

OPUNTIA

301

Early March 2015

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

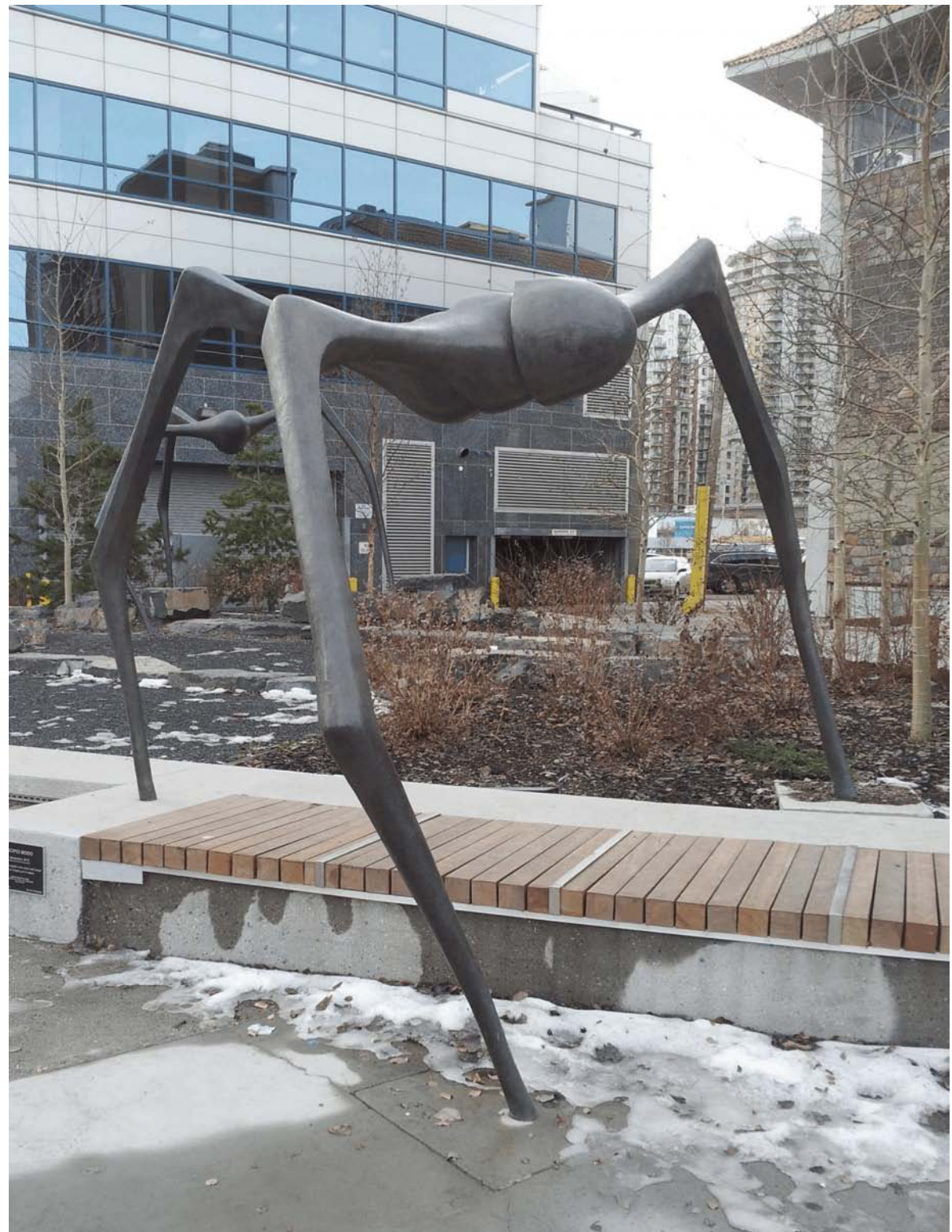
When sending me an emailed letter of comment, please include your name and town in the message.

