

# OPUNTIA

## 297

Late January 2015

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

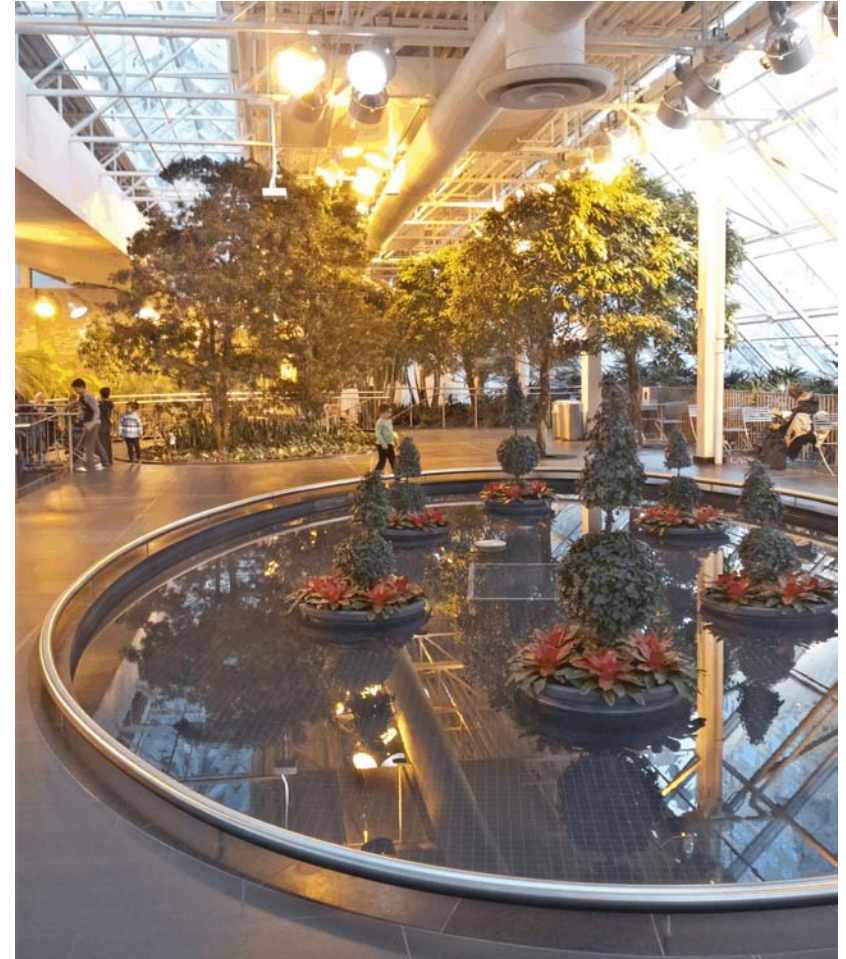


### DEVONIAN GARDENS

photos by Dale Speirs

Calgary's only indoor park run by the Parks Dept. are the Devonian Gardens on the fourth floor of TD Square, a skyscraper complex in the downtown core. The gardens are adjacent to the food court and are the product of negotiations by the City of Calgary back in the 1970s when the complex was being built. In exchange for the space, the City gave the developer additional air rights to build a taller skyscraper than would otherwise be allowed. I took these photos on a January Sunday morning when there weren't too many people about. Weekdays at lunch time, the park is shoulder-to-shoulder with office workers looking for a place to brown bag.

Below left is the park entrance, looking from the food court, and below right is the first sight on entering the park.









