

OPUNTIA 364

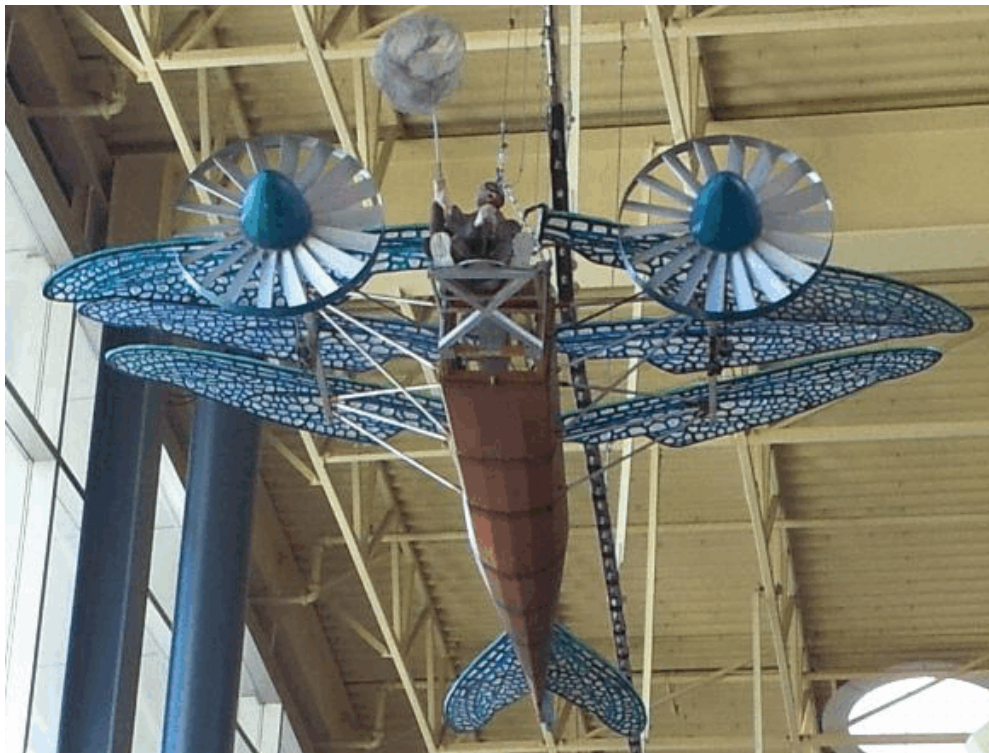
Mid-January 2017

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.

THOSE MAGNIFICENT FLYING MACHINES

photos by Dale Speirs

Chinook Centre in Calgary is the biggest and most profitable shopping mall citywide. It ranks sixth in Canada for dollar turnover. The mall is convenient from where I live, so I often stop in there. Like many of the big malls, it has extensive art and sculptures. Hanging above the food court is a small track from which dangle weird flying machines that slowly circle above the customers.





Upper left: This design is similar to one attempted by Malcolm Shmaal, a pioneer farmer at Gladys Ridge, about 50 km southeast of Calgary. The Wright brothers beat him at the flying game.

Above right: Design based on bush planes, which were and still are standard transport in the Canadian boreal forest and Arctic.

Lower left: Take a closer look at the pilot's head.

And, for the aerially-minded steampunk ...



STEAMPUNK REVIEWS

by Dale Speirs

Novels.

K.W. Jeter, the man who coined the word “steampunk”, published the novel FIENDISH SCHEMES (2013) as a follow-on to his previous novels. It takes place in a Victorian-era London that has gone steam mad. The protagonist is George Dower, deep in debt and looking for a quick fix in the steam-powered gadgets amongst the investors caught up in the steam.com mania. Dower’s father was the inventor who triggered the steam craze, but as is so common, the son cannot live up to the father’s standard.

The story opens on board a steam-powered walking lighthouse, where Dower tries unsuccessfully to squeeze money out of potential investors. And why are there walking lighthouses? It seems that not long ago the dumping of waste chemicals and biologicals into the oceans triggered the formation of sentient masses of water. The oceans are now a complex network of living blobs. They are not gelatinous or otherwise distinguishable from seawater, but they are there. In some places, they heap up onto the land and flood it many fathoms deep, while in others they suddenly withdraw and expose great areas of new land. Nothing to do with tides, which go on as always. This makes coastal navigation difficult to say the least, hence the development of mobile lighthouses that can shift position to match the shipping hazards.

Dower later crosses paths with Vicar Hamuel Stonebrake, a missionary trying to convert whales to Christianity. His Cetacean Mission feel that since whales have a language and sentience, they are therefore capable of learning about the Gospels. Stonebrake has other things on his mind, financial concerns which he wants Dower to become involved in.

The novel takes a number of detours, and along the way stops at various tourist viewpoints to explain steampunk Britain. There are giant metal pipes that snake their way from the soggy parts of England to provide water for steam generators tapping down in magma. Neo-Luddites riot against steam-powered machines taking away jobs. There is a female Prime Minister, who is a real Iron Lady, steam and metal all.

Jeter is one of the few SF authors who takes into account real-world economics and the behaviour of the general public. Much SF just handwaves how the

hero’s world operates. I’ve often wondered how supervillains and superheroes manage to build their under-a-volcano lair or polar base without someone at Bechtel or Haliburton blabbing about the weird construction contract they got. Batman’s cave might be a natural formation, but Bruce Wayne had to have had a crew in to build that nuclear reactor, and how does he handle waste fissionables?

Jeter takes into account that the rush to steam will whipsaw the stock market, and set companies bidding against each other for contracts. The novel is written in a mildly Victorian style which occasionally makes it slow reading. Characters do not talk in simple sentences but roll out long Johnsonian conversations overloaded with adjectives and latinate phrases.

JACK KANE AND THE STATUE OF LIBERTY (2014) by Michell Plested and J.R. Murdock is one that I bought in the dealer bourse at When Words Collide 2016. It has Zeppelins and steam-powered trucks in 1896 New York City, so that makes it steampunk. Strangely though, the authors refer to trucks as lorries, which is not an American term. There are steam-powered articulated walkers, like giant spiders, which don’t seem too efficient in a city, although they would be handy for rural or remote areas with poor roads.

Felonius Fenduke Filcher IV is waging sabotage against the Yankees, specifically trying to stop the Statue of Liberty from being built. He is an upper-class twit from an English family in decline socially. He is acting as a spy for the British government in the hopes of restoring the family fortunes.

Unknown to him, his butler Bennington is watching over him on behalf of Windsor Castle. Filcher and his minions Lenny and Squiggy are just competent enough to try and carry off various schemes, but manage to botch them up with bad breaks and bungling. Among his sideline projects is a battle mech, a giant robot with which to stomp the city flat, but it keeps leaking oil at its joints and seizing up.

Meanwhile, back in Manhattan, Jack Kane is trying to pass himself off as a masked superhero, but can’t seem to get much publicity in the newspapers. He builds miracle gadgets of his own invention, some of which actually work. Kane is still learning the tricks of the trade as a masked vigilante, and bumbles along as badly as the criminals he is chasing. His girlfriend Betsy Wilkes is a conspiracy theorist who sells pamphlets in the street.

