OPUNTIA 325

Halloween 2015

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EDGAR GALLOPING POE: PART 1

by Dale Speirs

Decades ago, I was at a rodeo watching the infield events when the announcer said that the bronco in the next round was named Edgar Galloping Poe. That horse has long since gone to the Great Pasture In The Sky, but its name has stuck in my mind ever since. Since this is the Halloween issue, why not Poe?

Below is the Alberta ghost town of Poe, all that remains.

The extinct hamlet of Poe is on Highway 14, halfway between the villages of Ryley and Holden, about an hour's drive east of Edmonton. In 1909, the Grand Trunk Railway extended a line across the district and one of the sidings was named Poe, specifically after the famous mystery writer. That year was the birth centennial of Edgar Allan Poe, born 1809-01-29, and one of the railroad executives was a literary man. A grain elevator was established and a hamlet grew up around the siding.

The Poe post office opened in 1912 and was in a general store until the Great Depression put the store out of business in 1935. The proof strike of the postmark is seen at left. After the store closed in 1935, the post office was in the postmaster's house for seven years. Charlie Kail opened a new store in 1942 and his wife Esther became postmaster.

Mrs. Helen S. Roloff held the position from 1951-10-01 until 1955-12-27. The last postmaster was August Auch until the post office finally closed on 1964-01-29, done to death by good roads.

Once Highway 14 came into existence, Poe was doomed as a viable hamlet. Holden is only five minutes drive east of it and Ryley is five minutes west of it, both on the same side of the same highway, so there was simply no need for Poe. The land and grain elevator at Poe have reverted to private ownership of a farmer, and not even a traffic sign indicates the place name. Even the railroad siding is gone, displaced by sidings at Ryley and Holden. On the previous page is a photo I took in 2011 of Poe. The only reason I found it was by referring to topographical maps. The grain elevator is used by the farmer to store his crops, and the area at left of photo is where the hamlet used to be.

Edgar Stylistic Poe.

At the 2015 When Words Collide, the Calgary readercon, I was in the dealer bourse (books only and nothing but) when I came across an anthology edited by Nancy Kilpatrick and Caro Soles titled nEVERMORE (the first letter deliberately lower-case by the editors), freshly published with stories and pastiches in the style of Edgar Allan Poe. It starts off with a learned essay briefly summarizing Poe's life and times, and his influence on subsequent generations. Nothing new in the way of information but I suppose it was written for the two book buyers who didn't know who Poe was.

The first story is "The Gold Bug Conundrum" by Chelsea Quinn Yarbro, and follows up Poe's story about the gold bug. It is about a man who decides that Poe must have heard a legend about the gold bug. He uses that as a basis to track down the mysterious island and find a hidden chest with an alien skull. The weather begins deteriorating, so he blithely leaves the chest behind because it was too much trouble to carry away, thinking to come back later at a more convenient time. Lightning strikes the old house where he left the chest and sets it on fire. The story comes to an unsatisfactory end as it is implausible that a fanatic who had been searching for his holy grail would then treat it so casually after finding it. It could have been done better.

"Street Of The Dead House" by Robert Lopresti interprets the murders in the Rue Morgue from the orangutang's point of view. Supposedly the murders were done by an escaped wild ape, but in this version the ape intended to steal the gold in the house. It had been treated by a mad scientist to boost its intelligence and it could communicate by sign language. The back story is nicely developed and meshes into Poe's version quite well.

"Noami" by Christopher Rice is an update of "The Tell-Tale Heart" for modern times. It is about a girl who was bullied to death by her classmates. In particular, they made fun of her cellphone's ringtone, a bouncy extract from a pop song. After her suicide, the bullies keep hearing that ringtone wherever they go, driving them to suicide. The story starts off with a bit too much angst but suddenly comes together to a chilling conclusion. This is how Poe would have written the story were he alive today.

"Finding Ulalume" by Lisa Morton is based on Poe's poem "Ulalume". In her foreword, the author says she chose that poem as the basis for her story because it is the only Poe literary work that mentions Halloween. The story is a "don't

go into the dark woods" horror piece. After a big buildup, it suddenly ends with a twist that doesn't work, when the protagonist suddenly remembers a past life after finding a tomb by a mysterious lake. A cheat ending that disappoints.

"Obsession With The Blood-Stained Door" by Rick Chiantaretto is supposedly based on the Amontillado story but I don't see the connection. The protagonist wanders into a deserted old mansion, can't find his way out, and is trapped within. He obsesses over a locked room and finally makes his way into it, at which point the story ends. While unable to escape the mansion, as surely as if he had been bricked in, he has not sinned against another but just seems to be a helpless victim of capricious fate.

Further on in the anthology, but which I will review here, is another rewrite of Amontillado, this time much better, albeit with an unnecessary twist ending that doesn't work. "The Masques Of Amanda Llado" by Thomas S. Roche begins with a man named Montresor escorting his ex-boss Ford Donato into the third sub-basement of a rental storage building. Montresor worked for Donato at a dot.com startup. It fizzled out three days before launching its Website because Donato and his fellow executives burned through all the cash in high living while Montresor and others slaved to make the site work.

