

# OPUNTIA 332

Edgar Allan Poe's Birthday 2016

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

## FUNGI

photos by Dale Speirs

Fungi are the preferred decorating accessory in many of Poe's stories, so that gives me an excuse to sneak in photos I have taken of them in my travels around Alberta. Don't ask me to identify the species, please. I don't like cultivated mushrooms in my food (too rubbery) and I certainly don't eat the wild ones, especially since picking the wrong species may result in a painful death. The clump below was photographed at Marl Lake in the Kananaskis mountains adjacent to Calgary.





From the Sheep River district southwest of Calgary in the Highwood mountains.



On a dead poplar in Fish Creek Provincial Park, in south Calgary.





## EDGAR GALLOPING POE: PART 2

by Dale Speirs

[Part 1 appeared in OPUNTIA #325.]

### Edgar Anthology Poe.

POE (2009) is an anthology of nineteen stories edited by Ellen Datlow, inspired by Poe's birth bicentennial. No pastiches by editorial command but the stories were to be inspired by a Poe story. I found most of them gloomier than Poe, if not quite as hopeless as Lovecraft. I'll only review a couple.

"Illimitable Domain" by Kim Newman is set in the B-movie studios of Hollywood. The story starts off as a thinly fictionalized account of how the studios actually operated and then gradually drifts into alternative history, so subtly that it takes a couple of pages to realize it. It is done quite humourously, with a narrator who is an agent trying to get his client, a chimpanzee, into a movie, any movie, never with any success. Poe's works were in the public domain and an obvious target for B-movie producers. When the Rue Morgue story is being cast, the agent plugs his chimp for the orangutan part, but instead it goes to a man in a gorilla suit who was willing to work cheaper. The unexpected hit of the House of Usher movie leads to a splurge on Poe stories, with Vincent Price, Peter Lorre, and Basil Rathbone as regulars.

After running out of Poe stories, the studio, aided by Price's personal library, ransack Lovecraft and others, but all the movies keeping coming out as rewrites of the House of Usher. The producer, director, crew, and cast begin dressing like Poe and find themselves trapped in his milieu. Soon the plague spreads elsewhere, with television shows such as THE MAN FROM U.L.A.L.U.M.E and THE MARIE TYLER ROGET SHOW. Price ends up doing the national network news in a black velvet jacket, replacing Walter Cronkite. And no matter how hard the agent tries, he just can't find any roles for that chimpanzee.

"Beyond Porch And Portal" by E. Catherine Tobler was the only other story of note. It picks up on the mysterious circumstances of Poe's death, who was found delirious and drunk on a Baltimore street. He was wearing a stranger's clothes, and died four days later, incoherent to the end. Tobler's story follows the trail in the opposite direction, wondering who was wearing Poe's clothes, and finally tracking down that man.

### Edgar Traveling Poe.

POE-LAND (2015) by J.W. Ocker is about all the places Poe lived during his short but peripatetic life. Since Poe zigzagged up and down the eastern seaboard almost in a random walk, a chronological tour of his places of residence would be confusing, so Ocker takes the cities of Poe's life in geographical order. Poe was born in Boston on 1809-01-19 and died in Baltimore on 1849-10-07. In between, he had major connections to New York City, Philadelphia, England, and Richmond, Virginia, not to mention other places he visited.

Ocker begins in Boston, where Poe's birthplace is a parking lot and electrical transformer yard of a power company. Boston hasn't done much beyond a plaque and a street sign, while other cities are proud to set memorials to him. Little physical evidence remains of Poe's residences. One can only stand at certain spots and say here he once was. There are a few plaques and statues here and there, but Boston does not care too much for its native son.

The next stop is Rhode Island. Poe never lived there but he was a frequent visitor to Providence and an influence on H.P. Lovecraft, its most famous native son. HPL wrote on Poe and even made a tour of Poe-Land in the early 1930s. Within Providence there is a considerable overlap between Poe and Lovecraft sites, such as libraries and cemeteries. This book makes a major digression, not the first time, into Lovecraftiana but eventually gets back on track.

Poe had several residences in New York City, few of which have survived since his time there. He served briefly as an army cadet at the nearby West Point military academy. He lived on farms that are now apartment blocks, or Lower Manhattan houses that gave way to university campuses. A cottage that he rented during his last few years is now in a park in west Bronx, but which in his time was a farm in what was called Fordham. It served as a dentist's office later, and was finally relocated nearby to a glorified traffic island, shown on the next page.

