

OPUNTIA 326

Remembrance Day 2015

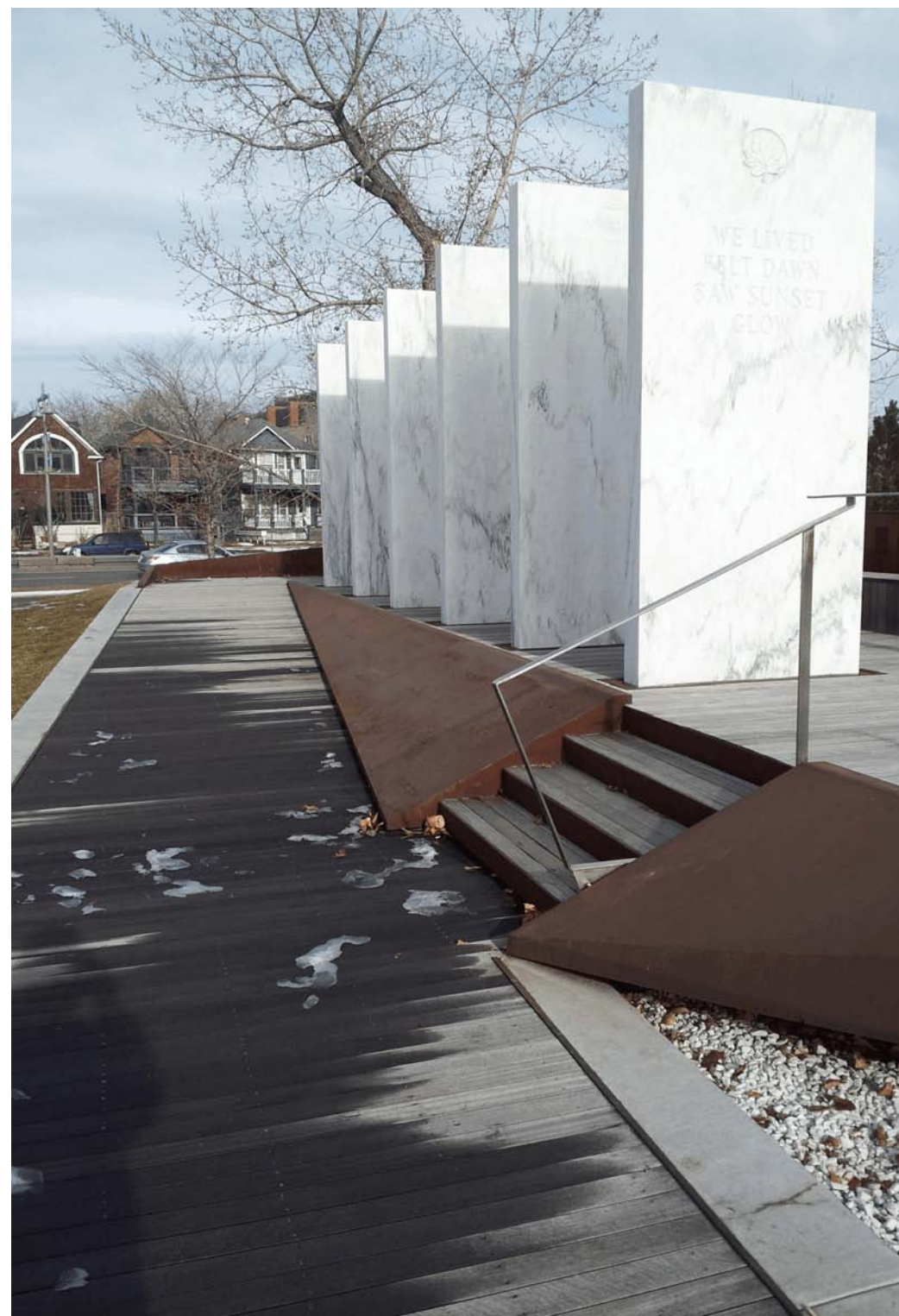
Opuntia is published by Dale Speirs, Calgary, Alberta. It is posted on www.efanzines.com and www.fanac.org. My e-mail address is: opuntia57@hotmail.com When sending me an emailed letter of comment, please include your name and town in the message.

LEST WE FORGET

photos by Dale Speirs

Memorial Drive runs east-west through central Calgary along the north bank of the Bow River. It is called that because originally each poplar tree along its boulevard stood for one Calgarian killed in World War One. Over the years, a number of additional monuments have been added, some of which I mentioned in OPUNTIA #303. One can walk several kilometres along the riverbank and view a depressing look at human behaviour over the past century.