For reasons too complex to summarize in a brief review, Kane has got the idea that Filcher is trying to sabotage a piano factory. There is also a running gag where Lenny and Squiggy are following Kane and Wilkes, while they in turn are following the minions, which makes for a lot of circular travels. It all ends up in Battery Park where Kane and Filcher mount their battle mechs and fight a duel. A funny book that reads well.

Anthologies.

CLOCKWORK CANADA (2016) is an anthology edited by Dominik Parisien. It leads off with “La Clochemar” by Charlotte Ashley, set in the Great Lakes area several years after the French have made contact with the native tribes. The aboriginals have lifelocks, metal devices that track every large animal in the neighbourhood, as well as giant monsters which are not mythology as in this timeline but really do exist. The lifelocks are used for hunting and for tracking and diverting the monsters away from the villages. They could also be used for tracking humans, something that gets the attention of the French, who can think of many uses for such devices back in Europe. The aboriginals want to keep the secret of lifelock construction away from the French for obvious reasons.

“East Wind In Carrall Street” by Holly Schofeld is set in Chinatown of Victoria, British Columbia, sometime during the era of the head tax. A father and son have been operating what they advertise is a clockwork lion dancer, but which is actually controlled by the son hidden inside. The problem is that the boy is growing up fast and is now too big to fit inside. He sees that the white folk have laundry machines controlled by programable wax cylinders, and adapts them to produce a genuine automaton lion dancer. An ingenious plot.

“The Harpoonist” by Brent Nichols is another British Columbian story, this time in Gastown, where Luddites and rival factory owners are burning factories. They meet their match against constables in steam-powered exoskeletons. A crippled night watchman at a factory under constant attack takes heart from this and builds his own steam weapons, a harpoon gun and an electrical shock machine. The battle is joined.

“Crew 255” by Claire Humphrey opens in Toronto, a city hollowed out by a giant crater when two Zeppelins collided, one carrying a new kind of metal fuel that detonated far worse than a hydrogen explosion. The story is about a salvage crew, one of hundreds, working to rebuild the city. Many of its workers are cyborgs. Not much happens. More of a mood piece than a narrative.

“The Curlicue Seahorse” by Chantal Boudreau has airships, so that makes it alternative history. The story is about an all-female airship crew from Nova Scotia. They originally set out to salvage sunken treasure in the Caribbean, but are diverted to Oak Island where they have assorted adventures recovering its treasures. This is a 1930s action-adventure pulp story, slightly updated for the 2000s.

“Strange Things Done” by Michal Wojcik is narrated by a woman sent to the Yukon gold rush to find Jack Sheldon, not an ordinary miner. She works for an organization which collects clockwork things. It believes that Sheldon is not mining for gold but for something else unknown. Sheldon has re-animated henchmen running on electricity. There are battles and chases under the midnight sun. The source of the trouble is a large crystal that Sheldon found while sluicing for gold. It is a self-programming alien intelligence trying to build itself into a mobile creature and go out into a world not ready for it.

“Buffalo Gals” by Colleen Anderson begins badly by using Squamish characters. Not a problem in itself, but the author footnotes each Squamish name with a detailed explanation on the orthography and pronunciation of the word, as if she was writing a Masters thesis on Squamish vocabulary. Very disrupting to the story. There would have been nothing wrong with transcribing the names into phonetic English and getting on with the story instead of lecturing the reader about accent marks.

The story is set in 1874 in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia. There are several divergences. The first is that the transcontinental railroad was completed in 1866 instead of 1884 as in our timeline. The second is that the protagonist is a Squamish woman who is a North West Mounted Police constable, impossible for that time on two accounts.

The story mentions the NMWP were formed in 1873, as indeed they were in our timeline, but there is no way that era would have had female constables, much less an aboriginal one. In our timeline, the first female constables date to 1975 and aboriginals to 2011 (although they were employed as auxiliaries prior).

The protagonist, with a footnoted name, investigates reports of strange creatures in the interior. She is also investigating the deaths of six women, both aboriginal and white. The two threads tie together when she finds the creatures are steam automatons whose circuitry has been taken over by the spirits of the dead women. The basic concept of the story is interesting, but the author needs

to learn a basic rule of historical fiction; don't overload the story with every fact discovered during the research.

“Our Chymical Seance” by Tony Pi will be funnier to an Albertan like me than outlanders, what with references to Calygrey, the Chateau Banffshyre, and the Pacifica Railway of the Canadas. The owner of the Chateau, Cesar De Bruin, has hired Tremaine Voss to expose a spiritual medium as a fraud. She has a device called the Ektoptikon, which she claims will communicate with De Bruin's dead son.

The seance goes terribly wrong when an alien presence is released from a piece of amber placed into the Ektoptikon. It is, however, destroyed by a movie camera capturing its spirit on the film. An interesting story of clockwork gone wrong.

“The Seven O’Clock Man” by Kate Heartfield is a bizarre story of New France about a town clock that regulates its citizens in more ways than one, and the man who has to wind the clock up. The clock has autonomous mechanisms that go out hunting for sinners and turns them into parts of the clock. One day they take the clock winder and his son.

“The Tunnels Of Madness” by Harold R. Thompson takes place in the 1860s of Halifax. A retired officer is summoned by an old comrade in arms, Edward Blackburn, whose daughter has been kidnapped by Confederate agents. Blackburn has a secret laboratory in a network of tunnels leading from the Citadel to various points in the city, and is working for the British Army. (Canada didn't exist until 1867 and didn't form its army until 1885.)

Blackburn has just perfected a poison gas bomb, which the Confederates want in exchange for his daughter. A routine action-adventure story with derring-do and hand-to-hand combat in the underground labyrinth.

“Let Slip The Sluiceways Of War, Hydro-Girl” by Terri Favro is about a bizarre battle circa 1900 between Canada and the USA over Niagara Falls hydroelectricity, as told by a prostitute. The war is fought with electric cannons firing Tesla beams across the river at the enemy. No steam-powered horses, but there are equine automatons powered by electricity, good for a ten-mile range before the batteries run down. The prostitute does a Laura Secord walk and helps win the battle.

Why a lost battle at Niagara Falls would cause the entire USA to collapse and surrender to Britain is beyond me. The story doesn't succeed because of this point. The USA is too big and has too many resources to be taken out by a single border skirmish. It's just too implausible.

“Equus” by Kate Story starts off steampunkish with an account of the Ramsden Steam-Propelled Theodolite, a giant machine used to survey railroad routes in Newfoundland. There are ancient spirits of the land who are offended by the iron monster. They fight it but cannot win.

“Gold Mountain” by Karin Lowachee is a tedious off-topic story filled with emoting and little else. Much angst and little resolution. This sort of thing belongs in one of those university small-press magazines that no one reads except the authors and whose stories are deservedly forgotten.

“Komagata Maru” by Rati Mehrotra is based on an actual historical incident in 1914, when a ship carrying Sikh migrants was refused entry at Vancouver and sent back to India. This story is a steampunk alternative where the Sikhs had made the ship into a convertible airship. It floats up above Burrard Inlet and heads across the Rocky Mountains to the Canadian prairies.