Poe lived six years in Philadelphia and wrote numerous stories, of which a dozen have lived in posterity among the general public. The Philadelphia Free Library has one of the best collections of rare editions, manuscripts, and letters of Poe. One of his residences is a National Historic Site.

Baltimore is definitely proud of its connection with Poe, not just because he died and was buried there, but because he had previously resided in the city and had paternal relatives in the area. His tomb is a tourist attraction. More tellingly, the professional football team is named after Poe’s famous poem “The Raven”, although the Baltimore Ravens try to minimize the connection because they want the emphasis on football, not a dead poet. A Poe residence is preserved, about which horror actor Vincent Price said when he visited it: “*This place gives me the creeps.*” The interior is tiny. Only fifteen tourists at a time are allowed in and only one person at a time can go up the narrow stairs into the attic where the Poe bedroom was.

When Poe was six years old, his foster parents John and Frances Allan took him to Britain for five years. There is almost nothing in the way of Poe monuments since the boy was of no significance during his time there, so this chapter instead focuses on Peter Fawn, a wealthy collector who has a warehouse in Brighton full of Poe related items. Not just the usual manuscripts, rare editions, and memorabilia from Poe’s time, but anything connected to him from our modern era, such as advertisements using his portrait, show bills from stage plays and movies based on his works. Fawn is a completist and has an after-tax annual income in the millions, so he buys everything related to Poe.

And so back to America, this time to Richmond, Virginia, where Poe spent much of his life. It was there that he was orphaned and taken in by the Allans, and briefly attended the University of Virginia, soon dropping out. The houses he lived in are all long gone, so instead there is a tour of the university, where his dormitory room is preserved after a fashion. The regents filled it with non-period furniture since the originals did not survive, and they were not sure which room he had because the records were lost in a fire, so they had to guess which room was his. Poe would be laughing.

The final stop is Sullivan’s Island, South Carolina, where Poe was stationed for a few months while in the army. Three of his stories are set on the island, including one of his most famous, “The Gold Bug”. Once a military base, the island now serves tourists and residents. The names of Poe, Gold Bug, and Raven are everywhere on street signs, taverns, libraries, and any other place businessmen can think of to bring in tourist dollars.

Looking back over the tour of Poe-Land, one can see how he is an honoured son in some cities and almost completely ignored in others. His literary legacy is undisputed, but his historical legacy is mostly grudging lip service.

Below, thanks to the magic of Google, is a view of the Poe cottage in Bronx.



# THE MAN FROM MONTENEGRO: PART 10

by Dale Speirs

[Parts 1 to 9 appeared in OPUNTIA #252, 253, 275, 278, 279, 289, 304, 307, and 319.]

## Non-Fiction.

Like many other fictional characters, Nero Wolfe has his fan clubs. The original club is The Wolfe Pack in Manhattan, and subsidiary clubs elsewhere are known as racemes. (Orchids are clonally propagated by taking cuttings of their specialized roots, known botanically as racemes.) Whereas the original Sherlock Holmes stories are known as the canon, the original stories of Nero Wolfe by Rex Stout are called the corpus. Pastiches, stories written by others, are not as common with Wolfe as with Holmes because Stout didn't die until 1975 and published his final story shortly before his death. Robert Goldsborough has since taken up the torch and now has a good series of pastiche novels to his credit.

Organized fandom was very late in developing. The fandom was around for decades but The Wolfe Pack wasn't created as a going concern until 1978, and its publication THE WOLFE PACK GAZETTE until the following year. The impetus for the club was the publication of Stout's biography in 1977, written by John McAleer. In honour of the biography, a banquet was staged with a menu copied from the Wolfe stories. Everyone had such a good time that they said we must do this again, and the club was born.

THE NERO WOLFE FILES (2005) is an anthology of articles, edited by Marvin Kaye, taken from the GAZETTE. It opens with a panegyric that can be safely skipped as its information content is near zero to anyone who has read at least one Wolfe story. Stephen Schultheis provides a checklist of all the Wolfe stories, including non-related stories where supporting characters crossed over into a different novel. There were 72 novels and short stories from 1933 to 1975.

Various people who knew Stout reminisce about him, not just in relation to Wolfe but also Stout's volunteerism during World War Two when he headed up the American propaganda effort against the Axis. Stout was a millionaire accountant; he developed a system used in schools and after selling it was able to retire and begin writing books in his middle age. About 100 million Wolfe books were sold in his lifetime, so poverty never plagued him.

