

OPUNTIA

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

CHINESE NEW YEAR 2015

photos by Dale Speirs

Chinese New Year 2015

February 19 was the 2015 Lunar New Year. The festivities are one of the biggest parties in Cowtown. Calgary Chinatown is more than a century old. I took this photo of the Chinese Cultural Centre in summer.



This is the interior of the CCC dome. Since the Lunar New Year is in winter, most of the events are indoors, but weather permitting they try to have the dragon and lion dancers outside.

The main events this year were on the weekend of February 14 and 15 because the actual day was a regular workday.





Saturday: The photo at left is looking down into the marketplace from a balcony. By the time the cultural events started on the stage, the building was shoulder-to-shoulder with people and the fire marshal was restricting the number of new people entering to the number of those exiting.

Below is the cultural stage just before events began. The audience was about 90% Chinese and 10% white folk. I got there a half hour before the show began and had to stand at the back because all the seats were filled. This was no hardship since I towered over all the standing Chinese. There were several tiny elderly Chinese standing in front of me who had to watch by holding up their cameras at arms length and viewing the screen.

On the next page are the sword dancers. Notice the clear plastic shields in front of the stage. They were put up during the weapons drills to protect the audience in case a dancer slipped. Those were real swords. The photo isn't bad considering I took it at telephoto zoom in low light with fast-moving dancers.





The following day I returned to see the dragon and lion dancers. Calgary has had a mild winter so far and the weather held out nicely for the dancers.

Each martial arts club in Calgary enters one or more lions.



Enter the dragon, a benevolent creature in oriental mythology.



This maneuver is called “the dragon climbing a pole”.



Enmax, Calgary's electricity supplier, has a programme of painting utility boxes to reduce graffiti. It seems to be working.



The themes are tied to the neighbourhood if possible. These have nothing to do with the Lunar New Year but I thought they were nice to photograph.



TOM HOLT: PART 1. MYTHS FOR THE MODERN READER

by Dale Speirs

Tom Holt has written many humorous novels, usually fantasy transplanted into modern England. He also writes serious historical fiction as Thomas Holt; see *OPUNTIA* #48.1A for a review of his novel *OLYMPIAD*. Like Robert Rankin, he is often compared to Terry Pratchett as an also-ran. I think one reason is that most of Pratchett's books are set in a single universe, on Discworld, where he could spend less time setting up the background as the series progressed. Although both Holt and Rankin use commonality in some of their novels, most of the Holt books are random walks through mythology.

Holt's books take a given legend, Shakespearean play, or opera, bring the characters into the England of today, and then let the action flow from the consequences. Quite often the myth is shown to have a different origin that what was handed down through history.

The Damned.

FLYING DUTCH (1991) is an example of adapting the myth to modern reality. In this novel there really was a Flying Dutchman ship condemned to sail the oceans for eternity, but not because of the captain cursing God while trying to sail around the Cape. In the book, Capt. Cornelius Vanderdecker and his crew of the *Verdomde* were made immortal when they drank an unusual beverage stolen from an alchemist named Montalban. The problem was that it also made them stink, not just the ordinary stink of an unwashed person or a sewer, but a stink that no one can tolerate for even a second. Every seven years the stink lets up for a month, enough to let them come to land, repair their ship, and resupply with food and necessities. They never have any trouble explaining the ship, as everyone assumes it is in a tall ship competition or being used to film a television commercial.

Vanderdecker also stole the alchemist's research journals and learned to synthesize gold, albeit a slow and inefficient process. With seven years at sea in each cycle, there is plenty of time to create enough gold to fund themselves for the next cycle. They have to use a sailing ship because they can't come into port to refuel in the normal way.

In the modern era of computerization, it becomes more and more difficult to stay unnoticed. A bank accountant, Jane Doland, notices that Vanderdecker's

account has been going for more than a century, and so the plot begins. She has no sense of smell, an obviously important plot point. She crosses paths with higher-ups in the bank who don't want her to notice one thing about the Vanderdecker account, the miracle of compound interest. After centuries of compounding, the amount owed should Vanderdecker come and demand it is more than the world's total currency in circulation.

Meanwhile the man himself makes landfall at a Scottish nuclear power plant where he and his crew discover the outflow from the reactor temporarily cancels the stink. None other than Montalban is working there as a research scientist, officially as a physicist but secretly trying to invent the Ultimate Deodorant. And to bring in the remaining sub-plot, BBC television producer Danny Bennett shows up with camera crew and conspiracy theories, both ready to go at the drop of a hat.

There is much to-ing and fro-ing across Britain, the characters interact in various ways, and the reader skips occasional pages en route to the denouement. There is a vast conspiracy uncovered with Montalban at the heart of it. Vanderdecker and crew are cured of the stink by walking into a nuclear reactor, and all ends well that should. A readable novel.

If Thou Be Willing, Remove This Cup From Me.