Sworn to revenge, Montresor lures Donato down to a storage unit on the pretext of showing him some collectible music records. Clamp go the leg irons while Donato is inspecting the records, slam goes the bin door, and in third sub-basements, no one can hear you scream. The justifications that Montresor uses to do the deed are well developed and carry the story, but unfortunately the author goes one step too far and works in an unnecessary twist ending.

"The Lighthouse" by Barbara Fradkin, rewriting the unfinished Poe story of the same name. is set at a Newfoundland lighthouse in 1942, when U-boats took a terrible toll in the Gulf of Saint Lawrence. A lighthouse keeper is paranoid, like all other Newfies, about a German invasion. In his case, however, the paranoia is justified when a German comes ashore in a dinghy, but only to defect. Having taken care of that crisis, the lighthouse keeper is all alone on a dark and stormy night when he notices the doorknob turning ...

"Atargatis" by Robert Bose was inspired by the author's sight of a crumbling old manor house on the cliffs of Saanich Peninsula, Vancouver Island. Combining this with "Fall Of The House Of Usher" produces a story about a young woman who inherits said crumbling manor from her great-grandfather. He also gave her a strange key but it doesn't seem to open anything. Then one day a door is pulled out of the sea below the house. When set in a frame, the key unlocks the door, which opens out onto a strange world with twin suns. As with "Finding Ulalume" mentioned above, the story is ruined by ending with the protagonist suddenly remembering her past life as an alien goddess. This is yet another illustration as to why deus ex machina endings don't work.

"The Ravens Of Consequence" by Carol Weekes and Michael Kelly (do I have to mention what Poe piece it is based on?) is the interior monologue of a man who has drifted into insanity or, at the very least, is profoundly disturbed as he mourns his lost love. While a reasonably good psychological tale, the plot wobbles noticeably between different possibilities, distracting the reader from the narrative. The story also went on a page or two longer than it should have, but then rushes to a contrived ending, as if the authors had written themselves into a corner.

"Annabel Lee" by Nancy Holder is a fantasy romance dripping with florid verbosity and syrupy love yearnings. I skimmed it at high speed.

"Dinner With Mamalou" by J. Madison Davis attempts to duplicate Poe's description of rotting environments as if it were a homage but this story could have been published in any mystery anthology. A group of petro-executives come out to a Louisiana bayou whose denizens are upset by fracking operations. They meet with the local leader, an old crone named Mamalou, who serves a sumptuous meal with sweet iced tea. She poisons the tea with antifreeze and kills them all, then feeds them to the alligators.

"The Deave Lane" by Michael Jecks is about an archaeologist investigating what is supposed to be a Bronze Age body found in the Dartmoor bogs but turns out to be a modern murder victim. The culprits are from a cult who kidnap hikers on the moor, put them alive into a stone sarcophagus as a sacrifice, and after they are dead re-inter them in the bogs. The theme of the story is the fear and terror a la Pit and the Pendulum. Then the archaeologist gets a personal experience of that terror. The ending was somewhat forced, with a lucky rescue and exposure of the cultists.

"133" by Richard Christian Matheson is based on the Poe poem "Ligeia" about a grieving husband who brings his dead wife back to life. This short-short is surprisingly effective, and John Campbell Jr would have bought it on sight for ANALOG. A serial killer is strapped down and by various injections has to die

and be revived 133 times for each of his 133 victims, with friends and next-of-kin enjoying his death agonies.

"Afterlife" by William F. Nolan, Jason V. Brock, and Sunni K. Brock deals with the ghost of Poe, which can get no satisfaction because his last scribbles at the moment of death are holding him back from entering the next life. Collectors who chase the papers finally realize this and by sacrificing the papers on his grave see his ghost finally escape the last bonds of this world.

"The Drowning City" by Loren Rhoads is based on Poe's description of Venice. It is about a siren, the mythological kind whose singing lures people to their death, which occasionally appears in Venice. A rather neat method of destroying her was to aim a microphone at her and a transmitter that analysed her singing and then deleted the killer harmonics, rendering her vocals useless. The twist was that the original singing analyzed by the equipment was left as a digital file, and you know how hard it is to eliminate that sort of thing once it gets out onto the Internet.

"The Orange Cat" by Kelley Armstrong changes the colour of Poe's famous cat and moves the story to modern-day Chicago. A defense attorney is hired by a client who can't seem to be rid of his wife's one-eyed orange cat that keeps staring at him. He takes it to animal shelters but it magically reappears back home. It is euthanased but comes back home. Murder is done and the client gets a plea bargain, thinking that jail will be a surcease from the cat. But the cat will be waiting for him when he gets out.

"The Inheritance" by Jane Petersen Burfield concerns a woman who inherits a manor house but has to deal with two cousins who are trying to overturn the will. Local lore had it that Poe slept there in 1830 and about as many references to ravens as possible are jammed into the story. The woman is protected from her cousins' dirty dealings by a flock of ravens.