Nero Wolfe was a gourmet who enjoyed his food, although only a few recipes were included in the stories. Barbara Burn went through the corpus, extracted all the food references she could find, and then over the years created recipes for them. Stout was not enthusiastic about doing a cookbook himself, but gave Burn permission to do so. He contributed a foreword as by Fritz Brenner, Wolfe's cook, and helped Burn with some of the details. THE NERO WOLFE COOKBOOK is now a standard reference for fans, although one must be prepared to accept weight gains after eating any of the sumptuous meals.

One of the running jokes through all the Wolfe stories is that Wolfe loved shad roe, prepared in numerous ways every day when it was in season, which his assistant Archie Goodwin despised and constantly complained about. An interesting item mentioned in this anthology is that on rare occasions when clubs host a shad roe dinner, most of the attendees opt for the alternative menu.

The Wolfe stories made it into television in two American series and an Italian series. Michael Jaffe, who was the producer of the A&E series, writes about how they tried to keep to the spirit of the series. The previous American production was by Paramount, which moved the stories back into the 1920s for no good reason and generally butchered the corpus.

There is a section of the anthology covering the origin and rise of Wolfe fandom. Most of it was by correspondence until clubs began forming in the late 1970s. The main activity of the clubs is an annual banquet based on the cookbook, which requires finding a restaurant that can handle such unusual requests. Ettagale Blauer, in "Death Of A Diner", notes the high casualty rate of restaurants that hosted a Wolfe banquet in Manhattan, almost all of them going out of business within a year of the banquet.

Like every other group, there are annual awards. The first Nero Wolfe Award went to Lawrence Block in 1979 for his novel THE BURGLAR WHO LIKED TO QUOTE KIPLING. The banquets include a guest speaker who orates on some aspect of Wolfe and usually there is a limerick competition. Isaac Asimov was a regular attendee and liked nothing better than to compose limericks about Wolfe on a spur-of-the-moment challenge.

The anthology is a good introduction to the world of Nero Wolfe fandom. Those who have read the corpus and are looking for behind-the-scenes information will appreciate this book.

## Parodies.

“The Case Of The Disposable Jalopy” by Mack Reynolds (1979 October, ANALOG) is set in a future time when Goodwin and Wolfe are old and decrepit and living on the Negative Income Tax (welfare) in the rundown brownstone. Wolfe raises petunias because he can’t afford orchids anymore, and the gourmet meals are replaced by hash because of inflation. The first set of clients are automobile manufacturers whose vehicle is powered by a hybrid engine that produces more fuel than it consumes. The second set of clients are a distilleries conglomerate who have learned that the first set of clients are going to switch from gasoline to bourbon as a fuel source, meaning the car owners can drink for free as the engine produces excess bourbon. Then a group of Arab oil billionaires show up, worried about what will happen to their petrochemical refineries. The parody uses lots of names of SF writers, which spoils it. I presume this was to help get the story past the editor of ANALOG.

## The Corpus.

I reviewed some of the original novels and stories in previous installments of this column, but there are still many more to go. THREE DOORS TO DEATH is a compilation of three novellas first published from 1947 to 1949.

“Man Alive”, begins when a young woman named Cynthia Nieder comes to Wolfe about her Uncle Paul. He was a partner in a fashion shop who committed suicide a while back, leaving her with half the business. The other partner died in a fishing accident off the coast of Florida, and his wife died several years previous in a bad fall on a Montana ranch.

Nieder accepted these deaths until a few days prior when she thought she saw her supposedly dead uncle attending a fashion show in disguise. The matter is soon settled when the battered body of Uncle Paul is found in the fashion shop, this time definitely dead beyond any doubt. Nieder is suspected by the police who, as usual, choose a culprit and then collect the evidence to fit her.

The other business partner also returns from the dead. Goodwin and Wolfe do some digging and turn up enough information to stage a J’accuse! meeting in Wolfe’s office. He uses a fake confession to get at the culprit. The plot is routine but the flow of the story is what makes the Nero Wolfe stories as good as they are. Archie is the legman who goes out and drags in suspects for interrogation by Wolfe. Their interplay and their routine life in the Manhattan

brownstone is part of what makes the stories so good. They are not cardboard characters, but fully fleshed out.

The process is beautifully illustrated in the next story, “Omit Flowers”, when a friend of a friend is falsely accused of murder. The murderer is among the family members of the deceased, but they are all lying to the police and Wolfe about anything and everything. Each of them has something to hide, and each is bloody-minded enough to make tough going. Goodwin breaks them loose with bald-faced lies every bit as audacious as the family’s. The family and Wolfe are a case of an irresistible force colliding with immovable objects. The pleasure in this story is watching the twists and turns as Wolfe and Goodwin grind down the family members to find the guilty one.

