

OPUNTIA

300

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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.

BOW RIVER PROMENADE
photos by Dale Speirs



The Bow River is the northern boundary of Calgary's downtown core, and the City has put a lot of money over the years into a pathway system along the river called the Bow River Promenade. On the front page above is a view looking east past a sandstone arch that was obviously salvaged from a demolished building. Unfortunately no one remembered to put up a plaque explaining it.

The view below is looking west along the channel that separates Prince's Island (at right) from the Promenade. The pedestrian bridge across the river is the Peace Bridge, which looks like a giant Chinese finger trap. See OPUNTIA #281 for close-ups of the bridge. It was a quiet Sunday morning in January when I took these photos, hence the lack of people about.





It seems that every ethnic group in the city puts up a monument for themselves. Below is the Hungarian monument for the 1956 October Revolution.

Further downstream are Chinese and Ukrainian monuments, and I'm sure if I looked around I could find others.



The "Turul-Bird"

The Turul is a giant falcon of Hungarian mythology; a regal and intelligent bird, described as "Master of the Sky" by ancient Hungarians. It is the icon of Hungarian freedom and national pride; a symbol of the House of Attila and of the Hungarian rulers of the Arpad Dynasty



FREEDOM FOR ALL

WHAT IS FREEDOM?

Freedom is a state of individual and collective liberty, devoid of the threat of oppression; Freedom is a reward, a hard-won source of shared noble accomplishment; Freedom is a privilege, but with privilege also comes responsibility - Unwavering faith in and accountability towards the nation which, through past sacrifice has allowed freedom to prevail.

with GEZA SOTI President

Presented by
The Hungarian Art and Heritage Foundation of Alberta
President JOZSEF TANYI

I took this photo a few days later, looking east from the 14 Street SW bridge to the west end of the downtown core. This was taken during the lunch hour, so the Promenade is busy with joggers.

The white planetarium dome at centre right used to be the Alberta Science Centre, which relocated in 2010 to a new and better location (ie, with parking). The building sits vacant while cultural groups tussle each other for it and City Council dithers as usual.



TOM HOLT: PART 2. THE OLD GODS IN MODERN TIMES
by Dale Speirs

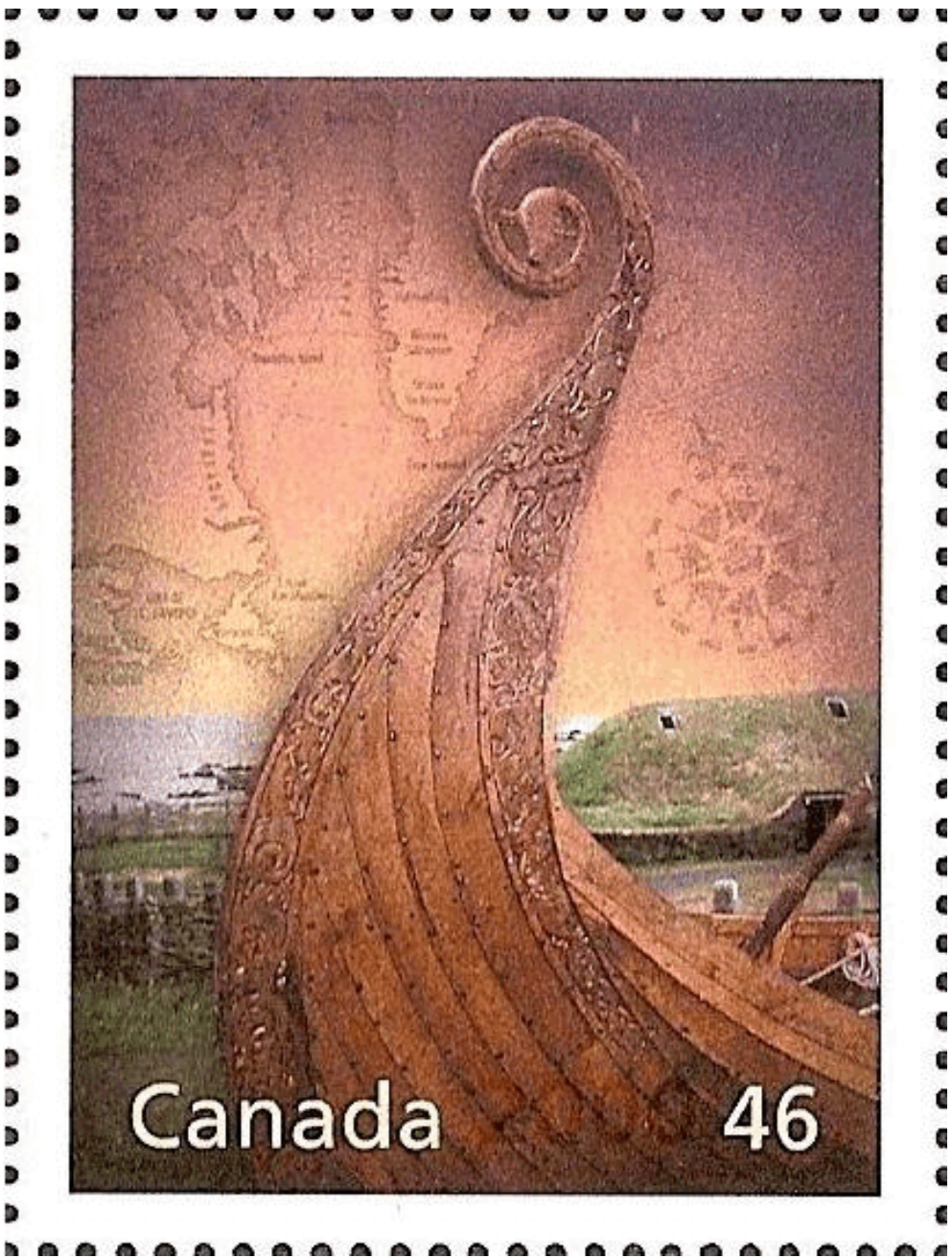
Norse By Norsewest.

