

OPUNTIA 337

Late March 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.

THIS JUST IN FROM COWTOWN

photos by Dale Speirs

A record warm winter in Calgary, with not a single -20°C day. We had about a dozen light snowfalls of about 10 cm, but chinooks soon removed them. The Mayor did not once have to declare snow routes in effect. The photo below was taken on March 18 when I was running an errand up in northwest Calgary. No snow on the ground all the way out to the Rockies, and there only on the mountain tops. The Calgary Zoo canceled its daily penguin walks because it was too warm for the birds. Rocky View County (the area in the photo below between the houses and the mountains) has already fought numerous grass fires.





I took this photo on March 19, and it may as well have been in August. This is a bus stop at the bottom of the 14 Street SW hill, where Calgary Transit has had many an exciting experience in previous winters (see OPUNTIA #298 for the most extreme one), but not at all this year.

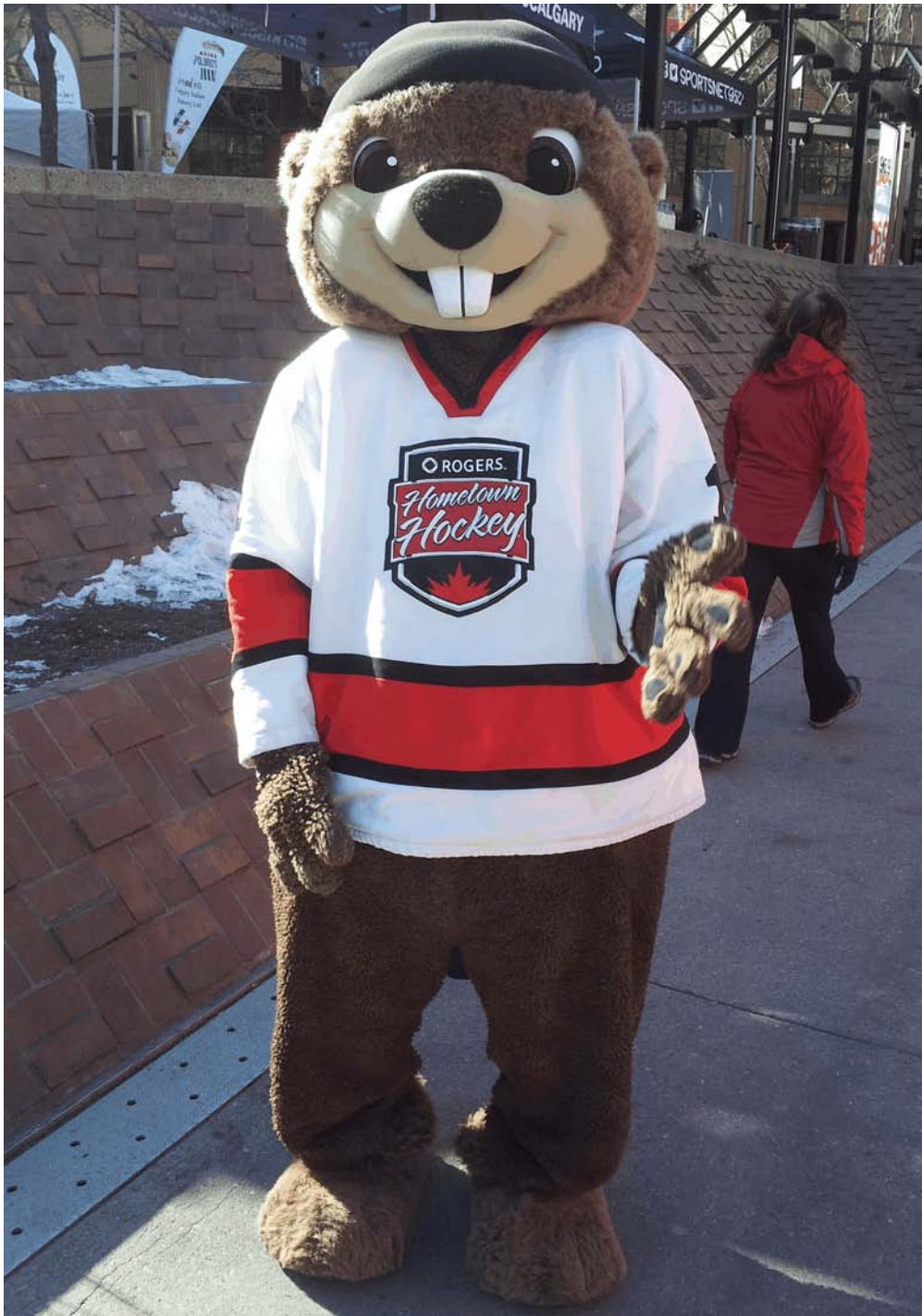
That same day, a Saturday, I wandered down to the Olympic Plaza where the Hometown Hockey Tour was being held that weekend. No prizes for guessing what it was about. The ceremonies were speeches by NHL players and autograph tents surrounding the plaza. Boring for a non-sports fan like me, so I took a few photos and left.



