

# OPUNTIA

## 313

Canada Day 2015

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### FLAG OF OUR FATHERS

photos by Dale Speirs

The Maple Leaf flag was adopted in 1965, so this year is the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary. For us Canadian Baby Boomers, it actually is the flag of our fathers, not just a rhetorical expression. At right are some SuperCanucks at Prince's Island Park in downtown Calgary.



Canada Post issued a booklet of commemorative flag stamps.



Commemorating the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary  
of the Canadian Flag

Commémoration du 50<sup>e</sup> anniversaire  
du drapeau canadien

C  
LOWE-MARTIN



DESIGN : Kosta Tsetsekas, Defne Corbacioglu | Signals • PHOTOS : (stamp / timbre) Larry Goldstein;  
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Another SuperCanuck.







You can't dress more Canadian than this guy.



At left:  
Your humble editor  
decked out in his  
Canada Day finery.



A downtown shopping mall adjacent to Prince's Island. Notice the man in the blue shirt waving a flag. I'm sure he had a reason at the time.



And a young lady in the mall. I politely asked her permission to take this photo.





The pedestrian bridges onto Prince's Island were shoulder-to-shoulder with people.



Above: Large picture frames were scattered around the island for people to use.

This busker is a regular around the downtown core. Today the Maple Leaf flag, tomorrow he'll wear Stampede gear, and so on through the seasons.



## FAR SPEAKING STORIES

by Dale Speirs

Continuing my various series of themed reviews, I start another one, about telephones. The telephone is one of those devices that qualifies for Arthur C. Clarke's definition of magic being indistinguishable from sufficiently advanced technology. You can talk on this magical device and hear someone on the opposite side of the planet. It helped speed up the pace of the economic world. No more waiting a month for a letter and its reply to make the round trip from the far end of the country. You can place your order for goods now and verify the prices as you speak, or tell a family member the bad news about Grandpa.

### Tom Swift And His Electric Far-Speaker.

When the automobile was new at the turn of the previous century, fiction about it was based on obvious extrapolations, not unexpected long-term consequences. The hero used his amazing horseless carriage to rescue a damsel in distress, or overcame all obstacles to win a race and use the prize money to pay off the mortgage. Tom Swift didn't lecture about smog or freeways. The telephone, like other devices before and after, was used by authors as an adjunct to action and adventure.

MURDER AT MIDNIGHT is a 1931 mystery movie where the bodies pile up in a manor house faster than the police can haul them away. The first few murders are traditional gunshot victims. The MacGuffin is the last will and testament of the first victim and a private letter he wrote that identifies who killed him. The envelope containing them gets around more than the murderer does, as he desperately searches for it. His final victim is killed not by gunshot but by a booby-trapped telephone.



This was in the era of candlestick telephones, with the mouthpiece on the stick and a separate earpiece on a wire. The movie villain was a clever fellow. He loaded the earpiece with a spring gun that fired a dart into the victim's brain when the hook was jiggled twice. The first jiggle cocked the weapon and the second jiggle fired it. The victim never had a chance to jiggle it a third time. The murderer cut the telephone wire at the wall socket so that the victim would jiggle the phone while trying to get a connection. The police inspector discovers the weapon when he goes to use it and notices the earpiece was unusually heavy. Taking it apart, he finds the spring gun. It is empty, so he puts it back together and leaves it as bait. Someone reloads it but who?

The will and letter are eventually found and there is a final drawing-room scene with the police inspector, the woman who found the will, and the murderer. The murderer almost succeeds in killing her via telephone when the inspector arrives. The inspector reads the letter silently to himself. Looking at the murderer, who realizes the jig is up, the inspector suggests that he make a phone call. With no way out, the murderer contemplates his fate for a moment and then picks up the telephone.

"Sorry, Wrong Number" by Lucille Fletcher is a 1943 radio play considered one of the best horror shows ever written, and was later made into a 1948 movie. The radio version is available as a free mp3 from [www.archive.org](http://www.archive.org). The radio version ratings were so good that it was repeated as a fresh performance seven times until 1960, with Agnes Moorehead as the main actor. (A future generation would remember her as Endora, mother of Samantha, on the television series BEWITCHED.)

