

OPUNTIA

295

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AULD LANG SYNE 2014

2014-12-31

by Dale Speirs

There are thousands of New Year's Eve celebrations throughout Calgary tonight but the biggest one is usually at Olympic Plaza downtown. I say usually because it depends on the temperature. I haven't been to the event for a few years because standing in one position on concrete for two hours watching a show when it is -20°C is not my idea of fun. Tonight though, the temperature is only -5°C, so I took the bus downtown to see in the new year.



Looking at the main stage. Unfortunately I couldn't get any decent photos of the performers because every time the music started, the strobe lights fired straight into the audience, blinding everyone and their cameras. This photo was taken during intermission.

The purple clock tower in the background is Old City Hall, lit up by coloured floodlights.



The centre of Olympic Plaza is a wading pool in summer and skating rink in winter. When summer events are held, it is easy enough to drain the pool and refill it after. Ice is a different story, so many people bring their skates. During the New Year's Eve ceremonies, people continued skating, as seen below.

And on the next few pages, the fireworks of the New Year. We all oohed and aaahed.







PREDICTIONS FOR THE YEAR 3000

by Dale Speirs

The December 1999 issue of BUSINESS 2.0 magazine skipped Y2K and went straight to Y3K, with articles on what the next 1,000 years might bring. We can't even predict 10 years ahead now, much less 1,000, but we'll all be safely dead and forgotten by the time Y3K rolls around. The magazine itself only lasted a few years. Included with that issue of BUSINESS 2.0 was a booklet, BRAINTICKLERS II, by Elizabeth Arnold and Rod Beckstrom. It does not make any predictions. Rather, the authors pose 194 questions about the year 3000. The idea is to select three questions and use them for dinner table conversation or a seminar. I'll pick three, not entirely at random, for consideration.

Ozone.

Question 30) *“If the ozone layer is destroyed, how will life on Earth react to massive doses of ultraviolet light? Will there be widespread blindness and skin cancer? What will happen to wildlife and plants? How will mankind cope with this problem?”* As it happens, about that time I worked on a briefing paper about the consequences of environmental change to parks maintenance. The Parks Dept. where I worked was planting trees that will mature in a different climate than now, so there was debate as to what should be done. My brief covered all aspects of environmental change from ozone to global warming to road salt. I include the extract on ultraviolet radiation as follows.

Ultraviolet Light Definitions.

- UV-A has wavelengths from 320 to 400 nm.
- UV-B has wavelengths from 280 to 315 nm.
- UV-C has wavelengths below 280 nm.

Photosynthesis is inhibited by UV-B, but in strong visible light (as opposed to shade) this effect is reduced. DNA damage is repaired by a process called photoreactivation, which is triggered by UV-A and blue light, and counteracts damage caused by UV-B. The shorter the wavelength, the greater the possible damage to plant physiology.

Ozone And UV.

Ozone screens out all UV-C and much UV-B from the surface of the Earth. UV-A is not affected much by ozone and goes through to the surface. If the worst happened and we lost 90% of the ozone, the UV-C would still not come through since it is so easily absorbed by even a small amount of ozone. In other words, no matter what happens, UV-A will still penetrate and UV-C will still be blocked. Only UV-B will be affected; more of it will come through if the ozone thins. UV that makes it past the ozone will be subject to backscattering in the atmosphere that makes it more diffuse. At high altitudes, the backscattering has only just begun and thus the UV is strong. Clouds may or may not reduce UV depending on how thick and dark they are. Snow cover actually increases diffuse UV because it is reflected back up into the sky. Plants near snowbanks get double the dose of UV. Plants at higher latitudes get less UV because ozone is thicker and the UV comes in at a greater angle, which makes it more diffuse or likely to be absorbed.

Palaeontological studies show that ozone depletion can be caused by natural events such as asteroid impacts, large-scale volcanism, and nearby supernovas. These things therefore indirectly boost the UV-B and additionally stress species [24]. In our time, we would not be concerned with these natural stressors, but our manmade ones such as pollution and changes to watersheds would provide that extra element of stress on top of UV-B exposure that might finally push a species over the edge.

Ultraviolet Effect On Plants.