The Calgary Flames last won a Stanley Cup in 1989. It is said that if they win it again, that will be a sign of the impending Apocalypse.



Furrie fans take note: if you walk around in an animal costume at a convention, you will be sneered at by the general public. However, add a sports jersey to your costume and that will make you a mascot fit for decent society.



THE MAN FROM MONTENEGRO: PART 12

by Dale Speirs

[Parts 1 to 11 appeared in OPUNTIA #252, 253, 275, 278, 279, 289, 304, 307, 319, 332, and 335.]

IF DEATH EVER SLEPT (1957) is a novel beginning with the visit of a client named Otis Jarrell to the brownstone. He wants his daughter-in-law Susan investigated because he thinks she is giving confidential information about his business to competitors. It is arranged for Goodwin to infiltrate Jarrell's operation as his new personal secretary Alan Green, in order for him to investigate the staff and relatives with greater ease. He is replacing the previous secretary Jim Eber, who was let go under questionable circumstances.

There's never a dull moment when Goodwin's on the job. Jarrell's revolver is stolen, and Eber shows up to make a scene. Goodwin later visits Eber at his apartment and finds him shot dead. When in doubt, Wolfe always has a meeting of the suspects, not necessarily to accuse anyone, but certainly to fish for details. A friend of the Jarrell family becomes the second murder victim; he apparently made use of the stolen information.

The story bogs down after this. It appears that Rex Stout wrote himself into a corner and couldn't think how to get out. He includes a multi-page detailed chronology of the movements of the suspects, in outline form, and in enough detail to confuse a supercomputer trying to correlate everyone's timeline during the murders. There are various meetings, people shouting at each other and going off in a huff, and finally a denouement with information kept from the reader until the big surprise is revealed. It turns out that Susan is the murderer but the evidence so gathered is almost a *deus ex machina*.

The first half of this novel read well. As it progressed, I began wondering how Wolfe would succeed. By the final quarter of the novel it was obvious that Rex Stout was going to have to pull off a head fake, and so he did. This is a book to be read on a rainy Sunday afternoon with nothing else to do, while eating a box of chocolates and turning off one's critical facilities.

THREE FOR THE CHAIR collects three novellas from 1955 and 1956. It begins with "A Window For Death", about the tragedy-stricken Fyfe family. Twenty years ago their father had died of pneumonia, helped along by an unknown person. A son named Bertram was accused of the murder, stood trial and was acquitted, and promptly disowned his family. He left for the wilds of

Canada, where in recent years he had hit it rich with a uranium discovery. The money was enough to convince him to return home as the prodigal son and reconcile with his family. Unfortunately he repeated his father's history, coming down with pneumonia and then being assisted into the next world by a person unknown.

Wolfe is hired by the family to find the murderer, and follows his usual routine of mass meetings in his office and sending out his legmen to research questions. The two questions he fixates upon are why the dead patient had empty hot-water bags packed on his chest, and what happened to an order of ice cream that was stored in a nearby refrigerator. Some of the information was withheld from the reader until the last few pages, specifically that the ice cream was packed in dry ice. This would have tipped off the reader as to how the second murder was done. The plot is routine, red herrings litter the floor, and the dialogue is average.

"Immune To Murder" brings Wolfe and Goodwin from the brownstone out to a country estate in the Adirondacks at the request of the State Department. The government is trying to curry favour with a foreign country, and when their ambassador says he'd like to do some trout fishing and then have them prepared by the famous gourmet Nero Wolfe, the combination of flattery and public service is enough to turn anyone's head.

Besides Ambassador Kelefy and his wife, Kelefy's aide Spiros Papps, the host and estate owner O.V. Bragan, the Assistant Secretary of State David Leeson and his wife, and oilman James Arthur Ferris. There is a scene with Goodwin trying his luck at fishing, with enough technical details inserted to allow Rex Stout to convince the reader that he knows the subject. Yes, Rex, we believe you're a fisherman. The first body soon shows up. Leeson departed this world abruptly when someone smashed his head in while he was fishing downstream of Goodwin.

Meanwhile, people must eat. Wolfe prepares the trout that the fishermen caught, except for those taken by the Ambassador. He refuses to say why. The murder investigation is complicated by the dignitaries being above the law, and those who weren't were innocent. Wolfe has his J'accuse! meeting in the estate living room. New data the reader wasn't aware of are introduced, such as Leeson having an affair with Mrs Kelefy. For it is indeed the Ambassador who was the murderer. He had planned the death of Leeson the day before, including catching the trout ahead of time. Wolfe had recognized they were not

fresh caught, and thus identified the murderer. The Ambassador walked free since he had diplomatic immunity, but in the epilogue, he paid for the crime with his life when he returned to his country. Governments do not like to be embarrassed like that.

“Too Many Detectives” opens with a New York State enquiry into private detectives using illegal wiretapping. Wolfe and Goodwin are caught up in it because they were hired by a man named Ross to tap his own phone, which was legal, for a domestic problem. Ross turned out to be an imposter snooping on the real Ross and disappeared from sight once he got the tapes.