DOWNTOWN COWTOWN: POETIC PARK

photos by Dale Speirs

The most bizarre park in Calgary is at the northwest entrance of the downtown core. Poetic Park is bounded by a Buddhist monastery on its west side and the Catholic School Board tower along the south. It is at the junction of 4 Avenue SW and the 10 Street bridge over the Bow River (behind the camera).

The park's main feature is a couple of giant three-legged beasts. I don't know why but every time I see them, they get me thinking of H.P. Lovecraft.









Who Can Stay The Bottles Of Heaven?

QUANTUM APOCALYPSE (2009) opens with the Mars Rover team awaiting the passage of a comet near Mars. As the manager says, with any luck they can get lots of pretty pictures to show the senators at the next budget hearing. But the comet unexpectedly changes course and crashes into Mars. The question arises: What cause the comet to suddenly change course?

But first, as always in these movies, there are various detours to set up the subplots. SFX are expensive, so the assorted threads are needed to pad out the movie. The hero of the movie, a small-town mayor, has a messed-up family life. He has remarried to a trophy wife barely older than his teenaged son, who does not approve. The mayor’s brother Terry is autistic and living with the family as well. For some reason Terry keeps rolling his eyes up like a blind man. He is important to the movie since he is a savant with an eidetic memory who has a plan to save the world.

Save the world, he must, for the comet was deflected by a quantum anomaly, possibly dark matter, which is now headed to Earth. Its gravity well is linear and has to be pointed in the correct direction to be detected and to have any effect, which is why it wasn’t spotted before. Like all movie bolides, it makes good time, traveling from Mars to Earth in 96 hours. However, we can allow that for artistic reasons.

The object is not the standard Big Ugly Rock. It is wobbling as it approaches, and its gravity well will plough the surface of the Earth. As the anomaly rotates, on Day 3 the gravity well is predicted to point directly at the Earth and swallow up the entire planet.

The subplots begin alternating with the SFX. There are high school kids, played as usual by actors obviously in their 20s, worrying about their big date for the prom. The American President fusses around and attends meetings with the Joint Chiefs of Staff, his aides, and a few cabinet members. Not the full cabinet, for why would you want the Secretary of Agriculture there?

Over at the space agency, weird young scientists with Asperger syndrome roam the halls doomsaying and devising plans that just might work. They are a 20ish woman who dresses punk rock style and her nerdy boyfriend. The best line in the movie comes when one of the grey-beard scientists sarcastically refers to them as Avril Lavigne and Poindexter.

The SFX kick in. It’s not a real foreboding until the aurora borealis suddenly appears in bright sunshine over a southern California high school, enabling those 20-something actors to practice their staring-in-awe poses. Cellphones and radios conk out, not actually an SFX but definitely a foreboding. Massive flocks of birds blot out the sun as they migrate to who knows where. Probably just to the next lake.

When in doubt, bring out the nukes. (How did disaster movies get along before 1945? Mostly by reversing the polarity, I suppose.) The plan is to knock the Earth over on one side and just miss the linear giant vacuum cleaner from space. Suddenly shifting Earth's rotation would cause the oceans to slop over the continents and scour them clean, but that must be better than being swallowed by a passing anomaly. The USA, Russia, and China are supposed to pool their nukes and detonate them at the North Pole, thereby knocking Earth off its axis.

USAF Space Command gets sneaky and at the last moment doesn't launch theirs. The axis tilts just enough from the Russian and Chinese fusion bombs to create a tsunami that wipes out Manhattan. It isn't a real disaster movie until you trash that island. I think the main reason is that Wall Street has caused so much damage to the rest of the world that moviegoers are delighted to see it erased.

There are tornadoes in southern California, London is vacuumed up into the anomaly, massive earthquakes everywhere, and gravity fluctuates. The final plan is implemented. Launch some more nukes and try to create a strangelet to neutralize the anomaly. A strangelet is a cluster of quarks that converts everything it touches into another strangelet. We know they don't exist because if they did, the universe would be one giant strangelet and we wouldn't be here. But the Asperger scientists, aided by Terry, are going to create one anyway.