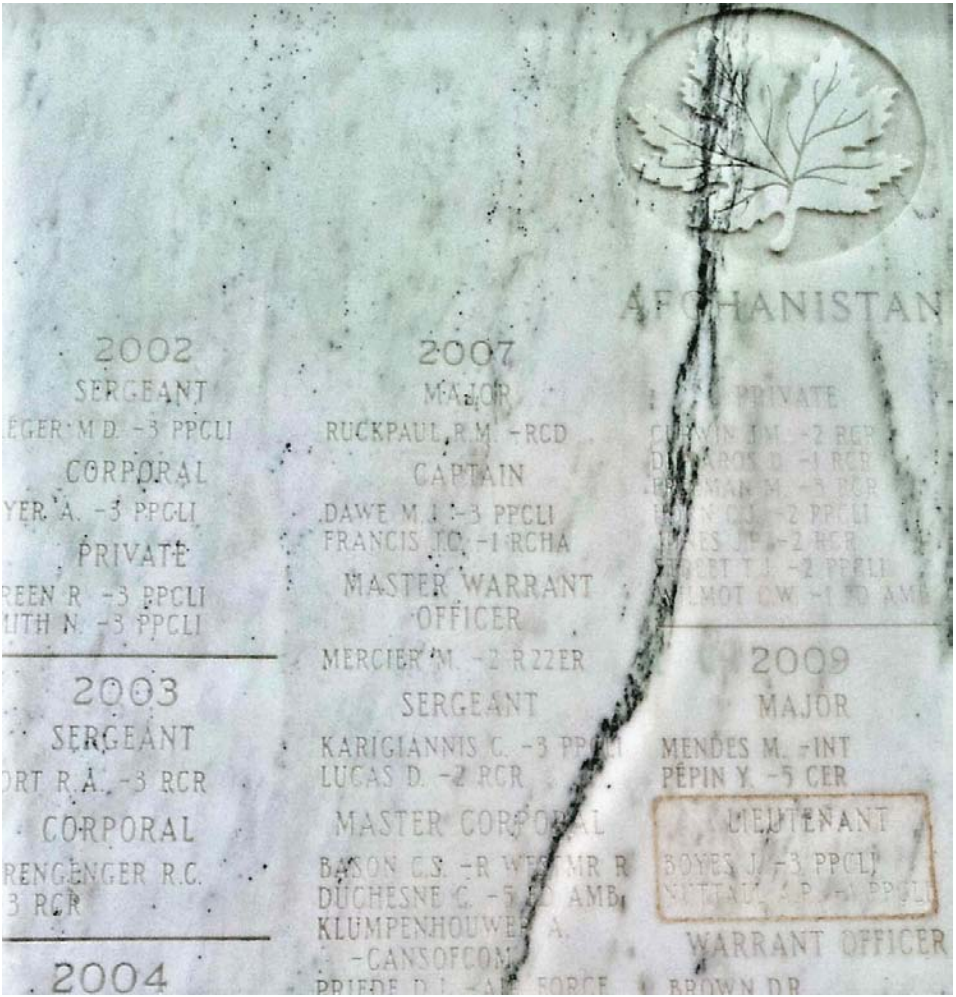
This issue has photographs of another section of the Memorial Drive riverbank, directly across from the downtown core. This particular memorial lists all the dead from Calgary from WW1 to date on giant tombstones of white marble.







Canada took heavy casualties in Afghanistan, where it was involved in the worst fighting in the Khandahar district. Calgarians were among the dead. This revived Remembrance Day ceremonies in Canada because they were no longer just old men shuffling along remembering their fallen comrades. The modern generation now has its own to remember.



Calgary's first homegrown military unit, commanded by and comprised of local men, was the 50th Battalion. It no longer exists, having been dissolved after World War One because there were so few survivors.

They fought at Somme, Vimy Ridge, Ypres, and Flanders Fields.



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HUTTH T.	MACDONALD C. 435377	MORRIS H.	ROBERTSON W.W.	TINSLEY A.J.
HUTSON W.H.	MACDONALD C. 895454	MORRIS W.S.	ROBINSON J. 447824	TOMBS T.E.
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HUTSON D.C.V.	MACFARLANE W.	MOSER J.	ROGERS W.	TONKIN S.
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	MACKAY P.S.	MOUNTAIN A.I.	ROSENTHAL H. MM	TOWLER

PROFESSOR CHALLENGER MARCHES OUT AGAIN

by Dale Speirs

Challenger is a giant of a man with an ego to match, the manners of a boor, and a willingness to travel in his scientific research to where both fools and angels fear to tread. I reviewed the stories of the Challenger canon in issues #67.1B and #70.1B. Those stories are enjoyable, and it is nice to see some new pastiches. Unlike Sherlock Holmes, where pastiches about him are a major industry, Challenger is comparatively neglected.

Anthology.