DNA in higher plants is better protected from UV than bacteria or algae. The weak point, however, is pollen, which lets in 20% of UV-B. Worse yet, pollen is haploid (one set of chromosomes) since it is to merge with the haploid egg cell to produce a diploid (two sets of chromosomes) plant. Any damage to a pollen chromosome cannot be compensated for by a backup set of chromosomes. In other tissues, there are a variety of nucleic acid repair systems, of which photoreactivation is one example. Plants can attempt to reduce direct UV by growing their leaves at an angle, but this is a minor success. Most UV hitting the leaf is diffuse backscattering and ground reflection. Some reflection occurs off the leaf, but it is the leaf epidermis that does most of the work by simply absorbing the UV and preventing it from reaching the inner tissues. Absorption is done by phenolic compounds, mainly flavones and flavonoids, but sometimes by cuticular waxes [3].

The question is not whether plants can survive high UV; they already do. Rather, it is whether they can take even higher UV. Studies have shown that species are quite variable in their responses [10]. Some cannot take extra UV, but others are successful, such as lowland plants now weedy on mountaintops. Tomatoes and corn are sensitive to higher UV. It appears that higher UV levels will not kill off any plant species, but may reduce growth rates or crop productivity slightly.

Indirect Ultraviolet Effects.

So can we rest easy? No. Increased UV will not affect the total biomass of plants as far as gross tonnage or occupied area is concerned. It will, however, affect the balance in species competition. The proportion of species in an ecosystem will be altered. Sensitive plants will grow slower and tolerant plants will grow faster. The latter will thus expand their populations at the expense of the former. Insect or other animal species dependent on a sensitive plant species will in turn be affected.

Genetic variability will select tolerant individuals via natural selection, so sensitive species might be able to adapt. In the alternative, sensitive species may be crowded into new habitats such as shaded forest understories. It appears then, that increased UV will trigger a slow and subtle change in entire ecosystems. First the plants shift to a new equilibrium, then the animals follow. Total biomass probably won't change but species composition will. Humans are independent of such shifts since we create our own environments such as grain fields or livestock pasture. Animals in habitat will undergo gradual dislocations. As one scientist, M.M. Caldwell remarked: " ... *the effects are potentially insidious.*" [3].

As with CO₂, increased UV will trigger changes in soil nutrient effects. Selenium, which is an anti-oxidative, has been shown to actually improve plant growth at increased UV-B levels. This depends on the correct concentration of selenium in the soil, where a toxic dose at normal UV levels is rendered helpful at higher levels, but if too toxic, then not [25]. Multiply this by other relationships between elements and UV levels, then throw in synergistic effects, and it can be seen that it will be impossible to predict the outcome of increased UV-B, not only globally but also locally in the infinite microhabitats of every plant.

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Back To The Booklet.

Question 59) “*How many languages will there be in 3000? What will be their origins?*” About 6,500 languages are spoken today, but as civilization advances, the number of languages declines. The fewest languages occur where the longest periods of political centralization exist, such as empires or economic trade dominance. Language loss is accelerating due to electronic media and cultural imperialism, and it is predicted that one-fifth to one-half of today’s languages will be extinct within the next century.

The ten largest languages are spoken by 49% of the world population, and the bottom 3,000 languages spoken by 0.002%. The Top Ten are: Mandarin (885 million), English (450 million), Spanish (226 million), Arabic (196 million), Hindu (182 million), Portuguese (175 million), Bengali (162 million), Russian (160 million), Japanese (126 million), and French (122 million) [2].

At first glance it might seem logical to have only a few languages to reduce global misunderstandings, increase efficiency, and so forth. Notice I didn’t say anything about a universal language bringing world peace. A common language didn’t stop that misunderstanding between Britain and the thirteen American colonies back in 1776. South American countries have fought border wars within living memory despite them speaking Spanish (Brazil excepted, of course). During the 1930s and 1940s, the two Chinese factions understood each other all too well up to the victory of the Communists in 1949 and subsequent Cold War spear-shaking between Taiwan and the Mainland.

There is another reason to be worried about the decline of languages. A study has shown that there is a correlation between endemic languages found only in one area, and endemic plant or animal species. There is logic behind this since both are greatest in number where there is diverse terrain and ecosystems, isolation (islands or deep mountain valleys), and a tropical climate (where the majority of ecosystem damage is occurring). The top 25 countries of endemic languages also have the top 16 in vertebrate species, top 12 in endemic birds, and top 17 in endemic flowers [2]. Destruction of the ecosystems also destroys the tribal homelands where the languages are spoken.