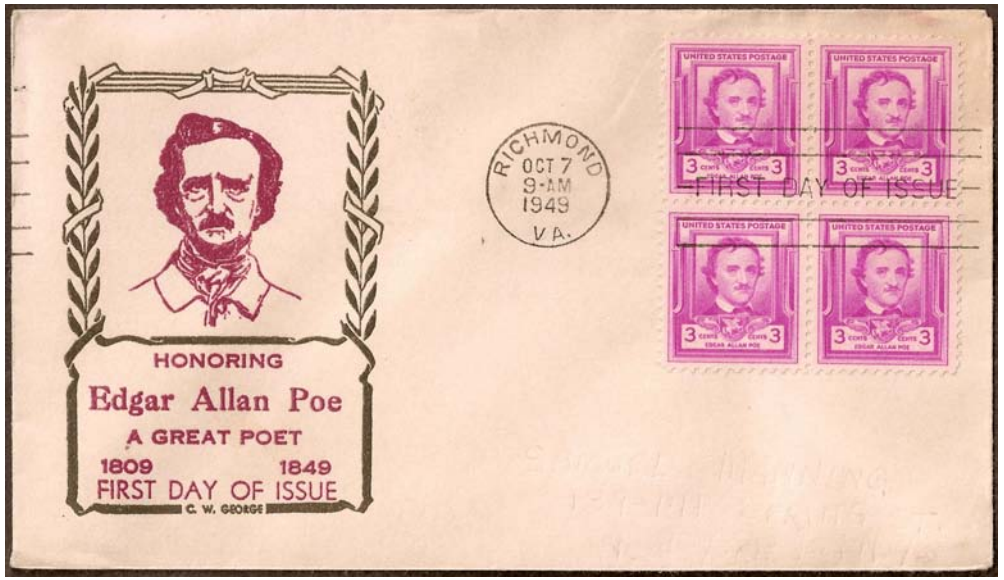
"Sympathetic Impulses" by David McDonald claims to be in the spirit of Poe's horror but I don't see it. It's just a medieval fantasy with magic used to evade the torture of Spanish Inquisitors. There is a twist ending that can be seen coming a page or two ahead.

"Asylum" by Colleen Anderson makes use of a phrase that I was surprised to learn that Poe invented, the one about the lunatics being in charge of the asylum. The protagonist visits an asylum, is trapped by the inmates, but turns the table in an implausible twist ending. Implausible because there was no foreshadowing that the protagonist had the particular abilities she revealed in the last paragraph.

"The Return Of Berenice" by Tanith Lee is about the guilt of a man who desecrated his wife's corpse. He is subsequently haunted by it until he goes insane. Much angst. Poe did it as well, so we hardly need a rewrite.

"The Eye Of Heaven" by Margaret Atwood was written by her, she says in the foreword, when she was sixteen and heavily influenced by having just read the collected works of Poe. If you haven't heard of her, she is the grand dame of Canadian literature, and we are all supposed to bow and genuflect in her direction whenever she passes by. The story is a short-short about a man who doesn't like eyes staring at him, tracing back to a childhood trauma when fishing. He becomes a serial killer and finally goes insane when he thinks the Sun is an eye staring at him. Atwood herself admits it wasn't one of her best.

"The Opium Eater" by David Morrell is about Thomas De Quincey, an English author said to be an influence on Poe. The story isn't particularly relevant or even in the Poe style, being a narration of De Quincey telling of his time in the Lake District and how he ended up an opium addict.



Edgar Tripartite Poe.

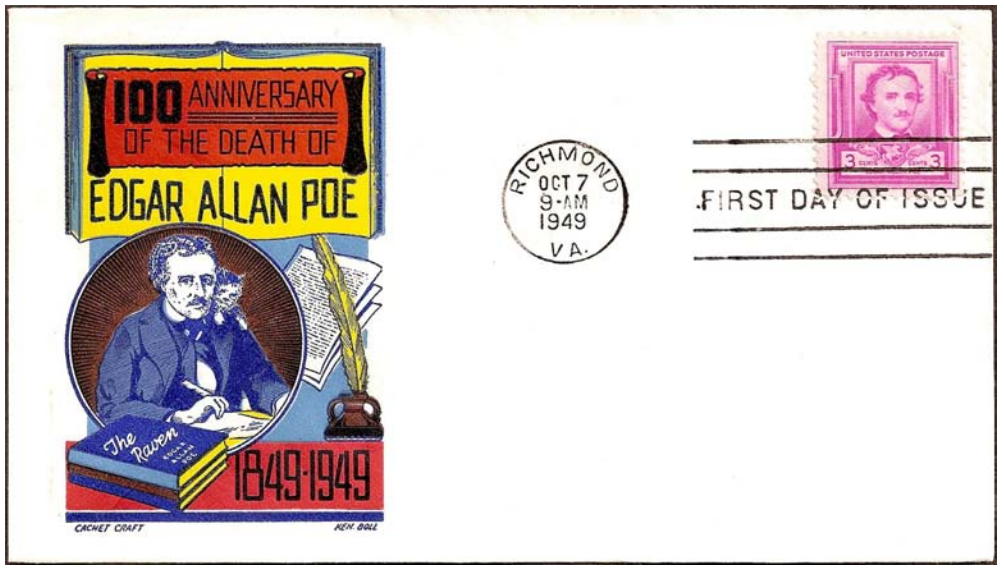
THE EDGAR ALLAN POE BEDSIDE COMPANION (1980) is an anthology edited by Peter Haining in three sections. The first is of three stories acknowledged by Poe himself as an influence on his writing, followed by three seldom-printed stories of Poe, and finally three Poe-inspired stories.