The Calgary readercon When Words Collide 2015, which I wrote up in issue #318 of this zine, had a books-only dealer bourse. Cowtown secondhand book dealers have dwindled down to one, and he wasn't there. All the books for sale in the bourse were new books from small-press publishers. Several titles had their premiere at WWC 2015, including PROFESSOR CHALLENGER: NEW WORLDS, LOST PLACES, edited by J.R. Campbell and Charles Prepolec. It is an anthology of pastiches about Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's bombastic scientist.

"Hind And Horn" by Wendy Wagner starts off the anthology with Challenger being invited to an Irish estate where a bog man has been found, a mummy preserved by the acidic peat moss and tannins. The locals believe it may be none other than the legendary Irish king Finn McCool, and a shapechanger woman wants to revive him to restore the greatness of Eire. An average fantasy.

"The Shug Monkey" by Stephen Volk takes Challenger and Edward Malone (a newspaper reporter who acts as a Boswell to the Professor) to the wilds of darkest Cambridgeshire. A rough beast called the Shug Monkey has been seen roaming the area; is it real or just folk imagination? They manage to take one down the hard way, and it is revealed to be an ape-man. But further evidence reveals that it is actually a barbaric descendant of modern humans that came back in a time machine. Not just the one, either. There may be more lurking out there in the rural counties.

"The Crystal Minders" by John Takis is about a pair of mad scientists who discovered a living crystal that can be used as a prosthetic for missing limbs. They take one step too far when they grow crystal brains, then transfer their minds into them in a bid for immortality. Looking about them for fresh fields to conquer, they decide to start preserving the great minds of the world, whether

or not they want to be preserved, starting with Challenger. It all ends in tears for the mad scientists.

"King Of The Moon" by Lawrence Connolly is the first of several crossover stories in this anthology, this one mixing in H.G. Wells. The Professor and companions, including Ann Cavor (niece of the inventor of the antigravity substance Cavorite) have landed on the Moon, are quickly captured by Selenites, rescue Uncle Cavor, and after assorted exciting moments, return home. The two story worlds are blended together reasonably well and discrepancies papered over.

"To One Table" by J.R. Campbell mixes in parasite biology, dinosaurs brought back from the Lost World, and, of course, Challenger and Malone. It is known that some parasites alternate between two species, one a predator on the other, by making the prey species passive and slow in the presence of the predator. This fact is neatly combined with a disastrous dinner party where illegally obtained dinosaur steaks are served. The host and guests were unaware that the dinosaurs were infected with such parasites, and when the surviving dinosaurs get loose from their cages, it is up to Challenger to resolve the problem.

"The Fool's Sea" by Simon Kurt Unsworth sends Challenger and Malone on a kraken-hunting expedition in the Atlantic Ocean. In the recent past, underwater telegraph cables had formed a spider's web across the ocean. In one area, the cables seemed to be susceptible to unusual breakage, and the repair ships keep disappearing. Challenger finds the answer; a kraken is deliberately breaking the cables to lure victims. There is a battle royal and Challenger kills the kraken. It is not an all-ends-well story because he and his friends realize there is never just one specimen of a species. What are the other kraken up to?

"The Eye Of The Devil" by Mark Morris is about a group of miners who extend a shaft and are infected by a new plague. Challenger and Malone go down into the mine wearing primitive biohazard suits to search for the cause and possibly a cure. They discover an ancient biochemwarfare machine which landed from the stars hundreds of millions of years ago and was eventually entombed in the sediments. The miners reactivated it, and now Challenger and Malone must deactivate it permanently.

"Professor Challenger And The Crimson Wonder" by Guy Adams and James Goss is a crossover story written in the form of letters back and forth between Challenger, his wife, Mycroft Holmes, and a couple of characters from H.G.

Wells stories. A mutant plant stolen from Challenger’s laboratory is used to produce a rejuvenation cream that makes women look decades younger, but also turns them into passive slaves, and eventually kills them. It is all a fiendish plot by enemy agents, but in the end truth, justice, and the British way of life triumph over all.

“Time’s Black Gulf” by Josh Reynolds brings in Carnacki to help Challenger deal with aliens using mind transference to take over humans. That pretty much sums it up; I didn’t find the story that enthralling.

“Out Of The Depths” by Andrew J. Wilson is the final and longest story of this anthology and mashes together numerous crossovers and timelines. It is 1937 and Challenger is in his declining years but still going. The Nazis have journeyed to the centre of the Earth, located under England naturally, as a possible place from which to attack if war should break out. They cover other bets as well, such as a trip to the Lost World, where Challenger crosses paths with them and stops a plot to take dinosaurs as war weapons. Mixed into the story is Dr. Moreau, who was also Jack the Ripper (the timelines actually fit), and who naturally falls in with the Nazis in their experiments to produce *Urbemensch*. The different storylines are tied together and explained quite well.

Novel.