The story ends there, but I'm not sure it would be a happy ending. All the good homestead land on the prairies was gone by 1914, although many homesteaders still tried marginal land into the 1920s. Since the Sikhs were not suited for agriculture, they would have had to settle in the cities. Given the attitude of Canadians in those days, Sikhs would have been dealt with harshly in the cities.

“Bones Of Bronze, Limbs Like Iron” by Rhea Rose concludes the anthology. Set in Saskatchewan of the 1800s when it was still empty land for the most part, the few homesteaders are greeted by time travelers from an overcrowded future seeking room. They arrive in a steam-powered time gate, so I guess that makes it steampunk. Like all time travel stories, it founders on illogic and contradictions. If the time travelers fill up the empty land, then why would the land be empty for them in the first place? And what happens to the real-timeline homesteaders who were only just beginning to colonize the land?

CRY UNCLE AND LET SLIP THE DOGS OF WAR: PART 4

by Dale Speirs

[Parts 1 to 3 appeared in OPUNTIA's #361 to 363.]

Movies.

Some of the episodes of THE MAN FROM UNCLE were combined to make eight movies, but original films waited until a long time after the series ended. There was silence for the space of fifteen years, but Solo and Kuryakin returned in a sequel movie.

THE FIFTEEN YEARS LATER AFFAIR (1983), written by Michael Sloan, picks up after Solo and Kuryakin have long ago departed from UNCLE. Solo is a computer salesman and part-time professional gambler, and Kuryakin is a fashion designer. Waverly has died and his replacement is Sir John Raleigh (played by Patrick Macnee). The younger generation of UNCLE agents are boors. Vaughn and McCallum were middle-aged men by then, so the femme fatale that Solo dallies with is a woman of a certain age, not a twenty-something bimbo that Hollywood studios usually match up with older men.

The movie begins with a B-52 flying over Alaska, as we are told, although the stock shots appear to be the Nevada desert, or possibly Arizona. THRUSH takes the plane down and steals the atomic bomb it is carrying. The ransom they demand is \$350 million plus Solo must act as the courier. If not paid, an American city will be destroyed with the bomb.

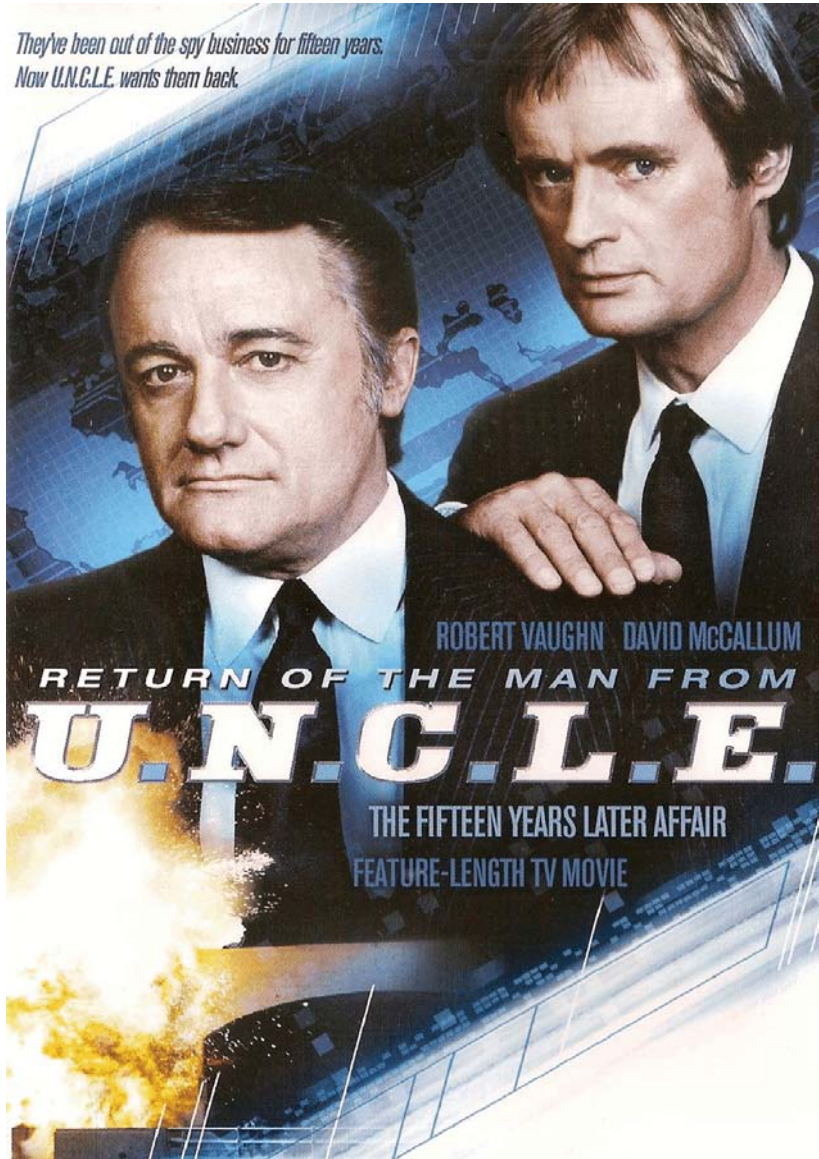
UNCLE has lost track of Solo and Kuryakin, but eventually everyone connects with each other, and they set out to save the world yet again. A few bad car chases through Las Vegas streets. The THRUSH agents have vehicles that explode instantly after crashing as if they were loaded with dynamite and extra gasoline, which they probably were. The plot is elaborated with many threads, alarms, and excursions, and that's before the ransom drop even begins.

The story then splits into two tracks, one with Solo going off to Libya to deliver the ransom to THRUSH headquarters, and the other with Ilya finding the bomb underneath a Chicago nuclear power reactor.

Solo is a one-man army, even at his age, although he does rely on backup teams of UNCLE agents for the final raid on THRUSH headquarters. During the

attack, the UNCLE raiders stay out in the open, disdain the idea of sheltering from enemy fire, and yet mop up the opposition with ease. The THRUSH flunkies, on the other hand, sweep the UNCLE teams with automatic fire but can't seem to hit a single man, while falling victims to shots fired from the hip by running agents.

Meanwhile, back in Chicago, Ilya brings along the only man who knows how to disarm the bomb. The techie snips away wires, pausing now and then to worry about the correct sequence to cut, and wipe the sweat off his brow. He succeeds with 57 seconds left on the digital readout. It was the red wire.



FROM THE DIRECTOR OF / DU RÉALISATEUR DE SHERLOCK HOLMES

HENRY CAVILL ARMIE HAMMER ALICIA VIKANDER ELIZABETH DEBICKI AND HUGH GRANT

THE MAN FROM U.N.C.L.E.

DES AGENTS TRÈS SPÉCIAUX : CODE U.N.C.L.E.



TWO SWORN ENEMIES. ONE COMMON MISSION.
DEUX ENNEMIS JURÉS UNIS DANS UNE SEULE ET MÊME MISSION.

THE MAN FROM U.N.C.L.E. is a 2015 reboot written by Guy Ritchie and Lionel Wigram that shows how Solo and Kuryakin met. The story opens in East Berlin in 1963, where Solo has been sent to extract Gaby, the daughter of a German scientist who knows how to make cheap, affordable atomic bombs.