As the group of seven private detectives wait in the courthouse to be summoned for their testimony, Ross reappeared in an adjacent room, under a different name, in the courthouse, only this time thoroughly dead, strangled with a necktie. All the private detectives recognized him. Each had been hired by him, using a different name each time, to wiretap a different member of the Charity Funds Investigating Committee.

From there it was just a matter of asking who had arranged for the detectives to be summoned and then investigate his background. The guilty man had previously been a lawyer for one of the charities under suspicion and managed not only to keep that hidden from the CFIC but to place himself in a position where he would have control over the prosecution. A clearcut case of *Quis custodiet ipsos custodes*?

AND FOUR TO GO compiles four short stories originally published in 1956 and 1957. It begins with “Christmas Party”, where Goodwin and Wolfe hoax each other because, unknown to each other, they wanted to sneak away to the same business party. They succeed, Goodwin going as himself and Wolfe in disguise as a Santa Claus bartender. Alas, the host takes a hearty gulp of Pernod with cyanide mixer. Goodwin can’t hide but no one else knew that Wolfe was Santa, so he flees the scene. Naturally the police concentrate on Santa Claus. Since it would only be a matter of time before they trace him, Wolfe and Goodwin must race to find the murderer and hand him over before the police get too far in their investigation.

It seems the host was in the habit of promising to marry women, three of them, then stringing them along by telling them the time was not yet ripe. One of the main characters is a Chinese woman, referred to in cringe-worthy terms with all the usual stereotypes of slant eyes (Goodwin uses that actual phrase) and

Oriental inscrutability, although it turns out she is a heroine. Rex Stout would re-write that part were he alive today. This is a short story, so there is only room for one J’accuse! meeting. Wolfe uses a bluff to smoke out the guilty woman by sending anonymous “I saw what you did” notes and seeing who responded. The story felt rushed, and needed the room of a novella.

“Easter Parade” starts off with Wolfe planning the theft of a flamingo-pink Vanda orchid. Millard Bynoe has bred the pure pink flower but won’t let anyone see it up close until next year’s flower show, which has Wolfe twitching with envy. Wolfe learns that Bynoe’s wife will be wearing a corsage of the pink Vanda in the annual Easter parade, so he has Goodwin holding a camera loaded with colour film amongst the spectators. Wolfe also hired a snatch-and-grab thief named Tabby to get the actual corsage itself. (You have to be a collector to understand these things.) The snatch works but Mrs Bynoe goes into convulsions a few seconds later and dies, which leads to obvious difficulties back at the brownstone.

The autopsy shows Mrs Bynoe had been stabbed with a needle containing strychnine. When Goodwin develops his photos, he discovered that he had the good luck to snap the moment of injection, and identify the culprit. The epilogue takes care of the motives (spurned love and embezzling from the Bynoes) in a J’accuse! meeting called not by Wolfe but by Bynoe. Wolfe keeps Tabby a secret and his part in the snatch, which avoids police charges. Bynoe, unaware of all that, is grateful and in appreciation, gives a plant of the pink Vanda to Wolfe. All’s well that ends well, except, of course, for Mrs Bynoe and the culprit, who goes up the river to Sing Sing to sit in the electric chair.

“Fourth Of July Picnic” has Wolfe dragooned into making a speech at the Independence Day picnic of the United Restaurant Workers of America. He had no real choice if he wanted to continue enjoying dining in fancy restaurants. One of the other speakers was to have been Phil Holt, a union official who ate something that didn’t agree with him. There was a tent set up behind the speaking platform and he went to lay down on a cot for what proved to be his final rest, courtesy of a chef’s knife into his back. The murder happened while the speeches were being made, and the speakers were the suspects as they had each individually gone into the tent from time to time. Wolfe is not excluded.

The story doesn’t move very far, even with Wolfe’s meetings. He finally exposes the murderer with a trick, but the motive isn’t explained until the epilogue when it is revealed that Holt was having an affair with the murderer’s

wife. Again, this is a short story that should have been expanded into a novella to provide more details and clues for the reader.

The fourth story, “Murder Is No Joke”, was later rewritten and republished in a later collection under a different title. I will save it for a future review to compare it with its rewrite. I call these Gemini stories; not identical twins but fraternal twins.

WHEN WORDS COLLIDE 2016

Calgary’s annual readercon will be held this year on the weekend of August 12 to 14, returning to the Delta Hotel at Southland Drive SE and Bonaventure Drive. The membership cap is 650; last year the convention sold out two months in advance. Details from: www.whenwordscollide.org

When Words Collide covers many genres of literature such as science fiction, fantasy, mystery, romance, westerns, and historical fiction. You can read my account of the 2015 event in OPUNTIA #318 to get an idea of the seminars and events. There will be a steampunk banquet this year, followed by the Aurora Awards. The Auroras are like the Hugos but without any sad-looking puppies.

WORLD WIDE PARTY ON JUNE 21

Founded by Benoit Girard (Quebec) and Franz Miklis (Austria) in 1994, the World Wide Party is held on June 21st every year. 2016 will be the 23rd year of the WWP. At 21h00 local time, everyone is invited to raise a glass and toast fellow members of the Papernet around the world. It is important to have it exactly at 21h00 your time. The idea is to get a wave of fellowship circling the planet.