The first section begins with "The Dead Alive" by an unknown author, from the October 1821 issue of BLACKWOOD'S MAGAZINE. It is the narrative of a man in a paralytic trance who was mistakenly buried alive, and saved only by grave robbers who sold corpses to medical schools. In those days it did happen occasionally that someone was buried alive while paralyzed from a stroke, then awoke inside the coffin before suffocating. There are several attested reports of this happening over the years. Nowadays if the supposed cause of death doesn't kill, the formaldehyde injected by the undertakers will.

"The Man In The Bell" (1821) by William Maginn was specifically mentioned by Poe in a review he wrote. The story is about a man who is accidentally trapped in a church belfry. The giant bell begins ringing and the sound drives him insane. "The Dead Daughter" by Henry Glassford Bell is a morbid tale about a couple whose daughter dies young. Eventually another daughter is born, who grows into a duplicate, with all the same emotional damage to her parents when she dies. The point of these three stories is that their Gothic narrative inspired Poe in his writings.

The second section has three rare pieces by Poe, "A Dream", "The Journal Of Julius Rodman", and "Who Is The Murderer?". The first is a mood piece about the Roman soldier who drove the nails into Jesus upon the Cross, and what happened later at the Resurrection. The second is an imagined narrative of an 1840 journey across the Rocky Mountains, in those days still mostly terra incognita. It is incomplete because Poe quarreled with his editor as it was being serialized and was fired before he could finish it. The third story was written in between the Rue Morgue and Marie Roget stories. It is a straightforward account of a murder and the trial. The jury said "Not Guilty", but Poe asks his readers how they would decide. All the facts and testimony are presented, with no cheating by withholding certain information as many mystery stories do.

The third section of this book starts off with "The Fire Fiend" by Charles Gardette, a parody of "The Raven" originally passed off as an original Poe story before the hoax was revealed. "The Lighthouse" is an unfinished story by Poe that was completed by Robert Bloch (of PSYCHO fame). It is about a beast summoned from the deeps by a lighthouse keeper. "The Mad Trist" by Robert Haining (brother of the editor) originates from that sad business with the Usher family and explains what happened to a book mentioned in the Poe story.



Edgar MacGuffin Poe.

Alfred Hitchcock defined a MacGuffin as an object that everyone in a movie or story was chasing after. It didn't matter what it was. Most MacGuffin stories could interchange stolen diamonds with the Ark of the Covenant or the Sacred Knickknack of Qwerty, and still read the same.

DANGER, DOCTOR DANFIELD was an old-time radio show about a psychologist named Daniel Danfield who spent most of his time barging into police investigations and solving the crime. (The shows are available as free mp3s from www.archive.org) The 1946-10-27 episode "Edgar Allan Poe Manuscript" used the said manuscript as the MacGuffin of the mystery.

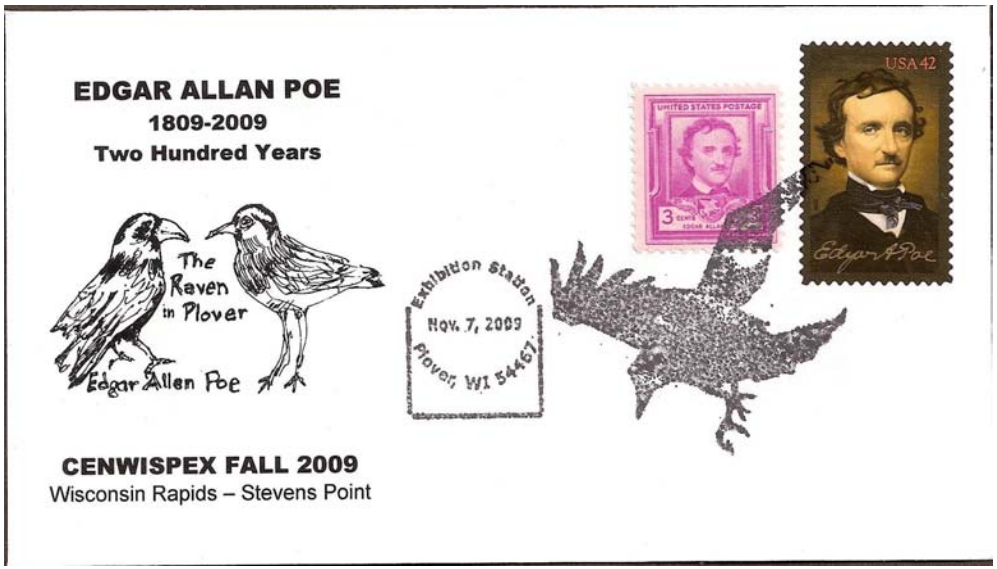
A collector is found dead, supposedly of a heart attack, but Danfield suspects murder. Of course he does, otherwise there wouldn't be an episode. It turns out the manuscript was forged, and the murderer killed the collector who had found him out and was going to expose him. The killer had practiced faking Poe's handwriting for years before attempting the forgery, so much so that his own

handwriting became like Poe's from force of habit. Danfield therefore identifies the murderer by snooping through everyone's papers and spotting the desk where normal documents were also in Poe's script.