The clock ticks down to the last second as it always does. The plan works but bizarrely so. The anomaly is neutralized and canceled out. Time reverses back to the Mars comet passage that began the movie. Since the anomaly isn't there anymore, the comet zooms by without too much excitement. No one remembers what happened except Terry, and he remains silent because he knows he won't be believed. If you fast-forward through the slower subplots, the movie is actually not bad. My copy is on one of those six-movies-for-\$10 from the DVD bargain bin.

If You Can't Move The Asteroid, Then Move The Earth.

The movie ASTEROID VS EARTH (2014) starts out with the usual cliches, such as the precocious kid who discovers a Big Ugly Rock headed to Earth. Instead of the Men in Black rounding up the scientists who can save Earth, it is a bunch of U.S. Marines personnel taking orders from a USAF general. So you can see this is fantasy.

The asteroid is too big to deflect with the usual nuclear missiles, so the plan is to pivot Earth out of the way by detonating nukes in the Yap Trench of the Pacific Ocean, at the junction of four tectonic plates. This will twist the planet on its axis and make it pirouette out of the way of the asteroid. Nonsense. If Earth was a cylinder, then pivoting it could work, but since it is a sphere, tilting its axis won't make any difference if it still occupies the same volume.

At least the planners have the decency to mention that this will kill half the Earth's population, but of course that is better than an extinction level event. They load up the submarine with nukes, pack a lunch, and head out. Meanwhile volcanoes and assorted harbinger impacts keep the landlubbers busy. Hong Kong is taken out by a harbinger fragment, and tsunamis flush away everything along the Pacific Rim. Nothing about Manhattan though.

Plan A fails, as does Plan B. Eventually they detonate enough nukes to contaminate the planet but somehow this causes the asteroid to miss. From the final SFX, it appears that all the explosions were on one side of Earth, thereby acting as rocket engines to push Earth out of the way. The asteroid zooms by harmlessly and all is well, save for the supporting actors who were killed off, including the black sidekick. Not to mention the hundreds of millions of people who lived in the wrong place. With billions of humans on the planet, that's not bad. As the USAF general famously said in the movie DR. STRANGELOVE, *"I'm not saying we won't get our hair mussed."*

The Hammer Of The Whole Earth Cut Asunder And Broken.

LUCIFER'S HAMMER (1977) by Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle is a novel by two stalwarts of hard SF. A comet is discovered but this time the nukes shall not avail and it falls to Earth as several large fragments, ending civilization as we know it. Those who own land and firearms and have the skills needed in the recovery become the warlords and aristocracy of the post-apocalypse. Those who don't become serfs, although I suspect that SF fans who read this delude themselves that they will be in the former.

The story has a long buildup as the comet is detected and society girds its loins for the impacts, or goes berserk as the case may be. The Hammer, as it becomes known, breaks apart while rounding the Sun and heading back to the outer system. Instead of Earth dying from a rifle bullet, it will intercept a shotgun blast, and the effects will be much worse.

Niven and Pournelle correctly point out that the giant fragments splashing into the ocean will do more damage than the land impacts. Firstly, the seawater will be displaced in massive quantities. Since most humans live within 100 km of an ocean shoreline, multiple tsunamis from the splashdowns will sweep the coasts clear. Secondly, the high-pressure steam from the impact points will lift gigatons of water vapour and debris into the upper atmosphere to disperse and cool the planet.

The human race survives because Earth does, but is now back in medieval times at best and the Stone Age in many places. The cities are gone and food is all that matters. It doesn't take long for the cults and newly-made warlords to begin fighting over valuable resources. Lawyers and accountants are no longer needed but tradesmen and techies are. The first half of the novel is the buildup to the apocalypse and the second half is the chaos of what happened after. In the first half, I found the authors were good at introducing the technical material without too many info dumps. The second half was a bit more unrealistic and there was, to me at least, some wish fulfillment about who would actually survive and who wouldn't. Altogether though, a good read.

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.