Starting off the thud-and-blunder sagas is WHO’S AFRAID OF BEOWULF? (1988). Archaeologist Hildy Frederiksen discovers a Norse burial ship near Caithness, Scotland. She sneaks out an artifact from the site, as a result of which a Norse king Hrolf Earthstar and his band of merry Vikings awake from their graves and decide to carry on in modern Britain as if it were back when. Hildy ends up chauffeuring them from one end of the British Isles to the other in search of their enemy, an evil sourcerer who is now CEO of the Gerrards Garth group of multinationals. Danny Bennett re-appears and latches on to the story, although he doesn’t understand what it is about, other than some sort of sharp practice involving archaeologists.

The MacGuffin of the story is an ancient gold brooch with a Celtic pattern on it that is actually an integrated circuit for magic. It is powered by two energy beings called Zxerp and Prexz, who are addicted to electricity (which explains various power outages) and oblivious to what effect they are having on the material world. Everyone wants that brooch and the two cthonic spirits powering it, for whoever has them can rule the world, bwaah ha ha ha! The chase to get everything together in one place before the other side does takes up most of the novel.

The ending wimps out as the evil sourcerer makes friends with the Vikings and they sail off to Valhalla, which according to their description would place it somewhere in Nunavut. Hildy returns to her university and settles back into her job. And so to bed.

VALHALLA (2000) turns out to be more than one such place. Each person ending up there finds out that Valhalla is a series of hells, tailored for the individual. A modern creative anachronist who played paintball every weekend of the year and thought that Valhalla was a Viking playground finds out that it is a contemporary battleground, because that is how the Vikings thought of it in their day. The Vikings fight all day in their style and are killed, resurrected for the evening banquet, and go back into battle the morrow morn. But modern roleplayers deluded into thinking that battle is glory find out that being killed in their contemporary version by shrapnel or napalm is a painful death.



Others are sent to a Valhalla where they have to watch paint dry on a wall, not just figuratively but actually. They were men of action, like Napoleon and Genghis Khan, and now sit in an auditorium watching paint dry on a wall on the stage. Attila the Hun is resurrected as a small pudgy boy beset upon by schoolyard bullies.

Tavern waitress Carol Kortright, who died suddenly and young of a brain aneurism, finds herself as a serving wench in the banquet hall of Valhalla, not a pleasant job with all those barbarians groping her, plus she is expected to scrub the toilets. Her father Lin is trying to get her back, something he has a chance of doing because he is an agent whose client is the Japanese corporation that owns and operates all the Valhallas. Carol, however, does manage to overcome her surroundings, starting off by trying to unionize the Vikings.

As the novel progresses, Odin appears in many forms to the characters, teasing and testing them. It becomes apparent that officially Valhalla is heaven as imagined by each character but with consequences they did not expect, thus making it a hell. But in the end, most of them manage to escape, inadvertently, when Valhalla is reorganized by the Japanese corporation.