Solo had served in wartime Europe, then stayed on to profit in the black market. He was given a choice of jail time or working for the CIA. Kuryakin, initially Solo's adversary, is a KGB agent with a troubled past and an anger-management problem.

Their controller is a man named Waverly but nothing is said of UNCLE because it doesn't exist yet. The two are forced to work together to chase down some freelance atomic bomb neo-fascists, who have Gaby's father as a prisoner.

The fascists are based in Greece, but side trips are made to other locales. The movie takes advantage of location shooting to pad out the movie a bit with beautiful scenery.

The usual great feats of derring-do take place. There is an extended cross-country chase with dune buggies and 4WDs. Funniest is a bizarre scene where Solo and Kuryakin inadvertently kill a prisoner in an electric chair. They were torturing him in it but the wiring was faulty and they couldn't fix it. When they step outside the room for a minute, the villain's struggles in the chair activate the circuit and he fries to death while Solo and Kuryakin are arguing elsewhere.

The villains look like getting away, but a neat double-cross with a missile, mentioned earlier so it wasn't cheating, takes them out. In the epilogue, Waverly tells Solo and Kuryakin that the Soviet and American governments have decided to make them a permanent team. They will join a new international organization called UNCLE.

This movie does considerable violence to the concept of the original series, particularly in altering the behaviour of Solo and Kuryakin. What bothers me about reboots is that if they are an ensemble series, then why not just introduce brand-new characters set at a later time? The same applies to the Star Trek reboot. The studio wanted young and exciting actors to catch the current generation. Fair enough, but they could just as easily, and at no additional expense, have started a new set of characters on a new set of adventures. UNCLE and THRUSH could still exist in our modern times, since they would be self-perpetuating organizations, and still hiring new staff.

THE MAN FROM MONTENEGRO: PART 15

by Dale Speirs

[Parts 1 to 14 appeared in OPUNTIA's #252, 253, 275, 278, 279, 289, 304, 307, 319, 332, 335, 337, 344, and 355.]

The Corpus: Polemics.

Rex Stout was a political activist, first against the Nazis, then the Communists, then later against McCarthyism and J. Edgar Hoover. Although there were threads of this in his novels prior, it was in the 1960s that the Nero Wolfe stories began to reflect the civil rights struggle that bloomed in that decade.

In one of the earliest Wolfe novels, *TOO MANY COOKS* (1938) he dealt with racism. A character in that book was a young Negro named Paul Whipple. He re-appears in *A RIGHT TO DIE* (1964) as a middle-aged man coming to Wolfe for help. His son Dunbar is courting a white woman named Susan Brooke, and they want to marry. Paul and his wife are upset at the proposed nuptials, and he wants Wolfe to investigate Brooke. He doesn't want his son marrying a white woman.

This was 1964, remember, when inter-racial marriages weren't just frowned upon by both races, but could be physically dangerous. A black man escorting a white woman in many areas of the USA at that time, not just the South, was risking his life. Stout was not writing on safe ground as did the majority of mystery novelists at that time.

Archie Goodwin arranges a meeting with Brooke to find out more about her. She is a first-reader for a New York publisher, but living with her mother, both of them on inheritances from dearly departed Papa. Goodwin doesn't get much information. The next step is a visit to her hometown of Racine, Wisconsin, where she grew up and her father made his fortune in real estate. The only thing Goodwin can find is that a young suitor she rejected committed suicide on her front porch. There were pedestrians who saw him pull out a handgun and blow his brains out, so it was a suicide, not murder.

The investigation is derailed after Goodwin returns to Manhattan, when Brooke's battered body is discovered in her apartment. The police instantly suspect Dunbar, he being the nearest convenient black man. Paul Whipple asks Wolfe to investigate, and so he does.

The investigation brings out bigots on both sides, and the Brooke family are the least of them. There is Paul Vaughn, a white man who claims he was Susan's real fiancé. Susan and Dunbar had both been volunteering for ROCC, a civil rights organization, whose staff, of both races, were not as entirely enlightened as they like to pretend. Wolfe hauls the staff in for a meeting at his brownstone, which pads out the novel but produces little new information.

From there, the investigation proceeds in fits and starts, one or two suspects at a time, as Goodwin earns his pay as a legman. More facts are elucidated. As per time-honoured tradition in mystery novels, the obvious suspect, Vaughn, is the second murder victim. That triggers a fresh flow of facts and another meeting with the ROCC staff.

The jilted fiancé who killed himself on Susan's porch comes back into the plot. Goodwin is sent to his hometown, Evansville, Indiana, to find out the back story. The connection is made. The dead man's mother subsequently changed her name and moved to Manhattan, and is now taking her revenge. It was bad enough that Susan rejected her son and caused his death, but for her to subsequently become engaged to a Negro was just too much.

Stout doesn't pull punches in this novel. The bigotry on both sides is dealt with frankly, with no political correctness. The audience who read this book in 1964 had a different point of view than we who read it today. It was far more daring then, at a time when civil rights workers were being murdered.

THE DOORBELL RANG (1965) is a failed Nero Wolfe novel, a polemic against the FBI that degenerates into wish fulfillment. Wolfe is given a \$100,000 retainer by a wealthy widow who is being harassed by the FBI for her political views. At that time, J. Edgar Hoover was on his worst behaviour, and Stout was reacting to the operations of the FBI.

Wolfe not only has an investigation to do but soon attracts a counter-operation by the FBI. They also interfere with a murder case that becomes entwined into the plot. One part of the story is far-fetched, the seizure by Wolfe and Goodwin at gunpoint of credentials belonging to FBI agents burglarizing the brownstone. This flushes out Hoover himself, who is forced to try and plead with Wolfe but is refused admittance. The last line of this novel is one of the most famous lines in detective fiction. The novel was understandably controversial when it came out. If you have high blood pressure, take a hydrochlorothiazide pill before you read it.

The Corpus: Cozy Mysteries.

THE FATHER HUNT (1968) is the search by Amy Denovo for her father. She is a secretary to Lily Rowan, wealthy young heiress about town and Archie Goodwin's girlfriend. Amy tells Goodwin she wants to hire him to find her father, whom she never knew. Her mother Elinor, recently killed by a hit-and-run driver, took the name Denovo, obviously to break from her past. ("to begin anew", to save you the trouble of looking it up on Google Translate.) Amy has no idea what her real family name is or who her relatives are. She knows she can't afford Wolfe's fees, so she tries Goodwin, to no avail.

Notwithstanding that, she shows up at the brownstone the next day with \$20,000 in cash, which she says she got legally. Wolfe presses the point, since he can't take the case without due diligence on the money. Amy tells him the cash was paid to her mother by her unknown father as monthly support payments, a total of \$264,000 by the time of Elinor's death.

And so the investigation begins. The source of the money is eventually traced to financier Cyrus Jarrett. He doesn't seem to be the father though, just an intermediary. Another angle is to find out who Elinor's male acquaintances were nine months before Amy was born. Goodwin manages to make an ID on Elinor's real name, Carlotta Vaughn, who was Jarrett's secretary back when. At first it seems that Jarrett was not the father but his son Eugene was. That falls apart when Eugene says he was sterile, and even sends Goodwin to his doctor to prove it.