THE GHOST AND THE DEAD MAN'S LIBRARY (2006) is a cozy mystery series involving bookseller Penelope Thornton-McClure. Her bookstore is haunted by the ghost of Jack Shepard, a private detective who was murdered in it in 1946 (before Penelope's time) and can only be heard by her. He is full of advice, she is a single mom, and there is always a dead body.

This particular novel concerns the purchase of a rare edition of Poe's works, a set of thirteen volumes. Supposedly the set contains clues to a treasure. The volumes are sold off singly. Someone wants to reassemble the set the hard way, because the buyers keep turning up dead and the books keep turning up missing.

After about one corpse every second chapter, the murder is finally solved by Miss Marple, pardon me, Penelope. The treasure turns out to be a previously unknown photograph of Poe, worth good money in reproduction royalties. Judging this as a cozy mystery, it is an average read but okay for its sub-genre.



ZOMBIES IN THE NEWS

The weekend after Thanksgiving is always CALTAPEX, the annual stamp show of the Calgary Philatelic Society, in which I am heavily involved. It is also the weekend that Cowtown zombie fans have their events, not so much a convention as a scattering of gatherings. It happened that this year CALTAPEX was held at the west end of downtown 7 Avenue South in the Kerby Centre, while the zombie fans had a gathering at the east end of 7 Avenue in the Olympic Plaza. When I took the LRT into the core for a quick bite to eat, there were some costumed fans at the Kerby station trying to find their way, so I pointed them down the line. I never made it to the Olympic Plaza, being busy with philatelic matters.

In any event, I've never liked zombie stories, the modern versions of which are as far detached from the original Haitian zombies as sparkly emo vampires are from Bram Stoker's original book. The Calgary zombie fans are not at all from science fiction, but are either cosplayers or just fell in with friends doing it and have never actually seen or read the stuff. They just like wearing makeup and strutting up and down the sidewalks. In this, they are much like Calgary steampunkers. I occasionally talk to steampunks and find that not only have none of them read the literature, they had no idea it existed. They are costumers, nothing else.

Sunday of the CALTAPEX weekend, I skimmed the news feed on my smartphone and spotted an item about shootings the previous day, October 17, at Zombicon in Fort Myers, Florida. One dead and four injured. The police said the crowd was 20,000 in size, so this is obviously not a real convention but just a specialized mob of cosplayers like the comic con crowds. It is a tragedy though, that cosplayers couldn't enjoy themselves without some expletive with rage control problems ruining it for everyone.

At the risk of being called facetious and unfeeling, I wonder how much difficulty the paramedics had in sorting out the dead and wounded from the cosplayers, and then doing the initial evaluation of the patients' conditions. If they were dripping blood, was that a real wound or makeup? When a first-responder arrives on a scene, he is trained to immediately do an initial visual check to ascertain any immediate hazards and determine how many victims there are. On a street filled with made-up zombies dripping blood, there must have been some confusion as to who had been shot and who was just hysterical.

BOTANICAL FICTION: PART 5
by Dale Speirs

[Parts 1 to 4 appeared in OPUNTIAs #316, 317, 320, and 323 respectively.]

Mundane Matters.

Most botanical fiction is SF or mystery but some of it is, for lack of a better word and not intended to be derogatory, mundane. Nigel Balchin had a story "The Phantom Gardener" (1965 March, THE SAINT MAGAZINE). It is about an elderly gardener who retires from an estate job. He can't stay away though, and later sneaks back and keeps maintaining the gardens without the owner catching him. I've known people like that, who didn't want to retire because they had nothing else in their lives but their work.

Dean Lambe's story "Damn Shame" (1979 September, ANALOG) is not really fiction. It is about a scientist who discovers a cure for cancer from a plant extract. He then learns that the habitat of the plant has been destroyed and the species is extinct.

This is in fact exactly why botanists are so concerned about environmental destruction, because we have no idea of what has been lost that might have been valuable. There are many species of plants now only grown in domestication because their habitats were destroyed by urbanization or deforestation. Horticulturists have hopes of someday reintroducing the plants but it can't be done unless there is habitat for them. Plants are the major source of pharmaceuticals, and it is easy to believe many species with healing alkaloids have vanished without us ever knowing what might have been.

That same issue of ANALOG also has a story "A Bit Of High Finance" by Frederick William Croft. A scientist discovers a plant that generates electricity. A power company executive tries to destroy it, but lest you think all megacorp execs are evil, a fertilizer company representative encourages the scientist. It's not always black and white.

Gregor Robinson's story "Metamorphosis" (1989 December, ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S) is not really a mystery but more of a revenge story. A man on a Caribbean island discards his native mistress unfeelingly. Her brother gets even by having him wade through swamp waters contaminated by sap from *Hippomane mancinella* (Euphorbiaceae). The tree sap permanently scars his legs with dermatitis. Now it happens that among the succulent plants I grow are some euphorbias. The sap of this family is in fact dangerous, evolved as a defense against herbivores. Whenever I prune the euphorbias, I always wear long plastic gloves to avoid any skin contact.

