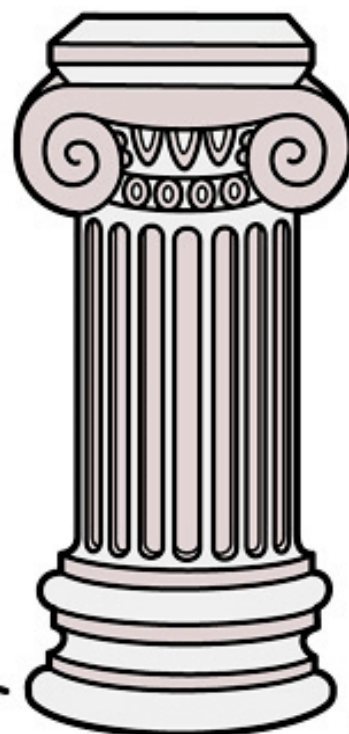


Bacchus said he wanted to put me on a pedestal. I was flattered until I realized he'd had too much to drink and just wanted to look up my skirt.



Bottoms up, eh?



TEDDY HARVIA

Lunar New Year 2016

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.

GONG HEY FAT CHOY, YEAR OF THE MONKEY
photos by Dale Speirs

Calgary is a great city for an endless stream of parades and festivals. The Stampede rodeo and Christmas are the two biggest, in that order. The Chinese New Year is third. The celebrations are centered around Chinatown, of course, but the crowds were so large that this year the festival committee decided to spread the events out over four weekends, from January 30 to February 21. It did make a difference; although still busy, the crowds weren't so thick that one couldn't move.

For the first weekend, I went down to the Chinese Cultural Centre to watch the lion dancers. There was quite a crowd on the main floor, so I took my photos from the second floor balcony.







This lion seemed to be giving me the evil eye! More Chinese New Year photos in the next issue.

TRANSIT FANNING IN CALGARY: PART 11

by Dale Speirs

[Parts 1 to 10 appeared in OPUNTIA's #256, 258, 260, 264, 269, 275, 283, 298, 302, and 327.]

I don't specifically seek out transit fiction, whether written, audio, or video, but occasionally come across items.

Death On The Tracks.

In some cities, transit systems are contracted out. A 1936 episode of the old-time radio (OTR) show GREEN HORNET titled "Trouble Hits The Trolley" is

about a corrupt man named Fisher who wants his bus franchise to supplant the existing trolley system. (This and other OTR shows mentioned below are available as free mp3s from www.archive.org) Fisher bribes City inspectors to write bad reports on the trolleys and infiltrates their system to have mechanics sabotage the cars. Fisher uses local newspaper reporters to sensationalize the troubles and tries to stampede City Council into giving him a bus franchise. Naturally the Green Hornet and Kato investigate to identify the culprit and bring him down.

In the 1972 January issue of AMAZING is “Commuter Special” by Richard E. Peck about an overpopulated America that strives to keep the population under control by random gassing of commuters in trains. In overcrowded areas such as Washington-Philadelphia-New York, each unit in every commuter train has a random chance of sealing off and killing its 200 commuters with poison gas. The car is then shunted away at the next station to dispose of the victims. The odds are thousands to one against being gassed but even so, dozens of cars are gassed each day.

All very legal, all very random, and accepted by a passive citizenry as a necessary task. Of course, the politicians and bankers don’t use public transit; they’re too important for that. The loss of freedom, if done gradually, has always been accepted complacently by the public. It does strike me as being inefficient though, for the amount of resources that had to be devoted to it. One reason the Nazis lost the war was because they sidetracked so many resources, trains, and staff into running the concentration camps.

Take The Eh? Train.

One of the classic science fiction stories is “A Subway Named Mobius” by Armin Joseph Deutsch (1950 December, ASTOUNDING). The Boston subway system adds some new track connections, which inadvertently turn some of the tracks into a Moebius strip.** Trains disappear but their ghosts can still be heard, and there is a desperate search to find them. This was later made into an Argentinian movie and reset into the Buenos Aires subway system. This short story has been anthologized many times.

** One of the those unlauted German words that make anglophones undecided as to whether it should be spelled with one or two vowels. I prefer “Moebius” as closer to the original pronunciation but the title of the story uses the American spelling.

A year earlier in 1949, Jacqueline Steiner and Bess Lomax Hawes wrote “The M.T.A. Song”, often known as “Charlie On The MTA” about a man trapped on Boston’s subway system. It was popularized by the Kingston Trio. The song was based on a bizarre system whereby subway riders had to pay at the exit, not on entrance, a system which apparently Boston actually did use. Charlie was short a nickel to pay the exit fare and thus had to keep riding the train. The song makes no sense to me. It says that as he goes through stations, his wife hands him sandwiches through the train windows to keep him sustained. Why doesn’t she just hand him the correct fare?

Digression: Calgary Transit has an integrated system of trains and buses. Tickets, transfers, and passes are good for both, and riders can move back and forth between them. The LRT train is free downtown along 7 Avenue South but proof of fare payment is required elsewhere. There are no ticket booths for the trains. Instead, special constables check the trains at random. Getting caught without a validated ticket or pass means a \$150 fine. The officers also keep out drunks and hooligans, and have the power of arrest to deal with troublemakers. That is why the trains are clean and graffiti-free.