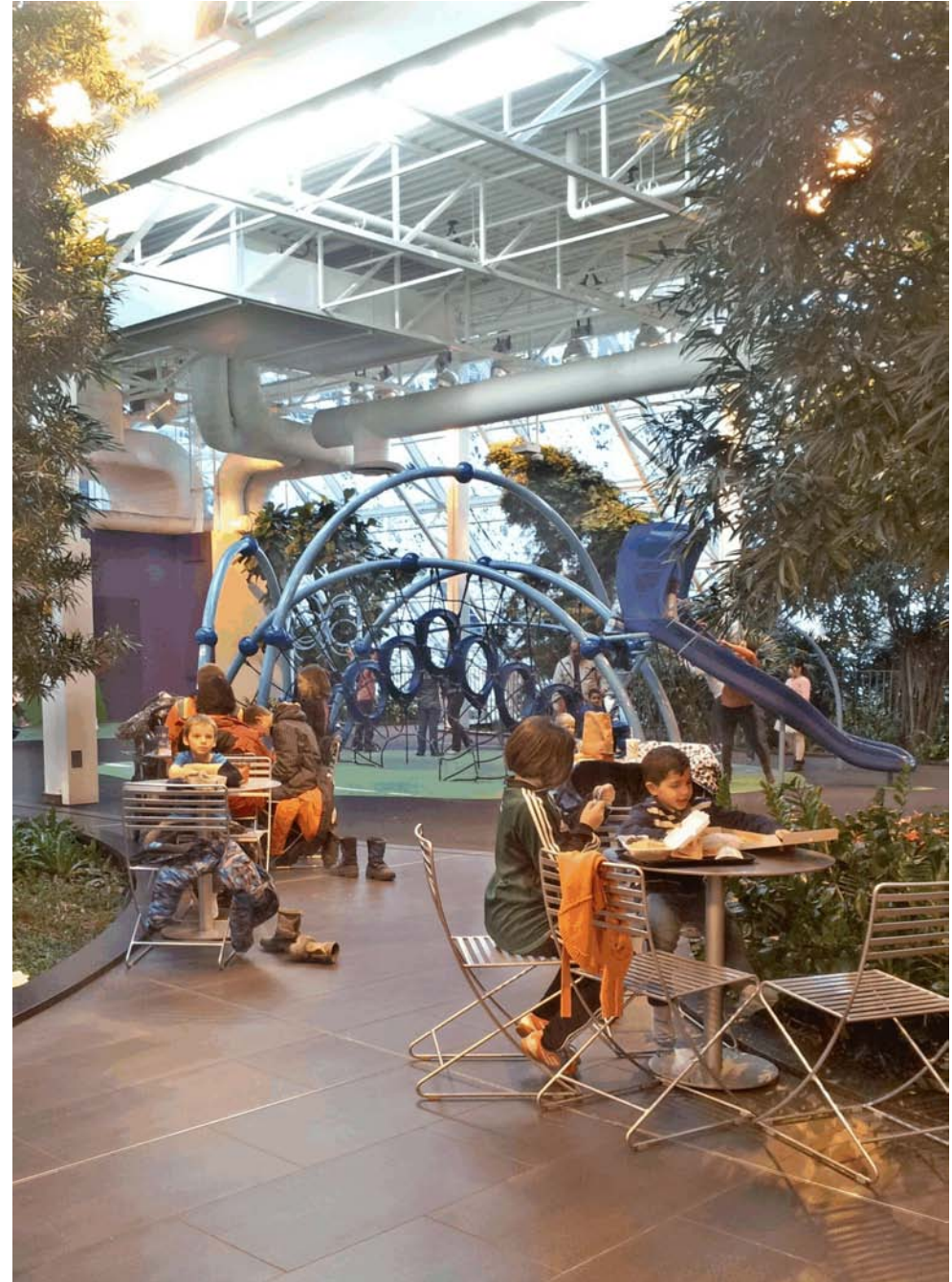




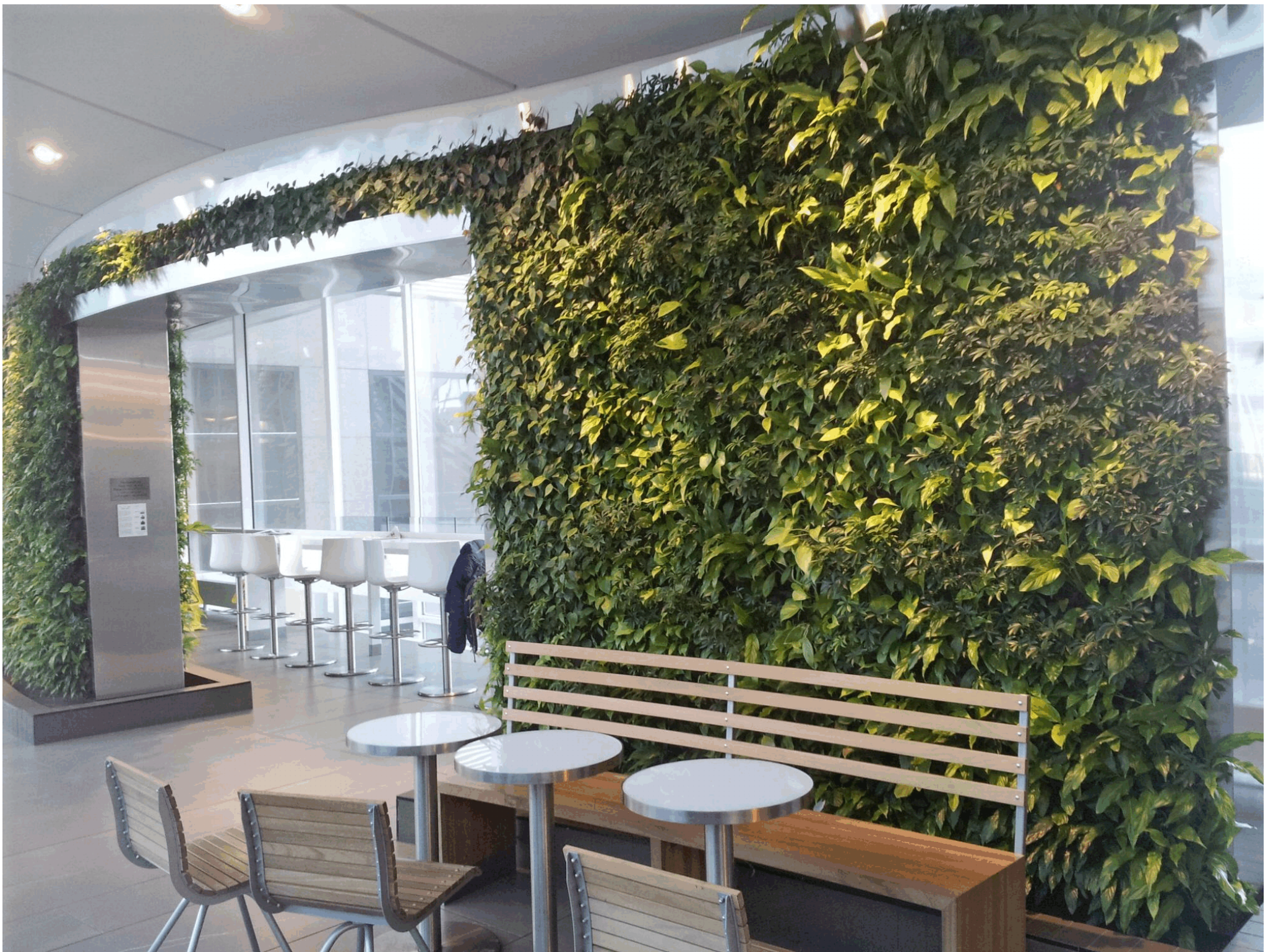


The children's playground is popular on rainy or blizzard days.

On the next page is one of the "living walls", planted solid with vines and automatically mist-irrigated.









# DISCWORLD: PART 8. LOSING MY RELIGION

by Dale Speirs

PYRAMIDS (1989) is about the teenage son of the Pharoah who finds himself as King Teppicymon XXVIII of Djelibeybi after his father's unexpected death. At his accession, Teppic was a student at the Assassin's Guild in Ankh-Morpork, certainly good training for kingship. His kingdom has declined since the glory days when its rulers built all those pyramids, which are no ordinary pyramids but keep discharge energy from their tips. They collect time, bottle it, loop it, store it, and release it in unexpected ways. Pyramids cost money though, as a result of which the kingdom is deeply in debt. Djelibeybi's society is in stasis, with a religious caste devoted to keeping it that way. Teppic, on the other hand, has seen the future, which involves a proper sewage system and mass literacy.

The start of the story keeps jumping back and forth in flashbacks, sometimes at an annoying pace. It is a technique to fill in the back story but sometimes comes off as one of those small-press stories where the author writes a linear narrative, realizes it may bore the reader, and chops up the manuscript and rearranges the pieces in random order to create a false sense of suspense. However, Pratchett eventually gets back to a linear narrative which, notwithstanding all those university litcrit professors, is the best method of telling a story.

Teppic returns home after graduating from the Assassin's Guild and takes up his role as the god-king of Djelibeybi. The High Priest is Dios, who served Teppic's father and grandfather. The two immediately butt heads but Teppic was never trained for palace intrigues, although his assassin training helps considerably. His father didn't want a pyramid but Dios gets a new one built because all god-kings have pyramids. The new one will be twice as big as any other. As construction proceeds, it turns out that the time anomalies and energy discharges will also be bigger, not by twice but exponentially.