The denouement tries to tie up the loose ends, but the main problem is that the story trickles to an halt. The paint on the wall finally dries and all the men of action are released, to where? Carol and her father get back together in the real world, her tending bar and him agenting again. And?

The Gods Themselves Do Weep.

Terry Pratchett's view of old gods no longer worshiped was that they fade away to nothing. Holt takes a different tack in *ODDS AND GODS* (1995), where the old gods wind up in a nursing home run by Osiris, who isn't much happier than his inmates.

The main plot gets rolling when Osiris has to run for it, a because his greedy godson Julian tries to have him certified so he can seize the estate. Osiris has no conception of life in the real world but fortunately his faithful nurse Sandra helps him. Meanwhile, Thor, Odin, and Frey occupy themselves restoring a steam traction engine, and the rest of the retired gods spend their time bickering about everything.

Julian hires an assassin named Kurt Lundqvist, and, to even up the sides, Osiris has the god Pan helping him. All the characters are constantly on the move across the planet collecting plot coupons. After much ado about truly nothing, the ending fizzles out. If you are a steam enthusiast, then the novel is worth obtaining, but otherwise all the running around becomes tedious. Most of the scenery changes seem to be so that Holt could show off his knowledge about some obscure Third World god.

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.

SIGNS, SIGNS, EVERYWHERE A SIGN: QUIZZICAL SIGNS
photos by Dale Speirs

On the preservation section of 8 Avenue SW downtown is what was originally the CALGARY TRIBUNE newspaper building, built in 1892. The newspaper, founded 1885, later became the CALGARY ALBERTAN, and is today the CALGARY SUN. The building was sold in 1907 and the SUN now has its printing plant and offices in a far distant suburb. The building changed hands many times over the decades and is rented out by its present landlord.

The ground floor, as you can see, is now a steakhouse. The sign was obviously drawn by a city slicker since the restaurant brags about using Angus beef but the cow depicted is a milk cow, probably a Guernsey because it has solid body colour rather than the patchwork of a Holstein. It has the skinny hips typical of milk cows and, of course, the greatly enlarged udder. Beef cattle such as Angus are bred for thick torsos. There is no superiority in Angus beef over Hereford or Charolais beef cattle, but the Angus breeders have a better advertising budget. I would say that even if I hadn't grown up on a Charolais cattle ranch.



ALTERNATIVE HISTORY REVIEWS

by Dale Speirs

AND HAVING WRIT (1978) by Donald Benson introduces aliens into American history in 1908. This humorous novel reads well as a light diversion. The aliens were inbound to Siberia involuntarily in 1908, where in our timeline they abruptly terminated as the Tunguska impact. In this book, they managed to shift into a different universe via a gadget and splash into San Francisco Bay. The Hearst newspapers score a big scoop with them, but the public alarm and fear is a three-day wonder, as it probably would be with us.

The aliens inadvertently disrupt the American presidential election, and Taft is displaced by Thomas Edison as the successful candidate. President Edison shows his dark side in office, and the aliens go on the lam to Europe. They cure the Kaiser of what ails him and made him a bitter warmonger, then fix the Czar's hemophiliac son and abort a revolution there. Rasputin loses his influence and finishes his life as a movie producer in the USA. World War One never happens. An assassination in Sarajevo produces a short-lived diplomatic crisis that soon blows over. And so the timeline goes. Nothing to write a five-page essay about, but an enjoyable read.

Where's My Airship, Dude?

STEAMPUNK III (2012) is an anthology edited by Ann Vandermeer, the previous two volumes of which I reviewed in OPUNTIA's #69.1D and 71.1B. For this volume, I won't review all the stories, some of which duplicated each other in theme without presenting much that was new. Vandermeer has an editorial about how she wants to move beyond steampunk, but this comes off as being ashamed of airships and brass goggles. I enjoy steampunk as the fun branch of alternative history, and one should not attempt to impose the dead weight of ideology on it.

Unlike other subgenres of science fiction, steampunk has multiple origins in unrelated sources that later pooled together. I won't say "merged" because even now it maintains separate sub-sub-genres, if such a taxon can be used. The literary SF readers think of it as originating from novels, while costumers only ever looked to comics and a few television or movie sources.