Having been stymied on that trail, Wolfe tries a different tack. The hit-and-run death of Elinor/Carlotta could easily have been a premeditated murder. No one else had reason to kill her, but Amy's father may have finally been triggered by some unknown event to do the deed. Another name emerges, Floyd Vance, a public relations man who had visited Elinor a few days before she died and whose name kept reappearing often enough to catch the attention of Wolfe and Goodwin.

Goodwin does some more legwork and the pieces fall into place. Vance is taken in by police for murder, but the motive was lacking. The plot begins to twist and turn. Jarrett was paying the money because Vance was his illegitimate son but didn't know it. Vance killed Elinor because she was still knifing him in various ways for the pregnancy decades later. The novel is well plotted and the narrative moves steadily forward. One of the best Wolfe stories.

DEATH OF A DUDE (1969) puts Wolfe in an atypical situation. He seldom left the sanctuary of his brownstone, and usually only for metro New York City, Long Island, or Connecticut. Occasionally he made a longer trip, such as to his birthplace in Montenegro. This novel sends him to a Montana ranch near the village of Lame Horse.

Goodwin's girlfriend Lily Rowan is not only a wealthy young heiress about town but also owns a ranch out west. The couple are vacationing there when her ranch manager Harvey Greve is arrested for murder. Goodwin naturally begins investigating, but gets nowhere since he is more than just a city dude, he is a Noo Yawk City dude. The locals don't cotton to him none.

The dead man had gotten Greve's daughter in the family way, so the county sheriff made the easy choice. The inhabitants, suspects or not, aren't saying or are lying to Goodwin's face. He sends a letter to Wolfe explaining that he'll be a couple more months in Montana, which results in Wolfe coming out west. As Rowan remarks, "*The mountain comes to Mohammed.*"

Wolfe has a friend in New York City who has influence with the Montana Attorney-General, which breaks the logjam of local indifference and allows the investigation to begin. The sheriff is one of the suspects now, and other witnesses are actively obstructive. The investigation proceeds with not a little trouble and strife.

As per standard murder mystery plot, a second victim abruptly departs this vale of tears. Deppity Dawg arrests Goodwin, and not according to proper police procedure. The murder, however, breaks open the case, albeit using withheld information that didn't play fair with the reader. There is no J'accuse! meeting, just Wolfe having it out with the sheriff while the state police put the collar on the murderer. The guilty party was one of Rowan's house guests, who had a terrible secret the first dead man knew about. Nothing to do with the baby.

The novel is a bit cliched about rural life. Its main failing is cheating at the end with hidden information. The first 90% reads well, but I was disappointed in the final chapters.

PLEASE PASS THE GUILT (1973) begins with a man suffering from the Lady MacBeth syndrome. Kenneth Meer obsessively washes his hands, trying to remove non-existent blood. A television executive named Peter Odell had been murdered two weeks prior when he opened a desk drawer and a bomb

detonated. The problem was that the office was not his, and the desk belonged to Amory Browning. Meer was Browning’s assistant. Who planted the bomb and why?

Odell might have been trying to kill Browning over a vacant Vice President position the two were vying for. Or perhaps Mrs Browning put it there, tired of her husband’s affair with his secretary. It may have been an employee who had been demoted by Browning.

Wolfe hadn’t had many cases coming in lately, and since orchids and gourmet cooking are expensive, Goodwin cleverly maneuvers Mrs Odell into hiring Wolfe. She reveals an interesting plot twist. Odell opened that drawer as part of a plan to sabotage Browning’s bid for the promotion, not with a bomb but by spiking a bottle of whiskey with LSD. Browning had found out about it earlier in the day, so he might have set the bomb himself.

Both Wolfe and the police go round and round questioning staff and friends but get nowhere. The murderer can’t be identified until it is known who the intended victim was. A different line of enquiry develops when one of the dead man’s colleagues is found to have information that had been withheld from the public by police and Wolfe. How did he get it?

The answer comes when it is discovered that his twin sister is married to a lieutenant on the NYPD Homicide Squad who was involved in the case. The breach of security from husband to wife to her brother blows the case open. Meer had gotten over his handwashing but Wolfe gets him before Meer can plant a second bomb in the brownstone.

The novel drags slightly in the middle as Wolfe interrogates fruitlessly, but the twist ending, derived logically, makes up for it. The last few pages are not to be skimmed over. A good read all told.

CONVENTIONAL FICTION: PART 5

by Dale Speirs

[Parts 1 to 4 appeared in OPUNTIA’s #70.1A, 270, 285, and 313.]

I like conventions, getting together with like-minded people and existing for a weekend in an isolated world where the subject at hand is something we all hold near and dear. One of my sideline book collections is fiction about science fiction or other types of conventions.

**Strange Beings Among Us, Or:
The Registration Desk Is Over There, Sir, Ma’am, It.**

It has been said that an SF convention is the one place where aliens could land and not cause a major stir. Kent Brewster, in his short story “Altercon” (1994 July/August, GALAXY) takes this one step further at a convention where parallel universes open up at a bid party put on by alien nerds. The attendees are transferred to different universes where they see strange sights, and return to a universe that looks like theirs but isn’t quite. This is a story that only an SF fan could like, but having said that, it isn’t bad.

Sharp Practice.

“In The Idiom Of The Old School” by David Schow (1978, GALILEO #9) begins with a vignette of Sergei Cardwell, a hack writer dying at his typewriter while pounding out another thud-and-blunder fantasy story. One of his devoted fans, a better selling writer named Martin Glass, feels Cardwell was never appreciated by fandom. He vows revenge, first by writing a story with a coded message in it, using words from the NECRONOMICON.

He announces at a substandard local SF convention that he is going to publish the story as a homage to Cardwell, to the sound of universal indifference. When it wins a Hugo at the following year’s Worldcon, he then tells the audience about the coded message. Even as he speaks, nerds in the audience, the kind with thick-lens glasses, eidetic memories, premature baldness, and lack of attention to personal hygiene, begin reading through the story to decode it. The ones who succeed find themselves floating up into the air and exploding, splattering the audience with blood and gore. The connection isn’t made just yet, and as word spreads across fandom about the code, more and more fans go blooey.

I could have included this story in my reviews of Lovecraftian fiction, but put it here because much of it is a depiction of SF cons. The local convention is described as written by someone who has the experience of visiting them. The reader who has been to an SF convention, or knows the personalities in the field circa the 1970s when this story was written, will recognize the characters. Glass is a short, loudmouthed writer not unlike Harlan Ellison, and the fans are the ones any con-goer has seen many times. The Worldcon has a controversy over the awards that from the vantage point of 2015 is remarkably prescient about the factors that led to the Sad Puppies debacle.

“The Con” by Mike Wheet (2016 Mar/Apr, ELLERY QUEEN’S MYSTERY MAGAZINE) is set at a medium-sized comic books convention in Manhattan, not to be confused with the big mass-media comic cons. Carlsen and Grace are a couple with a past, sometimes lovers, currently on the outs but still working together as professional thieves.