At 21h00, face to the east and salute those who have already celebrated. Rescheduling it to a club meeting or more convenient time negates the idea of a wave of celebration by SF fans and zinesters circling the globe. Then face north, then south, and toast those in your time zone who are celebrating as you do. Finally, face west and raise a glass to those who will celebrate WWP in the next hour. Raise a glass, publish a one-shot, have a party, or do a mail art project for the WWP. Let me know how you celebrated the day.

LET MARS DIVIDE ETERNITY IN TWAIN: PART 5
by Dale Speirs

[Parts 1 to 4 appeared in OPUNTIA #310, 321, 328, and 332. Reviews of the WAR OF THE WORLDS movies appeared in #289.]

Explorers.

THE LAST DAYS ON MARS is a 2013 movie that opens with credits to the national film boards of several countries for their financing, which immediately puts the viewer on guard. The movie begins well, with good SFX of explorers on Mars during their final day before a relief team arrives. One of the Marsnauts discovers a Martian bacteria of extreme virulency that turns the humans into zombies one by one. At that point, the movie degenerates into a zombie movie. They are unstoppable, and the fights between the living and the undead are staged in dark sets to save on makeup. It becomes quite tedious since everyone is going to die, so why bother watching it. You have been warned.

Colonists.

“The Patriot” by Charles L. Fontenay (1955 August, WORLDS OF IF) is about the independence movement on Mars. The red planet is under the control of a megacorporation who own the spaceports and control the traffic to and from Earth. The struggle for democratic government begins, not helped by Earth governments. Finally one brave leader uses a stirring song to rally financial support on Earth to challenge the Mars Corporation. Indeed.

Fontenay continues the saga with “Atom Drive” (1956 April, WORLDS OF IF). The Mars Corporation is bloody but unbowed. They had to yield points but are still using every dirty trick they can think of to keep out competition. The upstart Atom-Star Company is trying to demonstrate its ships are just as good for Earth-Mars travel despite sabotage by the Mars Corporation. A disaster with a tow cable pulled by an Atom-Star ship inadvertently results in a space elevator being created, dangling down from Phobos. This story predates the 1959 proposal by Yuri Artsutanov for a cabled space elevator hanging down from geosynchronous orbit to Earth.**

**Konstantin Tsiolkovski, the founder of modern rocket science, first proposed a space elevator in 1895 but he was thinking of a tower built up from Earth. The compressive strength required is too much, as compared with the more feasible tensile strength of a cable dangling from orbit.

“The Man Who Hated Mars” by Randall Garrett (1956 September, AMAZING) uses the idea of Mars as a penal colony, the idea being that the place is so lousy that it might as well be used as a dumping ground the way Australia was. (Does one still need a criminal record to emigrate to Australia today? Just asking.) The convicts get only minimal life support, the idea being that they will find ways to adapt to the harsh conditions and in time produce a self-supporting colony.

A sociopath named Ron Clayton hates every moment there, particularly the constant cold. He schemes successfully to stowaway on a spaceship returning to Earth, then cripple it and take its lifeboat down to the surface of Earth. He exults in a successful return, until the lifeboat crashes in a snowstorm and he finds he can’t walk because his leg muscles have atrophied after decades in Mars’s low gravity. The economics of the story don’t really make sense, but the plot moves along. The twist ending makes it readable only once.

In that same issue of AMAZING is a second Mars story, by Robert Silverberg titled “The Hunted Heroes”. A husband and wife are prospecting for uranium on Mars, it being wanted because Earth used up most of its supplies during several atomic wars. While out fossicking on the land, the couple are kidnapped by a hermit colonist who has his plans for them, heh heh heh. But they get away due to a couple of deus ex machina plot coupons not mentioned until needed. With a single bound, they were free, etcetera, and the villain brought not to justice but to the psych ward where he will be rehabilitated.

“Heart” by Henry Slesar (1957 January, AMAZING) begins with a billionaire named Fletcher Monk being told by his physician that his heart will kill him if he doesn’t change his lifestyle. Monk is a Type-A personality who won’t and can’t slow down, so he decides to emigrate to Mars where the lesser gravity will give him more time. Money can buy anything, but on arrival at Mars he discovers that paper currency is only fit for wallpaper and he will have to do physical labour to survive. Mars is not a tourist resort and they have no room for anyone who won’t work. Monk dies from a broken heart, both figurative and actual, when he finds that he has no influence with anyone and his wealth is meaningless.

A story well calculated to tug at the heartstrings is “Virgin Ground” by Rosel George Brown (1959 February, WORLDS OF IF) about a bride ship landing on Mars. One of the women, not a great beauty, finds herself stuck with an abusive husband and soon has to kill him in self-defense. Everyone else understands the

story and she is allowed to take over her husband’s farm. Working hard, she builds it up into a paying proposition, only to have a new husband assigned to her. She doesn’t want to share, so she plans an accidental death for him.