PROFESSOR CHALLENGER: THE ISLAND OF TERROR (2012) by William Meikle starts off with Malone being summoned by Challenger to Dartmoor, not the prison but the moors themselves. There are evil things about, tearing apart men and cattle alike. Government men in black trenchcoats are telling locals to keep quiet. Malone and Challenger are detained and taken to Lundy Island where they are shown what is going on. The big-game hunter Roxton brought back eggs of dinosaurian raptors which have been used to build a breeding colony. The raptors can be trained like guard dogs, and the British government intends to use them as shock troops in the next war.

While Malone and Challenger view the use of these animals as immoral, the author takes pains to present the other side of the story as well. People are not evil because they are evil or insane. In this case, the government men, acting with consent at the highest levels, are those who suffered in the trenches of World War One and want to ensure that future wars will not chew up millions of young men. It must be remembered that one reason why the appeasement movement grew in the 1930s was because Chamberlain and his generation still

had fresh in their memories the atrocities of WW1, and were hoping to avoid it with Hitler.

Malone and Challenger are helpless to stop the project. Malone’s newspaper has been ordered to remain silent, and Challenger’s boorish behaviour gets him no help from the Royal Society, some of whose members are actively involved in the project. Everyone ends up back at the island, where the raptors are learning a bit too much and get loose. As one might expect, it all ends in tears, gun fights, and firebombs.

This book could have used better editing and typesetting. Throughout the book, words are italicized at random, certainly not for legitimate emphasis.

IF THE WIND COULD BLOW MY TROUBLES AWAY: PART 1

by Dale Speirs

Alberta has a fairly nice climate. No hurricanes, extremely rare tornados, and humidity is never mentioned in weather forecasts because it is always low. We do get blizzards, but if you don’t commute to work they’re not a problem, and no town here ever had to be evacuated because of snow. Winters can be cold but on the other hand summers are mostly room temperature with occasional heat waves up to 35°C.

Military Weather.

“Any Number Can Play” by Richard Lippa (1969 December, ANALOG) was written at the height of the Cold War. For some reason, American meteorologists are having trouble predicting serious storms that are battering the east coast. Cut to a scene in the Atlantic where Soviet trawlers are discharging massive amounts of electricity into the air and turning small storms into big ones. The American meteorologists finally learn the reason for their errors after one trawler is wrecked by its own storm and washed ashore with its specialized equipment. They shake their heads at the perfidious Soviets, then go back to looking at a map of Eurasia where an unusually powerful blizzard is crossing Siberia and an equally unusual low-pressure system has formed in the Baltic Sea and is moving towards Russia.

“Weather War” by William E. Cochrane (1976 September, ANALOG) is a similar scenario. U.S. Marines are training on Sand Island in the Pacific Ocean, controlling tornados and aiming them at targets. A typhoon suddenly develops out of nowhere, not by natural processes but obviously a weather weapon by the Other Side. The Marines struggle to deal with the typhoon until someone thinks of using their tornados against it to break up the airflow and disrupt the rotation of the storm, thereby killing it.

Lots and lots of military slang and techno-talk. The happy ending is that someone thinks this would be a good procedure against Caribbean hurricanes. What bothers me is that hurricanes exist for a good ecological reason. They redistribute excess tropical heat into cooler areas at higher latitudes. If they were stymied, that would throw off the heat balance of the planet and lead to worse conditions.

Tornados.

Tornados are very rare in Alberta but not unknown. I haven’t made a specialty of collecting fiction about them but have accumulated a few items.

“In Rubble, Pleading” by Michael Bishop (1974 February, MAGAZINE OF FANTASY AND SF) is about a swarm of tornados that seem to be destroying towns in Kansas on a systematic basis, as if they were being directed by an intelligence. Most of the story is taken up by an anecdote about a boy who had a lumber plank fired through his torso and lived long enough to suffer a while. The ending is ambiguous. I got the impression that the author wanted to tell the anecdote and wrapped it with a light dressing of science fiction to make it saleable.

“Jill The Giant Killer” by William Tuning and Ewing Edgar (1975 March, ANALOG) is about the struggles of a meteorologist to get government funding for a project that will fire heat bombs into tornados to disrupt their circulation and thereby kill them. The idea is to put the bombs at the base of the cloud where the funnel descends. This is a short story turned into a novelette by padding with interminable Senate committee hearings and government maneuvering, the former to allow infodumps and the latter to add some suspense.

“Funnel Hawk” by Tom Ligon (1990 June, ANALOG) is about a team of storm chasers who can’t catch tornados with ground vehicles because they have to

stick to the roads. They decide to use an aircraft. I’m not sure why this was considered science fictional. Long before this was published there were storm chasers using aircraft. The hero’s plane is caught inside a funnel, and he survives to tell the story. And? Reading the story, I got the feeling that the editor was a day late and a dollar short.