In the "other crimes and misdemeanors" category is Nan Hamilton's story "The Melted Sugar Glaze" (1979 December, ELLERY QUEEN'S). A rare bonsai plant is stolen by a thief, who is then mugged by a second thief wanting the plant. Turnabout is fair play.

I've Been Through The Desert.

My initial interest in horticulture developed as a teenager when I bought a cactus plant, which led me to a university degree in horticulture and a three-decade career. Cacti and other succulent plants are fascinating because of their forms and beautiful flowers. The fiction I've found on them, however, doesn't seem to acknowledge this.

The reason cacti have spines is primarily to protect themselves against herbivores. A cactus plant is basically a pot of water, certainly to be desired by desert inhabitants, whether four-legged or bipedal. Tom Godwin made use of this in "Desert Execution" (1967 July, MAN FROM U.N.C.L.E. MAGAZINE) about a kidnap victim who survives being stranded in the desert by his captors by eating water out of cacti. Basically a survivalist course.

Kevin O'Donnell Jr** had a series of novels titled THE JOURNEYS OF MCGILL FEIGHAN. The third book in the set (1982) was subtitled LAVA. It includes a sentient cactus but I didn't find it interesting. It was a continuing series about a teleporter who spent his time traveling hither and yon in search of plot coupons. Not recommended.

"The Sword Of Pell The Idiot" by Julian F. Grow (1967 April, MAGAZINE OF FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION) is a humourous story set in the American Old West. A group of locals fall into a deep hole in the centre of an old crater. They find themselves in a society of descendants of aliens whose spaceship formed the crater when it crashed centuries ago. The aliens are motile plants which use their roots for movement, and feed at night by putting roots into the ground.

** Not to be confused with K.M. O'Donnell, a pseudonym of Barry Malzberg, who also wrote SF.

Keeping Them Down On The Farm.

Agricultural fiction has never been even a sub-genre, and there were no pulp magazines devoted to spicy farm stories. Corn blight or wheat rust are serious matters but not the kind that fanboys will read stories about. Look where you will, stories are scarce about how Farmer Jones managed to get the crop in after inventing a miracle cure, having it stolen by an evil scientist, getting it back after daring adventures in the back forty, and all's well that ends well. But there are some.

Weed control can get serious. "The Ivy War" by David H. Keller (1930 May, AMAZING) is about a mutant ivy with carnivorous tendencies which spreads out from a swamp-hole in England, covering the land with thick branches that grow back faster than it can be pruned. The ivy spreads around the world, and this story tells its saga in Pennsylvania, particularly the battle at Philadelphia. Chopping and burning don't control it, and it buries the city under vegetation. Finally someone thinks up a translocatable poison that is injected into the encroaching stems and circulated through the plants, killing the whole thing. This is one of those idiot plots without which the story cannot exist. Any horticulturist back then would have suggested an injected toxin, thus saving the world much trouble and work as soon as the problem was noted, instead of near destruction of civilization before someone thought of it. Of course the story would have been about three pages long.

Clifford Simak's "Green Thumb" (1954 July, GALAXY) is about a plant-like alien stranded in a rural county. The local agricultural agent befriends it, communicates via empathy, and teaches it mechanical repairs. The alien is finally rescued by fellow beings six months later.

John Jakes's story "A Cabbage Named Sam" (1961 October, FANTASTIC) was SF when it was first written but today is about the mundane world. The story is about a man who falls into an automated cabbage processing factory and struggles to stay alive while trapped in the machinery. Automation of warehouses and factories has made tremendous strides in the last decade, to the point where manufacturers can bring back their production from Mexico and China and still not have to hire overpaid workers. Farmers have been trying to replace stoop labour for decades with vegetable harvesting machines, and are making steady progress.

"The Fangs Of The Trees" by Robert Silverberg (1968 October, MAGAZINE OF FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION) is about a farmer who has an orchard of sentient trees that give juicy fruit. Due to a rust infection, he has to burn some of them out, not an easy task emotionally. This is why farm children are taught to view livestock impersonally because eventually we would be sitting down at the dinner table and eating them.

Wallace MacFarlane went "Down On The Farm" (1969 October, WORLDS OF IF). The story is about a planet where a crop called brabbage is grown, a vegetable which produces good food if harvested before seeding out. The seeds are toxic and jagged, produced in vast quantities, and a serious problem. Three agronomists on the planet are balked by a city mayor who tries to renege on a large debt he owes them. They retaliate by planting brabbage around his city and get settlement of the debt. John Campbell Jr would have liked this story; the techies get their revenge on the politicos.

Robert Bloch takes a run at giant mushrooms in his story "The Mad Scientist" (1947 September, FANTASTIC ADVENTURES), albeit with tongue in cheek. Rick Hanson, an SF writer, is having an affair with Sheila, wife of resident mad scientist Professor Lippert. The latter is doing some big work in hydroponics, and is oblivious to the other two sides in the love triangle. Rick and Sheila decide to clear the inconvenient professor out of the way by mixing some powdered poisonous mushrooms into his daily gin and tonic.