Palaeontological records show numerous changes in ecosystems over the last four billion years, one of which, the extinction of dinosaurs, was indirectly responsible for the evolution of humans. When a change is triggered in an ecosystem, the chaos effect may send it in any direction. The ecosystem may hardly be affected by the change, or it may collapse completely and wipe out most of the species associated with it. It is for this reason that the environmentalist movement has grown, for we have no way of predicting what will happen in most ecosystems, including whether or not humans would survive the change.

A basic principle of ecology is that the more species an ecosystem has, the more stable it is. Monocultures are very unstable, which is why farmers spend so much time and money on pest control, fertilizing, and water drainage or irrigation. Multi-species systems are more predictable as the number of species increases [3]. There is more redundancy as the number of species increases, and if one species is reduced or extirpated, another species can quickly fill in its niche. Because of this, species conservation is important.

We have no idea what the long-term effects are of allowing large numbers of species to disappear. This is particularly true for plants, which are the primary producers of oxygen and food for this planet, and upon which all animal life depends directly or indirectly.

It is not entirely unrelieved gloom though, as new languages are still being born, albeit not at the same pace. They are pidgin or creole languages, created wherever large numbers of immigrants mix in countries where their own languages are not used. Pidgin languages are limited vocabulary languages used between adults who do not speak each other's language. Creole languages are created by the children born into those immigrant mixes and are more complex. One interesting comment is: *“Around the world pidgins are often spoken at the*

level of a yell on the apparently universal human assumption that volume improves comprehensibility.” [1].

By year 3000, I expect there will be a few hundred languages at most. Our English will be as easy for the 3000ers to read as the Anglo-Saxon of year 1000 is for us: not very.

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The Papernet Versus The Internet.

Question 73) *“What will we choose to document on paper versus electronically? Beyond digital audio and video, what new methods for storing information might evolve?”* Paper is an archival medium, electronic data are not. One would hope, therefore, that paper records will be used for valuable information on history and science, not episode lists of THE BRADY BUNCH. Paper will still be around but mostly replaced by the Internet or the Cloud, whatever it may be known as. No new medium has ever killed an old one. The only new medium I can see coming is photonics, currently still very primitive, about where transistors were in the early 1960s. There will undoubtedly be other media that we can't imagine anymore than the Vikings of year 1000 could imagine laptop computers.

Paper will be a rarity to the average person in Y3K, found only in museums and archives. Libraries as we know them today will be gone except as adjuncts to museums. Google is already today the world's largest library, and a millennium from now who can say what will be.

The greatest problem of future information storage will be separating the wheat from the chaff. Misinformation will grow at faster rates than reliable data, since anyone can post on the Internet whether they know what they're talking about or not.

DISCWORLD: PART 6. THE CITY WATCH

by Dale Speirs

One of the longer Discworld story arcs is that of the Ankh-Morpork police force, the City Watch. Captain Sam Vimes builds it up from a decrepit Keystone Cops force into a mostly effective law enforcement agency, despite the majority of the population and the dictator of Ankh-Morpork wishing it would go away and leave them alone.

GUARDS! GUARDS! (1989) begins the story arc with the City Watch at its lowest point. Vimes is a drunk, and the force is down to three. There is a new recruit coming in from the country named Carrot (because he is shaped like one), a giant young man who was raised by dwarfs after being orphaned. He is too tall to work in the mines, so they send him to Ankh-Morpork, where his size and strength might be of some use. Carrot is naive and unworldly, and Ankh-Morpork is in for a shock.

Another plot line involves one of the myriad secret societies of Ankh-Morpork, whose Supreme Grand Master has ideas of being an evil power behind the throne, to replace the Patrician of the city and instigate a reign of terror. Towards this end, he has managed to obtain a book on how to summon dragons, despite his lack of knowledge about magic. We know what's coming, don't we? The SGM will find a handsome young farm lad, the rightful heir to the throne, and use him as a cat's paw. The fact that Ankh-Morpork has been a republican city-state for centuries is one of those piddling little details that can easily be rushed past the populace.

The reason the City Watch has dwindled to its low point was that Lord Vetinari, the Patrician, had decided when he came to power was that since crime was going to happen no matter what, he might as well organize and regulate it. Accordingly he ordered the thieves of Ankh-Morpork to form a Guild, with rules and regulations, quotas, and strict limits on how much they could take from citizens. They were also required to eliminate freelance thieves, which they did with enthusiasm, since criminals hate competition as much as governments and multinational corporations. The system works quite well, until Carrot comes along and starts arresting thieves.