While Teppic has fun with Dios by using his skills to thwart the High Priest, the giant pyramid is capped. Like a mathematical curve that suddenly goes exponential, the pyramid not only intercepts and distorts its fair share of time and space, it takes all the other pyramids as well. The resulting surge causes Djelibeybi to drop out of Discworld into a different continuum, where the gods of its culture suddenly become manifest as reality. The sun was said in mythology to be a ball of fire pushed along by a giant dung beetle. Now it really has become a ball of fire pushed along by a giant dung beetle, and its

inhabitants watch the spectacle in horror. No one is more upset than Dios and his fellow priests, for the last thing they want to deal with is the actual appearance of their gods.

At the time, Teppic was rescuing a handmaiden in distress named Ptraci and was outside the zone. Djelibeybi had separated the two kingdoms of Ephebe and Tsort. Once they discover they now have a common border, they immediately prepare for war. Fortunately the generals on both sides, like generals everywhere, prepare to fight the last war. They both start building giant wooden horses, sneak their troops inside them, and wait for the other to act. And wait, and wait, and wait.

Teppic manages to find his way back into Djelibeybi, where he discovers that not only have the gods been made real but the dead in the pyramids, including his father, have been revived. Using a just-might-work-and-does-with-three-seconds-to-spare plan, Teppic brings Djelibeybi back out into the real Discworld.

Dios is dealt with in a neat twist, for of the long line of pyramids stretching back to the founding of the dynasty, it turns out that he was the first pharaoh, who stayed alive seven millennia by making trips back to his pyramid for a refreshing revitalization. The gods are sent back to non-existence, which makes life easier for priests who resent them getting in the way of their church. Dios is thrown back in time to start over establishing a dynasty. Djelibeybi settles back into real life with many changes, so it is not entirely a zero-reset story, and all ends well.

SMALL GODS (1992) begins in the valley of the History Monks, high in the Ramtop mountains of Discworld. There, in a monastery library, history is written down in giant books in microscopic handwriting. If it isn't written down, it didn't happen. Nothing like our world, of course. The monk Lu-Tze is sent down by his abbot to Omnia, where trouble is anticipated for him to deal with. In the Church of the Great God Om, a novice named Brutha has heard a voice. Lots of people hear voices but this one comes from outside his brain.

Pause for digression. On Discworld there are billions of gods but almost all remain microscopic and unheard. The power of a god is proportional to the number of its believers. The majority of small gods can never get themselves noticed, but a lucky few lingering near a spot where a coincidence occurred that was deemed a miracle by humans get a little boost in power. The more

believers they collect, the stronger they become. It works in reverse too, as a dwindling number of believers will also return the god back to its primordial origins.

The Church of the Great God Om is a mighty and bureaucratic organization, with an empire and dreams of expanding it further and eradicating the infidels elsewhere on Discworld. The problem is that there are few, if any, genuine believers left. The Great God Om may be worshiped in thousands of churches, but only because of social pressure. Even the church hierarchy don't really believe in Om anymore. As a result, the god has dwindled down to barely being able to make his presence known to Brutha, a simple country lad who genuinely believes. Om has occupied the body of a small tortoise and speaks from it, establishing credibility problems. He can only communicate with true believers, which means only Brutha. Om is not yet powerful enough to work miracles and exact divine retribution, thus requiring more believers.

Nor does the god appreciate that Brutha can't just walk in on the leaders of the church, anymore than an Able Seaman can stop by a meeting at Admiralty House and ask a Sea Lord for a personal favour. Lu-Tze makes an occasional walk-on appearance but is mostly absent from the story. Notwithstanding all that, Brutha finds himself as an assistant to Deacon Vorbis, in charge of the Quisition. Vorbis normally devotes himself to purging heretics from the Church, real or imagined, but is currently leading a delegation to Ephebe to convert the heathens whether or not they want to be converted.

The Omnian delegation succeeds by treachery in conquering the Ephebians. However, their success doesn't last long and the Ephebians manage to recover. They and all the other nations of Discworld decide to unite and put an end to the troublesome Omnians. Vorbis et al make it back to Omnia but he doesn't have long for this world, for Om also makes it back. With invaders at the gates, the people of Omnia suddenly get real religion and Om is instantly transformed into a very powerful god, the smiting kind. Brutha and Om turn back the invasion but there is a new order in Omnia, with no inquisitors. Vorbis is sent off to the next life, not a pleasant one, but a hell of his own making.

Lu-Tze suddenly steps back into the plot and returns home to report to his abbot. We are expected to believe that the events were shaped by him, but if he had been deleted from the novel there would have been no change in the story. The parallels when this novel was written were obviously with the Spanish Inquisition, but circa 2015 one can see another parallel with radical

Islamism. It is a truism to historians that the worst sins are usually committed in the name of a god.