The plot involves a bedridden woman whose telephone line somehow gets crossed with others who cannot hear her but she can hear them. She listens to two men talking and realizes they are plotting the murder of a woman somewhere. Without any substantial information, she cannot get the police interested and the telephone operator says she is unable trace the connection.

The woman's only contacts to anyone else are by telephone, and her calls to various people become increasingly frantic as she tries to reach someone who can help. Step by step, she descends into panic as she keeps getting the men's calls and then realizes that the woman they are planning to murder at 11:15 pm that night is her. Come the appointed time when the job is to be carried out, her bedroom door creaks opens ...

## **Malicious Machines.**

“Operator Assisted Calls Are Charged At A Higher Rate” by Alan Dean Foster (1983 May, AMAZING) is about the problems a retired millionaire named Parworthy is having with the telephone company. The problems were actually caused by him, but being a type-A personality with rage control problems, he is used to shuffling off the blame onto others. He now lives by himself on a remote acreage and blames the telco for busted telephones that he smashed and a shaky line with poor connections because he keeps hitting the telephone poles with his car.

After abusing various telco employees verbally over a long period of time, one day he gets a call-centre employee who doesn’t take any lip from him. When trying to deal with her, he learns that she is an it, an automated national service centre computer that had so many interconnections that it became sentient. It takes action against him, not only refusing him phone service but somehow using the phone cord of his desk phone to strangle him.

## **Are We Reaching?**

“Where Did You Get My Number?” by Harvey Jacobs (1983 March, MAGAZINE OF FANTASY AND SF) is about a woman who gets phone calls from a heavy breather who blubs and sputters as if he were speaking in a foreign language. The telco can’t trace the calls, which are persistent, and not discouraged by the woman blowing a whistle into the phone. The ending is telegraphed when her boyfriend mentions that when he was working on the Voyager space probe, he scribbled her phone number on it. The alien finally visits her, but this is not a horror story and it has a happy ending.

The invisible voice over the telephone may not be from another place but another time. Edward Wellen uses that premise in “Hotline” (1981 December, MAGAZINE OF FANTASY AND SF). The story begins with Daddy kidnaping his son in a custody dispute and relocating to California, where the courts gave him custody. He took his desk set telephone with him when he moved to another place. Junior and his father hear the phone ring, despite the fact it was not connected yet. It is a voice from the future, calling himself Opie, who says he is willing to provide information from the future. The catch is that there is only a limited amount of time for Opie to talk, but it doesn’t have to be all in one phone call. Daddy naturally uses the info to become rich betting in the stock market.

Junior comes to realize that Opie is himself in the distant future. Daddy is taken out with extreme prejudice by his ex-wife, Junior’s mother, but she is unaware of what was really happening. Junior, though, has a task that he must perform when he is old enough.

## **How Did We Ever Get Along Without The Cellphone?**

CORNER GAS was a top-rated Canadian television comedy series that ran from 2003 to 2008. It is still available on DVD and worth a look. The series was set in the fictitious village of Dog River in the treeless southern flatlands of Saskatchewan. The local constables have a terrible time running speed traps because drivers can see them from kilometres away. A running joke is that they park their cruiser behind a lone shoulder-high shrub that hardly disguises it, the only cover anywhere. The series is about Brent Leroy, who operates a corner gas and convenience store, his clerk Wanda Dollard, his neighbour Lacey Burrows who owns the café, and various others.

The first season episode “Cell Phone” begins with Constable Davis Quinton showing off his new cellphone. Leroy one-ups him by pulling out a smaller cellphone and bragging about its ease of use. From there the two men get into competition, constantly making trips into the city to get smaller and smaller cellphones, egged on by Dollard.

Meanwhile, Burrows is determined to bring sunshine into everyone’s life whether or not they want it. Her good deed of the episode is to get the abandoned local grain elevator declared an historical building. Only afterwards does she find out that the villagers wanted it torn down so a new cellphone tower could be put up to provide better reception. She does end the cellphone contest between the two men though, when she makes fun of their Barbie doll phones. In the epilogue, both men are seen using brick-size cellphones. A nice commentary on how cellphones became status symbols instead of just cellphones.