"Harry And Marlowe And The Talisman Of The Cult Of Evil" by Carrie Vaughn takes place in 1894. There are lots of airships, and people wear brass



Seen in a Calgary Gap store that apparently is trying to be the next Target Canada. "These four winners were selected from your area!" touts the blurb. Really? According to the descriptions under each kid's photo, they are from Abbotsford, British Columbia; Snohomish, Washington State; Yonkers, New York; and Elyria, Ohio. Now it is possible to reach Abbotsford from Calgary in one day of hard driving from sunrise to midnight, so if one uses a very generous definition of "area", that might be acceptable. Snohomish, however, is a two-day trip, and Yonkers and Elyria are on the other side of the continent.

goggles, so that proves it must be steampunk. Harry (a woman despite the name) steals an alien artifact from an Icelandic cult. An Aetherian spaceship crashed in Surrey in 1869, and ever since then the hunt was on for other alien technology. In trying to get back to Britain, Harry and her companion Marlowe (a man, just to verify) have to run a blockade by the Germans interdicting aerial traffic as a war breaks out. Many exciting airship battles here and finally they make it home. A good story straight from the pages of an AH version of BOYS ANNUAL.

“On Wooden Wings” by Paolo Chikiamco is set in a Filipino world which is part of a Sultanate. Clarita has entered a competition to fly the first heavier-than-air machine. She wins against all odds as we knew she would. Given how the Islamic world has stagnated in science and mathematics over the past centuries since the last Arab invented algebra, it is difficult to believe that a Sultan would be as progressive as all that.

There are a number of cyborg stories, of which I’ll pick two. “Sir Ranulph Wykeham-Rackham, GBE, Aka Roboticus The All-Knowing” is a long-winded title to a story by Lev Grossman. Sir Ranulph is a London dandy on a nobelman’s allowance who goes off to serve in WW1. He comes home minus his legs and lower face, and is rebuilt as a cyborg. As the years go by, he receives various upgrades and lives past his prime. He becomes more and more robotic, and more and more melancholy. Finally he consents to one last upgrade, having his brain replaced by a light bulb and automatic controls, fading out of history as a mechanical fortune teller.

“Arbeitskraft” by Nick Mamatas is an amusing look at a Victorian world where the factories have been automated or are staffed only by robots and cyborgs. The story is narrated by a Marxist who is frustrated because there are no factory workers left to organize. He instead tries to organize the automatons. This is one AH that is becoming reality in our own world.

This anthology doesn’t break any new ground despite Vandermeer’s skittishness about being seen in public as a steampunk. But the stories are by and large readable, and will be enjoyed by the AH fan.

Time Is The Simplest Thing (With Apologies To Mr. Simak).

EINSTEIN’S DREAMS by Alan Lightman (1994) is billed as a novel, but it is really a series of vignettes, each chapter a dream suffered by a young Swiss

patent clerk in 1905. He is working on a new theory of space and time but is inundated with variations and alternative universes running through his mind. Each chapter is the dream of one night. Some vignettes do not involve physics, such as a universe where people sense time qualitatively, not quantitatively. Some people see a fast flow of time, others a slow one. There is an Earth that worships clocks.

The book begins the night of 14 April 1905, when Einstein dreams of a universe where time is circular. People re-live their lives over and over unknowing, except a few who are driven psychotic by the foreknowledge of their unchangeable lives. This idea has been used in a few science fiction stories. For alternative history, it is an obvious non-starter.

16 April’s dream supposes that time flows like water, with occasional eddies working back upstream. The eddies take a few people with them into the past. Those unfortunates live in terror that they will alter their future and vanish. They huddle in alleys and out-of-the-way locations, trying not to be noticed until they are eddied back into their time. The citizens of the time assume they must be homeless persons, and in a way they are.

In the universe of 19 April, time has three dimensions perpendicular to each other. Every person travels down three separate futures at each point of divergence, which geometrically leads to an infinite number of universes. This is the basic method of most science fiction assuming parauniverses or multiverses, a standard of the genre. It is essentially a geometric description of quantum mechanics dogma.

26 April’s world has time running slower the further one is from the Earth’s centre. People live on mountaintops, then build their houses on stilts to gain that little bit extra of longevity. They go down into valleys as seldom as possible, and hustle as fast as they can to be in and out before losing too much time. The lower classes really are the lower classes.

If our universe had settled into laws of nature such that time slows in direct proportion as gravity decreases, then humans would certainly have developed different societies. Lowlands would only be used for growing crops, since mountains are not suited for agriculture. Crops would produce several harvests per year more than they do in our timeline, but to balance that, the yields would be less because there would be a greater drain on soil fertility. Everyone would live on the mountaintops and only descend for travel or harvesting. There

would have been fewer wars, since it is much harder to fight in mountains. The Netherlands, for example, would be uninhabited except for crops, and the Rocky Mountains thickly settled with numerous bridges linking the ramparts.