“The Helix” by Gerard Rejskind (1971 Jan/Feb, WORLDS OF IF) is a replay of “A Subway Named Mobius” but in a different style. An inventor has developed a device using a mathematical construct called the Geoffroy Effect, which allows subway trains to share the same switches and pass through each other using different dimensions in the same physical space. The system works fine in the Montreal subway for a while until a blip occurs and one train disappears into the system. It’s in there, but no one can get it out. After much bafflegab and hand-waving, the system restarts itself, but when the train reappears, its passengers are horribly mutated.

It turns out that the switches weren’t interdimensional as thought but instead dissolved the trains on contact with each other, then reduplicated them on the other side. The problem was that an electrical blip caused the duplicates to be recopied over top of themselves multiple times. This didn’t matter for inanimate objects that didn’t change, but humans have blood circulating inside, tissues moving about, and organs with biochemical metabolism. Each subsequent copy was blurred and created on top of the previous one, producing shambling creatures who had once been commuters. An interesting story, although like most that rely on a surprise ending, it can only be read once.

In Transit Res.

The comedy team of Fibber McGee and Molly were on OTR for decades, mostly for THE JOHNSON WAX PROGRAM, as shows in those days were often named for their sponsor. Fibber and Molly were a suburban couple always getting in and out of trouble, usually because of Fibber’s pigheadedness. They lived in the town of Wistful Vista, and a couple of their episodes had to do with the local transit system.

“Streetcar Motorman” is a 1936 episode with that begins with Fibber and Molly boarding a streetcar just as the motorman’s wife runs up to it and tells her husband they’ve won the lottery. He quits his job on spot, not figuratively, and abandons the streetcar where it is, stranding the passengers. Fibber is always confident that he can do any job even if he can’t, and takes the controls of the streetcar, with Molly collecting the fares. Along the way they deal with assorted passengers, doing funny routines. Eventually the streetcar runs away on Fibber but fortunately it derails near their house. They walk home smug and satisfied, leaving others to worry about the mess.

“Waiting For The Bus” is a 1947 episode. Evidently by then Wistful Vista had abandoned streetcars and converted to buses. Fibber and Molly have been waiting a long time for their bus, but when it finally arrives, the driver won’t let them on because it is full. An indignant Fibber stands in front of the bus and won’t let it move. He and the bus driver discuss the matter at the top of their lungs, while assorted characters come and go. The mayor eventually shows up and orders the driver to squeeze the McGees in. Only then does Fibber notice that the bus wasn’t the one they wanted and refuses to get on it.

Another case of mortal combat with the bus company was a 1946 episode of the OTR comedy series THE LIFE OF RILEY. Chester Riley is a born loser, mainly because he is cowardly, inarticulate, and a boneless wonder. How he managed to have a wife and two children is a puzzle.

The episode “Bus Company Lawsuit” begins when the buses keep passing him by at the stop. Rather than walk home in a few minutes, he is stubbornly determined to get the full value of his transfer. By the time a bus finally stops for him, the transfer has expired, and the driver physically throws him off the bus. Riley goes to a community association meeting to complain about the incident and finds himself roped into a full-blown lawsuit against the bus company.

He wants to settle out of court and accept the apology and cash the bus company offered, but is pushed into a trial. Riley is completely inept in the witness box and messes up his case. God looks after fools though. The trial recesses for lunch and the judge takes his car to a nearby restaurant. The car breaks down and the judge is forced to take the bus back to the courthouse, but the driver roughhouses him as well. He therefore instructs the jury to find in favour of Riley.

SHERLOCKIANA: PART 18

by Dale Speirs

[Parts 1 to 17 appeared in OPUNTIA #63.1B, 63.1C, 63.1D, 67.1D, 68.1C, 69.1E, 70.1A, 71.1B, 251, 253, 256, 261, 269, 270, 276, 288, and 309.]

The original Sherlock Holmes stories are referred to as the canon, while stories written by other authors in the Holmesian setting are called pastiches.

Anthology, My Dear Watson.

FURTHER ENCOUNTERS OF SHERLOCK HOLMES (2014), edited by George Mann, is a sequel anthology. There are no prizes for guessing the name of the first volume, which I reviewed in OPUNTIA #276.

Leading off is “The Adventure Of The Professor’s Bequest” by Philip Purser-Hallard. Holmes gets a request from a man whose wife is Abigail Banister, sister of the deceased Professor Moriarty. The Professor had sent some papers to his sister just before his fall to the death, which have now been stolen. He wants Holmes, of all detectives, to investigate. Since the author is adding a fair number of Moriarty family members and friends to the pastiche, the story spends quite some time filling in all the details of their lives and relationships. Finally though, on to the search and a midnight rendezvous (how come no one has a rendezvous at 09h00 while they’re fresh and still have the day ahead of them to do the grocery shopping?). Abigail is exposed as the culprit behind the theft of her own property, wanting to secretly sell them to some other mastermind.

The story does not end there, though. Holmes goes through Moriarty's papers and discovers there were plans to build autonomous Babbage machines across the country and around the world, then link them together with telegraphs. This would allow them to form an international network that would rule the world and alter human behaviour. Never happen, of course.