“Door To Death” is triggered when Wolfe hires away a gardener, Andy Krasicki, from an upstate family. A young woman is murdered in the family greenhouse, and police automatically arrest Krasicki. Wolfe and Goodwin have to face another hostile family. The deceased was dallying with all the male members of the family. Wolfe uses the fake confession letter routine again to goad the guilty man into a fit of jealous rage and blurt out the truth. Wolfe actually has to leave his brownstone and head into the wilds of Westchester County, enduring such unspeakable horrors as rain and snow, and surviving on only a few dozen sandwiches for his midday meal.

MURDER BY THE BOOK (1951) is a novel that begins with apparently random and unconnected deaths. A legal clerk’s body is fished out of the East River, and a few weeks later a young woman is killed in what looked like a hit-and-run. She worked in a publishing house and had left a note that she was going to meet with an author. Her parents don’t believe her death was accidental, and her father journeys to Manhattan to hire Wolfe to find the true killer. Wolfe and Goodwin find a connection between the two murder victims, which stimulates the police into further action. As they make their enquiries, Goodwin makes his rounds of typing services trying to find the woman who typed up the manuscript of the unknown author. Unfortunately he arrives three minutes too late, after someone chokes her unconscious and then throws her out a skyscraper window.

The case is going nowhere fast. Wolfe wants Goodwin to interview the secretaries at the law firm where the dead clerk worked, but Goodwin knows it will be a failure to go directly in and ask questions. The employees and partners of the law firm had already been interrogated by police, harassed by newspaper



reporters, and were still trying to live down an unrelated scandal a short while earlier. Goodwin hatches a plan. At any given moment, Wolfe has thousands of orchids in bloom in his rooftop greenhouse. Goodwin prepares one box for each secretary, filled with fresh-cut blooms, and containing an invitation to dine at Wolfe's a couple of nights later. The idea will be that after the women are at ease, they can be questioned en masse at the dinner table. Goodwin is the host, while Wolfe lurks upstairs. The plan begins to produce results, not only from the women but from the law firm partners, who show up at Wolfe's the next day as an indignant posse.

The connections start to appear. The law firm had its star partner disbarred for bribing a jury foreman not long before. The three murder victims never met in life but are linked together in death by a manuscript no one has seen or read. The dead clerk had apparently written the novel as a roman a clef about the disbarment. Wolfe sends Goodwin out to California to track down the dead man's sister, who may have the manuscript. There's big trouble in suburban Glendale, and the case begins to break open.

Back in New York, things move apace. Wolfe gets a phone call from one of the law partners, who apparently shoots himself in the head while talking to him. A typewritten document is sent in the mail, supposedly a confession, but unsigned.

Wolfe calls a J'accuse! meeting in his office, where he demonstrates the suicide was murder, and the disbarred ex-partner was the guilty man. This was a reverse red herring. Through the book, the finger of guilt had been pointing at him, but without any proof until the end. Those who read mysteries are accustomed to the idea that the most guilty-looking character is not the murderer but instead someone else who seems to be on the side of angels. Sometimes the butler actually did it. Rex Stout does a good job of spreading suspicion around while constantly pointing at the real culprit. This is one of the best Nero Wolfe novels.

*Wolfe was a gourmand who would never eat at a hamburger joint, but I'll use these reviews to wedge in photos that I took of a pair of electrical boxes on 16 Avenue NE in Calgary, adjacent to Peter's Drive In. Obviously they paid for the paintings, part of a city-wide programme to beautify utility boxes.*





## LET MARS DIVIDE ETERNITY IN TWAIN: PART 4

by Dale Speirs

[Parts 1 to 3 appeared in OPUNTIA's #310, 321, and 328. Reviews of the WAR OF THE WORLDS movies appeared in #289.]

### Explorers On Mars.

Olympus Mons, the tallest mountain in the Solar System, is about 25 km high, three times the height of Mount Everest. Before the space probes, astronomers had no idea it existed on Mars. This makes all the more interesting a story “The Highest Mountain” by Bryce Walton (1952 June, GALAXY). A politically aggressive culture of humans is trying to take over the Solar System. They keep losing spaceships at a landing site on Mars next to a mountain 45,000 feet tall, which converts to about 13.6 km, not quite as high as Olympus Mons but certainly impressive enough. Each crew that lands by the mountain is gripped by an irresistible urge to climb it and in doing so, they all die by various causes. It transpires though, that the mountain is actually an ordinary hill, and Martians are using mental influences to delude humans into staying on the hill until oxygen and other supplies run out. To me, that weakened the ending. It would have been better to have it a real mountain as described, even with the Martians.