RADIO FICTION: PART 1. GIVE ME THAT OLD-TIME RADIO

by Dale Speirs



I am a fan of old-time radio (OTR) and enjoy listening to the shows of the golden age of radio from the 1930s to the early 1950s. Attempts at radio broadcasting began as early as 1906, but the first radio station in North America with a pre-announced schedule was XWA of Montreal (later CFCF, then CIQC, then CINW until the station permanently closed in 2010), which began broadcasting on May 20, 1920. The Americans followed later in 1920 with KDKA in Pittsburgh, which went on the air on November 2. It wasn't until the 1930s that radio began to hit its stride.

Radio was the fourth form of mass communication over long distances. The first was the postal system, which was expensive and unreliable until 1840, when Sir Rowland Hill's reforms and the introduction of the postage stamp made it cheap and fast for letters. Newspapers were the second form of mass communication, and were partly an outgrowth of a good postal system which could deliver them to areas beyond city limits. Telegraphs and telephones were the third system, and radio was the fourth.

By the Great Depression, the isolation of remote areas had pretty much been done away with. Homesteaders out on the lone prairie could tune in to Jack Benny or hear potted-palm music from a hotel ballroom orchestra. I've reviewed many aspects of radio in OPUNTIA #27.1, #263, and #271.

OTR shows have staged a comeback with the advent of mp3 podcasts, and there are now thousands of shows whose episodes can be downloaded for free from www.archive.org/details/radioprograms I was born in 1955 just at the death rattle of OTR, and never listened to them until the 1980s, first as cassettes and now as mp3s.



Written Fiction.

Probably the best written fiction about OTR was Harlan Ellison's 1977 short story "Jeffty Is Five", about a boy who stopped growing at five years of age and never changed. It is narrated by a childhood friend who grows to manhood while Jeffty remains a boy. A theme of the story is the narrator regretting the loss of many things seen through rose-coloured glasses, while being forced to admit that medical care and technology have brought many benefits into our lives.

The frightening thing about Jeffty that drove his parents and friends to distraction was that around him was a bubble of late 1940s life. Any radios within his influence broadcast only old-time shows. When Jeffty sent away for premiums from comic book publishers long dead, he got them in the mail. The world around him always stayed in the immediate post-war era, and since Jeffty was always only ever a five-year-old boy, he could not understand what was happening. He only knew the cowboy shows, the Cisco Kid, and Hopalong Cassidy. The story ends tragically with his mother drowning him in his bathtub so she and her husband could revert to a life in modern times.

With Lettuce And Tomato.

WLT: A RADIO ROMANCE (1991, mass-market paperback) by Garrison Keillor, follows the history of a radio station from its beginnings in 1926 in Minneapolis, Minnesota, to modern times. The stars of the golden age come and go, some to fade away forgotten, and a lucky few to television. Those familiar with the history of OTR will recognize many of the anecdotes and might-be-true legends of radio, rewritten into a single narrative but still amusing.

The earliest commercial radio stations were usually an adjunct to some other business, often a newspaper, because they were considered loss-leaders good for advertising and future profitability. On this premise, the novel begins, as the Soderbjerg family sets up a station in 1926 to promote their restaurant in Minneapolis, Minnesota. WLT (With Lettuce and Tomato) grew like topsy, and the book is a fix-up collection of events in its history.

The station does well, selling \$10,000 a week in advertisements back when that was real un-depreciated currency. Hundreds of people line up to perform in the shows and possibly become stars, and hundreds of businessmen line up to buy

commercials. The stores that put their noses in the air and refused to lower themselves to undignified radio ads begin their decline. For just as the Internet is today killing many businesses, so it was back then that radio caused a sea change in retail sales. WLT leases two floors in the Ogden Hotel and several more thereafter as it expands.

Mispronounced words, spoonerisms, and unintended double entendres have long plagued and amused announcers and news readers from the beginning of commercial radio and so it was at WLT. There were the daily soap operas whose story arcs took months or years to be resolved, and whose characters were idiots who could solve their problems in a half-minute if they but would. Corn pone reigned supreme on country-and-western shows, and if in doubt, sing a sad sentimental tune from the Old Country.