Meanwhile, a dragon appears in the city, burning people to ash and generally making a nuisance of itself. The Patrician and Vimes are both concerned for different reasons, and the search is on for the source of the supposedly extinct

creatures. Vimes pays a call to Lady Sybil Ramkin at her manor house (she has old money), where she breeds dragons. The small ones, *Draco vulgaris*, barely knee-high and certainly not able to swoop about setting cities on fire. Not the big, supposedly extinct *Draco nobilis*, which were the ones that caused all the trouble. Make note of her name, for she is a spinster and Vimes is a bachelor.

The handsome young farm lad waves his sword about, the SGM who conjured the dragon cripples its ability to fight, and yon lad is now the King of Ankh-Morpork. The Patrician is removed from power and disappears from sight. But the lad is not long for this world, as the summoned dragon asks itself why it should take orders from a biped, and the answer being none, incinerates yon lad and becomes King itself. After a suitable period of terrorizing the denizens of Ankh-Morpork, the dragon meets its match against one of Lady Sybil's pet dragons, and the Patrician is restored. Vimes and Ramkin begin a cautious relationship, which will bear fruit in future novels.

MEN AT ARMS (1993) carries on the saga of the City Watch and begins to expand its characters and back story. Corporal Carrot is recognized on the street by a royalist fanatic, Edward, 37th Lord D'eath. The D'eath family are much reduced in circumstances, and Edward is in a perpetual state of rage at Ankh-Morpork for having gone republican and not recognizing the divine right of nobility. Carrot, orphaned when his family was ambushed on the road and he was adopted by passing dwarfs, appears to be in line to the throne, at least in D'eath's mind.

Vimes is leaving the Watch in a week to marry Lady Sybil and become a gentleman. He is glad to be going because the City of Ankh-Morpork has decreed the Watch must become culturally diverse to reflect the city's population. That is to say, the Watch has hired some new recruits, such as a troll, a dwarf, and a female werewolf named Angua. Carrot has to train and integrate them into the Watch. Vimes considers himself a fairly liberal man but even so, dwarfs and trolls in the Watch?

As they train, some mysterious things are occurring. The museum of the Assassins Guild has a break-in but only one item is stolen, a never-used device that uses fireworks powder to fire a metal lump at high speed. Then various people are found dead from holes punched through their bodies by metal lumps. Vimes and the Watch slowly piece together a pattern. From there the search goes on for the murderer who, in a plot twist, is not D'eath, but the leader of the Assassins Guild.

There is a plot afoot to restore the throne and put Carrot in his rightful inheritance, but Carrot isn't having any of that. This novel is not so much about the plotting and the ultimate victory of Vimes and company, which the reader knows will happen even before turning past Page 1. Rather, it develops the Watch into a new and growing thing, as the characters not only investigate the crimes but expand their presence into a new force in the city. This novel is, more so than GUARDS! GUARDS!, the cornerstone upon which the Watch story arc stands. GUARDS! GUARDS! can be thought of as the opening overture which sets the stage for the first act to follow.

FEET OF CLAY (1996) begins with two sub-plots that slowly develop. Golems are on the prowl, killing certain people for unknown reasons, and someone is slowly poisoning the Patrician. Captain Vimes must investigate both and see if there is a connection. The public are resentful of golems taking jobs away from workers, since golems are clay automatons that work 24/7 for nothing. Strangely however, some of the golems are committing suicide because something is shaming their minds to the point where they would rather go back to clay dust.

The golems are forming a conspiracy to liberate themselves. The humans are not to be outdone by the golems when it comes to conspiracy, for as soon as the news of the Patrician's poisoning leaks out, the descendants of what was once the nobility of Ankh-Morpork begin plotting to put a king back onto a throne. The two sub-plots finally tie together as Vimes discovers the source of the arsenic that has slowly been working on the Patrician, and the golems that survive establish a new order for themselves.

This novel is basically a murder mystery, except of course the victim doesn't actually die. The reader is provided with the same clues as Vimes as to where the arsenic may be coming from (not the food; that is too obvious), so one can play Miss Marple as Pratchett serves up and then dismisses each hypothesis. There is also a foreshadowing for future novels of the developing relationship between Carrot and Angua.