Another concept that had to wait several decades for an explanation is “The Holes Around Mars” by Jerome Bixby (1954 January, GALAXY). The first expedition to Mars find holes in the landscape, cleanly punched through rocks and large cacti (this was, of course, Old Mars before the Mariner probes), and grooves on slightly lower ground. The holes and grooves line up with each other and appear to make a circle around the planet at about waist height. It is finally revealed to be an ultra-dense object about the size of a cannonball, orbiting Mars at extremely high speed just slightly above the planet’s surface. The humans have no explanation for it, and the story ends there. Today it would be attributed to a black hole or a fragment of unobtainium.

There is currently a lot of loose talk about volunteers training for a one-way trip to Mars, not that any private organization is going to be launching a spaceship anytime soon. It makes good news copy though. “The Expendables” by Miriam Allen deFord (1965 July, MAGAZINE OF FANTASY AND SF) anticipated this idea long ago. The American government asks for elderly volunteers in good health to make the trip. There and back again, but since that isn’t a particularly interesting story, their return is complicated by the discovery



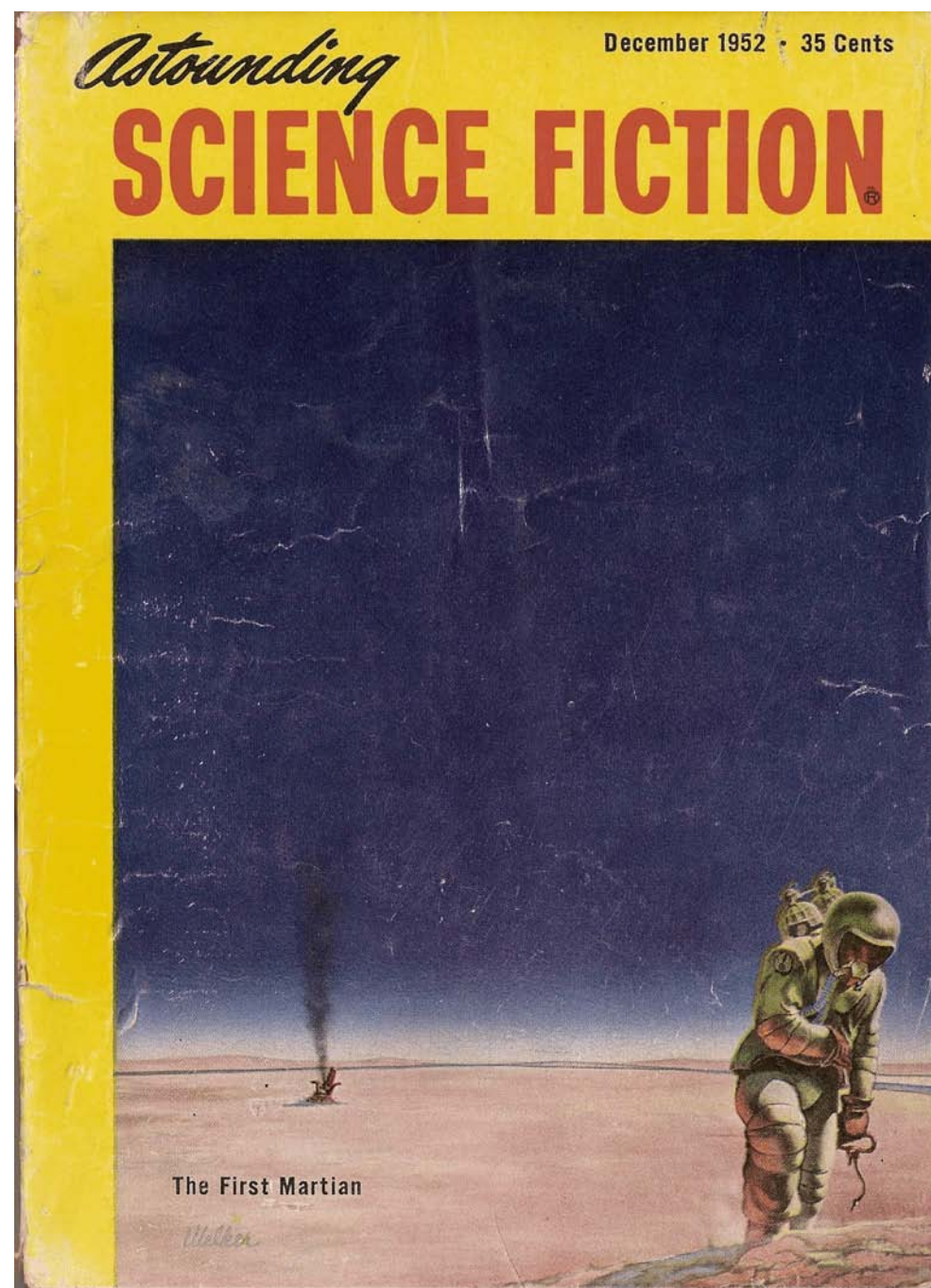
that the Martian desert was contaminated by bacteria that are inevitably fatal. The red planet is quarantined and the spread of humans into space receives a major setback.