Much of the novel is the story of Francis With, a naive young lad who is a fanboy (yes, they had them back then) of radio. Father dead, mother in an institution, bounced around between relatives who resented taking care of him, bullied at school. In short, looking for a way out, and that way out was getting a job at WLT, where he changed his name to Frank White and began a new life.

There is also sex and dilly-dallying among the performers, not to mention the Soderbjerg men. But on the air, everyone was pure and virginal. As the English say, whatever you do, don't frighten the horses.

When the 1950s arrive, OTR goes into its terminal decline at WLT, taking the performers and staff with it. Frank, meanwhile, makes the jump into television just in time and finishes off his life as a Grand Old Man. WLT becomes what all the other stations became, an endless reel of hit songs, talk show hosts, announcers reading the news from wire service copy, and a constant flow of commercials.

Movie Fiction.

RADIO DAYS (1987) is a pleasant story. This is a Woody Allen movie about the golden age of OTR in the 1940s, and is a thinly-disguised nostalgic look at himself as a young boy and his family. The protagonist is Joe Needleman, a young boy who lives in an extended Jewish family in New York City. His narration of the family's life is punctuated by vignettes of OTR shows.

Allen's audience at the time this film was released was his generation and their elders, most of whom are gone now. You don't have to be an OTR fan to understand the references though, as the movie depicts how the shows were produced. Comedy shows were broadcast from theatres because comedians need audience feedback to be at their best. Dramas were done in private studios, with portly middle-aged men portraying heroes and sound-effects men breaking glass and slamming miniature doors in a corner of the booth. We see the stage orchestras, the smarmy announcers, the insecure wanna-bes desperately trying to get a break, and the equally insecure stars who lived and died by the ratings.

The events in the Needleman family are counterpointed by events in the outside world. Joe's aunt is at the age where she is desperately looking for a nice man to marry instead being a spinster, but instead is left with 4F men as all the good ones go off to serve in the war. An uncle is converted to Communism after he goes next door to complain to the neighbours because they are not observing Yom Kippur properly. Joe's parents bicker but nonetheless produce a baby sister for him to admire.

Allen emphasizes the point that the household radio was turned on for most of the day, as with most homes. Joe's mother followed the breakfast shows and soap operas. Good-morning shows on television are nothing new. Back in the 1930s, there were famous couples who chatted around the breakfast table about the celebrities they had met at glittering movie premieres or charity balls. Many of the radio soap operas not only went decades on the radio, they migrated into television unchanged.

The men followed sports, and the boys were fans of action-adventure series. Joe's greatest wish was for a decoder ring from his favourite suspense show. The girls listened to music shows and dreamed about the crooners of that era. The entire family huddled around the set for breaking news of major events.

The movie ends with a New Year's party where many of the characters coalesce into a final summary of Allen's nostalgic view. The war was almost over, and television would soon destroy OTR in a few years.

GYPPED!

by Dale Speirs

The other day I felt around in my coat pocket for some spare change to make a purchase. One coin didn't feel right so I pulled them all out and discovered that it was a Mexican 5-peso coin. At quick glance it appeared to be a Canadian 2-dollar coin but it was the size of a 25-cent coin. I had obviously been given it in change at some fast-food outlet, whether unintentionally because the shopgirl didn't notice it or deliberately because she was hoping to unload the coin on a sucker. So I was out \$2, not that it will hurt me financially that much.



The coin is shown here between a toonie (as we call the \$2 coin) and a quarter. The 5-peso coin is worn enough that it is difficult to make out clearly but it shows an eagle with a snake in its beak, sitting on a cholla, all of which is the symbol of Mexico. Chollas are the upright species of the genus *Opuntia*, while pricklypears are the ground-hugging species.

The toonie has what appears to be a blank hologramme on the rim, but which is actually a finely-engraved mesh intended to make life difficult for counterfeiters. At least the ones who haven't been to Mexico.

Alberta has two species of pricklypears, on which I published some papers back in the late 1970s when I was a university student. My car licence plate reads OPUNTIA. So now any newcomers reading this zine know where the name comes from.