"The Curious Case Of The Compromised Card Index" by Andrew Lane begins with an intrusion into 221B while Holmes and Watson were away. Someone has meddled with Holmes's new punchcard index of criminals and news events. He previously kept them in ledger books, but in the late 1800s punchcards were the cutting edge of technology. (See OPUNTIA #274 for a brief history).

What Holmes can't tell is if fake cards were added, real cards stolen, or the whole disturbance was a sham to divert him away from a crime in progress. After a bit of detection, Holmes tracks down the perpetrator, a professional blackmailer named Aloysius Morgan. He had taken the cards, copied them through a keypunch machine, and then returned the originals. Morgan will use the data, much of which was confidential, to correlate it for potential blackmail victims.

Holmes does his stern "Now you're in for it" act but meets open defiance. Morgan points out that Holmes can't prove the burglary. His cards were still there, and no law existed to make it illegal to copy information. (In Canada, the first hackers were prosecuted for mis-using electricity, that being the only law available until new legislation was brought in during the late 1980s.) Holmes is stymied. But as he did before in the canon, he recognized that justice and the courts are two different things, so he tips off a underworld operative that Morgan was compiling a file on him. The next day's newspapers run a story about Morgan being found entangled and dead in some sort of machine he was inventing, purpose unknown.

"Sherlock Holmes And The Popish Relic" by Mark Latham begins with Watson attending a seance sans Holmes. The medium predicts that Watson and a friend of his will one day soon be lost in a catacomb. Six months later, Sir Daniel Hotchkiss hires Holmes in the matter of a missing uncle, Lord Septimus Bairstowe. Ghosts and strange noises have been seen and heard in Bairstowe's manor house, and there are legends about it from the Popish Plot days. Holmes and Watson stay the night in the empty house. Ghosts appear with lanterns, and one of them slugs Watson unconscious, so obviously they are not real ghosts but men up to no good. Holmes and Watson get into a foot chase with the culprits

through catacombs under the big house. They discover that thieves were mining for gold artifacts hidden by Catholics during the Popish Plot. The thieves lose both their treasure and their lives, and Holmes and Watson barely make it back out of the catacombs. Most of the plot was predictable but some of the perpetrators were a surprise when revealed.

"The Adventure Of The Decadent Headmaster" by Nick Campbell begins in late 1899 with a letter to Holmes supposedly from a schoolmaster who is concerned about the headmaster of his school. The headmaster, when in his private quarters, wears silk garments and reads yellow-backed literature. One of the schoolboys has disappeared in mysterious circumstances. The letter was faked by the boys of the school. Holmes and Watson investigate, of course, and find a plentitude of clues. A female automaton enters the scene, and the school turns out to be a hive of cultists expecting the end of the world. The cultists are brave and prepared for the fin de siecle. They don't want the boys to suffer though, so they have prepare poison-laced food to help the lads avoid the End Times. Fortunately Holmes and Watson stop the fiendish plan.

"The Case Of The Devil's Door" by James Goss involves a South American exiled by his politics and who fears that demons are trying to kill him. There is a mysterious house which only exists at night, and which swallows up the exiled revolutionaries visiting it. It is actually a death trap, a false floor into a ventilation shaft of the London Underground, to which the victims fell to their death. The mechanics of the vanishing house and the death trap are what carry the story.

"The Adventure Of The Coin Of The Realm" by William Patrick Maynard and Alexandra Martukovich takes place at sea, where Holmes and Watson are on a ship returning to England. A porter sounds the alarm for a man overboard, who is identified as a coin dealer with a past in counterfeits. Not long after, the porter is murdered. The story then slows down a bit as Holmes interviews the passengers one by one. There is the traditional J'accuse! meeting and the culprit is identified. She then makes a speech about representing a secret organization that controls the world by currency manipulation. Having blabbed all that, she commits suicide with poison, leaving justice to be done and the authors with an opportunity to start a series about Holmes and Watson chasing the conspiracy.

"The Strange Case Of The Displaced Detective" by Roy Gill is a time travel story about an inventor with a strange device. I dislike such stories because of

all the paradoxes and anything-can-happen plot lines. With no rhyme or reason, it doesn't make for a good detective story, especially when Holmes crosses paths with himself.

“The Girl Who Paid For Silence” by Scott Handcock is about a young girl who witnessed the brutal murder of her playmate and comes to Watson for help. Emily’s dialogue is too adult to be believable but setting that aside, she tell Watson that no one will listen to her. Holmes arrives during the middle of the interview. Not only does he fail to acknowledge Emily’s presence, he tells Watson there is no girl there. Times passes, as it always does, and eventually Holmes catches the murderer. The epilogue reveals that Emily was the dead girl’s imaginary playmate.

“An Adventure In Three Courses” by Guy Adams has a grumpy Watson and an acerbic Holmes dining in a fancy establishment. As they slurp their soup, Holmes makes deductions about the other restaurant patrons. The others are as equally interested in Holmes and Watson, and it turns out they are all criminals who had the misfortune to tangle with Holmes in the past. The ending, while predictable (Holmes and Watson triumph), is very bizarre, and uses Holmes’s adage that justice and the law are not the same thing. Holmes strikes first and fastest, and poisons all the other diners before they can kill him. The story builds up suspense nicely and suddenly snaps to its climax in an unexpected manner.