THIEF OF TIME (2001) gets off to a slow start with various forebodings and sub-plots. The main storyline is that Jeremy Clockson has been hired to build the perfect clock that is truly accurate. Ostensibly his client is Lady Myria LeJean, but she is actually just the physical manifestation of one of the Auditors, basically the accountants of the universe. They have appeared as walk-ons in previous novels, but here they are going all out to deal with humans. Auditors dislike humans intensely because of their random behaviour, and hope that a perfect accurate clock will stop time and thus allow them to catch up on the paperwork.

Jeremy is a compulsive nerd, abandoned as a baby and taken in by the Clockmakers' Guild. He now has his own shop and Igor. All mad scientists on Discworld have a laboratory assistant named Igor. You're not a real mad scientist until you have a servant who limps, lisps, and is stitched together like Frankenstein's monster. In opposition are the History Monks, who pump time from places it is not needed, such as at the bottom of the ocean, to places where there's never enough time, like the big cities. They use giant prayer wheels called Procrastinators, which suck in time from useless places and redistribute it as programmed. Lu-Tze and his apprentice Lobsang Ludd, are assigned by the History Monks to stop the accurate clock.



Death also becomes involved in stopping the clock, although he assigns his granddaughter Susan to do the job. She is, as always, accompanied by the Death Of Rats and Quoth the Raven. Death tried to get the other three Horsemen (War, Famine, and Pestilence) to help but they're no good. However, the Fifth Horseman (Ronnie) who left the group before they became famous, will help.

The clock is built and activated. Time stops and Discworld freezes at one instant of time. The main characters can move independently of time, either because they are supernatural or have contrivances such as the Procrastinators.

They all converge on Ankh-Morpork where the clock is. The Auditors take human forms, but run into problems. They name themselves after colours, such as Mr. White, Mr. Green, etcetera, but run into problems when they discover that there are millions of shades of colours but only a few hundred names for colours. It's all very well for Mr. Dark Avocado, but the Auditors who don't get names because there are none left become indignant. Lady Myria has her own problems when she meets up with Susan ("*That's "Miss Susan" to you!"*") whose day job is teaching at a girls' school and who treats adults around her as if they were students.

The clock is smashed, various sub-plots are tied up, and assorted revelations are made about some of the characters. Death and his fellow Horsemen are disappointed because they really didn't have much to do except deal with a petulant Angel of Doom. It was waiting thousands of years for its part in the final Apocalypse, only to discover when it showed up that no one believed in it anymore because its religion had died out centuries before. The History Monks settle back in with the satisfaction of knowing the job was well done.

## **SCHADENFREUDE: TARGET CANADA GOES DOWN HARD**

by Dale Speirs

Two years ago, the American department store chain Target entered the Canadian retail market with great fanfare. For years, Canucks living near the border went south to shop in Target for lower prices and merchandise that could not be found in Canada (such as Cherry Coca-Cola). Target bought the Canadian discount chain store Zellers, changed the signs on the front of the stores, and, which was to be their fatal mistake, ditched the Zellers computer system and tried to run the stores from south of the border. Yesterday, January 15, it was announced that Target Canada had been placed into voluntary protection (a type of bankruptcy) after a dismal Christmas sales season. Target USA will eat a \$10 billion loss, try to unload 133 stores just as Canada is going into recession because of low oil prices, and lay off 17,600 employees with 16 weeks severance pay.

What went wrong? The major problem was that Canadians were expecting them to beat the prices of Walmart Canada, but instead Target Canada prices were the same or higher, and certainly higher than Zellers. Also, they failed to bring in Cherry Coca-Cola or any other unique goods that Walmart or Canadian Tire (a department store despite its name) didn't have. Their computer system was set up for American stores, and management operated on the assumption that Canada was the 51<sup>st</sup> state. From the very day they held their grand opening, many of their shelves were empty, and constantly so thereafter because their inventory and re-ordering system wasn't working properly.

I went into Target Canada three times. The first time was a week after the grand opening sale. I was looking for Happy Foot dress socks, which I like because they are thicker and don't wear out as fast as ordinary dress socks. The aisle was empty save for a few odd-size socks. One pair was lying on the floor. I gave them the benefit of a doubt and assumed that the grand opening sale had cleared the shelves and fresh stock was en route. I returned the following week and the shelves were still bare. Not only that, the pair of socks was still lying on the floor. Not only that, the adjacent aisle of ankle-high mens socks had so many of them, they were overflowing onto the floor. The inventory computer was obviously shipping in surplus stuff that wasn't selling south of the border. I went to Walmart and they had racks full of Happy Foot socks. I bought some.