Although I have some pricklypears growing in my yard, they are not native to the Calgary area. One has to drive about 100 km east out onto the flatlands of the shortgrass prairie before they begin to appear.

VULCAN MOURNS

by Dale Speirs

The death of Leonard Nimoy on 2015-02-27 was given particular emphasis in the Calgary area because of his connection with the nearby village of Vulcan, about an hour's drive south-southeast of the city. Vulcan was named after the Roman god and is in the heart of the wheat-growing flatlands. There are no natural or historical features that would attract tourists, and as the kids graduated from school, they moved to the big city.

In an effort to capitalize on Star Trek and reverse the decline of the village, the inhabitants built a giant model of the Enterprise and hosted an annual festival for Trekkies. Nimoy was kind enough to help the villagers over some of the

hurdles when dealing with Paramount Studios as far as licencing and trademark use was concerned. He visited Vulcan in April 2010.

I have made a couple of trips to Vulcan, written up in OPUNTIA's #43.5 and #70.5A. The death of Nimoy made the front page of the CALGARY SUN.



CALGARY LITTLE FREE LIBRARIES

photo by Dale Speirs

I've been photographing Little Free Library locations as I come across them, this one at the West Hillhurst Community Association in central Calgary, just after a light snowfall.



This one was at the CBC Calgary studios on the south edge of West Hillhurst.



The Little Free Library system operates on the “take a book, leave a book” system. Now that the Co-op supermarkets have discontinued their book exchanges, the LFL boxes are where I am gradually disposing of my library.



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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

FROM: Lloyd Penney
Etobicoke, Ontario

2015-02-25

[Re: OPUNTIA #298] Mike Resnick has written a series of Weird West Steampunk stories, I’ve read the first two, and they have been fun to read. Although you can tell he’s writing directly for a specialty market; he’s done his homework.

[Re: OPUNTIA #299] I’d like to know where the large coin on page 9 came from. Looks like it should be something British, but Britannia has been on the back of that coin from as far back as I can remember, right up to the beginning of decimal coinage.

[Still is. The scan is an enlargement of a British gold sovereign, real size somewhat smaller than a quarter.]

[Re: OPUNTIA #300] The sandstone arch on the cover reminds me of a similar façade on the campus of Ryerson University in downtown Toronto, my alma mater. The façade plaque says that it belonged to the Toronto Normal School. Of course, we always smiled when we said they knocked down the Normal School, and built Ryerson.

[My mother attended the Edmonton Normal School in the 1940s, today now part of the University of Alberta, from which I graduated in 1978. A Normal School was a teacher’s college. The name comes from the idea that such schools would establish norms in teaching, instead of everyone doing their own thing.]

I have been seeing reports on social media about Little Free Libraries. They seem popular here. A local fan, Adam Smith has one in front of his house, and has built a couple of dozen more and put them up here and there. However, in the US, some are leery of them, and some American towns and cities have made putting them up illegal.

[Not a problem in Cowtown as seen above.]

BOOK REVIEWS

by Dale Speirs

MOST SECRET WAR (1978) by R.V. Jones Normally I don’t have much interest in military history, but this 556-page book covers the scientific part of World War Two, and so I bought it.

As the head of the British technical operations against the Germans, Dr. Jones was in charge in the Battle of the Beams. The radio direction-finding beams were used by Germans to guide bombers over England. It was his responsibility to nullify their effect somehow. At the same time, there was a radar war going on between both sides, radio message jamming was routine, and the V-1 and V-2 rockets were in development. Jones was in the thick of the intelligence gathering and countermeasures. This books details his work, liberally intermixed with humourous anecdotes. Thoroughly readable.

An early what-if? appears on page 10, when Jones writes about the impact of the famous Oxford Union Society debate on the resolution that “Under no circumstances will this house fight for King and Country”. The resolution passed, and the impact went round the world. Jones quotes Erich von Richthofen (after the war): *“I can assure you, from personal knowledge, that no other factor influenced Hitler more and decided him on his course than that “refusal to fight for King and Country”, coming from what was assumed to be the intellectual elite of your country.”*

What if the appeasers had not been so public and prominent? This would have required a second divergence of Chamberlain not coming back from Munich with peace in his own time. However, the second divergence was a product of that 1933 resolution. If the British leadership had stood a bit more firmly against Hitler, World War Two probably still would have occurred, but it would have been delayed a few critical months or years.