“The Sleep Of Reason” by Lou Anders is a parody set at 177B Bleecker Street in New York City in early 1900. The great detective is S. Quentin Carmichael, and his companion Dr. Avery Wilson narrates the story. There are all sorts of parodied name checks from the pulp fiction of that era, with Barsoomian Martians and Venusians walking on stage as well. A bit tiresome though, if you aren’t up on all the old pulp stories.

“The Snowtorn Terror” by Justin Richards is about the murder of a Scot on the snow-covered slopes of his estate in the Highlands. The victim’s son brings in Holmes and Watson to investigate. Holmes thinks the death is related to a nearby train robbery of a large amount of gold. The problem with stealing gold is that it is heavy, yet tons of it disappeared in minutes. It seems obvious to both police and Holmes that the gold was hidden very near the robbery site. The list of suspects is narrowed down. The dead man met his end because he had been about to discover the gold. A routine puzzle story.

“A Betrayal Of Doubt” by Philip Marsh concludes this anthology. It is narrated by Watson’s son. Holmes is a feeble old man brought out of retirement to investigate a locked room murder. There are hints of cultists involved in Satanic rituals, and there are corrupt police officers who make for a messy ending.

Overall, this anthology wasn’t bad. One or two clunkers, and the rest are quite readable.

Winding Your Way Down On Baker Street.

THE BROTHERS OF BAKER STREET (2011) by Michael Robertson is the sequel to THE BAKER STREET LETTERS, which I reviewed in OPUNTIA #69.1E. This modern-era series is about two brothers, Reggie and Nigel Heath, who rent 221B for their law office. The lease stipulates that they must answer letters sent to Sherlock Holmes at that address.

The novel at hand starts off at a low, with Reggie in a bad mood. His girlfriend Laura Rankin has been cheating on him, and his clients are deserting him because he has been neglecting his practice. The landlord has warned him of possible eviction because the flow of letters to Holmes is not being dealt with as per the lease contract. Reggie doesn’t want that job, but Nigel is in Los Angeles, so he hits on the idea of bundling up the letters and couriering them to Nigel for him to do the work.

Reggie is messing up his life completely. He is photographed assaulting Laura’s current paramour, media tycoon Lord Robert Buxton. He botches up cases. He is distracted by a letter from someone claiming to be a descendant of Professor James Moriarty, thinks Holmes was preserved by cryogenics and is now masquerading as Reggie, and who vows revenge.

But at least one client is desperate enough to hire him, a cabbie who has been accused of murdering two American tourists. As his court case proceeds, he manages to get lucky, using traffic cameras to prove the cabbie was nowhere near the murder scene. It all turns out to be a conspiracy by a tech company that wants to install GPS devices in every cab.

A second plot involves one of the culprits, Darla Rennie, being descended from a man named James Moriarty. Not the Moriarty, since the name is a common one in Ireland. She is schizophrenic and off her medications, causing her to

think that Reggie qua Holmes killed her ancestor in 1891. There is a chase and she dies in the Thames River, her body never found. Some of the coincidences are unbelievable, such as Scotland Yard being able to trace the first owner of a manual typewriter manufactured and sold in the USA in the 1890s. That first owner was Rennie's ancestor.

The third installment in this series is THE BAKER STREET TRANSLATION (2013). The mail to 221B includes an American heiress who wants to leave her fortune to Holmes, and a translator who wants Holmes's advice on English nursery rhymes. The latter eventually ties into a plot to bomb a Royal garden party (not the Queen, just one of her minor relatives) which eventually takes over the main plot of the novel.

But before that, Buxton's competition with Reggie for the hand of Laura becomes vicious. Lord Robert tries to buy 221B from the landlord so he can evict the Heath brothers. When his offer is refused, he then initiates a hostile takeover of the building owner's company. Buxton sneaks into Reggie's office to rummage through his papers. His plans go no further because he is put on ice for the rest of the novel when he is kidnapped by a third party and held for ransom.

The details are gradually revealed of the attack on the Royals, and are far too complicated to be believable. The translator was supplying secret codes to be installed in talking birthday cards, which in turn would be used by a disgruntled former employee of the Royal Parks to detonate plastic ducks filled with plastique explosive and used as garden decorations. The investigation is hampered by a bent cop, and Reggie's inability to get along with the people he needs most to help him.

This novel reads reasonably well but takes a while to get to the point. The author did a good job of tying up all those loose ends he created en route to the denouement, most of which were unnecessary in the first place. Reggie's behaviour moderates slightly, ever so slightly, and the reader begins, ever so slightly as well, to have a modicum of sympathy for him.

The next book in the series is MORIARTY RETURNS A LETTER (2014), which begins in the Victorian era when a private detective gets himself into trouble in the London dockyards and is killed by a man named Redgil. Not before the ignorant criminals surrounding him think he is Moriarty, they being unable to distinguish between fiction and biography. The dead man's pregnant

widow vows revenge, and sets up an elaborate plan to strip Redgil of the proceeds of his crime, knowing she probably can't bring him to justice.

The novel then jumps forward to the London Blitz, where the widow's son, now a middle-aged Army captain, tracks down Redgil, an old man at this stage. The confrontation is terminated by a V-1 buzz bomb hitting the building. A glaring error that jars the reader is that the buzz bombs are repeatedly referred to as V-2 missiles, but the description clearly indicates they are the V-1 cruise missiles, not the ballistic rocket.