This story resonated with me because I am descended on both sides of my family from homesteaders. As a boy, I heard the stories about how hard life was back then, particularly for the wives. Most homesteads were in remote areas with no social services, back in the days before telephones or radio, and a day’s ride from the nearest post office. If that is how Mars would be colonized, I can believe it. After all, food will have to be grown there, not hauled in by spaceship, which means farming in the homesteader style.

“Way Station” by Irving E. Cox Jr (1965 May, WORLDS OF IF) is about a Mars colony that has been cut off from Earth for six centuries for some unknown reason. The colony survives inside a dome of advanced technology they no longer understand, and their society has solidified into a rigid culture based on garbled history and science. One man wants to escape to the outside and does. He can survive because the colonists do not realize they have already adapted to the outside environment. Their dome leaked centuries ago, even though they think it still is impervious. The story is a standard SF trope about an isolated society with an unchanging way of life based on authority, and the usual young man or woman who wants to be free. The only thing missing is that the young man in this story is not the rightful heir to the throne on a quest that will take x number of novels to conclude, x being based on book sales.

Invasions: Beware Of Tripods.

H.G. Wells’ WAR OF THE WORLDS has inspired many pastiches. The movies were reviewed in OPUNTIA #289.

“Sherlock Holmes Versus Mars” by Manly W. Wellman and Wade Wellman (1975 May, MAGAZINE OF FANTASY AND SF) crosses the two stories. Holmes runs about helping government officials deal with the invaders, deducing certain elements about the Martians, and setting the stage for some action against them. Challenger and Watson are off-stage, while Holmes and Mrs. Watson carry on an affair. Mostly the story elucidates a few details about the vulnerability of the Martian war machines. The poisonous black smoke they lay down can be counteracted by steam or mist, and the way for artillery to kill a machine is to aim armor-piercing shells at its head. Although interesting to read, it doesn’t break much new ground.

The novel THE MARTIAN WAR (2012) by Kevin J. Anderson is an alternative history of the invasion, with a mashup of several Wellsian stories and crossovers, and featuring Wells himself as a character. Luminaries include T.H. Huxley, Percival Lowell, and a host of other real people who were contemporary with that era. The Invisible Man makes an appearance (pardon the expression), and is eventually exposed as a German spy. Dr. Selwyn Cavor hoves into the novel with his antigravity spaceship.

Lowell carries out his scheme, once seriously considered in our timeline, of digging giant trenches in the Saharan Desert in various geometric shapes, filling them with fuel, and igniting them on a clear night so that Martians might see them and realize there is intelligent life on Earth. It works only too well, as the Martians launch a scouting vessel. One of the critters in it comes to grief when the scoutship lands in the Sahara and falls into the hands of Dr. Moreau, recently forced to leave his island due to that misunderstanding about his experiments.

Meanwhile, back in England, Wells, his fiancée Jane Robbins, and his mentor Huxley, accidentally make a trip to the Moon in Cavor’s spaceship. They discover that the majority of the Selenites have been taken to Mars as slaves, so the trio head to the red planet. Assorted adventures happen and the Selenites are liberated. The latter steal all the Martian spaceships and return to the Moon. The humans spread bacteria on Mars that don’t seem to bother Selenites, but kill off the Martians before any invasion can occur. The novel therefore switches to a different timeline where there was no war of the worlds.

All told, a rather grand mashup. Knowledge of at least the basic plots of Wells’ novels is required but since most readers of this novel will have read the books at least once in childhood or seen the movies, this shouldn’t be a problem. Anderson does a good job of combining all the myriad plot lines of Wells.

Invasions: Non-Wellsian.

Looking at other invasion stories brings us to “Me And Flapjack And The Martians” by Mack Reynolds and Fredric Brown (1952 December, ASTOUNDING). The narrator is a prospector in the Mojave Desert, Flapjack is his burro, and they are camped in the desert when a spaceship lands nearby. The aliens within set up a universal translating machine and attempt to communicate with Flapjack, thinking he is the dominant species. They succeed, although we only hear one side of the conversation. They announce they are from Mars, and when the prospector tries to talk with them, they wave weapons

at him in warning, and ask Flapjack to keep his domestic animals quiet. Whatever Flapjack brays isn’t translated into English, but he somehow convinces the Martians not to invade. Not much of a story.

“We’re Civilized” by Mark Clifton and Alex Apostolides (1953 August, GALAXY) has the first Marsnauts landing and claiming the red planet for their government. There are some primitive natives, but nothing to worry about. The Earthlings return home in triumph. Shortly afterwards, they are followed by the Martians, who have superior spacecraft and technology, and claim Earth for their government. They were just shamming until they could launch an invasion.



FAR SPEAKING STORIES: PART 3

by Dale Speirs

[Parts 1 and 2 appeared in OPUNTIA's #313 and 327.]

Have I Reached The Party To Whom I Am Speaking?

Just as people are spoofed by spammers, so it was from the beginning of the telephone that listeners were not always sure that they were speaking to whom it did concern. This was a popular plot point for murder mysteries.