Disaster Movies.

CATEGORY 7 (2005) gets off to a fast start, with Paris, France, being trashed by tornados and lightning storms. How bad are the storms? They destroy the Egyptian pyramids. Indeed. Jump cut (and there are a lot of them as a substitute for proper pacing) to Washington, D.C., where the Federal Protective Services is in charge of dealing with similar storms demolishing big cities across the USA. No word about Hungry Horse, Montana, though.

The usual subplots are trotted out. The bureaucratic infighting is almost as bad as the Category 6 and 7 storms battering the nation. A televangelist and his ambitious wife from Hall Ministries use the storms as a sign of the impending Apocalypse, always a good fund raiser. A investigative newspaper reporter (are there any left these days?) is looking for a scoop, any scoop. There is a starry-eyed young couple who accidentally wandered out of a romcom and find themselves in the middle of the storms. A career woman who is a single mom raising a teenaged son. And it isn’t a disaster movie without the man-of-the-hour scientist whose theory accurately predicted the storms but was scoffed at by politicians. The SFX are reasonably good, although one wonders why one of the faces on Mount Rushmore would fall off without any physical contact by the storms.

What saves the movie are the over-the-top, scenery-chewing performances by actors Randy Quaid and Shannon Doherty, who play a boisterous tornado chaser and his white-trash assistant. Tommy Tornado, as he likes to call himself in his videos, is just out of hospital after surviving a trip through an F6 tornado. She’s looking for something more exciting in life than tending bar in a roadhouse and gets it chasing tornados. Tommy has a practical view of storm chasing. If a tornado is seen in the area, he looks around for the nearest mobile-home park, on the justifiable grounds that any self-respecting tornado is going to run over it as standard operating procedure.

The televangelist is a good-hearted man who really believes his message, but is being pushed along by his wife. He gets his from a lightning bolt while

preaching on stage, which some might interpret as a sign from God to shut up. The grieving widow manages to turn his death into another money-spinner.

Trying to collect information on the fast-moving storms is difficult, so a USAF SR-71 Blackbird is brought in. A superstorm heading east from Chicago is going to meet up with a Category 5 hurricane heading north from Florida. The collision point is Washington, D.C., at which time the storms will merge into a single Category 7 city-smasher. This makes evacuating the population impossible since no matter which direction they run, they'll be going into one of the storms, but if they sit tight then they'll have a Category 7 on top of them.

Another subplot is added in the second half of the movie, when a weird young fanatic volunteering for Hall Ministries takes matters into his own hands and kidnaps a batch of teenagers who are each the oldest child of important bureaucrats and politicians. He figures it's the End Times, and since the Bible says the firstborn children will die as a warning to sinners, why not help the process along and fulfil the prophecy.

While that pads out the movies, the scientists are busy figuring out how to deal with the Category 7 storm. The man-of-the-hour meteorologist has a crazy plan that just might work and does. Not before the White House is demolished by a supertornado though, but that is always a crowd pleaser. The final segments stretch endlessly but there's got to be a morning after and is, where everyone crawls out of the rubble into bright sunshine and happily do a group hug, while a voice-over blames the whole thing on global warming.

The movie is good, taken as an action-adventure with a cliched plot. Randy Quaid is at his hilarious best, almost as crazy as he is in real life (Google his name if you haven't heard of his escapades). The screenwriters did a fine job of tying all the subplot threads together and maintaining consistency.



SHAKING ALL OVER: PART 2

by Dale Speirs

[Part 1 appeared in OPUNTIA #259.]

Predictions.

Earthquakes, like volcanic eruptions or tornados, are impossible to predict to the day or the hour. “A Slight Miscalculation” by Ben Bova (1971 August, MAGAZINE OF FANTASY AND SF) also considers the problem of location. A scientist, known to his colleagues as a top-quality worker, privately predicts an earthquake in California of unprecedented magnitude for next Thursday. No public announcement but rumour spreads on the quiet. People make plans, and certain unexplained movements in the stock market occur. Soon there is a panic, and the population runs from California to safer ground. The scientist, meanwhile, stays where he is, puzzled by a strange anomaly in the equations he used to predict the big one. Come the day, come the hour, it is California that survives while the rest of North America falls into the ocean. A twist story that can only be read once, but humorous.

The short story “Fault” by James Gunn (1975 June, ANALOG) is about a San Francisco mayor who is faced with a decision. He has been importuned by seismologists who show him charts and proof positive that San Francisco will be hit within two weeks by a major earthquake. Should he announce the news? In his personal life, he has been diddling underage girls who don't know who he is but will recognize him once he makes the television announcement. He finally releases the prediction. Hundreds die in traffic accidents as citizens run from the city, there is looting by the thieves who stayed behind, and fires burn out of control because the Fire Dept. is gone. No earthquake occurs, and the populace returns to the city in an angry mood. The mayor's career is over. Two days later, an 8.2 earthquake occurs. A good story that summarizes the impossibility of making a decision when vague but credible predictions are issued.