Hanson picks fresh mushrooms nearby but as he is about to prepare them, the Professor unexpectedly arrives and Hanson hides them in a drawer. He can't get back to them but the Professor finds them and uses them to synthesize giant puffballs that release toxic powders. He is now aware of what Rick and Sheila are doing, and locks them into the laboratory just as the puffballs explode and kill them. An interesting switcheroo on the usual mad scientist story.

Stephen L. Burns has a humourous story "Green Fuse" (1992 April, ANALOG) set in Gnatswarm, Oregon, a lumbering town. Bertha D. Nation, a direct

descendent of Carrie, works for a very minor spy agency called UPIGS, so named by a careless Washington, D.C., bureaucrat who didn't stop to think what acronym the Unusual Phenomenon Investigation Service would form. (The "G" was added from the middle of the word "Investigation" to try and reduce the damage but the result wasn't much better.)

UPIGS has to investigate a complaint from a rapacious forest company that wants to clearcut Oregon. Their local mad scientist has invented a method to make plants grow into giants in days, and applied it around the company headquarters. He uses a virus to alter the seed or sprout of a plant to over-clock it, that is, get its metabolism running many times faster and thus its growth. It does require huge amounts of fertilizer, which limits the spread. As a result, staff are running weedwhackers continuously, and few people can find the building because it is so overgrown. It all boils down to foiling the evil lumberman and saving a rare patch of redwoods.

"Where There's Smoke" by Larry Eisenberg (1974 June, GALAXY) is a humourous story about a plant breeder working on tobacco. He produces tobacco plants which produce smoke that is heavier than air, so that the smoke falls to the ground instead of polluting the air. That would be fine if you lived or worked in a single-story building, but I wouldn't want to be on a lower floor in a skyscraper.

Algae run amok is a popular topic for fiction than you might think. I did a special review of some of these stories in OPUNTIA #51.1B. Another one I have since come across is "A Message To The King Of Brobdingnag" by Richard Cowper (1984 May, MAGAZINE OF FANTASY AND SF). Some plant breeders have successfully created bacteria that not only fix nitrogen but also phosphate. Test plots on crops are successful, so field trials are initiated in several places around the world. The beneficial genes leak out and are absorbed by unicellular algae, which begin to grow unchecked and rapidly spread over the world to cause a green doomsday. This short story is a variation of the Frankenstein theme, that there are things we were never meant to know.

I found this story difficult to believe. The author says the algae doubles every fifteen minutes, but even with optimal nutrient supply this couldn't happen. Photosynthetic metabolism isn't that fast. Also, other nutrients would limit growth to some extent. That is why, in the real world, red tides of algae soon go away. As a first-year horticulture student in university, one of the basic principles of plant nutrition I was taught was Liebig's Law of the Minimum. It states that plant yield is limited by the least available nutrient it needs, even if all the other nutrients are abundant. Algae may bloom if nitrogen and phosphorous are abundant, but if magnesium (the central atom of chlorophyll), iron (an essential element for photosynthetic development), or some other nutrient supply is used up, then the algal growth will stop.

Every country has plant and animal quarantine rules, and space will be no different. "A Great Day For The Irish" by Alice M. Lightner (1960 May, WORLDS OF IF) is about a plant quarantine specialist emigrating to a new planet. He has trouble with a passenger trying to import infested shamrocks. A basic conflict story.

Biochemwarfare has not been used against crops because of the difficulty in controlling the spread, leading to the possibility of a disease coming back at the people who spread it.

There is another aspect, illustrated in the story "Unlimited Warfare" by Hayford Peirce (1974 November, ANALOG). It is the era when Britain and France were still important nations on the world stage, and were feuding about the Common Market. The British decide to get even with the French by secretly introducing grape pests and diseases to destroy the vineyards. The French way of life would thus be disrupted twofold, once by the economic loss and mass unemployment from the death of the wine industry, and secondly by depriving the French of their favourite tipple. The French can't prove anything against the British, so they retaliate by spreading a virus that destroys all tea plants. The British economy collapses as they have to go without their accustomed beverage.

SEEN IN THE LITERATURE

Letsch, D. (2015) **R.A. Daly's early model of seafloor generation 40 years before the Vine–Matthews hypothesis: an outstanding theoretical achievement inspired by field work on St. Helena in 1921–1922.** CANADIAN JOURNAL OF EARTH SCIENCES 52:893–902