BOX 13 was an old-time radio (OTR) series about Dan Holiday, a former newspaper journalist turned freelance writer. He had trouble thinking up ideas for his novels, so he ran a continuing classified advertisement in a newspaper: *“Adventure wanted, will go anywhere, do anything. Box 13”* Once a week he would drop by the newspaper to pick up mail addressed to his box number and begin another adventure. (This and many other OTR shows are available as free mp3 downloads from www.archive.org) Alan Ladd played the role of Dan Holiday, and his company produced it. This explains why he kept the part, for he had a very flat, emotionless voice that would have got him fired by any other producer.

The episode “Actor’s Alibi” was a 1948 episode that began in a radio studio. Holiday had received a letter in Box 13 from Jean Blake, a young actress who was the leading lady in a drama show. She was fearful for her life and wanted him to do something, just what she couldn’t articulate. On that radio show was Marvin Masterson, an elderly actor who once was a headliner on the stage but had sunk to supporting roles in radio, making him bitter. He and Holiday have lunch at a restaurant. As they are dining, Holiday gets a telephone call from Blake, who is hysterical. Holiday is unable to get a response from the woman before gunshots are heard and someone else hangs up the phone at her end.

Holiday rushes over to the actress’s apartment and finds her dead. When the coroner tells the police she had been dead for at least twelve hours, it becomes obvious this was a staged murder. Others in the apartment building say they never heard shots. During Holiday’s final conversation with the deceased, he had noticed a tinny sound to her voice and the sound of a mantelpiece clock in the background.

Holiday plays the private detective and eventually visits Masterson’s daughter. It turns out that she and her father have an apartment in the same building. He notices she has a stack of shellac disks by her record player, the kind that were used for radio rehearsals and auditions back then. Holiday suggests to her that they play them back, which she is understandably reluctant to do. One of them was an audition record by Blake in which she played an hysterical woman in a murder mystery.

The telephone call was a set-up, with the phone held close to the record player after Holiday had answered, and the scripted scene used to deceive him and provide an alibi for Masterson. The murdered woman would not have known where Holiday was dining, but Masterson told his daughter where to call. The clinching evidence is that the daughter had a mantelpiece clock but the dead woman did not. It was a conspiracy between the father, jealous of Blake’s rising star, and the daughter, a dutiful child who made the phone call.

This episode is average in all respects. The supporting actors do their best to pep up the script but Ladd’s monotonous drone is a wet blanket muffling the life out of the dialogue.

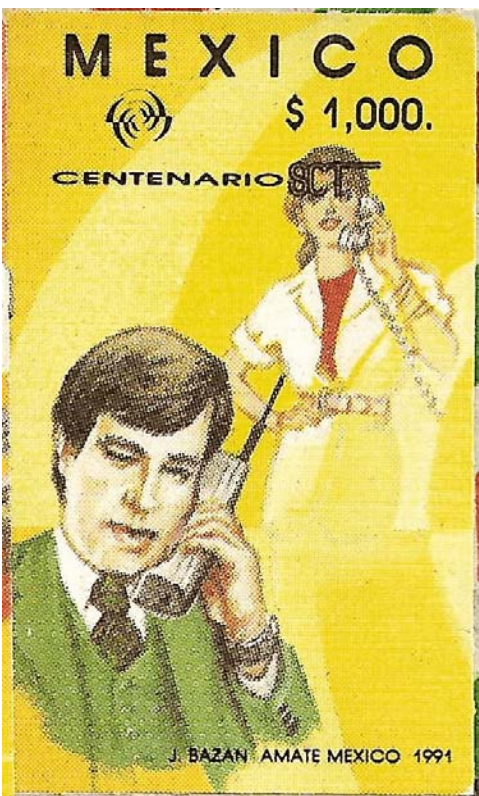
Call Me, Any, Any Time.

Another use of telephonic trickery was in “Phone Call From Death”, a 1945 episode of THE WHISTLER. The host of that name was a pompous narrator, and each episode ended with a double-cross twist that hoisted the murderer on his or her own petard. The episode begins with Ellen, a woman of a certain age who feels that life is passing her by. She was at school with a friend named Sheila, who is younger, attractive, and inherited money. Sheila was two-timing Glen and Paul, both of whom thought they were the one who was going to marry her and her money.

Glen visits Ellen and treats her as an agony aunt, unaware of her feelings at always being a bridesmaid, never a bride. He unloads about Sheila, and proclaims his jealousy about Paul, jealous enough to want to kill him. Ellen offers to call Sheila for a talk. As Glen waits, Ellen dials the number, then suddenly declares she can’t go through with it and hangs up. Almost immediately the telephone rings and she answers it. It is apparently from Sheila, who is hysterical about someone trying to force his way into her apartment. Ellen tells Sheila that she’ll call the police, which makes one wonder why Sheila didn’t do that in the first instance.