I returned to Target Canada last October to see what they had for winter parkas. They were selling light windbreaker jackets suitable for October in Florida, but not a parka in sight. Just out of curiosity, I wandered over to the menswear section and looked at their socks. Nothing had changed! (I'm tempted to add some extra exclamation marks.) The dress socks rack had only a few odd-size socks, and the ankle socks rack was still overflowing. However, someone had picked up the pair of socks lying on the floor. I'll bet that it was the janitor mopping the floor who did it, not a shopgirl.

The Target Canada fiasco cost several American executives their jobs, and belatedly they brought in some Canadian executives. Too little, too late, and the December shopping season, when department stores make half their annual income, was a disaster for Target. The Canadian operation never had an online store, where many Canadians now do their shopping. To make matters worse, the loonie was at par with the American dollar when Target moved in but now it is about 85 cents as the currency wars proceed (see OPUNTIA #250 for more on the currency wars). This means that any currency Target repatriates to the USA will be at a 15% loss.





I took this photo on January 16 of the Target Canada store in Chinook Mall, looking at their main entrance into the mall. I could have fired a rifle down the aisle without hitting anyone. Yet the rest of the mall had steady crowds.

Just about every economic news reporter has commented that the Target Canada disaster will be written up in business school textbooks for years to come. Other American businesses thinking of expanding into Canada have already said they have studied the debacle closely and will learn from the failure. Walmart executives are properly somber in public but there can be no doubt that more than a few of them celebrated in the boardroom with a bottle of champagne. Discount domestic vintage, probably.

To be fair, Target Canada isn't the only big business to fail. Sony is closing all their stores in Canada, and Sears Canada has been on a death watch for several years even through the boom. The Internet is killing retail, and the younger generation presently being born will see 3-D printing kill manufacturing. I'm glad I'm not a young man out looking for work, because the rapid replacement of jobs by computers and robots is making the scramble for the remaining jobs very fierce, which in turn will deflate wages.

During the last oil boom of the late 1970s, which collapsed suddenly in early 1982, it was said that Calgary had more waterbed stores than New York City. I bought my house then for 20% below market. As the next oil boom, just now concluded, went on, I began keeping my eye out for stores that could only exist during a boom and would wither away in the next down cycle. There was a cheese store that specialized in brie and fancy European cheeses, but it didn't even make it through the boom. My next candidate for the What Were They Thinking? Award goes to a shop that specializes in olive oil and vinegar. It is located in the high-rent area of the downtown core, and is now on my death watch list. I walk by it frequently but have never seen customers inside.



Kitty-corner across from it was a battery shop that specialized in small batteries for hearing aids, cellphones, etcetera. I never thought to photograph it before it went under, immediately after the Christmas season concluded. I'm trying to open my eyes as I go about town and photograph things that could disappear quickly without warning. I always bear in mind my mother's warning. Photography was her hobby since she was a teenager. She told me once that one of her great regrets in life was that she never photographed a steam locomotive because they were so common when she was growing up. Suddenly they were gone and it was too late.



SEEN IN THE LITERATURE

Carrigan, M.A., et al (2015) **Hominids adapted to metabolize ethanol long before human-directed fermentation.** PROCEEDINGS OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES USA 112:458–463

Authors' abstract: *"Many modern human diseases are attributed to incompatibility between our current environment and the environment for which our genome is adapted. It is unclear whether this model applies to alcoholism. We investigated this possibility by studying alcohol dehydrogenase class IV (ADH4), the first enzyme exposed to ethanol in the digestive tract that is capable of metabolizing ethanol. We resurrected ancestral ADH4 enzymes from various points in the about 70 million years of primate evolution and identified a single mutation occurring about 10 million years ago that endowed our ancestors with a markedly enhanced ability to metabolize ethanol. This change occurred approximately when our ancestors adopted a terrestrial lifestyle and may have been advantageous to primates living where highly fermented fruit is more likely. ..."*