There is an auction at the convention which includes a rare Issue #1 comic book, which the couple have targeted. A side plot uses an info dump about an elaborate courier system for criminals which uses fake Yellow Cabs to get around Manhattan. The rare comic book is stolen by someone else at the convention, who then uses the courier system to get rid of the loot. Grace intercepts the contraband and substitutes an ordinary comic book, thereby not only knocking out the thief but shaking the courier system. There is a twist ending as Carlsen and Grace renounce their ways. No, not thieving, but con-going. An interesting concept but a touch too complicated.

Cruising For A Bruising.

A popular type of cruise is the specialty convention on board ship. This has been done a number of times with SF and mystery conventions. When the ship is out at sea, the view never changes, so the tourists can congregate inside for meetings without missing anything. The most popular aspect is the food; constant supplies that will blow any diets out of the water (pardon the pun).

“Killer’s Cruise” by Brett Halliday (1981 September, MIKE SHAYNE MYSTERY MAGAZINE) is the usual two-fisted bang-bang-bang style of Michael Shayne adventures. I don’t care for this style of thud and blunder writing but this one caught my eye because it is set at a mystery convention being held on a cruise ship. A publisher named Martin Sanger hired Shayne because he has been threatened and attacked over a forthcoming book by Troy

Dalton, a retired mercenary who is going to tell all. Not surprisingly, there are people who would prefer not to be mentioned by Dalton and are prepared to get nasty about it.

Trouble and strife begin the moment Shayne and his secretary Lucy board the cruise ship. Dalton is a rude boy gone to seed, and he’s one of the better behaved authors. Sanger is punched out by another writer at the Captain’s Table on the first night out. From there the convention goes downhill, if one can be said to go downhill on the ocean. Sanger doesn’t live to see the second sunset of the cruise. After that, the body count steadily increases. It turns out to be a mixed bag of professional hitmen after Dalton and disgruntled employees after Sanger. This confuses the investigation because Shayne doesn’t know who killed whom for what motive. Not too much is written about the actual convention.

TITLE WAVE (2016) by Lorna Barrett is a novel that is part of a series about a village bookstore owner Tricia Miles. She and her sister book a cruise ship catering a mystery fans’ convention. The list of characters includes a dozen cozy mystery authors and hundreds of fans.

The obnoxious author on the ship is E.M. Barstow, and yes, she does go by her initials. She is a diva who insults the crew, her editor, fans, and anyone else who doesn’t kowtow to her. She causes a scene at one of the panels. It is obvious that the cruise ship is barely big enough to carry her ego. This sort of thing would never happen at an SF convention on land. (Okay, I’m being sarcastic. Anyone who has been to more than a few conventions has met authors with delusions about godhood.)

Someone does the obvious public service, and Barstow is found hanging in her shower, an apparent suicide. Since the ship is in international waters, there is no Deppity Dawg sheriff to investigate. The ship’s security officer says it is suicide until proven otherwise, but they aren’t working to prove it otherwise. Murder on board cruise ships is not unknown, and the shipping lines don’t like to publicize such cases.

A proposed memorial service for Barstow is a non-starter, and her death meets with no tears on board. The fans are more enthusiastic about investigating the death as a murder. Being at sea, all those Miss Marples are not hindered by pesky police officers who think they are the ones who should investigate. The fans get it wrong, of course.

Tricia is the one who identifies the culprit, an editor who will get away with it because of the grey area of international maritime law. Land-based police will not investigate because it is not in their jurisdiction, and it's not the cruise line's job since it was recorded as a suicide. The murderer tries to eliminate Tricia in a fight on deck in a secluded corner, but in the struggle falls overboard.

This novel makes a good point about the difference between the courts and justice. Out on the open sea, the law may be helpless or unenforced, but justice can still be served.

No Refunds In Case Of Murder.

“Johnny Depp Kick Line Of Doom” by Mysti Berry (2016 June, ELLERY QUEEN) takes place at the San Diego Comic Con, where an Edward Scissorhands cosplayer winds up dead on the floor of the dealer bourse. The narrator's young niece was an up-close witness to the death, apparently by poisoning. She is interrogated by police.

Far from being traumatized, her first thought, like any young teen today, is to be the first to post about it on Twitter. Her mother Kate shows up, anxious for the safety of her daughter and to figure out a way to make money from it on social media, not necessarily in that order. It turns out that Kate knew the cosplayer, which is good enough reason for the police to arrest her.

That was a diversion, of course. A clue at the beginning of the story is that the deceased had stolen a can of Diet Coke which had been poisoned and was intended for a show business agent who had done wrong to the perpetrator. Once the intended victim was identified, the rest fell into place. The true murderer was a jealous cosplayer who wanted revenge.

“The Pact” by Margaret Maron (2016 October, ELLERY QUEEN) takes place at a mystery convention, where author Avis Arthur has been strangled in her room. As the news circulates through the hotel, the fans are anguished because they didn't get all their books by her autographed while they had the chance, while the dealers in the bourse immediately begin repricing her signed editions, previously remaindered. First things first, you understand.

Police Lieutenant Steinbock, the officer in charge of the investigation, is plagued by 400 Miss Marples racing to solve the case ahead of him. Another author, Dodie Cantrell, had a piece of lead pipe fall from an upper floor in the

atrium, but fortunately she had a thick skull. Was it related? Was it jealousy between authors carried too far? An author tells her friends the sad news that this will be the last convention she is attending, as her Alzheimer disease is reaching the point where she has to go into a home. It all ties together when a batch of Miss Marples discover who committed the murder but decide to keep quiet for good reasons. They never did like the deceased anyway. The plot is a bit stretched, but the convention rings true for anyone who has attended such an event.

Resorting To Murder.

The Book Retreat Mystery series by Ellery Adams is one damned convention after another. Nevermind the village, it's the convention centre that makes darkest Manhattan look like a walk in the park. The series is set at Storyton Hall, a manor house in rural Virginia near the village of Storyton. It is operated as a hotel resort. The specialty is retreats and conventions for book lovers. The manager is Jane Steward, a widowed single mother with twin boys. She lives on the kindness of her Aunt Octavia and Uncle Aloysius Steward, the owners of Storyton Hall.

The first book in the series is MURDER IN THE MYSTERY SUITE (2014). The manor house needs repairs, so to encourage more guests, Jane comes up with the idea of a Murder And Mayhem Week. The reader is not surprised that by the second chapter it won't be a figurative week. The convention has various role-playing games, costuming, and a scavenger hunt. The prize for winning the latter is a rare first edition.

The first death takes place in the village, not out at Storyton Hall. The resort soon matches it when Felix Hampden, one of the more annoying guests, succumbs to poison. He had won the scavenger hunt, and the rare book he received went missing. To add to Jane's burdens, Aunt Octavia has a serious non-fatal stroke that cripples her.

Jane is of two minds. The murder might affect future bookings at the Hall, but conversely there is the saying that all publicity is good publicity. The sheriff tries to carry out the investigation while fending off a hotel full of Miss Marples. The plot is made more complex by several criminals working in the hotel as infiltrated employees. They fall out between themselves, and spend as much time double-crossing each other as they do stealing. Jane then discovers that the Steward family has a secret past that must be kept quiet.