JINGO (1997) begins with a sunken land named Leshp reappearing above water as geological movements lift it back up. It is in the centre of the ocean, with Ankh-Morpork on one shore and Klatch on the other. What with fishing rights and everything, it should be the natural property of Ankh-Morpork, although the Klatchians beg to differ. This means war, of course.

Things get ugly before Ankh-Morpork even starts forming an army. Citizens firebomb homes of people who look Klatchian, and unruly crowds in bars say something must be done. Klatchian immigrants band together for self-defense. The aristocracy, always seeking a way around the Patrician, assert their right to form private regiments. A visiting Klatchian prince is the subject of an assassination attempt, but which side staged it? The sheiks in Klatch set aside their differences and prepare for war.

The Patrician always seems to disappear during times of crisis, and as in previous novels, he vanishes. The aristocracy, a group of slow learners, once more make a grab for power. Lord Rust dismisses Captain Vimes from the Watch in the usual turn-in-your-badge routine, followed by the usual rogue ex-cop routine you've seen a hundred times in the movies.

It has been observed by many about how easy it is to inflame the populace and send them off to war, while the politicians and military-industrial executives stay at home and profit. The sad part is that the politicians don't have to work very hard to stir up citizens and get them to rush forward and eagerly join the regiments. Pratchett shows this process in both Ankh-Morpork and Klatch, for which one can substitute any modern clash of arms in our world. The young men wanting excitement and the middle-aged men worried about "them" proudly march off to do their duty. Perhaps this novel should be made required reading in schools. That, of course, will never happen because it would really be fantasy.

Leshp sinks back down into the ocean, the war fizzles out just as it looks like it may get going, the Patrician is once again restored to office, and Vimes and the Watch survive to the next novel.

THE FIFTH ELEPHANT (1999) deals with diplomacy and religious wars, not unlike the spherical world we know and love. Uberwald has immense natural resources that are undeveloped and under the gaze of Ankh-Morpork, Klatch, and assorted other nations. A diplomatic conference has been called to carve up, pardon me, encourage the development of those resources. The dwarfs, meanwhile, are rioting in the streets over religion, divided between the fundamentalists and a new generation of expatriates whose children resent taking orders from some old fogey up in the mountains. Dwarfs are spread across Discworld, and their disputes are a matter of concern to governments everywhere because dwarfs work hard and pay lots of taxes.

The Patrician decides that Captain Vimes, now a Duke because of his marriage to Lady Sybil, is just the person to represent Ankh-Morpork at the Uberwald conference. Thus the stage is set.

The typical fantasy series is set in a world in stasis where technology doesn't exist and brave heroes ride out on feats of derring-do the way their grandfathers did. This Discworld novel introduces another player, the clacks system. These are semaphore telegraph systems, which are spreading rapidly across Discworld. The information they transmit is occasionally matters of state, but mostly matters of finance. A trader can find out in a day if his ship arrived safely on the other side of the Circle Sea. A farmer can check the price of cattle in Ankh-Morpork, and if Quirm auction marts are paying more, then he tells his drovers to divert to the latter. A merchant learns there is a crop failure on the other side of the country and quickly re-prices his stock. A father learns his son needs help and rushes to the rescue.

As Vimes and his official party travel to the Uberwald, they see the semaphore stations going up along the roads and, more importantly, short-cutting across mountain ranges and barren wastelands to provide communication in a day that a year ago took weeks or months. A new world is being born, and the events on Discworld will be shaped by the clackers as much as by kings and patricians. As far as the plots are concerned, they are the usual alarums and excursions, the latter being actual excursions as the characters to and fro across the landscape of Uberwald. The various political intrigues are sorted out. The ultimate answer is to encourage free trade by building more clackers, canals, and roads. As Samuel Johnson remarked, men are never better when they are innocently employed chasing a livelihood. Thus it is in Ankh-Morpork and Uberwald. The people opposed to free trade are the ones who keep the tyranny of government bureaucracy going but they can't stop the free flow of information once it begins.

NIGHT WATCH (2002) is a type of story that I have always been prejudiced against, that of time travel. It is a type of narrative that plays tennis without nets or line markings. Either the paradoxes are ignored and thus destroy suspension of disbelief, or else the novel becomes an elaborate zero-reset story, which is the case here. Vimes is pursuing a criminal across the rooftops of Ankh-Morpork when he is struck by lightning and finds himself in the past. At great length he must deal with variations in Ankh-Morpork history, reset the timeline without wiping himself out or committing too many paradoxes, and get back to his own time. Since we know he will do it successfully, none of his efforts in the past

timeline really matter to the reader. Not one of Pratchett's better efforts.