*"Here, we resurrect digestive alcohol dehydrogenases (ADH4) from our primate ancestors to explore the history of primate–ethanol interactions. The evolving catalytic properties of these resurrected enzymes show that our ape ancestors gained a digestive dehydrogenase enzyme capable of metabolizing ethanol near the time that they began using the forest floor, about 10 million years ago. The ADH4 enzyme in our more ancient and arboreal ancestors did not efficiently oxidize ethanol. This change suggests that exposure to dietary sources of ethanol increased in hominids during the early stages of our adaptation to a terrestrial lifestyle. Because fruit collected from the forest floor is expected to contain higher concentrations of fermenting yeast and ethanol than similar fruits hanging on trees, this transition may also be the first time our ancestors were exposed to (and adapted to) substantial amounts of dietary ethanol. ..."*

*"One trend in modern medicine attributes diseases in humans to an incomplete adaptation of the human genome to new challenges presented by our changing cultural and demographic environment. This attribution is especially convincing for some "lifestyle" diseases. For example, the recent increase in sugar consumption (including sucrose and fructose) is associated with the emergence of obesity, diabetes, and hypertension. Under an evolutionary*

*paradigm, an organism fully adapted to a sugar-rich diet would not be expected to become diseased by consuming sugars, suggesting that humankind has not had enough time to adapt to a modern diet rich in such sugars."*

Speirs: Humans got drunk from fermenting fruit long before they began brewing booze from grain. So go ahead, have another glass of French Sauternes.

Schoene, B., et al (2015) **U-Pb geochronology of the Deccan Traps and relation to the end-Cretaceous mass extinction.** SCIENCE 347:182-185

Authors' abstract: *"The Deccan Traps are a continental flood basalt province that comprise >1.3 million km<sup>3</sup> of erupted lavas and associated rocks that reach a total thickness of ~3000 meters near the eruptive center in Western India. Paleomagnetic data combined with K-Ar and <sup>40</sup>Ar/<sup>39</sup>Ar geochronology of Deccan basalts have been interpreted to indicate that >90% of the eruptive volume was emplaced rapidly (<1 million years), coincident with the Cretaceous-Paleogene boundary. This temporal relationship has long led to speculation that Deccan volcanism had a major role in the end-Cretaceous mass extinction, which saw the disappearance of nonavian dinosaurs and ammonoids, as well as major biotic turnovers in foraminifera, corals, land plants, reptiles, and mammals. ... "*

*"The Chicxulub asteroid impact (Mexico) and the eruption of the massive Deccan volcanic province (India) are two proposed causes of the end-Cretaceous mass extinction, which includes the demise of nonavian dinosaurs. Despite widespread acceptance of the impact hypothesis, the lack of a high-resolution eruption timeline for the Deccan basalts has prevented full assessment of their relationship to the mass extinction. Here we apply uranium-lead (U-Pb) zircon geochronology to Deccan rocks and show that the main phase of eruptions initiated ~250,000 years before the Cretaceous-Paleogene boundary and that >1.1 million cubic kilometers of basalt erupted in ~750,000 years. Our results are consistent with the hypothesis that the Deccan Traps contributed to the latest Cretaceous environmental change and biologic turnover that culminated in the marine and terrestrial mass extinctions."*

Speirs: The Deccan Traps were a flood basalt that buried India under 3 km of lava and heated up the Earth so much that the subsequent asteroid impact killed off heat-stressed species that otherwise would have survived.



**SIGNS, SIGNS, EVERYWHERE A SIGN: THE BOW RIVER**  
photos by Dale Speirs

The downtown core of Calgary is a triangular shape, with the transcontinental railroad forming the base along the southern boundary, and a bend in the Bow River forming the two sides along the north. There is a promenade along the

river, so I went for a stroll on a mild January day when the temperature was -10°C, just right for winter exercise. Canada geese were gathered around a stormwater outfall, but what caught my eye was the sign below the outfall identification number. All the outfalls have signs like this, each with a different question. The signs were added after the great flood of 2013, which devastated Calgary and southern Alberta. (See OPUNTIA's #264 to #266 for details.)





On 2013-06-21 after a record rainfall, the rivers of southwestern Alberta rose an average of 5 metres above normal level, and life has never been the same since. The downtown core was flooded and the skyscrapers shut down for a week.

## 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](mailto:opuntia57@hotmail.com)]

FROM: Lloyd Penney  
Etobicoke, Ontario

2015-01-16

Re: OPUNTIA #294: We went to see the Canadian Pacific Holiday Train, too. It was the only Toronto stop, and it was jammed packed. We'd gotten a good place to stand and watch, but of course, there's plenty of people bigger and taller than we are who took great pleasure in pushing us aside, so we didn't see a lot until the show actually started. There were CP security people, Toronto police and other security types there, but people will do what they damned well want to do, and the bright yellow police tape seemed to be for decoration only.