It all works out well in the end though, as the assorted bad guys are rounded up and the loose threads tied off. The publicity attracts a group of romance writers who book their convention at Storyton Hall, just in time for the sequel.

MURDER IN THE PAPERBACK PARLOR (2015) is the next installment in the series. The convention this time is Romancing The Reader. It is a week of author panels, seminars, Regency fashions, a male cover model show (which probably brought most of the women to the event), and advance reading copy book giveaways. The menu includes various soups such as the John Keats (chicken and wild rice) and a selection of sandwiches such as the Emily Dickinson (egg salad with pickled celery and Dijon mustard).

Jane Steward concludes the first chapter by telling someone: *“But Romancing The Reader will be completely different than our Murder And Mayhem week. We’ll be hosting a company of ladies devoted to happy endings. It’ll be a lovely, festive, and harmonious time. Not a single dead body in sight.”*

The guest of honour is Rosamund York. She is one of those people about whom one wonders how they managed to live as long as they did without a public-spirited citizen eliminating them from the gene pool years ago. York is feuding with other authors, and in turn is the object of a vendetta by Georgia Dupree, a very ambitious writer. A jealous former lover shows up. York also stirs up trouble with a number of romance fans who don’t like her latest book.

Surprisingly, York makes it all the way to Chapter 6 before someone sends her into oblivion by poisoning. The search for clues by police and Miss Marple, that is, Jane Steward, and assorted romance fans, turns up some interesting items. York used ghostwriters for her novels. This was a good entrance for blackmailers, and devastating for her readers, who found out their idol had feet of clay.

Jane and her staff spend a lot of time reviewing security camera footage in and around the hotel. Since the defunct was poisoned with shaved castor beans in her chocolates, it isn’t easy to spot the perpetrator, who didn’t have to go near the victim. Dupree, meanwhile, was arrested by the sheriff as the most likely suspect. Part of that had to do with her offer to York’s editors, while the body was still cooling, to take over York’s book series.

Eventually the culprit is found, and the village and hotel staff can relax. Until the next convention, that is.

More Conventional Murders.

Joan Hess is a prolific writer of cozy mysteries, one series of which is about Claire Malloy, a bookstore owner in Farberville, Arkansas. A couple of these books deal with conventions, the first at hand being A CONVENTIONAL CORPSE (2000). It brings the “Murder Comes To Campus” convention to the local college.

Claire has a bourse table but suddenly finds herself in charge of the entire show when the convention chairwoman is hospitalized with a leg thrombosis. The committee is woefully understaffed, so Claire finds herself doing a half-dozen jobs. That includes babysitting authors, and in one case a cat the author brought along.

No one dies at the convention but it’s not safe in the village. One attendee dies in a car accident that wasn’t accidental, and another is pushed into a concrete cistern. Claire’s residential neighbourhood becomes a perpetual crime scene, and to put icing on it, the cat goes missing.

The root cause of all this mayhem was plagiarism. One of the authors had been supplied with manuscripts by a ghostwriter who in turn was stealing them from someone else. When all three showed up at the convention, what followed was almost automatic as people strove to keep their secrets safe. But Claire did have good book sales, so there is that.

Another novel in the series is DAMSELS IN DISTRESS (2007). A Renaissance Fair has come to Farberville, a convention of a different sort, but nonetheless a gathering of like minds. It is staged by the local chapter of the Association for Renaissance Scholarship and Enlightenment, which has the unfortunate or perhaps deliberate acronym of ARSE.

Setting up a Ren Fair isn’t much different than a convention. One has to get the right people into the proper places at the correct time, and of personal jealousies and giant egos there is no end. The murders are of course only in the fictional world. (I don’t recall any at a real-life convention; readers please advise.)

All the fuss and bother of the Ren Fair is explained in a J’accuse! meeting at the end. The causes were multiple romantic entanglements, with babies born out of wedlock now and fifteen years ago, and love triangles too numerous to mention. One marriage was of a woman carrying her father-in-law’s baby, if

I understood the convoluted explanation correctly. One almost needs to draw up a genealogical chart to keep track of who diddled whom, and who was murdered by what relative or ex-lover.

Unconventional Murders.

DARK CHOCOLATE DEMISE (2015) by Jenn McKinlay is part of the Cupcake Bakery series of cozy mysteries, set in Scottsdale, Arizona. Hundreds of fans are visiting for the Old Town Zombie Walk. Angie DeLaura and Melanie Cooper are the proprietors of a bakery, hoping to capitalize on hungry fans with desserts such as Marshmallow Mummy, Vanilla Eyeballs, and Strawberry Brains.

DeLaura gets into the spirit of things as a zombie bride. Some of the fans are feuding like sad puppies and social justice warriors, so it is not surprising when another zombie bride is discovered dead in a coffin.

However, fandom is exonerated. There is a family feud, a Mafia family, not just any old family. The FBI had undercover zombies, and the ambitious scion of the local don whacked the wrong zombie bride. DeLaura was the real target. Lucky for her and unlucky for an undercover female agent, the hit man couldn't tell the difference between one zombie bride and another.

The roundup of suspects at the end is a bit complicated. The reader may want to keep a list of who's who to sort out all the characters. There is also information held back until the end, although the true culprit can be suggested on general grounds of suspicion. The behaviour of the zombie fans confirms my prejudices against such cosplayers, but that's me as a literary fan showing through.

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: Ray Palm 2017-01-04
Plattsburgh, New York

[Re: THE MAN FROM UNCLE series] I agree with you that David McDaniel was the best writer when it came to THE MAN FROM UNCLE paperback series. My favorite is "The Dagger Affair" where UNCLE and Thrush have to join forces against a third organization.

I hated the so-called THE MAN FROM UNCLE movie (2015.) I find it interesting that those who liked it stated they never saw the TV series. Well, that film had nothing to do with the TV series. Napoleon is a professional thief? Illya is a hulking sociopath? If the characters were named Joe and Ivan no one would suspect the movie had anything do to with the real UNCLE. The worst cinematic adaptation of a TV series since THE AVENGERS (that is the John Steed and Emma Peel duo.) Throw in THE BEVERLY HILLBILLIES movie and you would have a three-feature mental gauntlet that few viewers could survive.

[I consider it a reboot into a parallel universe, like the younger version of Star Trek.]