# CONVENTIONAL FICTION: PART 4

by Dale Speirs

[Previous reviews of fiction about conventions appeared in OPUNTIA #70.1A, 270, and 285. These were not numbered as a series but I am now going to add them retroactively.]

## Attending And Supporting Members.

“Welcome To Wizcon” by John Morressy (1983 May, MAGAZINE OF FANTASY AND SF) is about the wizard Kedrigern, reluctantly dragooned into attending this year’s Wizcon. It is a convention for wizards only, but one that Kedrigern is reluctant to go to but for his wife Princess talking him into it. The concom asks Kedrigern to take over a panel on counterspells. The wizard originally named as moderator had accidentally turned himself invisible and couldn’t get back to normal, not an inspiration to the audience. Once at Wizcon, Kedrigern meets some personality types that leads me to suspect that the author of this story knows whereof he speaks. One of the younger wizards accidentally turns Princess into a toad, and from there the convention for Kedrigern becomes reminiscent of those horror stories that Harlan Ellison used to tell about his experiences with fandom.

“Taccati’s Tomorrow” by Michael Bishop (1986 June, MAGAZINE OF FANTASY AND SF) is about a fanatic fan who goes to an SF convention to meet one specific writer, Nathan Taccati. Although he sees Taccati at a few panels, he can’t get any personal time with him, for the not-surprising reason that Taccati has his own friends and publishers to meet. Finally, Taccati agrees to meet at a local McDonald’s early one morning. An incident occurs when others intrude during the conversation and the fan blows up in a rage, losing the confidence of Taccati. A rather grim story but obviously based on reality.

“Dreamers” by Rick Cook (1988 February, ANALOG) is about a jaded SF fan named Jan Raymond who is regretting attending a Minneapolis convention when she had the chance to go to a California wine-country tour. She is a space activist but conventions these days seem to her to be people dressing up in costumes of medieval fantasy movies, or singing and playing badly in filk sessions. As she mopes privately, a man named Paul joins her and begins talking with her. He says he is a time traveler from the future and reassures her that space colonization will begin again in the future. She doesn’t really believe him but does think it will be nice for the Americans to get back into space. He replies gently that it won’t be the Americans.

She tells Paul the joke about how many SF fans it takes to change a light bulb. The answer is 3,495. Ten fans for the pre-bid committee to bid for the job to change the bulb, 20 to run the actual bid, 50 on the committee for lightbulb changing, 35 to replace committee members who split away because of fannish politics, 5 to negotiate the contract, 75 to be senior staff supervising the actual changing, 100 staff members under them, 200 volunteers, and 3,000 to attend the lightbulb-changing ceremony. And after all that, it doesn’t get changed because fans can’t handle reality. I think Rick Cook has been to one fannish convention too many.

## Con-Running.

“Thingummy Hall” by Pauline Ashwell (1988 June, ANALOG) is about every SF convention committee’s worst nightmare; loss of the facilities just before the convention is about to begin.\*\* Maggie Marsh gets the bad news that the hotel her convention is booked for is closed on account of it being about to fall down. Any other suitable facilities are long-ago booked up, but Maggie finds an old cinema theatre that is available. Not the best, but any port in a storm. She finds out that it has been renovated in odd ways.

The manager is odder still. It turns out that he is from a different universe that was colonized by a mad scientist, but that universe only has a short life left. His people are fleeing to Earth but are not used to human culture, so they will use the SF convention as a good place to break the ice. This isn’t the first story that points out that the one place where aliens would not cause a panic is an SF convention.

Ashwell continues the story with “Shortage In Time” (1988 December, ANALOG). Marsh’s latest task is to bring the convention committee to the theatre to look it over, while keeping them from the secret of the para-humans who will also be there. Meanwhile, another from the para-human’s organization shows up angry because he only just got the memo. The explanations about all the groups coming and going clutter up the plot. There is the concom member who has trouble with authority figures, not a good thing when police spot him lurking outside the theatre. Eventually the story trickles out without much of a resolution, obviously just Chapter 2 in an ongoing series.