GRAILBLAZERS (1994) starts off with Prince Boamund being revived after 1,500 years of suspended animation to replace one of the Grail Knights. They were the ones sworn to the quest for the Holy Grail. (I have always suspected that the real grail was cleared away with the other dinner cutlery by the maid, washed up, and put away for the next supper. It may have been the Last Supper for Jesus, but the household carried on.)

Boamund re-assembles the Knights, who in this modern world are selling insurance or delivering pizza. It is a truism in fantasy novels that the hero never goes directly to the Sacred Knickknack of Qwerty but must first take several side trips, usually over three volumes if the author is any good at padding the word count. In this novel, the Knights must first find the Apron of Invincibility, the Personal Organizer of Wisdom, and the Socks of Inevitability before they can turn their attention to the Holy Grail.

That takes up most of the novel but finally they arrive at the conclusion. The Holy Grail isn't what people thought it was, and further it was hidden in the

headquarters of the Knights as being the last place they'd look for it. Better to keep it away from the wrong people.

And he took the cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them: and they all drank of it.

Saint George, That Swing'd The Dragon.



PAINT YOUR DRAGON (1996) revises the myth of St. George killing the dragon as being a fixed fight. Bianca Wilson is a sculptor who carved a statue of that battle, except that it seems to have come to life. First the dragon, who resents being told it is Evil, and then George, who wasn't quite the brave warrior he was made out to be.

The other subplots are a coach party of demons from Hell on vacation, and a group of men in black who have discovered how to suck time out of quiet places and apply it elsewhere where it is more needed (for a price, of course). It makes sense somewhat, and once the threads are established the reader knows they will all tangle together at the end of the novel.

Bianca has no end of trouble with various statues coming to life or going back to stone, as well as mundanes trying to blow them up or restore them as per personal taste. The action revolves around the physical centre of the universe, that is, Birmingham, England. When all the to-ing and fro-ing is finally done, St. George becomes an involuntary resident of Hell, and the dragon ascends to heaven. Everything is as it should be.

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.]

CHERRY MONOCLE #13 (The Usual from Phlox Icona, 870 East Ponce de Leon Avenue, Decatur, Georgia 30030) Handwritten collage zine.

OSFS STATEMENT #429 (The Usual from Ottawa Science Fiction Society, 1568 Merivale Road #304, Ottawa, Ontario K2G 5Y7) SF clubzine with science news, event listings, and letters of comment.

THE FOSSIL #362 (US\$10 per year from The Fossils Inc, c/o Tom Parson, 157 South Logan Street, Denver, Colorado 80209) Covering the history of zines, this issue begins with a tribute to zinester Martha Shivers on the occasion of her 100th birthday, and a discussion about funding zine collections in university libraries. It is not enough to donate a box of zines and sit back; libraries need money to properly curate collections.

SEEN IN THE LITERATURE

Smith, J.N., et al (2015) **Arrival of the Fukushima radioactivity plume in North American continental waters.** PROCEEDINGS OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES USA 112:1310–1315

Authors' abstract: "*The large discharge of radioactivity into the northwest Pacific Ocean from the 2011 Fukushima Dai-ichi nuclear reactor accident has generated considerable concern about the spread of this material across the*

ocean to North America. We report here the first systematic study to our knowledge of the transport of the Fukushima marine radioactivity signal to the eastern North Pacific. Time series measurements of 134-Cs [caesium] and 137-Cs in seawater revealed the initial arrival of the Fukushima signal by ocean current transport at a location 1,500 km west of British Columbia, Canada, in June 2012, about 1.3 y after the accident. By June 2013, the Fukushima signal had spread onto the Canadian continental shelf, and by February 2014, it had increased to a value of 2 Bq/m³ throughout the upper 150 m of the water column, resulting in an overall doubling of the fallout background from atmospheric nuclear weapons tests. Ocean circulation model estimates that are in reasonable agreement with our measured values indicate that future total levels of 137-Cs (Fukushima-derived plus fallout 137-Cs) off the North American coast will likely attain maximum values in the 3–5 Bq/m³ range by 2015–2016 before declining to levels closer to the fallout background of about 1 Bq/m³ by 2021. The increase in 137-Cs levels in the eastern North Pacific from Fukushima inputs will probably return eastern North Pacific concentrations to the fallout levels that prevailed during the 1980s but does not represent a threat to human health or the environment."

Youyou, Wu, et al (2015) **Computer-based personality judgments are more accurate than those made by humans.** PROCEEDINGS OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES USA 112:1036–1040

Authors' abstract: *"This study compares the accuracy of human and computer-based personality judgments, using a sample of 86,220 volunteers who completed a 100-item personality questionnaire. We show that (i) computer predictions based on a generic digital footprint (Facebook Likes) are more accurate ($r = 0.56$) than those made by the participants' Facebook friends using a personality questionnaire ($r = 0.49$); (ii) computer models show higher interjudge agreement; and (iii) computer personality judgments have higher external validity when predicting life outcomes such as substance use, political attitudes, and physical health; for some outcomes, they even outperform the self-rated personality scores. Computers outpacing humans in personality judgment presents significant opportunities and challenges in the areas of psychological assessment, marketing, and privacy."*

Speirs: I have never been on Facebook, Twitter, and all the other social media where you give away your privacy. The above study is probably years behind what police, credit agencies, and spy agencies are already doing to you.