Once that vignette concludes, the story jumps forward in time again to the present. It brings back Darla Rennie, who supposedly died in BROTHERS but now, it transpires, had faked her death. Reggie and Laura are engaged, and Nigel putters about the edges of the stage. Some of the letters to Holmes that the Heath brothers have been receiving, along with others from an unrelated archive, are in an exhibition at a hotel owned by the Redfern family. Rennie is looking for revenge once again, for that murdered Victorian detective and the Army captain were her ancestors. She drags the Heath brothers back into the plot, a very convoluted one indeed, with several coincidences.



The Redferns are descendants of Redgil, who changed his name for obvious reasons and became a respectable hotel owner in his later years. The family are embarrassed to discover their grandfather was a murderer, and Rennie even angrier to find out that she is not a Moriarty. It all ends on a cliff top by a Gothic manor house, with Rennie and the last male Redfern fighting on the precipice and falling to their deaths onto the jagged rocks below, a la Holmes and Moriarty.

The author pulls off a success in tying all the threads together in the last few pages. In this novel, he is finding his range, particularly with his ability to write complex plots that seem unrelated but suddenly all converge in the denouement. Well done, that man.

233 qua 221B Baker Street, per Google Street View

**IF YOU AREN'T SQUAMOUS,
THEN WHY ARE YOU TRYING TO BE ELDRITCH?: PART 2**

by Dale Speirs

[Part 1 appeared in OPUNTIA #298. Issues #22 and 63.1A have related articles on H.P. Lovecraft.]

Elementary, My Dear Howard.

SHADOWS OVER BAKER STREET (2003) is an anthology edited by Michael Reeves and John Pelan, a crossover between Sherlock Holmes and the Cthulhu Mythos. I suppose it could just as easily be reviewed as Sherlockiana, but I'll put it here since the Lovecraftian theme dominates over the Sherlockian elements.

Leading off the anthology is "A Study In Emerald" by Neil Gaiman begins with the murder of a Bohemian prince in cheap rooms in the slummier part of London. The word "Rache" is painted on the wall with the prince's green blood. Victoria is the Queen but not human, for the Great Old Ones conquered the world seven centuries prior and now rule the planet as an interlocking set of monarchies. The murderer and his accomplices are Restorationists hoping to destroy the Old Ones. They are found out by Holmes but escape. The story dribbles to an end, evidently the first chapter in a series.

"Tiger! Tiger!" by Elizabeth Bear concerns a hunting party of tourists in India on the trail of a man-eating tiger. Irene Adler is one of the group, who find not a tiger but a Creature (so capitalized in the story). They also cross paths with Col. Sebastian Moran and various other characters and elements of the Holmesian canon but not the great detective himself. The Creature does not fit the mould of the Old Ones, being made of fire and ash. There is a mad Arab, so that's alright then. A climatic battle with the Creature and a small twist in the ending when the monsoon arrives.

"The Case Of The Wavy Black Dagger" by Steve Perry takes place in New York City where Holmes and Watson are visiting. Since the whole event takes place in a hotel room, it could just as easily been in chambers at 221B. Holmes is visited by a Balinese woman. She is a martial arts expert who is tracking down an Old One terrorizing her neighbourhood, as they so often do. It can only be killed with two special knives, of which she has one and Holmes has the other. The knives must be used simultaneously against the beast's two hearts. Holmes gives it to her and she departs. More a character study than a real story.

"A Case Of Royal Blood" by Steven Elliot Altman brings in H.G. Wells to work with Holmes. There is trouble in the Royal Household of the Netherlands, which is plagued by a poltergeist. The game afoot is a Dutch shoggoth. It shambles about and is eventually put to death. The monarchy is saved and so is the life of Princess Wilhelmina, the future Queen.

"The Weeping Masks" by James Lowder has Watson describing his time in Afghanistan and the Battle of Maiwand. In the aftermath, suffering from his wounds, he crosses paths with priests of He Who Is Not To Be Named.

"Art In The Blood" by Brian Stableford brings in Mycroft Holmes when his brother Sherlock drags him into a case dealing with the Old Ones. The Diogenes Club has lost one of its agents, Captain Pye, a name familiar from the Holmes canon. There is a cursed stone, the touch of which slowly turns a man into a cephalopodic monster. Sherlock is at a loss to stop such eldritch horrors.

"The Curious Case Of Miss Violet Stone" by Poppy Z. Brite and David Ferguson is about a young woman who was taken ill and has supposedly lived on nothing for three years. Her brother Thomas, a chef, asks Holmes and Watson to investigate. On visiting her, she tells Holmes, using the voice of an alien, that she is the victim of a mind transfer experiment gone wrong. It can't get back to its real body. The Old One, for it is so, gives Holmes instructions to build a device to free it. The thing is done, the mind swap is reversed, and Violet begins eating again. A routine story with no suspense or deduction required.

"The Adventure Of The Antiquarian's Niece" by Barbara Hambly begins with a man asking Holmes to find out why his fiancée's family suddenly rejected him. Her home in a Welsh border manor house has been the source of ugly rumours for centuries. There is an unholy altar deep underneath the manor. Shoggoths and their ilk are summoned, with the usual results that transpire whenever people start waving around copies of the NECRONOMICON.