I may have to do what you're doing with your own book collection, give it a final read, and then stick them in a Free Library.

[I have three rooms of books, but if I leave them for the next of kin they will end up in the recycle bin. So I'm reading them all for the final time, probably a twenty-year job, and then donating them to the book exchanges such as Co-op or Little Free Library.]

All our online purchases came through, only one was returned, and we are hoping for its replacement coming soon. Christmas was great, New Year's was quiet but fun, and so far, 2015 is pretty typical, with Target shutting down all the stores in the country, including the 22 stores around Toronto. When will American retailers actually put the time and money into discovering the Canadian market before they move up here?

[Most of the American retailers here have learned that Canada is not the 51<sup>st</sup> state. Walmart, McDonalds, Harveys, Tiffany, Apple, Subway, HMV, are but a few foreign retailers doing all right in Canada. Of course, they didn't squander \$10 billion setting up their operations]

Re: OPUNTIA #295: After reading the predictions about the year 3000, I have to think that there being humans on this big ball of dirt after the next 985 years is a mighty big prediction to begin with.



**WHERE MY UNWANTED BOOKS GO**  
photo by Dale Speirs

I took this photo of the Little Free Library in the Chevron Petroleum building in downtown Calgary. Few are as elaborate as this, though.

The next generation reads, but not printed books. Once there were dozens of secondhand bookstores in Calgary (pop. 1.2 million), now there is only one. There is only one video store left as well, an independent. The only new-music stores are the HMV chain, and they stock mostly DVDs. The only new-book chain store is Chapters/Indigo/Coles/W.H. Smith/Classic Books, all owned by Heather Reisman, and she is gradually converting them into gift shops.





## ALTERNATIVE HISTORY REVIEW

by Dale Speirs

THE TRIAL OF LEE HARVEY OSWALD by Robert E. Thompson (1977, mass-market paperback) is a novelization of his television screenplay. Nothing happens the day Oswald is transferred to a new prison, and he lives to stand trial. This book takes the point of view that it was a conspiracy, a tie-in between anti-Communist CIA agents who want to overthrow Castro, the Mafia who want to get back their loot from Cuba, and possible sundry others.

Matthew Weldon is the defence lawyer assigned to Oswald. The trial eventually goes to a jury, and since Oswald won't plead insanity, the only hope is to prove that either there was a gunman on the infamous grassy knoll or Oswald was elsewhere in the Book Depository and a different gunman fired from the sixth floor.

Weldon's problem is that the bystanders who could testify they heard shots from the grassy knoll are dying off before he can get to them. They seem to have a higher than average suicide rate or fatal accident incidence. The trial is full of what Hollywood thinks goes on in a court proceeding, and Oswald takes the stand in his own defence. The book ends with the jury about to announce the verdict.

At this point, the author stops the story cold, and asks the reader "What do you think?". I imagine Thompson thought it would be a tantalizing way to end the story. Maybe it was back when "The Lady Or The Tiger?" was written, but nowadays it's a cheat. It is one thing to end a novel on a note of ambiguity when the situation is ambiguous, but if a clear-cut denouement is set up, then the author must follow through. There is no ambiguity about a jury ready to announce its verdict, and Thompson's failure to follow through is timidity.

And how would the jury report? Since Weldon was never able to present proof of a conspiracy, all of his witnesses having disappeared, the best he would be able to do is try to cast doubt on prosecution evidence. It would not be enough, and a jury hearing only the evidence presented at the trial would therefore bring in a verdict of guilty.

## WORLD WIDE PARTY ON JUNE 21

Founded by Benoit Girard (Quebec) and Franz Miklis (Austria) in 1994, the World Wide Party is held on June 21 every year. 2015 will be the 21nd year of the WWP.

At 21h00 local time on June 21, everyone is invited to raise a glass and toast fellow members of the Papernet around the world. It is important to have it exactly at 21h00 your time. The idea is to get a wave of fellowship circling the planet. Rescheduling it to a club meeting or more convenient time negates the idea of a wave of celebration by SF fans and zinesters circling the globe.

At 21h00, face to the east and salute those who have already celebrated. Then face north, then south, and toast those in your time zone who are celebrating as you do. Finally, face west and raise a glass to those who will celebrate WWP in the next hour.

Raise a glass, publish a one-shot, have a party, or do a mail art project for the WWP. Let me know how you celebrated the day.