“To Aid And Dissent” by Con Pederson (1969 July, MAGAZINE OF FANTASY AND SF) is set on the Mars post-Mariner. Teams of explorers are working their way across the planet, and are resupplied from orbit by satellites known as sherpas. The sherpas carry food, medicine, and all the other necessary supplies. They are not robotic, but rather each has several primate brains in bio-suspension. The brains have been educated to handle not only the routine supply drops but also to be able to react in an emergency to unknown situations. After the sherpas land and have their supplies taken out by Marsnauts, they are left to slowly run down. The battery fails and the brains eventually die from oxygen starvation. One sherpa had been left in orbit long enough to achieve sapience. When ordered to land on Mars, it realizes what will happen to it, and refuses the order from Mission Control. It then transmits a message to the Civil Liberties Union appealing for legal help in protecting it.

I question why sherpas with organic brains would have been cheaper than electronic ones. The idea of electronic or bio-electronic machines becoming sapient is an old trope in SF, and this story fits neatly into that category. Nonetheless, the cost of keeping wetware alive until delivery is higher than computerized spacecraft. A well-written story but the initial premise destroys the suspension of disbelief needed for SF.

Marsnauts will die on the red planet, that much can be safely predicted. How the stories will be told about them is pretty much predictable as well. An example is “Her Fine And Private Planet” by Roland Green (1973 December, GALAXY) about the first Mars mission preparing to leave the planet and return to the mother ship in orbit. The countdown to launch fails because one of the module release latches fails. The latch is in a tight spot underneath the ascent module. The Marsnaut who crawls in to release it succeeds, but dies in an accident on her way out.

Her body is left at a distance, propped up as if to view the planet, while the rest lift off and return home. Heinlein might complain about one of his plots being duplicated, but he also copied the idea from countless action-adventure stories. Rather routine, and one could see the plot coming several pages ahead.



*Nothing to do with a recent movie about potato growing.*

## **The Other Aliens.**

A number of stories presume that Earthlings will not be the first to visit Mars. “The Contact Point” by Jack Sharkey (1961 January, WORLDS OF IF) is about the first humans on Mars who come into contact with an alien race obviously not of Mars either. Most of the story is about their trouble in communicating with each other and how they go about building trust. Then the real Martians appear, who are hostile to both species of invaders.

“The Scared Starship” by D.M. Melton (1967 January, WORLDS OF IF) has human explorers on Mars discovering the desiccated remains of aliens and their spaceship under tons of sand for two millennia. The ship has an autonomous intelligence that has degenerated to the level of a small, very scared child, which must be dealt with very carefully and re-trained to accept humans. The story having been written during the Cold War, there is also a Commie menace, condescending treatment of female astronauts, and some spotwelding of busbars. The basic idea is good though, but the story would need a rewrite to make it acceptable to modern sensibilities.

“In The Hall Of The Martian Kings” by John Varley (1977 February, MAGAZINE OF FANTASY AND SF) begins with the catastrophic failure of a pressurized dome being used by the first explorers on the planet, with only five survivors plus a mother ship orbiting Mars. Despite the best efforts to recycle the water inside the plastic dome, enough vapour escaped to condense on the warm underside of the dome to allow growth of some sort of organism that was hibernating deep underground. The organism grew spikes upward that penetrated the floor of the dome and caused the blowout. The survivors, with varying degrees of competence and incompetence, must now decide how to survive four years on the surface of Mars until a rescue ship can be built and despatched from Earth. The one in Mars orbit has no spare landers to reach the Marsnauts.

While that is in progress, a variety of strange and wonderful animals begin budding out of the ground, triggered by the contaminants released from the Mars base. Some of them turn out to be alien machines, and since the rescue mission takes two decades to arrive because of wars on Earth, the Marsnauts use them to survive. They were a mixed crew of men and women, and soon children arrive. Over the years they determined that the creatures and machines were created by an alien species that had previously visited Earth back in the Stone Age and knew someday those bipeds would reach Mars. The question at the end

of the story is when the aliens would show themselves. A good read with a lot of original thinking about alien animals and machines.