"The Mystery Of The Worm" by John Pelan begins with Holmes and Watson receiving, in short succession, two bizarre callers. They had been hunting for an elixir of eternal life among the ancient buried cities of Egypt. The clients tell Holmes of discovering a strange device that may be a matter transmitter. There is a climactic scene in a mad scientist's laboratory, or at least what would be climactic except that nothing much happens that hadn't already happened earlier in the story. No sign of the Old Ones.

“The Mystery Of The Hanged Man’s Puzzle” by Paul Finch has Holmes and Watson summoned to solve a puzzle upon which the fate of the world etcetera. They travel about the worst slums of London looking for clues, and find a wretched creature who was once a man and is now a Cthulhuian monster. He/It took delivery of some cargo from Innsmouth, Massachusetts, and the familiar name (at least for HPL acolytes) of Obed Marsh is heard. The chase goes down into the sewers of London, then to a watermains station. Cultists have brought a supply of Devil’s Reef Moss from Innsmouth, which if mixed into the water supply would turn London into a city of gibbering cephalopodic creatures. The plot is stopped in the nick of time, of course.

“The Horror Of Many Faces” by Tim Lebbon has a creature impersonating Holmes and making Watson doubt the truth. It is up to no good and comes after the real Holmes. If it succeeds, life as we know it will end. Cue the violent struggle in 221B chambers, the real Holmes wins, and so to the epilogue where everyone sits back and smokes a pipe while Holmes ties up the loose threads.

“The Drowned Geologist” by Caitlin Kiernan begins with a somewhat tedious monologue by the narrator, Dr. Tobias Logan. He is an American geologist traveling about the British coastline examining fossil exposures. A fellow geologist drowns while collecting specimens on a beach. The body is holding in its hand an ammonite. These shelled cephalopods died out with the dinosaurs 65 megayears ago. But this ammonite was fresh, not a fossil. The story ends without resolution. In the epilogue, Logan gets a letter from Holmes, the only mention of the great detective, and obviously tacked on to qualify the story for this anthology.

“A Case Of Insomnia” by John Vourlis is more a plague of insomnia, with the citizens of the village of Inswich suffering from three months of sleeplessness. They are afraid of the dark and keep candles burning continuously. Some sort of creature is said to be prowling around in the night, lurking on thresholds. The trouble began the previous December after a total lunar eclipse.

Holmes and Watson visit the manor house where the creature conveniently makes its next appearance, apparently searching for something. That something was a stone looted from Egypt and now set in a necklace worn by the lady of the house. It is the key to interdimensional space from whence came the creature. The tentacled beast can only travel in darkness, and came from Egypt to find the stone, using the eclipse to travel the long distance. This seems illogical, as the creature should have shown up years before it did on any night of a new moon.

Be that as it may, it is killed and the stone dropped into a deep well to prevent anyone using it to open up a portal into the realm of the Elder Gods.

“The Adventure Of The Voorish Sign” by Richard Lupoff has a client informing Holmes and Watson that both her missing husband and brother were up to some sort of occult mischief about which she was not allowed to know. A visit follows to the family manor in Wales, known as Anthracite Palace because the family fortune is based on coal and the house was built of actual anthracite. There is evil afoot, an altar for the worship of the Old Ones, and a monster rising from the depths of the coal for a battle to the death.

“The Adventure Of Exham Priory” by F. Gwynplaine MacIntyre returns to the Welsh Marches, this time the manor house of Exham Priory. Those who reside in it gradually become deformed into eldritch creatures, and there are things residing in the sub-cellar which fear the light. Moriarty shows up as well, an interdimensional vortex opens in the sub-cellar, there is a struggle, and those who blaspheme against God, Queen, and Country get what they deserve.

“Death Did Not Become Him” by David Niall Wilson and Patricia Lee Macomber has Watson facing a man who he had declared dead from a knife wound the week before. His handler turns out to be a defrocked rabbi who knew how to create golems and, in the bargain, had a copy of the NECRONOMICON. It comes to a bad end, of course, with green ichor splattered about and all that sort of stuff.

The final story is “Nightmare In Wax” by Simon Clark, which begins during World War One when Watson receives a visit from men in black. They ask Watson to listen to a wax cylinder made by Moriarty, who has come into possession of a copy of the NECRONOMICON. He is on a train heading to a village that was flooded by the sea in a storm and is now invaded by eldritch creatures. He makes a trip to the underworld of the Elder Gods, where Holmes appears for the first time in the story and takes him back to our world. There



is struggle and destruction, with all the usual sort of Lovecraftian alarums and excursions.

All told, this anthology was good reading. Like almost every themed anthology I have read, the editors could have sorted the stories into a more logical order and smoothed out discrepancies between them. This would have made for a better overall narrative flow as the reader passes from one story to the next, instead of jarring him with inconsistencies.