Ellen and Glen rush over to Sheila's apartment to find the police already there. It is murder; Sheila was shot twice in the back of her head. The police investigation goes nowhere, and over time it becomes a cold case. Glen vows that he will find the murderer and kill the culprit. Sheila had no family and left her estate to Ellen, who then begins to enjoy life on the money. She falls in love with Paul, who does not return her affections. Glen thinks Paul killed Sheila, and it all turns into a soap opera.

More time passes, and once again Glen comes to visit Ellen. He rants about Paul. Ellen, forgetting that Glen has been through the procedure many months before, calls Paul, hangs up after only dialing four numbers, and immediately gets a call. She fakes a conversation with Paul, but Glen is outraged when she suggests they go over to Paul's apartment. He tells her the reason for his visit was because he was trying to work up the nerve to tell her that he had just killed Paul and had come to confess.



He now realizes that Ellen was the true murderer, having used the fake telephone call to provide herself with an alibi. What she had actually done was dial the last four digits of her own number and then quickly hung up, which caused the telephone to ring back.

Ellen breaks down and admits she killed Sheila and then staged the fake phone call to alibi herself. Paul reminds her that he had vowed to kill the murderer. Having made one mistake, he corrects himself by strangling Ellen. And so to the whistling and the end credits.

The story is an interesting one but after seven decades loses its impact on the younger generation. The Millennials, who have never used rotary-dial telephones, would not be aware of the four-digit callback method. It was used by the general public to test one's

own telephone to see if it was working okay. As a young boy in the 1960s, I watched my father do this after he had trouble connecting with a number he was dialing. When the telephone rang back to him, he knew the problem wasn't our phone but at the other end.

One Ringy Dingy, Two Ringy Dingies.

Crossed lines were an occasional problem in the era of electromechanical relays. "The Other End Of The Line" by Walter Tevis (1961 November, MAGAZINE OF FANTASY AND SF) begins with a drunken man accidentally dialing his own telephone number. His future self answers and tells him to grab a piece of paper and write down some future horse race and stock market results. The man becomes wealthy but carelessly doesn't make that future phone call to his past self, resulting in his time-looped existence fading away into nothingness. The time paradox of his telephone call is excised by the universe snipping him out of existence.

SEEN IN THE LITERATURE

Jones, C.E., and D. Ley (2016) **Transit-oriented development and gentrification along Metro Vancouver's low-income SkyTrain corridor.** CANADIAN GEOGRAPHER 60(1):9-22

Authors' abstract: "*We examine the incipient gentrification of a low-income corridor that follows the alignment of the SkyTrain rapid transit route through Vancouver and its suburbs. The corridor contains concentrations of aging, private, low-rise apartments built through welfare state programs 40-50 years ago that have become the affordable homes of poorer residents, including recent refugees and immigrants. Focus groups in suburban Burnaby confirm that these neighbourhoods are highly valued by residents, because they are close to family services and SkyTrain stations. But transit proximity is also bringing transformation through a regional sustainability policy of transit-oriented development (TOD), permitting the construction of high-density condominium towers around stations. In Burnaby redevelopment is being accelerated by the upzoning policy of the NDP-led municipal council, removing planning protection from the apartments. The council argues that in light of*

cost downloading by senior government there is no alternative to such gentrification. Comparable affordable housing stock from the welfare state era is under threat across Canada as subsidies expire and the fabric ages; with local variations this Burnaby story is a national story. The paper contributes to critical assessment of TOD and state-aided gentrification, demonstrating how environmental aspirations can exclude social justice from the policy register.”



“A wrinkle to this state-facilitated version of low income displacement is the influential commitment to the environmental credentials of TOD. Policies to support TOD are present in all the municipalities through which the SkyTrain runs. The planning logic of increasing density near rapid transit stations to provide environmentally sustainable housing for future residents was often cited in interviews with key informants. Although this argument has its merits, environmental gains are producing social justice deficits. The promotional materials promising public art and luxurious amenities in new condominium developments point to class and racial succession. TOD’s overt environmental aspirations distract from its covert status as a suburban tool of state-aided gentrification and displacement.”

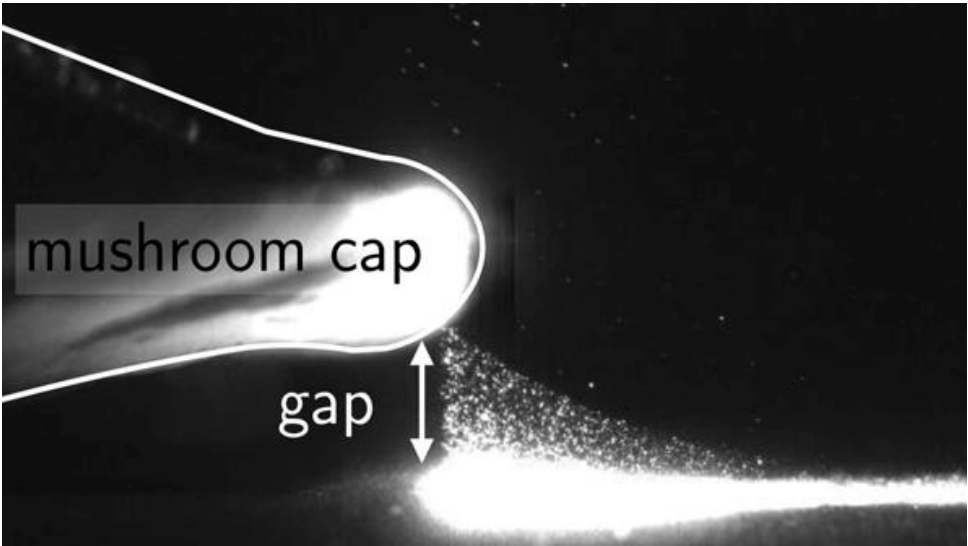
Speirs: It is nothing new that city dwellers like to live near transit stations, as a result of which property values rise and skyscraper projects cluster around them. Low-income residents are forced out. As this study shows, even the socialists (NDP) will throw overboard their principles when it becomes a matter