To those who have never worked in a scientific laboratory or studied at a learned institution, it may seem that scientists are calm, methodical, and logical thinkers. Even the briefest glance at the history of science shows that this isn't just so, and emotions often affect the behaviour of scientists. The short story “The Reunion” by Paul J. Nahin (1979 April, ANALOG) is about a seismologist in California who has perfected an absolutely accurate method of

predicting the epicenter, magnitude, and duration of earthquakes. He has tested his method privately and was always correct. Now he knows his old hometown will be hit by a devastating earthquake, and is ready to announce it in advance to the public for fame and glory.

But just before that, he receives a letter inviting him to a high-school reunion. As he contemplates it, he remembers the bullying and hazing he received as a student, the deliberate shunning of him because he was a geek, and the cruel taunts from fellow students, some of whom are now on the reunion committee. He decides to suppress his method and let his hometown be destroyed. This story will resonate with all of us for whom high school was something to be endured en route to university, and for whom the television series HAPPY DAYS was blatant fantasy.

The future will be no better for predicting stochastic events. “Earthquake” by William E. Cochrane (1973 April, ANALOG) is about the difficulty of predicting earthquakes on a newly colonized planet, Canis 4, which is extremely active tectonically and has massive earthquakes. A seismological team is trying to predict the next event, but they only know where the obvious faults are. When the Big One snaps, it turns out that the responsible fault is directly underneath the seismology lab. This story is mostly about the criticism directed at the seismologists by the colonists, who want certainty in the predictions and complain when they don’t get it.

“The August Revolution” by Mary Soderstrom (1974 September, GALAXY) picks up on the fuss caused by the 1971 Amchitka, Alaska, atomic bomb tests. Another round of tests is scheduled but just at detonation a big meteorite punches in through the Mid-Atlantic Rift system at Iceland by incredible coincidence. The resonance between the two blasts shakes loose all the northern hemisphere tectonic plates. They move rapidly and dramatically, triggering massive worldwide tsunamis and volcanoes, and throwing strike-slip faults hundreds of kilometres. As the hero of the story notes, while waiting to die in San Francisco, the Canadian provinces of Saskatchewan and Manitoba would be the lucky survivors.

Hubris.

There are those who not only seek to predict earthquakes but also to control them. A complicated method of earthquake control is in “Underground” by Lawrence A. Perkins (1968 October, ANALOG). The location is a Latin

American dictatorship, where an American senator has been kidnapped, more to help the protagonist explain the plot to him rather than for actual plot reasons. The senator has been kidnapped by underground revolutionaries who are not just underground figuratively but have built an elaborate network of tunnels and caverns. By diverting foreign aid from the USA, they have hollowed out a network underneath the dictator’s palace, the army barracks, etcetera, and replaced the subsurface material with thixotropic clay, which liquefies when vibrated. (Anchorage, Alaska, is built on such clay, which is why so much of it sank during the 1964 earthquake.) The revolutionaries will then trigger earthquakes by snapping strata under strain and releasing the energy to shake the clay. In the chaos that follows, they will take over.

The story is one infodump after another. When a character is tired of explaining the plan to the senator, a colleague takes over. The author is determined to demonstrate that he has thought the plan through, and each succeeding infodump takes care of yet more details of how the thing is to be done. Matters are not helped by the stilted dialogue, where characters actually say out loud words such as “ulp” and “sheesh”. The coup succeeds and the endless train of infodumps comes to an end. This story is way too elaborate for its own good, and built on a concept that should have remained a concept.

A thoughtful story about the sociopolitical consequences of earthquake control is “The Trouble With Project Slickenside” by Dean McLaughlin (1973 March, MAGAZINE OF FANTASY AND SF). A team of engineers is trying out a method of earthquake intensity reduction, but the local populace on the San Andreas Fault aren’t happy. The project involves drilling five wells along the fault. Water is pumped out of the two leading and two trailing wells and into the middle well. The idea is to trigger a small earthquake in the centre and keep it from spreading by locking the ends of the experimental zone. Then by repeating with new wells along the fault, the pressure can be slowly and systematically released and prevent a big earthquake. The engineers can’t understand why citizens are so upset, resorting to sniper fire, protest marches, and sabotage of the equipment. After all, they are doing it for the good of us all, so it must be right and proper.