Johnson, B.C., et al (2015) **Impact jetting as the origin of chondrules.** NATURE 517:339-344

Authors' abstract: *"Chondrules are the millimetre-scale, previously molten, spherules found in most meteorites. Before chondrules formed, large differentiating planetesimals had already accreted. Volatile-rich olivine reveals that chondrules formed in extremely solid-rich environments, more like impact plumes than the solar nebula. The unique chondrules in CB chondrites probably formed in a vapour-melt plume produced by a hypervelocity impact with an impact velocity greater than 10 kilometres per second. An acceptable formation model for the overwhelming majority of chondrules, however, has not been established."*

"Here we report that impacts can produce enough chondrules during the first five million years of planetary accretion to explain their observed abundance. Building on a previous study of impact jetting, we simulate protoplanetary impacts, finding that material is melted and ejected at high speed when the impact velocity exceeds 2.5 kilometres per second. Using a Monte Carlo accretion code, we estimate the location, timing, sizes, and velocities of chondrule-forming impacts. Ejecta size estimates indicate that jetted melt will form millimetre-scale droplets. Our radiative transfer models show that these droplets experience the expected cooling rates of ten to a thousand kelvin per hour. An impact origin for chondrules implies that meteorites are a byproduct of planet formation rather than leftover building material."

Stevenson, C.M., et al (2015) **Variation in Rapa Nui (Easter Island) land use indicates production and population peaks prior to European contact.** PROCEEDINGS OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES USA 112:1025–1030

Authors' abstract: *"Many researchers believe that prehistoric Rapa Nui society collapsed because of centuries of unchecked population growth within a fragile environment. Recently, the notion of societal collapse has been questioned with the suggestion that extreme societal and demographic change occurred only after European contact in AD 1722. Establishing the veracity of demographic dynamics has been hindered by the lack of empirical evidence and the inability to establish a precise chronological framework. We use chronometric dates from hydrated obsidian artifacts recovered from habitation sites in regional study areas to evaluate regional land-use within Rapa Nui. The analysis*

suggests region-specific dynamics including pre-contact land use decline in some near coastal and upland areas and post-contact increases and subsequent declines in other coastal locations. These temporal land use patterns correlate with rainfall variation and soil quality, with poorer environmental locations declining earlier. This analysis confirms that the intensity of land use decreased substantially in some areas of the island before European contact.”

“ ... Initial settlement and expansion occurred from ca. AD 1200, with the rapid development of the interior for agricultural activities beginning in the early AD 1300s. Reductions in the intensity of land use before European contact in the dry northwest section of Rapa Nui and the region of nutrient-leached soils in upland areas would have contributed to increasing land pressure in other parts of the island and may have led to periods of conflict as land use was renegotiated.”

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

FROM: Taral Wayne
Toronto, Ontario

2015-02-05

It’s odd ... you don’t write a loc, and you don’t write a loc, and it looks as though you never will. Then, for no good reason, you do. My no-good reason this time is your photo of a prairie dog. Strangely enough, I’ve seen tons of them, even though I live in Toronto, and I didn’t see them from afar, either. I saw them right up close. In fact, they came to me, practically scratched up the paintwork on the car, and begged for Oreos.

It was on one of the periodic car trips that Victoria Vayne and I made back in the 1970s, to this or that Worldcon. That year it must have been Kansas City, because we swung way out west to take in the Badlands and anything else we could see. We stayed overnight at Devil’s Tower, and near there was where the prairie dog community had sprung up. There signs telling tourists not to feed the #%\$& prairie dogs, but it didn’t stop anyone, of course. The cheeky little beggars took advantage of the line of cars stopped to gawk at them, and busked like professionals. They only lacked an open guitar case for spare change.

I Also Heard From: Kris Mininger

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.

WHEN WORDS COLLIDE 2015

Calgary's annual readercon When Words Collide returns on the weekend of August 14 to 16, 2015, at a new and bigger location, the Delta Calgary South Hotel on Southland Drive SE, just east of Macleod Trail. There have been SF conventions at this hotel in previous years, so the building is a good venue. More details at their Website: www.whenwordscollide.org

This is a literary convention designed to cross genres, with author Guests of Honour from fantasy, science, fiction, mystery, romance, and young adults. The convention has become very popular with literary agents, editors, and publishers, who take rooms for pitch sessions and private negotiations.

The panels are mostly literary but there is a strong science track. For mystery writers and readers, the Calgary Police Service usually send an officer out to explain the real-life procedures of detective work, not at all like the CSI shows. The dealer bourse is almost entirely small-press publishers and a couple of book dealers. No one selling crystals or light sabres.

STILL ICE RUNS DEEP
photo by Dale Speirs

Elbow River, in the Erlton district just upstream of the downtown core. River flow is left to right. An interesting pattern in the ice.