There is, however, one significant plot point that takes place in the true timeline of Vimes and carries forward in the City Watch story arc. While Vimes is wandering about in the past, Lady Sybil gives birth to their son, and he returns home to find himself become a father.

THUD! (2005) is set during a time of political tensions in multicultural Ankh-Morpork. The anniversary of the battle of Koom Valley is at hand, far away on the other side where a long time ago the dwarfs ambushed the trolls or vice versa, depending on who is telling the tale. Like Kosovo or Appomattox, there are many dwarfs and trolls who will not let go of the past. Vimes also has to deal with pressure from above to appoint a vampire Watchman for cultural diversity. Just to add a bit more to Vimes' plate, the Patrician has sent in an auditor to examine the Watch books. A dwarf is murdered in Ankh-Morpork and a race war seems imminent. The Deep-Downers, a militant faction of the dwarfs, are stirring up trouble, and try to murder Vimes' family.

All concerned run to or are chased by others to Koom Valley, where the truth of the ancient battle is sorted out. It is not necessarily a matter of the dwarfs and trolls sitting down together for a cup of tea, but when the actual history of the battle becomes known, there is a brighter future.

SNUFF (2011) is a police procedural mixed with more "Why can't we all get along?" philosophy. Vimes and family are on vacation in Howondaland but true to mystery novel tradition, Vimes becomes involved in a local murder. The usual plot lines are followed, such as the false accusation against Vimes, and inhabitants carrying dark secrets. Lord Rust, from JINGO, has a tobacco plantation and uses goblins as slave labour. Rust and his son are up to no good and apply pressure and threats against Vimes. There are various page-filling adventures and travels by boat and stagecoach, here, there, and over to Quirm.

The bad guys eventually get what they deserve. The goblins also get what they deserve, their rights under law the same as any human, dwarf, or troll. In THUD!, Vimes gained the power from a dwarf god called the Summoning Dark to see in the dark, which he uses again in this novel. It is not necessarily a *deus ex machina*, but it does help him out considerably in his travels through assorted underground domains.

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: Ryan Speer
Blacksburg, Virginia

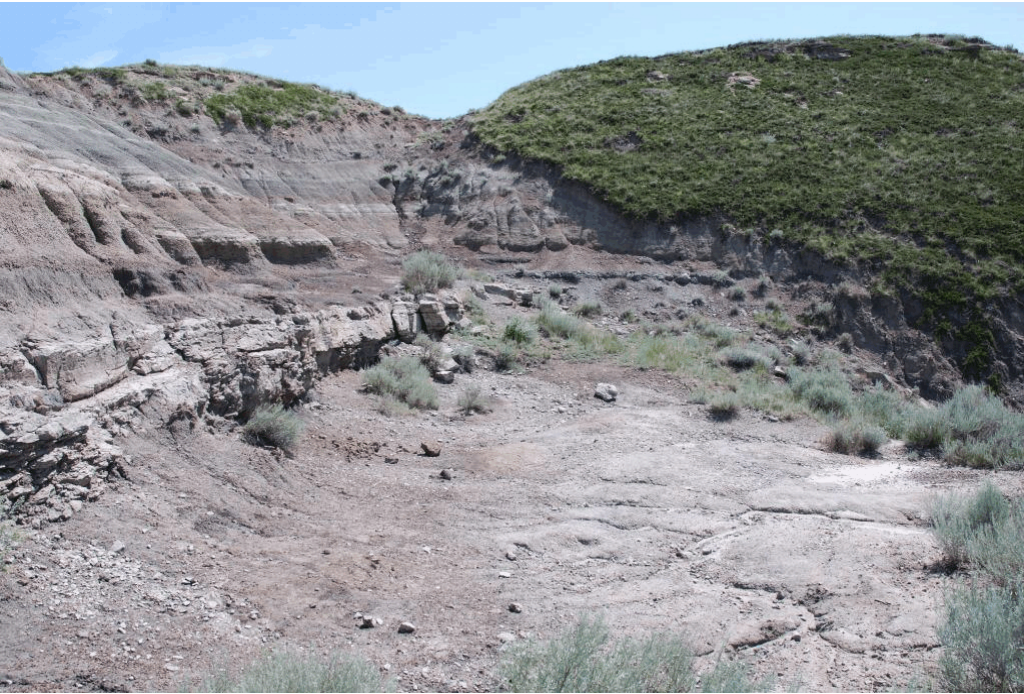
2014-12-25

I picked up a book on houseplants at Goodwill the other day and it had an entry for *Opuntia*, the prickly pear. One of my favorite places as a kid in the Arkansas Ozarks was a nice sunny, gravelly cedar glade with lots of nice prickly pear growing around in the grass. Is that where the name comes from?