of money. More condo towers equals more property taxes flowing in to the municipal government.

Dressaire, E., et al (2016) **Mushrooms use convectively created airflows to disperse their spores.** PROCEEDINGS OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES USA 113:2833-2838

Authors’ abstract: “Rooted in a host organism or patch of habitat such as a dead log, tens of thousands of species of filamentous fungi rely on spores shed from mushrooms and passively carried by the wind to disperse to new hosts or habitat patches. A single basidiomycete mushroom is capable of releasing over 1 billion spores per day, but it is thought that the probability of any single spore establishing a new individual is very small.”

“Thousands of basidiomycete fungal species rely on mushroom spores to spread across landscapes. It has long been thought that spores depend on favorable winds for dispersal—that active control of spore dispersal by the parent fungus is limited to an impulse delivered to the spores to carry them clear of the gill surface. Here we show that evaporative cooling of the air surrounding the pileus creates convective airflows capable of carrying spores at speeds of centimeters per second. Convective cells can transport spores from gaps that may be only 1 cm high and lift spores 10 cm or more into the air. This work reveals how mushrooms tolerate and even benefit from crowding and explains their high water needs.”



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

2016-03-14

Re: OPUNTIA #335: Chinese New Year celebrations around here were more special dinners at Chinese-style buffet restaurants, and the usual dancing dragons, but I didn’t see much more than that. I wish I had; we might have been able to enjoy some of the celebrations without overeating.

[I didn’t even attempt any Chinese restaurants during the Lunar New Year festivities; they all had line-ups out the door.]

My previous letter about Nero Wolfe menus: I will ask about shad roe at the next Bouchercon meeting, and see what the reaction is.



[The Wolfe Pack fan club in New York City is hosting a banquet on April 11, featuring shad roe as the main course. The photo shown here is from their Website at www.nerowolfe.org. It doesn’t look that appealing to me, but then again I am a prairie farm boy raised on beef. Has any reader of this zine actually eaten the stuff? Please advise.]

FROM: Milt Stevens
Simi Valley, California

2016-03-16

In OPUNTIA #334, I generally agree with your comments on literary criticism. Most of it isn’t worth anything. I’ve noticed a chasm between fan writing and academic writing about literature. With fan writing, I almost always know what the person was trying to say even if I disagree with it. With academic writers,

I frequently don’t know whether I disagree with them, because I can’t figure out what they were trying to say. I should mention that I think academics do their best work in literary history. Those books are often useful. It’s in the realm of theory that their ideas mutate into monstrosities.

I think Damon Knight was essentially a nasty person. Maybe that is why he went into criticism in the first place. I remember reading a piece where Knight was almost gloating over the fact that his review of WORLD OF NULL A ruined A.E. Van Vogt’s career. The review may have been accurate and deserved, but the malice shouldn’t have been there.

[I could never get through any of Van Vogt’s books. My impression from reading other reviews of him was that he was firmly stuck in the 1930s and once his gosh-wow fanboys died off from old age in the 1970s, that was the end of him. He was never one of the greats like Asimov, Heinlein, or Clarke.]

I only had one personal encounter with Damon Knight. At the worldcon before, LACon II I was offering free memberships to pros who said they were likely to attend the convention. If Knight hadn’t wanted to attend the convention, he could have simply said “No.” Instead, he gave a short talk on what an awful place Los Angeles was and by implication, what an inferior life form I was. After that encounter, I was very glad Damon Knight wasn’t going to attend the convention.

Some people think working with codes is interesting or exciting. This belief is based on movies which show cryptographers meeting all sorts of exotic women and being chased all over the countryside by sinister characters. I was a cryptographer, and none of that stuff happened to me. To be specific, I was the Registered Publications Officer on board an aircraft carrier during the Vietnam War.

I recall learning something major about American codes from a fanzine. The particular fanzine was ERG from Terry Jeeves of England. He had repaired radio gear on British bombers in WWII. He drew some pictures of some equipment he remembered. I recognized one piece of the equipment. It was what we called an Adonis machine. Since British and American militaries can communicate, it makes sense that they use the same equipment. It was a bit of a surprise we were still using equipment from WWII. However, we used double encryption with both codes changing every day. I don’t think anyone is ever going to break that.