SEEN IN THE LITERATURE

Case, Anne, and Angus Deaton (2015) **Rising morbidity and mortality in midlife among white non-Hispanic Americans in the 21st century.** PROCEEDINGS OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCE USA 112:15078–15083

Authors’ abstract: “*This paper documents a marked increase in the all-cause mortality of middle-aged white non-Hispanic men and women in the United States between 1999 and 2013. This change reversed decades of progress in mortality and was unique to the United States; no other rich country saw a similar turnaround. The midlife mortality reversal was confined to white non-Hispanics, Black non-Hispanics and Hispanics at midlife, and those aged 65 and above in every racial and ethnic group, continued to see mortality rates fall. This increase for whites was largely accounted for by increasing death rates from drug and alcohol poisonings, suicide, and chronic liver diseases and cirrhosis. Although all education groups saw increases in mortality from suicide and poisonings, and an overall increase in external cause mortality, those with less education saw the most marked increases. Rising midlife mortality rates of white non-Hispanics were paralleled by increases in midlife morbidity. Self-reported declines in health, mental health, and ability to conduct activities of daily living, and increases in chronic pain and inability to work, as well as clinically measured deteriorations in liver function, all point to growing distress in this population.*”

Côtéa, S., J. Housea, and R. Willerb (2015) **High economic inequality leads higher-income individuals to be less generous.** PROCEEDINGS OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES USA 112:15838–15843

Authors’ abstract: “*Research on social class and generosity suggests that higher-income individuals are less generous than poorer individuals. We propose that this pattern emerges only under conditions of high economic inequality, contexts that can foster a sense of entitlement among higher-income individuals that, in turn, reduces their generosity. Analyzing results of a unique nationally representative survey that included a real-stakes giving opportunity (n = 1,498), we found that in the most unequal US states, higher-income respondents were less generous than lower-income respondents. In the least unequal states, however, higher-income individuals were more generous. To better establish causality, we next conducted an experiment (n = 704) in which apparent levels of economic inequality in participants’ home states were portrayed as either relatively high or low. Participants were then presented with a giving opportunity. Higher-income participants were less generous than lower-income participants when inequality was portrayed as relatively high, but there was no association between income and generosity when inequality was portrayed as relatively low. This research finds that the tendency for higher-income individuals to be less generous pertains only when inequality is high, challenging the view that higher-income individuals are necessarily more selfish, and suggesting a previously undocumented way in which inequitable resource distributions undermine collective welfare.*”

“*But why specifically does inequality reduce the generosity of higher-income individuals? As we note above, higher inequality might trigger a sense of entitlement because higher-income individuals perceive a wider gap between their social standing and that of most others, engaging in more favorable downward social comparisons as a result. High inequality might also lead higher-income individuals to worry more about losing their privileged standing, because a loss of economic standing in a highly unequal area would represent a particularly large drop. Other processes could also explain the results. Where greater inequality exists, psychological motivations to justify their uniquely privileged positions could lead higher-income individuals to view the prevailing distribution of resources as fair and just. Consistent with this possibility, higher-income residents of highly unequal US counties more strongly endorse the meritocratic sentiment that hard work leads to economic success, compared with higher-income residents of less unequal counties.*”

Lyons, S.K., et al (2016) **Holocene shifts in the assembly of plant and animal communities implicate human impacts.** NATURE 529:80-83

Authors’ abstract: “Whereas most studies have described overall community structure with simple indices such as species richness⁸ and average co-occurrence³, some analyses categorize individual species pairs in assemblages as random, aggregated, or segregated. Segregated species pairs may be generated by processes such as negative species interactions, distinct habitat preferences, and dispersal limitation. Aggregated species pairs may be generated by processes such as positive species interactions, shared habitat preferences, and concordant dispersal.”

“Here we evaluate changes in plant and animal community organization over geological time by quantifying the co-occurrence structure of 359,896 unique taxon pairs in 80 assemblages spanning the past 300 million years. Co-occurrences of most taxon pairs were statistically random, but a significant fraction were spatially aggregated or segregated. Aggregated pairs dominated from the Carboniferous period (307 million years ago) to the early Holocene epoch (11,700 years before present), when there was a pronounced shift to more segregated pairs, a trend that continues in modern assemblages. The shift began during the Holocene and coincided with increasing human population size and the spread of agriculture in North America. Before the shift, an average of 64% of significant pairs were aggregated; after the shift, the average dropped to 37%. The organization of modern and late Holocene plant and animal assemblages differs fundamentally from that of assemblages over the past 300 million years that predate the large-scale impacts of humans. Our results suggest that the rules governing the assembly of communities have recently been changed by human activity.”

Speirs: Humans have not only altered ecosystems since the rise of agriculture, they have altered the way that ecosystems are organized by changing the manner in which different species interact with each other independent of humans.

Waters, C.N., et al (2016) **The Anthropocene is functionally and stratigraphically distinct from the Holocene.** SCIENCE 351:137, aad2622-1 to aad2622-10

Authors’ abstract: “Human activity is leaving a pervasive and persistent signature on Earth. Vigorous debate continues about whether this warrants

recognition as a new geologic time unit known as the Anthropocene. We review anthropogenic markers of functional changes in the Earth system through the stratigraphic record. The appearance of manufactured materials in sediments, including aluminum, plastics, and concrete, coincides with global spikes in fallout radionuclides and particulates from fossil fuel combustion. Carbon, nitrogen, and phosphorus cycles have been substantially modified over the past century. Rates of sea-level rise and the extent of human perturbation of the climate system exceed Late Holocene changes. Biotic changes include species invasions worldwide and accelerating rates of extinction. These combined signals render the Anthropocene stratigraphically distinct from the Holocene and earlier epochs.”