“Deus Ex Machina” by Lisa Mason (1988 December, ASIMOV’S) is about an 8.9 earthquake shaking San Francisco in a near future. Danni Roberts, an office worker, survives but finds herself caught up in a corporate conspiracy. It seems that some thought they could play God and prevent earthquakes by implanting wedges into the active faults. Not only doesn’t the idea work, but when The

Big One arrives, some of the wedges convert the fault from a strike-slip (sideways motion) to a subduction zone (forcing the tectonic plate downward, far more dangerous). The corporation escapes responsibility because it had signed a secret contract with the government relieving it of liability, and, as a sweetener, first refusal as contractor to repair any earthquake damages. That part is difficult to believe; someone would have blabbed to the press.

FIREQUAKE (2014) was filmed in Bulgaria, so at least the scenery was different, instead of those same old, same old, hills in southern California. A corporation called Promethean Kinetics has created an underground machine called Helios, purporting to supply endless perfectly clean energy from coal.

What that energy may be is not specified, but interestingly there is a computer screen in the control room background endlessly scrolling a series of chemical equations that suggest the energy is ordinary methane. Natural gas is mostly methane (CH₄) with some other liquids mixed in such as butane and propane. I did a considerable amount of frame-freezing on the DVD but could never get the full set of equations being scrolled because the camera angles were obviously on the actors. However, the fragments I did get were: “CH₂O”, “CHO+OH”, “CH₄+HO₂>(missing part), and “CH₄+OH>CH₃+(missing part)”, all of which point clearly to some sort of methane generation.

Helios is behind schedule and over budget, so the manager wants it on line now. The creator of the project, Eve Adams, says no, because some of the machinery began vibrating at 46% power. When she steps out of the laboratory for a moment, the manager orders full power. Helios goes berserk and then blooey. It leaks out into a coal mine, then into utility tunnels, and then begins cracking the Earth’s crust and rapidly propagating across Europe. Earthquakes shake down buildings everywhere.

Every time the plot slows down and more action is needed, there is another earthquake cracking open the farm fields and spouting flames. Not very believable, especially when lava begins flowing through the tunnels, supposedly generated by the methane qua Helios. Crevices spread across the landscape, and numerous vehicles drive into the cracks opening up on the roads. Adams manages to steer around the cracks with better reflexes than a professional race car driver.

One sub-plot is developed, that of a group of Helios technicians trapped in a coal mine, but there is no suspense because you know they will make it to the

end credits. The manager publicly blames the fiasco on Adams, and she becomes a wanted felon, chased across the landscape into the Czech Republic. American troops flying dozens of choppers are providing disaster relief to the Czechs, as if that country had no emergency responders of its own. Adams convinces some of the troops to blow a hydroelectric dam and flood the approaching Helios. Success, of course, then the happy group hug and orchestral music. Complete unadulterated nonsense.

Popcorn Stuff.

EPICENTER (2000) begins in San Francisco, where a computer hacker steals a microchip that will compromise the security of stealth planes, and sells it to the Russian Mafia. Before the chip is handed over, FBI Agent Foster, played by former porn actor Traci Lords, breaks up the transaction and takes the hacker into custody. There is an explicit pornographic scene in this movie but not with her; she stays fully clothed. A chase develops, with the Russians after the good guys and the microchip. The story moves to Los Angeles for no real reason.

At that point, what has been a ordinary cops-and-robbers chase, plus the porno, becomes more interesting and saves the movie. Everyone converges into a classy restaurant where the microchip deal is going down. The Russkies pull guns on Foster, her fellow FBI agents, and the hacker. In turn, backup agents get the drop on the bad guys. But there are more Russians with guns, and more FBI agents. Fully half the people in the restaurant are standing up, pointing guns at each other. It’s quite funny really, the world’s largest Mexican standoff.

At that exact moment, The Big One hits Los Angeles. As the massive earthquake shakes the city, a gun battle erupts in the restaurant, with everyone not only dodging bullets but falling debris. Cue the panicky crowds outside in the streets, derauling trains, gaping fissures in the ground, and windows popping out of skyscrapers. Meanwhile the gunfight rages inside the building, and as many of the combatants are taken out by debris as by bullets. The SFX are good, and the idea lifts the movie out of the routine.

Some survive the shake though, including the principal cast and major supporting characters. The chase is on through the ruins. From there it is a standard disaster movie plot, punctuated by aftershocks and occasional gunfights. It ends as one expects, with the good guys victorious and the microchip back in safe hands. Not a bad movie.

DOOMSDAY PROPHECY (2011) is a television movie which starts off with earthquakes everywhere, including places that never have tectonic quakes, such as the centre of the Canadian Shield, which is the core of the North American continent. The Black Sea is drained by giant cracks in Earth's crust. Things are falling apart everywhere and not just figuratively.



The various subplots are established and eventually coalesce. The conspiracy theory gang in the military, the wise old men who know the ancient prophecies, and the man-of-the-hour who stumbles into the solution. Lots and lots of earthquakes but why?