Author's abstract: "*Large-scale lateral mobility of the Earth's lithosphere (mobilism) was a hotly debated issue in Earth Sciences during some two decades following publication of Wegener's (1912) theory of continental displacement. The final acceptance of lithospheric mobility was brought about with the plate tectonics revolution during the late 1960s. Support for mobilism was rather popular in certain European countries during the 1920s, whereas the reactions in North America were mostly hostile. One of the very few influential mobilists in the New World was Reginald Aldworth Daly of Harvard University. The present paper discusses his model of continental displacement which is very remarkable in many aspects. We focus on the hitherto neglected fact that Daly proposed in the mid-1920s a mechanism to create oceanic crust which would have been totally consistent with the Vine-Matthews hypothesis of seafloor generation published in 1963. It is furthermore suggested that Daly's geotectonic proposals were inspired by small-scale analogues of lava flows and multiple dike swarms he observed on Atlantic islands such as St. Helena and Ascension. His model to account for the construction of new oceanic crust is reminiscent of the models of Vine and Moores (1972) and Cann (1970) which eventually led to the "Penrose-definition" of ophiolites in 1972. As these scientists arrived at their conclusions absolutely independently of Daly, this episode is an instructive example of a multiple or repeated discovery in the Earth Sciences which renders it difficult to believe certain theories of science which assume scientific models to depend mostly on social factors.*"

Speirs: Alfred Wegener's theory of continental drift was first published in 1915 but was not accepted until the 1960s because he had no explanation as to why continents drifted. The discovery of sea-floor spreading and plate tectonics finally proved him correct. Those discoveries, as this paper mentions, came suddenly and simultaneously from several researchers because research methodology and technology finally reached the stage where it was possible to prove continental drift. The saga demonstrates once again that it is not enough to write up a theory but one must also have the data to back it up.

Renne, P.R., et al (2015) **State shift in Deccan volcanism at the Cretaceous-Paleogene boundary, possibly induced by impact.** SCIENCE 350:76-78

Authors' abstract: "*Bolide impact and flood volcanism compete as leading candidates for the cause of terminal-Cretaceous mass extinctions. High-precision 40Ar/39Ar data indicate that these two mechanisms may be genetically related, and neither can be considered in isolation. The existing Deccan Traps magmatic system underwent a state shift approximately coincident with the Chicxulub impact and the terminal-Cretaceous mass extinctions, after which ~70% of the Traps' total volume was extruded in more massive and more episodic eruptions. Initiation of this new regime occurred within ~50,000 years of the impact, which is consistent with transient effects of impact-induced seismic energy. Post-extinction recovery of marine ecosystems was probably suppressed until after the accelerated volcanism waned.*"

Speirs: The Deccan Traps are a flood lava deposit in western India which are up to a kilometre thick, with a total volume of 1,000,000 cubic kilometres. They heated up the Earth enough to kill off many ecosystems. This paper shows that the flood lavas occurred within 50,000 years of the Chicxulub impact and the Cretaceous-Paleocene extinction of the dinosaurs and numerous marine life forms. The impact in Mexico may have jarred loose tectonic plates on the other side of the world just enough to allow huge volumes of magma through the cracks. The extinction of the dinosaurs et al wasn't instantaneous. The fossil record shows that it happened over a few thousand years.

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: Milt Stevens 2015-10-23
Simi Valley, California

Your description of "The Meteor Monsters" in OPUNTIA #323 gave me a jolt of nostalgia. Rutabagas on stilt legs. Earth just doesn't get attacked by many interstellar rutabagas anymore. We don't' even see many intellectual carrots. SF just isn't as colorful as it once was.

Of course, a vengeful vegetable garden really doesn't make a lot of sense. By comparison, Von Neumann machines are more sensible. I remember reading Fred Saberhagen's Berserker Series. Actually, I remember reading, and reading, and reading the series. It seemed to go on forever with no end in sight. Eventually, I started skipping the Berserker stories, so I don't know if the series ever came to any sort of a conclusion.

[I'm not sure. Like you, I started skipping over the stories because Saberhagen used the same plot repeatedly. As with Wodehouse's Jeeves stories, if you've read one, then you've read them all.]

I read John D. MacDonald's story "Vagabond of the Lost" in the Fifties. I remembered the story but never associated it with Von Neumann machines. I thought of it as a parable of what we would now call suburban sprawl. Between 1945 and 1955, suburban housing tracts were springing up faster than weeds all over the country. During the same period, there was the fear that Communists might be springing up almost as fast as suburban houses were.

SF writers withdrew into writing parables about things rather that stories about the things themselves. Thus, "If You Was A Moklin" by Murray Leinster was about the possible impact of a Red Scare, and "A Helping Hand" by Poul Anderson was about some virtues of the Soviet Union and some of the ills of colonialism.

In OPUNTIA #324, your article "All That Glisters" reminded me of EDISON'S CONQUEST OF MARS by Garrett P. Serviss. In that story, the characters have landed on one of the moons of Mars and realize the gravity is too high for an object of that diameter. They reason that the moon is mostly made of gold and is probably the reserves of the Bank of Mars. Putting your gold in orbit is certainly one way to keep it away from idle hands. However, it might also lead to some space piracy that E. E. Smith would have really loved.

[I reviewed THE MOON METAL by Serviss in OPUNTIA #261. When it comes to bad SF, his writings are worse than Lionel Fanthorpe.]

I Also Heard From: Franz Zrilich

AROUND COWTOWN

photos by Dale Speirs

This skyscraper going up on 7 Avenue SW in downtown Calgary has the usual advertising signs on the hoardings. Except for the one on the next page, which seems to indicate a whimsical project manager.


We know, we know...
you wanted a pony.