEWRITER STORIES #2 might be considered early steampunk by some of the punkers I know? The technology always improves, but I still wonder if older tech is still good tech. Usually, it is. 3.5" disks seem archaic, but to me storage is storage. I'd like to get a removable 3.5" drive. How many others would be able to read it? That's secure. There's a guy in Toronto with an amazing typewriter collection that goes long before the QWERTY board. I don't think we really fear change; we fear looking out of date. Myself, I don't mind, but others will buy every model of iPad, and drain their wallets prematurely.

[I prefer to be a late adopter and let other people work out the glitches in new technology. Also, when a new technology is introduced, it undergoes rapid changes at first that quickly superannuate equipment. If you wait a decade, then a new iGadget will last quite a while because any further tech changes are incremental. I have a plug-in 3.5" drive that I use to transfer files between my 1998 laptop (before USB) and my 2006 laptop (which I use for the online OPUNTIA's).]

The typewriter ads are great. I still think learning to type is a necessity, but I gather most kids pick it up anyway. I am also in favour of teaching cursive writing, but that's just me. I could go further, and say that Yvonne has a small collection of fountain pens. Not nearly as bulky as typewriters.

OPUNTIA #288: What a horrific event in Ottawa. It made Remembrance Day much more meaningful, especially when it was held right at the War Memorial.

[Lloyd is referring to an attack by an Islamic lone gunman at Parliament Hill on October 22, who killed a soldier on ceremonial guard duty at the War Memorial, then ran inside the House of Commons. In an exchange of gunfire, he was shot dead by the Sergeant-At-Arms. Canadians learned to their surprise that the SAA wasn't just a ceremonial job for retired Mounties. Calgary has always had strong turnouts for the Remembrance Day ceremonies across the city but this year had a record attendance despite the -15°C weather.]

Purdy's is great chocolate, and I know of three locations in Toronto. Buy the stuff? Are you kidding? Not at that price.

[I occasionally indulge but not often. It is top quality but expensive. Purdy's was founded in 1907 in Vancouver and has expanded over the years across Canada. It was bought out by the Flavelle family in 1963. Several years ago, old man Flavelle himself was visiting one of the Calgary stores when I was there. I shook hands with him on my way out of the store and talked briefly with him. His daughter Karen now runs the business.]

OPUNTIA #289: Always great pictures from the Rockies. If you moved to Calgary for the climate, I suppose I should move away from Toronto. We're dealing with a very early snowstorm, just the edge of the huge storm that is centered close to Buffalo, New York. Our family moved to Victoria for the better climate in the late 70s, but I didn't stay there, and neither did they.

[Humidity is never mentioned in Calgary weather forecasts because it is always low, the winter cold spells are punctuated by chinooks, and snowfalls are seldom more than 15 cm at a time.]

SIGNS, SIGNS, EVERYWHERE A SIGN

photo by Dale Speirs

Just to even out the last page, at right is a sign I saw in downtown Calgary this month. Some building managers do have a sense of humour.