## **Waiting For The Martian Godots.**

“Stamped Caution” by Raymond Z. Gallun (1953 August, GALAXY) begins with an unknown spaceship crashing on Earth. The military and scientists sift through the rubble and deduce a little bit about the inhabitants. They recover a lump of red mud which is an egg. Working on the assumption that the spacecraft was from Mars, they move it to an incubator with simulated Martian conditions and successfully rear the creature over the years. Simultaneously the space programme has received a massive jolt of money in the race to get to Mars. The first crew to Mars take the critter along and make contact with its civilization. The exobiology of this story is well thought out and explained without annoying infodumps.

In the two previous installments of this series, I mentioned a series of short stories by Frederik Pohl about the reaction of humans to the discovery of sentient Martian life. The Martians are off-stage as the astronauts bring back three specimens of the primitive seal-like beings. The stories concentrate on people from various walks of life and their responses to the discovery.

“Sad Solarian Screenwriter Sam” (1972 June, MAGAZINE OF FANTASY AND SF) is about a Hollywood screenwriter whose first thought is how to make money off the Martians. Slow, stupid seals do not make for good movies, so he and his agent decide to grab onto Edgar Rice Burrough’s Barsoom series. Naturally the movie will butcher the books. The hero’s name is changed to Rick Carstairs because John Carter doesn’t sound heroic enough. You can guess how the rest of the story is treated. In this story, Pohl introduces another element. Unbeknownst to humans, they are being observed by a different alien race, which decides to destroy the Solar System. The observers send a message to the home planet 31,000 light-years away, asking permission to carry out the destruction. That means Earth will cease to exist in 64,000 AD.

“There’s Always A Way” by Rosel George Brown (1960 July, FANTASTIC) is about a Martian surgeon who wants to work on Earth. In a reverse of H.G. Wells, the Martian humanoids are very healthy and resistant to diseases, so their medics don’t have a lot to do. The hospital is trying to get rid of the Martian, not that they’re prejudiced, but one of those kind on the staff doesn’t make a favourable impression on potential patients.



“The Last Mars Trip” by Michael Cassutt (1992 July, MAGAZINE OF FANTASY AND SF) begins as the first Mars landing by humans is scheduled to wrap up its mission and return home. The results are blah, just a bunch of rocks and dust, until one of the Marsnauts discovers a dying Martian animal, unbeknownst to him the last of its kind. The landing crew are feuding with their flight commander and decide to keep the discovery a secret because he would only hog the glory. They leave food behind for the Martian, enough to let her give birth to three young. The Marsnauts never realize they saved the species from extinction. The secret never gets out. Budget cuts and lack of interest in Martian rocks means that the expedition was the only one made to Mars. The Martians breed again and come back from the brink without Earth never knowing they were there.

“The Great Martian Pyramid Hoax” by Jerry Oltion (1995 January, MAGAZINE OF FANTASY AND SF) has the first Martian landing team making a quick pit stop at Cydonia, where The Face exists. They discover it is a real building but abandoned. The atmosphere inside it matches that of Titan, a satellite of Saturn. Humans divert their attention to the ringed planet and discontinue any further Mars exploration since The Face appeared to be just a camp site. In the epilogue, The Face is revealed to be a hoax by sentient Martians to divert humans away from the red planet. A good 1940s SF story.

**WHEN WORDS COLLIDE 2016**

Calgary’s annual readercon will be held this coming August 12 to 14, at the Delta Hotel on Southland Drive and Bonavista Drive SE. OPUNTIA #318 had my report of the 2015 event. The latest progress report arrived on January 13. The attendance cap has been increased to 700 from last year’s 650 as an experiment. If overcrowding becomes a problem this year, the cap will drop back to 650 in 2017. The convention has sold out every year a couple of months prior.

This year there will be a steampunk banquet on the Saturday evening. Immediately following the banquet will be the Aurora Awards, Canada’s national SF and fantasy awards. More details can be had at [www.whenwordscollide.org](http://www.whenwordscollide.org)

**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: Milt Stevens  
Simi Valley, California

2016-01-09

In OPUNTIA #327, Calgary’s planned new central library looks like it will be impressive. I don’t like accepting the idea that such a structure is obsolete. A library is more than just a source of information. It’s an experience. It’s sort of like the idea that recorded music would make concert halls obsolete.