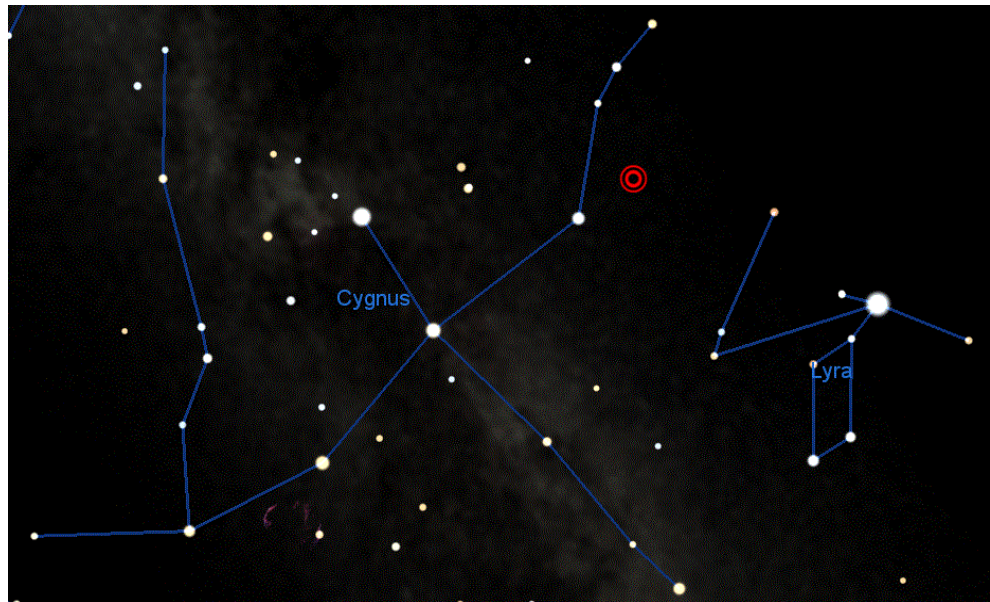
Some people criticized Robert Vaughn for being a one-note actor, but in the first season of UNCLE, when Solo went undercover, Vaughn proved that he did have an extended range. He did a great job acting like a hayseed in "The Neptune Affair" and as a prissy personal male secretary in "The Green Opal Affair". The series could have featured the fake persona angle more often since Vaughn seemed capable of handling different roles.

[Vaughn also turned in a stellar performance as the crusading Senator Chalmers in the movie BULLITT.]

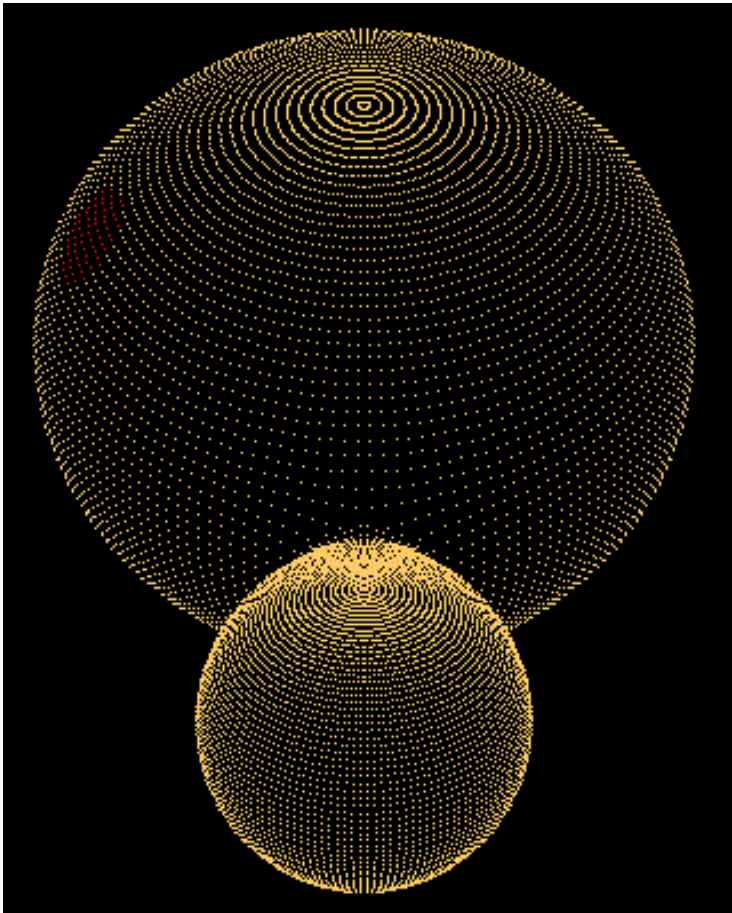
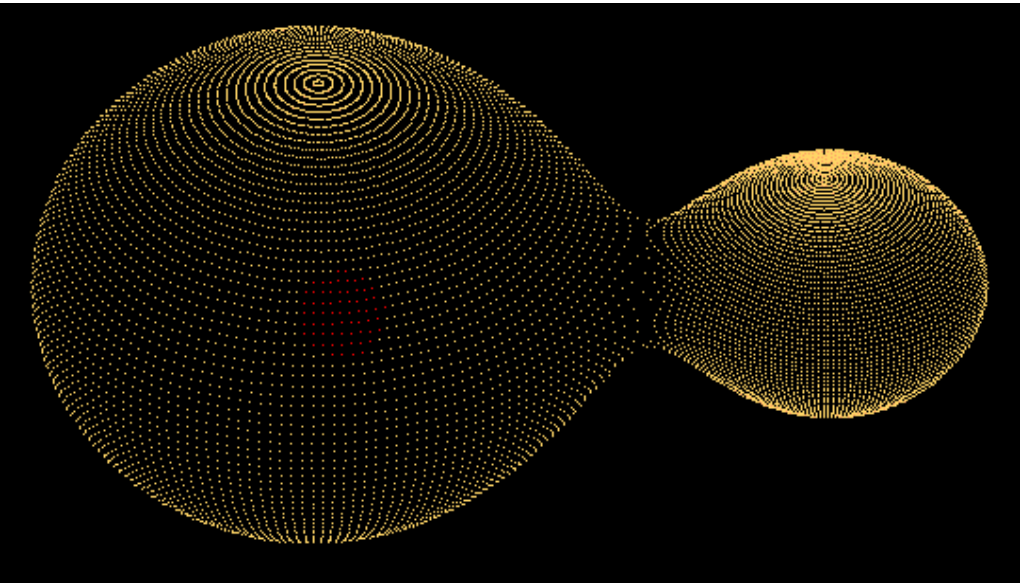
SEEN IN THE LITERATURE

Molnar, Lawrence A., et al (2017) **Prediction of a red nova outburst in KIC 9832227**. Preprint submitted to ASTROPHYSICS JOURNAL

Authors’ abstract: “We present the first identification of a candidate precursor for an imminent red nova. Our prediction is based on the example of the precursor to the red nova V1309 Sco, which was retrospectively found to be a contact binary with an exponentially decreasing period. We explore the use of this distinctive timing signature to identify precursors, developing the observational and analysis steps needed. We estimate that our Galaxy has roughly 1 to 10 observable precursors. Specifically, we lay out the observational case for KIC 9832227, which we identified as a tentative candidate two years ago. Orbital timing over the past two years has followed the tentative exponential fit. As of late 2015, the period time derivative went beyond the range found in other systems, a necessary criterion for a serious candidate. We estimate time of merger is the year 2022:2 plus or minus 0:6. Double absorption line spectra confirm directly the 0.458 d light curve period is a contact binary system and yield a mass ratio $m_B=m_A = 0:23$. Closer analysis of the Kepler timing data shows evidence of a component C with orbital period $P_C = 590$ plus or minus 8 days and $m_C \sin i_C = 0:11 M$. An alternative interpretation of the long term timing trend, light travel time delay due to orbit around a distant component D, is ruled out by the spectroscopic data for any nondegenerate star.”



(Images from Molnar. Red circle on map below left is location of red nova.)



Two views of the stars as they currently exist.