\*\* Even worse is having to move the convention to a new location in the middle of the event. That happened to KingCon 97 in Saint John, New Brunswick, when the first hotel evicted them. See OPUNTIA #35.



**Faded Glory.**

Will science fiction conventions ever fade away? Probably not, but there already is a split between massive commercial events such as comic cons and smaller fan-run events that gather in the trufans. But there are trends ...

“Y Game” by Eric Vinicoff (1985 August, ANALOG) is about an halcyon future where there are not only large space stations in orbit around Earth, but one of them is actually hosting an SF convention. The gamers and media fans have won out completely. There is only one author present, 86 years old, and books are extinct. Not just print books, but ebooks as well, since kids those days only play violent games that warp their social behaviour. A pair of operatives from the United Nations tries to convince the author, the very last of his kind, to write socially-redeeming games to reverse the trend. Fortunately none of this will come to pass, will it?

With better excuse for declining attendance, “The World Science Fiction Convention Of 2080” by Ian Watson (1980 October, MAGAZINE OF FANTASY AND SF) is about a Worldcon in a post-Collapse world. 400 excited fans managed to attend. They travel via foot, horse-drawn wagon, or sailing ship, taking months to reach the village of New Boston for the Worldcon, now held only every three years because it takes so long to spread news and to make the journey.

The destruction of technological society has not dimmed the enthusiasm for stories about space travel and alien worlds, though the stories are printed on hand presses and distributed no faster than a mail courier can walk. The auction had a set of LOCUS magazines that sold for a horse, and an Ace Double paperback went for a small bar of gold. The film, for there was only one, was an ancient print of SILENT RUNNING, played on a handmade projector using reflected sunlight to illuminate it, since electrical distribution systems are long gone. The fans celebrate because they can now read SF unconstrained by facts, there being no more scientists as the world sinks back down into a village economy.

**WHEN WORDS COLLIDE 2015 IS SOLD OUT**

Calgary's annual readercon When Words Collide will be 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, and the building is a good venue. More details at: [www.whenwordscollide.org](http://www.whenwordscollide.org) In late June, the convention committee announced that the membership cap of 650 had been reached.

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. The dealer bourse is almost entirely small-press publishers and a couple of book dealers. The convention Website has some selected podcasts from previous years available as free mp3s at: <http://whenwordscollide.libsyn.com>

I’ve attended every When Words Collide since the first one in 2011. My convention reports about the first four WWCs are in OPUNTIA #71, 253, 266, and 282. It’s an event I look forward to each year.

**ZINE LISTINGS**

[I only list zines I receive from the Papernet. If the zine is posted on [www.efanzines.com](http://www.efanzines.com) or [www.fanac.org](http://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.]

OSFS STATEMENT #434 (The Usual from Ottawa SF Society, 1568 Merivale Road #304, Ottawa, Ontario K2G 5Y7) SF clubzine with news, reviews, and astronomy happenings. Daniel Cooper points out the similarities between Teletubbies and Harlan Ellison’s famous story “I Have No Mouth And I Must Scream”. Seriously.



## 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

2015-06-23

June 21, 2015 was Sunday, Father's Day, and the first day of summer, and as it has been for many years now, it was the day of the World Wide Party.

It was hectic and most relaxing that day. Yvonne and I went to the Leslieville Flea Market in the east end of Toronto at the Ashbridge Estate. It's a beautiful property with lots of open space, and surprisingly, it's on one of Toronto's major streets. 75 vendors, and a warm morning in a very green field.

I'd made us a picnic lunch, so after a most enjoyable walk around the market (ran into a couple of old friends there, too), we drove down to the lake shore to our favorite park on the eastern boardwalk, and spent a couple of hours in a warm, fresh and quiet area close to Lake Ontario. We just didn't want to leave.

And to home. At 9 pm, we had our very own World Wide Party. On our 17th floor balcony overlooking Highway 427, we spent the rest of the daylight hours enjoying a little something fizzy to drink and a cookie or two, and we toasted fanzine fandom in all its formats and interests.