The universe of 26 April would also have a speeded-up space programme due to the impetus of longer life in zero gee. Religions would have direct proof that God exists, since the closer you get to Him, the closer you are to life everlasting.

The alternative universe of 11 May has time's arrow reversed, with a resulting increase in entropy. People do not live their lives backward, but rather things become increasingly more ordered. Towns become more tidy by themselves, gardens weed themselves, and desks neaten up in offices as the day goes on.

The 29 May dream suppose that relativistic time dilation works at Newtonian speeds. Time passes more slowly for an object in motion even at low speeds. As a result, people spend their time running, desks swing around in circles constantly, and humans live in moving houses. In this universe, things really are the quick and the dead.

The 20 June universe is where time is a local phenomenon. The further apart two clocks are, the greater the discrepancy between them. Time flows at different speeds in different locations. The result is that cities are isolated and there is little commerce between them. *"What took seconds in Berne might take hours in Fribourg ... the traveller's body adjusts to the local movement of time ... only when he communicates with the city of departure does he realize he has entered a new domain of time ... his daughter has lived her life and grown old, or perhaps his neighbour's wife has just completed the song she was singing when he left his front gate."* Travelers never return because of relativistic effects at Newtonian speeds.

I think though, that contrary to Lightman's assertion, there would be trade between adjacent cities or at least those not too far apart. The most efficient producers, where time flows fastest, would have a trade surplus because they can produce goods faster. Cities where time flows slowly would be popular for living in. If there are two opposites near to each other, one can imagine a heck of a commuter rush hour. Trains could be automated to deliver goods between cities without crews worrying if their families will still be there when they get off shift.

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

2015-02-16

[Re: OPUNTIA #298 painted cow art] The bovine public statuary reminds me of one of those jokes that is probably funnier for the family involved. The statues here in Blacksburg are of the Hokiebird, the Virginia Tech mascot. When we moved here, our oldest daughter was three, and called them yogas because she thought they looked Yoda but couldn't quite get it out. So we have a town full of yogas.



FROM: Milt Stevens
Simi Valley, California

2015-02-21

Your article on the failure of Target Canada in Opuntia #297, and the letter by Joseph Nicholas in #298 sounded a lot like the retailing situation in my town. The letter from Nicholas reminded me of the shopping mall we have in Simi Valley. It seems reasonable that Simi Valley could support a shopping mall. Simi Valley is a town of 105,000 with twice the average family income of Los Angeles. The mall is out on the western edge of town surrounded by horse ranches and open country. It is on a bus line, although I don't know who rides the bus in Simi Valley.

The mall has always been a ghost town. A number of major retailers have come and gone over the years. At the moment, there is a Macy's for Men at one end of the mall and a Macy's for Women at the other. About half of the shop spaces in between are vacant. I visited the mall for the first time in a number of years in November. I was looking for a particular type of slipper that the other stores in town didn't carry. I visited the mall on a week day at about 11 am. The place reminded me of a town that had been abandoned for fear of a zombie onslaught. In the Macy's for Men, I encountered a saleslady. She seemed surprised to see me. She seemed surprised to see anybody. I found what I was looking for, but I don't plan to go back there anytime soon. The place gives me the creeps.

Your photography is superior. In #299, your photos of Chinese New Year looked like a Worldcon for people who don't go to Worldcon.

[Thanks for the compliment. I learned to take photos in the days when film developing was expensive and every shot had to count. As a result, we learned how to compose shots, not just making sure no one had a telephone pole growing out of their head but things like balancing people and objects in the photo to provide a natural eye-track. Nowadays people just bang away with digital cameras, take ten photos where one would do, and post them all online without any editing or deleting the bad duplicates. The times we live in.]

[I like to tell visiting SF fans who are costumers to come back to Calgary during the Stampede rodeo and see what a real costume con looks like. A million Cowtowners dress up like cowboys/cowgirls, few of whom know the difference between straw and hay, or steers and bulls.]

LITTLE FREE LIBRARIES IN CALGARY
photo by Dale Speirs

There are now about thirty or so Little Free Library book exchanges (take a book, leave a book) around Calgary. I'm not going to photograph all of them; some are far out in distant suburbs a half-hour driving time. Here's one on 13 Avenue SW in the Beltline district of central Calgary.