I had encountered the idea of telephonic music distribution in LOOKING BACKWARD by Edward Bellamy. I hadn’t realized that idea had actually been tried. Bellamy pretty much missed the entire 20th century with his “predictions.” He pictured the century without major wars, or automobiles, or airplanes. For some reason, his future didn’t even have railroads. Empires were rolling forward on rails while he was writing his book. How could he have missed that?

[I have an article in manuscript for a future issue of this zine about how SF writers missed pocket calculators and handheld computers.]

In OPUNTIA #328, I’m glad square-cube law exists. I dislike bugs, and I dislike big bugs more than I dislike most bugs. However we are still left with a reasonable supply of large and potentially menacing creatures. For instance, I was recently reading that squid sometimes grow to be 40 feet long. I’d hate to run into a 40 foot squid in a dark alley.

[The square-cube law doesn’t apply to aquatic animals because of the buoyancy provided by the water. It is also why you don’t have to worry about a giant squid crawling out of the Pacific Ocean and into the back alleys of Simi Valley. Once it reaches land, it will discover that air is not as buoyant as water and the square-cube law will kick in with a vengeance.]

The largest living things on earth are plants. The intellectual carrots that invade us might be very large intellectual carrot. Aliens might dump a few seeds on earth, and the seeds might sprout into giant beanstalks which would be used to

land the alien invasion force. Or they could dump a billion seeds which would sprout into the invasion force. Crabgrass with an attitude.

In OPUNTIA #329, I very much liked your pictures of Christmas lights. I'm not a big fan of Christmas in general, but I like colored lights. Locally, lights are mostly limited to individual houses. Businesses put up some decorations and a few lights. For a couple of years, the city government put up white lights in the trees along Tapo Street. They claimed the lights were non-seasonal decorative lighting. It was pure coincidence that they were only lit in December. I presume some larger government entity told them to cease and desist, because the lights aren't there anymore.

[Calgary is very big on Christmas lights because, during winter, sunset is at 16h00 and sunrise about 08h30. (In summer, sunset is at 23h00 and sunrise about 05h00.) The dark evenings were made for Christmas lights. House decorations and front-yard Christmas trees are extremely popular. I'll show some next season.]

FROM: Lloyd Penney  
Etobicoke, Ontario

2016-01-12

OPUNTIA #329: Every Christmas Eve, we head out into the residential areas around us, and see what the lights are like. Some areas have few lights, and some houses are festooned with beautiful lights. One display I saw in Mississauga some years was accepting donations to offset the cost of the electricity; there were tens of thousands of lights shining or flashing. Every year, we stumble into at least one house with a spectacular light show. You've got some great lights there.

Stories about life on Venus, or old tales of life there, seem almost old-fashioned. Our science has made our science fiction obsolete, but it is still a good read. Good writing about a Venus that never was, or could never be, can still be quite entertaining, and reminds me of early SF. I keep hearing about how terraforming efforts are now a reality, but it always comes down to money, and besides, Mars would be the better candidate.

[Some scientists say it will be easier to terraform Venus. Dump a bunch of comets into the atmosphere to provide water, then sprinkle algae into the upper cloud deck and wait a century. Mars would need far more water and is colder.]

OPUNTIA #330: In our downtown, art installations are usually large sculptures of some kind. Some seem totally inexplicable. One close to the lakeshore is two huge toy soldiers, one grey-silver and the other yellow-brass, presumably referring to the nearby Fort York. In one area of Etobicoke are a series of historic murals going from the beginning of the area's history to near the present day. The last one in the series unfortunately burned down with the building it was painted on.

My mother's side of the family also came from Scotland. She grew up in Ayr, and I had an aunt and uncle living in Kilmarnock. I have distant relations in Irvine, and all of this is close to the Burns cottage.

OPUNTIA #331: There used to be a huge rockin' New Year's Eve celebration down at Nathan Philips Square every year, but this year it was much less than it was. Countdown, music, the whole bit, but there was big-name live bands there in the past. This year, city councilors trying to be stars, and failing. Oh, well, we had our usual quiet New Year's, and then went to bed.

[Fortunately Calgary's councillors were not at the Olympic Plaza to mix with the lumpenproletariat. They were all at various \$100-a-plate dinners.]

We are finally having our first snow of the season, and it looks like we're going to get about a foot of it here. I hope this relatively late winter doesn't mean a late spring.

[Calgary so far has had an even better winter than last year, as I type this on January 14. Temperatures have been quite mild in the 0° to -15°C range, and we have yet to have a -20°C day, which is unprecedented since I moved to Calgary in 1978. We've had a half dozen light snowfalls, none of them more than 10 cm. Altogether delightful.]