[Yes. I am a retired professional horticulturist and back in the 1970s and 1980s published several papers on the *Opuntia* species of Alberta. Many past issues of this zine have shown line drawings of prickly pears but now that I can run photos, I include a couple that I took in the Red Deer River badlands near Drumheller, showing the habitat of *Opuntia polyacantha* and the plant with green fruits.]

I wonder how serious Heinlein could have been in predicting that intelligent life would be found on Mars. Either he was just shooting his mouth off, or maybe it could be the case that the myth of the Martian canals was not really fully debunked until the very latest probes? Every other prediction seems a bit more grounded, even the crankier ones about Freud and modern art. I'm also not completely sure what he means about increasing mobility disenfranchising a majority of the population, unless he was assuming that valid participation in local government presupposes some tenure in the community (and presumably home ownership - presence on the tax rolls)? Seems like something he would go for. And I think his agricultural and diet related predictions are still a possibility, but would require another hundred years or so at least (which makes my prediction safe and embarrassment proof as well).

[Re: photo of man on bus carrying a large-screen TV] It would have been a great visual joke if the guy on the bus had the screen side of that television facing him. Everyone is always in their screen lately...



FROM: Milt Stevens
Simi Valley, California

2014-12-24

I enjoyed your four part series on the Discworld novels. I've been reading the series sequentially, but I'm only up to #11, REAPER MAN. I'm not at all unhappy that I have a lot more Discworld novels to read. In one respect, the novels are like a very rich confection. They taste great, but you don't want to consume a lot of them at one time.

[Re-reading them or any other series, I try to space them out a bit so they don't blur one into the other. On the other hand, I try to read the next one while the last is still fresh in my mind because it creates a continual narrative that lets me spot things I missed the first time around when the books came out six months apart.]

The Discworld series is funny. I like funny. If a book amuses me, it doesn't have to have any other virtues. I've never thought of the Discworld novels as being fantasy. I think of them as being parody. Pratchett is more like S. J. Perlman (who wrote "Captain Future, Block That Kick" among other things) than like traditional fantasy writers.

[Parody is amusing but authors need to be careful. Topical humour is the funniest but it also loses its humour very rapidly with time. For example, as you sent your loc to me, I was going through the Captain Vimes story arc in the Discworld novels. There is a passing mention in one of those novels about Vimes, who doesn't like trolls, dwarfs, and werewolves, being sent on a diplomatic mission by the ruler of Ankh-Morpork because "Only Vimes can go to Uberwald" (the home of werewolves). Boomers such as myself immediately recognize the American saying "Only Nixon could go to China" but that would pass over the heads of Millennials who weren't around back then. It is why Bob Hope was the one of the funniest stand-up comedians of his day but is rapidly being forgotten because his humour was so much about the events of his time.]

I really like what Pratchett can do with illogical logic. Things may be utterly silly, but they are consistently silly. A god like Quetzlovercoatle who is half man, half chicken, half hedgehog, and half aardvark makes a strange sort of sense in the Discworld universe.

In OPUNTIA #293, Heinlein didn't do too badly getting 8 out of 19 predictions

more-or-less right.. Not being a professional seer, he made the mistake of being too specific. He could have made predictions like "The President of the United States will shock the country." Nobody would have expected Monica Lewinski.

I recall an article in a prozine from around 1950 that used projections to predict the world of 2000. By that time all the curves would be going straight up which would mean we would live forever, have infinite energy, and be able to travel at infinite speed. I spotted one problem off the top. Actual life expectancy has increased a lot over the last century. However, potential life expectancy hasn't increased at all. A few people would always live around 100 years. Nobody does much better than that today.

[Life expectancy increased because fewer children die young, thus raising the average. The problem with extrapolating lines is that they all become exponential after a while. Central bankers say that 2% inflation is a desirable goal but that is 2% on top of 2% on top of 2% over the years, and thus it becomes exponential. That is why my mother could fill the back seat of her car with \$20 of groceries in 1970 and I carry home \$20 worth in one plastic bag.]