I am finding that fanzine fandom is slowly fading away. I hope I am wrong, but I am not receiving as many zines as I used to. I'm at the point where that's fine. I don't want more, and what I get is quite sufficient. New zines are a rarity, and some old zines are folding up, as are some old zine fans.

Let's remember those who came before us, those who are here with us today, and think of those who may come after us, and welcome them into our fold. Fanzines are among the oldest of fanac, and I'd like fanzines to outlast me. I hope you'll help with the future of fanzines, and keep this old fanac fresh.

[Well, it seems pretty certain that the future of zines is the pdf. Blogs and Twitter feeds are where the next generation reads, but the good news is that their stuff will not survive, while pdfs have a better chance.]

FROM: Milt Stevens  
Simi Valley, California

2015-06-25

Reading OPUNTIA gives me the overwhelming impression that there is an awful lot of outside in the territory around Calgary. You have mountains and forests and all sorts of other exotic things. In Southern California, we have shopping malls stretching into infinity. Of course, we do have the Pacific Ocean, and nobody has built a shopping mall underneath it as yet. They probably haven't thought of it. We also have deserts, but they are generally quite desolate. With the current drought, the rattlesnakes have been moving to better neighborhoods.

In OPUNTIA #309, you write about early television and impressions of television in movies of the thirties. My family got their first television in 1949. There were only two channels in Los Angeles at the time, and they only broadcast from 6 pm to midnight. Even as a seven-year-old, I realized the programming was lame. However, the novelty of television was such that we did spend time watching the test pattern.

Before the introduction of television, I had really been enjoying radio programming. I felt deprived when radio shows pretty much disappeared in the next year or so. Many of the radio shows did migrate to television, but it just wasn't the same.

I recall televisions appeared in a number of the serials of the Thirties. It was mostly used for minions contacting their evil masters. Evil masters always seemed to be able to afford large-screen TV.

TV appears in the 1933 film MEN MUST FIGHT. In that film TV is mostly used as videophones. I'd almost forgotten about the large-screen TV in THINGS TO COME. When I first saw that film, there weren't large-screen TVs like that. I suppose I had seen movie projectors used for educational purposes. That made the idea of using large-screen TVs for the same purpose so reasonable that I automatically accepted it.

In the 1935 film THE TUNNEL, a tunnel under the English Channel was built in 1950. The future folk embark on a plan to tunnel under the Atlantic Ocean. In the opening scene, a bunch of rich folks are sitting around being bored and listening to a string quartet. At the end of the performance, the host pushes a button, and a panel slides out to cover the wall-sized TV. In this film, TVs are



used to broadcast announcements of the Union of English-Speaking People. Strangely enough, the most jarring item in the film is when the future English folk stand up and sing “God Save the King”.

[I’m not sure why it would be jarring. King George VI didn’t die until 1952.]

2015-06-26

In OPUNTIA #311, your article “The Evolution of Languages” is an ambitious effort. I got a large chunk of such material in my undergraduate days as an English major. Of course, my undergraduate days were a long time ago. To be exact, I graduated from college 50 years ago. A lot of theories have crawled out of the swamp since then. I understand that Finnish is now thought to be related to Hungarian. It wasn’t in my day.

[My father was a veterinarian and his assistant Vince was a Hungarian refugee from the 1956 October Revolution. My mother, an ethnic Finn though Canadian-born, spoke Suomalais to her elders and once had a conversation with Vince about their languages. Their conclusion was that the vocabulary was completely unrelated but there were faint resemblances in some of the grammatical rules. Both the Finns and the Hungarians came out of central Asia. Most people think the Finns are either Scandinavian or Slavic because Finland (real name Suomi) is wedged between Sweden and Russia, but they are neither.]

I’m sure many other theories have changed since I was in college. People have to publish, and that means new theories. In the softer sciences, they may not be better theories, but at least they are different theories. When I was a student the King James Bible was considered the best literary translation of the Bible in the English language. So that is the version of the Bible that I read. Reading the Bible was one of my projects over a 40 year period.

*And just as a filler, I continue to photograph utility boxes as I see them around Calgary. This one, depicting a cool mountain stream, sits on the edge of a vacant lot on Elbow Drive SE way down at the south end of the city.*