At times, Jones had more fighting to do against his own government than the Germans. His theme throughout this book is that great things are not done by committees, and most bad things are done by committees. A panel of scientific experts is less than the sum of their individual talents.

Witness Jones’ struggles to convince the committees that the V-2 rocket was as he described it, not as the experts pooh-poohed it because they couldn’t see how a rocket that size could fly. Too much cordite would be needed for propulsion,

they said. They were correct, but as Jones vainly tried to make them understand, the V-2 was a liquid fuel rocket, not solid fuel. The experts got their comeuppance when they announced to the newspapers that there was no threat from V-2 rockets. The first V-2s hit London the next day, making a mockery of the “all’s well” headlines in the morning newspapers.

The Germans made the same mistake when their experts declared that 10-cm wavelength radar was impossible and therefore stopped working on it. They got a bad shock later in the war when they captured a crashed British bomber with a working 10-cm radar.

What if Jones had been stymied by committees during the Battle of the Beams early in the war? He muses on this in the book (page 180) and concludes that if his one-man operation hadn’t developed the jamming of German directional beams, then southern England would have been pounded much harder by German bombs. Including, probably, the aircraft engine factories, the destruction of which would have lost the Battle of Britain.

Jones wrote in a lucid and understandable style. You don’t have to know much about technology. He explained the political and scientific background very clearly. Well recommended.

Robert Rankin is yet another English author churning out humourous fantasy novels, a poor man’s Pratchett. Whereas Tom Holt adapts ancient myths to modern times and Terry Pratchett stands above them all with Discworld, Rankin usually does parodies of movies or current events. Topical humour is funniest at the time first used, but as the world moves on, the next generation of readers miss many of the references and the humour dwindles away. Rankin’s novels are often interlinked by common settings, often set in his native Brentford, England, and have recurring characters but do stand alone individually without much trouble.

THE FANDOM OF THE OPERATOR (2001) is narrated by Gary Cheese, a fanboy who tried to reanimate his favourite author P.P. Penrose, who wrote the Lazlo Woodbine mystery series and the Adam Earth science fiction books. Gary’s life is a series of snapshots as he drifts along without purpose or destination in a compulsory full-employment world. He is ordered to take a job with a telecommunications company where he sits in a room with a light bulb on a table. Every time the light bulb comes on, he must flip a switch and turn it off. That is all. He is not told why.

Eventually he learns that the telecom has a secret project called Flatline, which enables communication with the dead. Not just dead humans but also dead aliens. Because of the demand by spymasters and researchers to speak with the dead, they are limited to three minutes on the telephone with them. At that point, the light bulb comes on and the bulb monkey, as Gary and his coworkers are derogatorily known, must flip the switch and which not only turns off the light but cuts off the conversation with the dead. [It seems pointless, as one would think such a project would use automatic timers.]

Flatline began during WW2 to interrogate dead Nazis but its obvious usefulness was such that it continued ever since. The problem was that the dead aliens were attracted to Earth and took over humans, using their brains as receiver/transmitters and thus controlling the planet.

Gary is a psychopathic killer, who, when not killing people who get in his way, is reanimating others who might be of value to him. As he is drawn into the Flatline conspiracy, the plot threads become more and more tangled. When Gary is killed, he then experiences what the dead were going through. He becomes like the aliens, taking over minds for his own use in competition with other psychos.

The novel mostly reads well, although there are some silly parts near the end as the author ties up the loose threads. Some of the forebodings at the beginning are neatly brought to the centre of the plot as the novel progresses, without seeming to be forced.



Despite its name, Merchant’s Gargling Oil was actually a horse liniment. They went out of business after the automobile and the tractor replaced horses.