It turns out that due to a galactic alignment and a dark star, gravitational waves are crumpling the Earth's surface. The dark star is most interesting. It begins cracking Earth's crust from outside the Solar System. As it passes into the system, it sucks up Jupiter like a vacuum cleaner. One would think that Earth and the Moon would be gone long before it gets near them, but suddenly the gravity well of the dark star doesn't do that much more damage. It comes in close to Earth and just begins to suck in the atmosphere before it is diverted.

The answer is a secret weapon the ancients built and buried in British Columbia. It is a set of giant heads identical to the ones on Easter Island, which emit beams that deflect the dark star just as it is about to touch Earth's atmosphere. How the ancients had this technology in the Stone Age is never explained.

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

2015-11-05

OPUNTIA #324: [Re: Grassi Lakes above the town of Canmore] Great photographs, and the telephoto lens really adds to the detail. I hope the town of Canmore has forgiven, or better yet, forgotten the Air Farce's Mike. It's one thing to smile, but the character got a little too much airtime over the years.

[For the benefit of my non-Canadian readers, the comedy troupe Royal Canadian Air Farce was on CBC radio and television for decades. One of their stock characters was Mike From Canmore, a village idiot who frequently phoned in to talk shows, was interviewed as the man in the street, or any other situation where he could demonstrate his total ignorance of the subject at hand. He always introduced himself as "*Hello, I'm Mike* (long pause while he tried to remember where he lived) *from Canmore.*"]

I think the only reason for SF movies to be set on Venus is that Mars was overused, and the fact that most of the Venusian surface was obscured just added to the mystery of what was there. So, anything could be there, including, quite conveniently, a mysterious tentacled beast waiting patiently to grab our heroes.

I remember the evening news report would tell us all how much gold was per ounce. I don't see those figures any more, but we certainly see how much a barrel of petroleum is. I read stories here and there of how some countries have cleaned out their gold reserves, but have not reported their absence, and so their currencies are based on lies. Fiat currencies indeed.

OPUNTIA #325: Darned raven. I gather the Poe grave in Philadelphia isn't quite as popular as it once was, and the regular roses no longer arrive. The philatelist in me appreciates the Poe commemorative postmarks. Every so often, I see a picture of someone at a convention cosplaying Poe, and I'd bet there are few, if any, at the convention who might recognize who that cosplayer is supposed to be.

Re: my previous letter of comment: I used to mark student literacy papers on a part-time basis, and when I'd receive them to mark, about one in ten papers had cursive writing on them. The rest had printing. This past November I saw a show at the downtown reference library called Scriptus. Last year was the first show, and we returned for the second. It is much like a dealers' room full of vendors who sell an amazing selection of fountain pens, ballpoint pens, fountain cartridges, ballpoint refills, pen caddies, amazing specialty papers to write on, pen repairmen, and portable lap desks, plus even subscriptions to PEN WORLD MAGAZINE. For the 2+ hours we were there, the place was packed, as it was last year, each time a reassuring event, for the future of cursive writing. We will definitely be there next year.

[I'm not into that sort of stuff but I did have an essay of mine on the history of public letter writers published in a 2000 issue of JOURNAL OF THE WRITING EQUIPMENT SOCIETY. A first draft of that article was published in 1998 in OPUNTIA #37. I got an author's copy of JWES and was amazed at some of the detailed articles about pens and writing boxes. The magazine was a all-colour glossy with lots of full-page ads.]

ZINE LISTINGS

[I only list zines I receive from the Papernet. If the zine is posted on www.efanzines.com or www.fanac.org, then I don't mention it since you can read it directly.]

THE FOSSIL #365 (US\$10 from The Fossils Inc, c/o Tom Parson, 157 South Logan Street, Denver, Colorado 80209) Devoted to the history of zinedom since its rise in the 1870s to the modern form we understand it as. This issue discusses the Library of Amateur Journalism at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. There is a history of pioneer black zinesters, and news reports of ongoing efforts to preserve zines in proper collections for posterity.

BETWEEN THE CROSSES, ROW ON ROW
photos by Dale Speirs



Each year a volunteer group sets up thousands of crosses in a park on the north side of Memorial Drive, each cross with a name of a Calgarian who died in war.

The crosses stretch for about a kilometre along the road. Their massed appearance is intended to impress citizens in a visual way how many died.



Descendants who live in Calgary often personalize the crosses. In this and following photos, notice how young the soldiers were (age is after the name).



Nor are the dead just ancient history. Each year a few more crosses are added for personnel who died in Afghanistan.



Canada was in both world wars from the start, but the USA didn't come in until much later. Some Americans went north and enlisted with the Canadian Forces.



Jewish KIA's were marked with Stars of David. If you look in the background, you can see another one.