FROM: Dale Cozort
Chicago, Illinois

2014-12-20

[Normally I don't allow puffery or press releases in OPUNTIA, but I'll make an exception for Dale Cozort (The Other Dale), whom I first met in the Point Of Divergence apa (devoted to alternative history) and later in Fantasy APA. I reviewed his 2003 book AMERICAN INDIAN VICTORIES in issue #52.1A of this zine. I'm sure it is still available online. He continues to publish alternative history and I think he deserves a wider audience.]

The short version: One of my novels is in the Kindle Scout program. I'm looking for nominations for my new science fiction novel, SNAPSHOT, as part of Amazon's Kindle Scout program. It's a quick process: Click the link, <https://kindlescout.amazon.com/p/332ZJ8YN22MIT> Click 'nominate me' and you're done. If my book is selected, you get a free e-book copy. If the direct link doesn't work for you, go to <https://kindlescout.amazon.com/>, then scroll down to the science fiction and fantasy section and scroll left or right until you find SNAPSHOT.

The longer version: I've been working on the Snapshot universe for over five years. I think it's a spectacular idea. Here is what it's about:

For eighty million years, the Tourists have been taking Snapshots of Earth, exact replicas of continents. Each Snapshot goes into its own snow-globe-shaped artificial universe. Snapshots are connected like a string of pearls by vents high over their oceans.

Snapshot people and animals quickly diverge from the real-world, creating a universe where humans and animals from much of Earth's history explore, fight and sometimes meet themselves. In October 2014, the Tourists take a North America Snapshot, cutting everyone in that copy off from the real world, but letting them fly to Snapshots where dinosaurs roam, where Indians rule North America or where Soviets or Nazis rule Europe. They may also confront the menace that lurks on the other side of a wind-swept Antarctic Snapshot. Flying to another Snapshot means going through a Babble Zone, a giant mental KEEP OUT in front of the vents between Snapshots. It acts on anything with a nervous system, forcing them to turn back from the vents. Going through it in a plane on autopilot brings on hallucinations real enough that you act on them, dredging up the worst of the darkness that lurks in human minds.

The new Snapshot catches Middle East Analyst Greg Dunne rushing toward Hawaii to join his wife, his unborn sons and his extended family at a family reunion. The new Snapshot doesn't include Hawaii, so it cuts Greg off from everyone he loves. It also thrusts him into the aftermath of a hidden, decades-old massacre, part of a struggle between Germans from a pre-World War II European Snapshot and ranchers from Korean War-era US-53 Snapshot. The prize: a thinly settled North America-sized Madagascar Snapshot, much like the Wild West or the Australian outback. Whoever controls the Madagascar Snapshot controls communications between dozens of Snapshots.

Greg struggles to survive in this unique, cut-throat new reality, to remain faithful to a family he may never see again and to find a way back to his original Earth. He is caught between powerful opponents. A rancher who rode a hidden massacre to almost unchallenged political power faces the only survivor of that massacre, a woman driven nearly insane by the experience, but now in her own position of power, plotting revenge.

Their struggle plays out in the shadow of larger issues. The new US Snapshot has to deal with an alternate US that is decades behind it socially and

technologically. US-53 hasn't had a personal computer revolution, an Internet revolution or a cell phone revolution, and isn't sure it wants any of them. Worse, the Civil Rights struggle has taken a different and slower course there. In many ways, the new US Snapshot is confronting its past, with all of its virtues and warts.

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.]

OSFS Statement #428 (The Usual from Ottawa Science Fiction Society, c/o 1568 Merivale Road #304, Ottawa, Ontario K2G 5Y7) SF clubzine, always strong in the latest astronomy and physics news.

Christian New Age Quarterly V21#4 (US\$5 for a sample copy from Catherine Groves, Box 276, Clifton, New Jersey 07015-0276) The two main articles in this issue are on the Christ Myth and coincidence. I'm not sure what the author of the first is getting at. He seems to be saying if that Jesus's historical authenticity is doubted (excluding the miracles attributed to him by subsequent writers) then something something or other according to a long list of philosophers he cites, not to mention Buddha and the Book of Mormon. The article on coincidence is clearer; take advantage of them as you find them. To me, coincidence is opportunity revealed because you were unconsciously looking for it. Also lots of letters of comment.