Speirs: Until now, the term Anthropocene has been used informally to denote the rising impact of humans on the planet. This paper establishes that these impacts are detectable in the geological record, using the same criteria that define older eras. This includes sudden changes in deposition into sediments of radionuclides (dating the Atomic Era from 1942), various exotic elements such as rare earths (dating the computer era from the 1960s), and petrochemicals (dating the automobile age from circa 1910). Therefore, there is a scientific basis to declare the Anthropocene based on geology, not opinion.

Kistler, L., et al (2015) **Gourds and squashes (*Cucurbita* spp.) adapted to megafaunal extinction and ecological anachronism through domestication.** PROCEEDINGS OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES USA 112:15107–15112

Authors’ abstract: “Squashes, pumpkins, and gourds belonging to the genus *Cucurbita* were domesticated on several occasions throughout the Americas, beginning around 10,000 years ago. The wild forms of these species are unpalatably bitter to humans and other extant mammals, but their seeds are present in mastodon dung deposits, demonstrating that they may have been dispersed by large-bodied herbivores undeterred by their bitterness. However, *Cucurbita* may have been poorly adapted to a landscape lacking these large dispersal partners. Our study proposes a link between the disappearance of megafaunal mammals from the landscape, the decline of wild *Cucurbita* populations, and, ultimately, the evolution of domesticated *Cucurbita* alongside human cultivators.”

“The wild precursors of domestic squashes (Cucurbita spp.) are adapted for a landscape inhabited by large herbivores. Their robust pepo fruits were dispersed by large mammals, as revealed by intact Cucurbita seeds in mastodon dung deposits. Furthermore, Cucurbita is a weedy genus (3) well suited to the mosaic-like landscapes maintained by megafauna, which offer an abundance of disturbed habitat in a niche-diverse ecosystem. However, all megafauna greater than 1,000 kg disappeared from the Americas by the early Holocene through ecological shifts, human predation, or some combination of both, leaving Cucurbita in a turbulent ecosystem lacking its mutualistic partners.”

“Cucurbita is among many such anachronistic New World taxa, including avocado (Persea americana), chocolate (Theobroma cacao), Osage orange (Maclura pomifera), honey locust (Gleditsia triacanthos), and tree calabash (Crescentia cujete). Distributions of ancient samples show that some species of Cucurbita were distributed much more broadly in the past, suggesting that the Holocene has witnessed extirpation and refugiation of certain wild types. The decline of wild Cucurbita may have stemmed from both its loss of dispersal mutualists and the changing habitat. Other anachronistic plants have partnered with substitute dispersers, but most wild Cucurbita have not adapted in this way. Although Cucurbita species declined in the wild, they thrived in domestication. The genus contains at least five domesticated species and has been used extensively throughout the Holocene, beginning around 10,000 B.P. in Mexico. Cucurbita domestication was a widespread phenomenon involving numerous wild precursor lineages throughout the Americas, and these taxa now contain hundreds of cultivars and landraces grown worldwide.”

Speirs: Humans have inadvertently saved some species from extinction.

Del Vicario, M., et al (2016) **The spreading of misinformation online.** PROCEEDINGS OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES USA 113:554–559

Authors’ abstract: *“The wide availability of user-provided content in online social media facilitates the aggregation of people around common interests, world views, and narratives. However, the World Wide Web (WWW) also allows for the rapid dissemination of unsubstantiated rumors and conspiracy theories that often elicit rapid, large, but naive social responses such as the recent case of Jade Helm 15, where a simple military exercise turned out to be perceived as the beginning of a new civil war in the United States. In this work,*

we address the determinants governing misinformation spreading through a thorough quantitative analysis. In particular, we focus on how Facebook users consume information related to two distinct narratives: scientific and conspiracy news. We find that, although consumers of scientific and conspiracy stories present similar consumption patterns with respect to content, cascade dynamics differ. Selective exposure to content is the primary driver of content diffusion and generates the formation of homogeneous clusters, i.e., “echo chambers.” Indeed, homogeneity appears to be the primary driver for the diffusion of contents and each echo chamber has its own cascade dynamics. Finally, we introduce a data-driven percolation model mimicking rumor spreading and we show that homogeneity and polarization are the main determinants for predicting cascades’ size.”

“Digital misinformation has become so pervasive in online social media that it has been listed by the World Economic Forum as one of the main threats to human society. Whether a news item, either substantiated or not, is accepted as true by a user may be strongly affected by social norms or by how much it coheres with the user’s system of beliefs. Many mechanisms cause false information to gain acceptance, which in turn generate false beliefs that, once adopted by an individual, are highly resistant to correction.”

“These results suggest that news assimilation differs according to the categories. Science news is usually assimilated, i.e., it reaches a higher level of diffusion quickly, and a longer lifetime does not correspond to a higher level of interest. Conversely, conspiracy rumors are assimilated more slowly and show a positive relation between lifetime and size. For both science and conspiracy news, we compute the size as a function of the lifetime and confirm that differentiation in the sharing patterns is content-driven, and that for conspiracy there is a positive relation between size and lifetime.”