

OPUNTIA

370

Saint Urho's Day 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.



LIFE AT CHEZ OPUNTIA

photo by Dale Speirs

This snowshoe hare in my front yard was just starting to change its fur back to brown for the summer. A bit early I should think.

RADIO FICTION: PART 7

by Dale Speirs

[Parts 1 to 6 appeared in OPUNTIA's #301, 302, 310, 319, 330, and 353.]

Other Jefftys.

“Searching For Commander Parsec” by Peter Wood (2015 September, ASIMOV’S) starts off as a rewrite of Harlan Ellison’s story about Jeffty when Laura, a divorced mother, becomes concerned that her young son Brian is listening to an old-time radio (OTR) series COMMANDER PARSEC from 1952 that shouldn’t be on the air in 2015 as a live show.

The plot soon veers away onto a different track than Ellison’s idea. Laura researches online and finds that no known copies of COMMANDER PARSEC, tape or mp3, are known to exist. The station broadcasting it went off the air in 1962, yet Brian is somehow listening to it on his radio.

Then the show announces that Commander Parsec will be arriving in person nearby on October 19, 2015, the far distant future in the OTR timeline and tomorrow in Laura and Brian’s world. This seems a bit much, but Laura gives in to Brian’s request and drives him out to the location.

At the appointed hour and day, an Art Deco spaceship does appear. Laura and Brian find themselves living in an OTR world, and have to make a choice. An interesting story, although the ending seems a bit contrived.

None Dare Call It.

NIGHT TALK (2016) was written by George Noory, better known as the host of the late-night radio programme COAST-TO-COAST AM. It is heard by millions of listeners on more than 600 stations in the USA and Canada. The show specializes in paranormal matters and conspiracy theory, although it does occasionally cover real astronomy, economics, and sometimes big breaking news stories. Connie Willis, the SF author, sometimes relieves for Noory on weekends. Maybe she gets some of her story ideas from call-in listeners.

I don’t believe in the paranormal or conspiracies, but will tune in when the schedule indicates a real-world astronomer or financial expert is speaking. The show is heard on a Calgary station between 01h00 and 05h00, but easterners

may get it from 22h00 to 03h00 depending on their time zone. They have a schedule of speakers posted on their Website for each coming week.

The novel at hand by Noory is about a late-night radio show hosted by Greg Nowell which deals in the paranormal and conspiracy theory. Like they say in creative writing classes, write what you know. Nowell is accused by the Feds of receiving stolen information about a secret cabal in the American federal government. He has to go on the run from an assassin, and the novel is thoroughly drenched in conspiracy theory.

Nowell has to rely on Webcasting to his listeners about the coverup, since the radio stations are blocked off to him. Aliens come into the plot, who are using the communications network (not just the Internet) to gain control of the population.

I was surprised that Bigfoot wasn’t implicated, but there probably wasn’t room to work in everything from the far side. The novel is basically pulp fiction, the kind that L. Ron Hubbard would be writing if he were still alive.

WELCOME TO NIGHT VALE is a weird fiction podcast series that began in 2012 and as of 2017 is releasing two podcasts per month. The series is done as a radio station newscast and public service announcements from Night Vale, a desert town where every conspiracy theory is true. The weather forecast on the radio station is always a musical number by an alternative rock group.

Citizens try not to notice the glowing lights passing overhead every night. When walking past the Dog Park (no dogs allowed) they look the other way and ignore the hooded figures prowling inside.

Not only are black helicopters from the One World Government constantly circling above, so are blue helicopters from the Sheriff’s Secret Police. There is an underground city beneath the bowling alley, discovered when a stray bowling ball fell into the vast cavern at the end of lane 5.

The Night Vale Business Association has just opened the Night Vale Harbor and Waterfront Recreation Area. To those who point out that it has no water, being in the desert, they reply that one should just wait until the next flash flood. The Night Vale Tourism Board encourages visitors to hike through the nearby Radon Canyon; respirators are available at most local stores.

These are just a few of the ongoing story arcs in the podcasts. Free mp3s for the complete series since 2012 are available at <http://nightvale.libsyn.com> The shows are about 25 minutes each, perfect for listening on your daily commute. Well recommended.



“... and the selection from ‘Carmen’ will be followed by a talk on stockbreeding.”

from PUNCH, 1944-02-09, page 116

Sharp Practice.

BOX 13 was an OTR series about Dan Holiday, a writer who had trouble thinking up plots for his stories. He ran a continuing classified ad in a newspaper that he would go anywhere or do anything as long as it promised adventure, with replies to Box 13 at the newspaper. (This and other OTR shows are available as free mp3s from www.archive.org.)

“Much Too Lucky” is a 1949 episode, written by Robert Light, that begins when a race track gambler writes to Holiday. Bert Hendricks bets at an off-track

facility and noticed that one particular bettor seems to have perfect luck in putting money on the winning horse.

Like other off-track facilities, the betting shop broadcasts the races from the track with the radio announcer’s play-by-play. The sharp practice man always put in his bet just before the windows closed. The final straw for Hendricks was when, a second before bets closed, the bettor put \$100 on a 20-to-1 longshot who wins easily.

Holiday begins his investigation and soon becomes tangled up in various thud-and-blunder adventures. The off-site facility turns out to be rigged. There is a gang who have a radio in a back room and a wire recorder. They receive the radio broadcast from the track, record it, and then put down their winning bets before broadcasting a delayed report on the off-site’s public radio system. The local bettors don’t notice the two-minute delay, and to bely suspicion, the gang only delayed the broadcasts from the middle races.

Murder By Radio.

When radio spread into the homes of the general public, it was a big polished-wood cabinet that families gathered round in the living room, or a breadbox-sized device on an end table. They weren’t portable but had to be plugged into a household socket. Mystery writers soon thought of the idea of killing victims by having the bad guy push a radio into the victim’s bathtub while it was plugged in, supposedly electrocuting them.

I took a few electricity courses in high school, enough to learn that it isn’t necessarily so, depending on the circumstances. Fred S. Tobey takes up this idea in “Murder Is A Specialty” (1963 January, THE SAINT MYSTERY MAGAZINE). A woman is supposedly dead from electrocution because a radio fell into her bathtub, but an autopsy revealed water in the lungs, indicating that she was drowned.

The murderer thought she would die instantly from electrical shock, but fresh water is a poor conductor. The radio was dropped in at her feet, so the electricity would have taken the shortest distance to the nearest ground, which in bathtubs is the metal drain. It wouldn’t go through her body, stopping the heart or scrambling the brain. The murderer then had to fight with her and hold her head under water to kill her.

Cartoons.

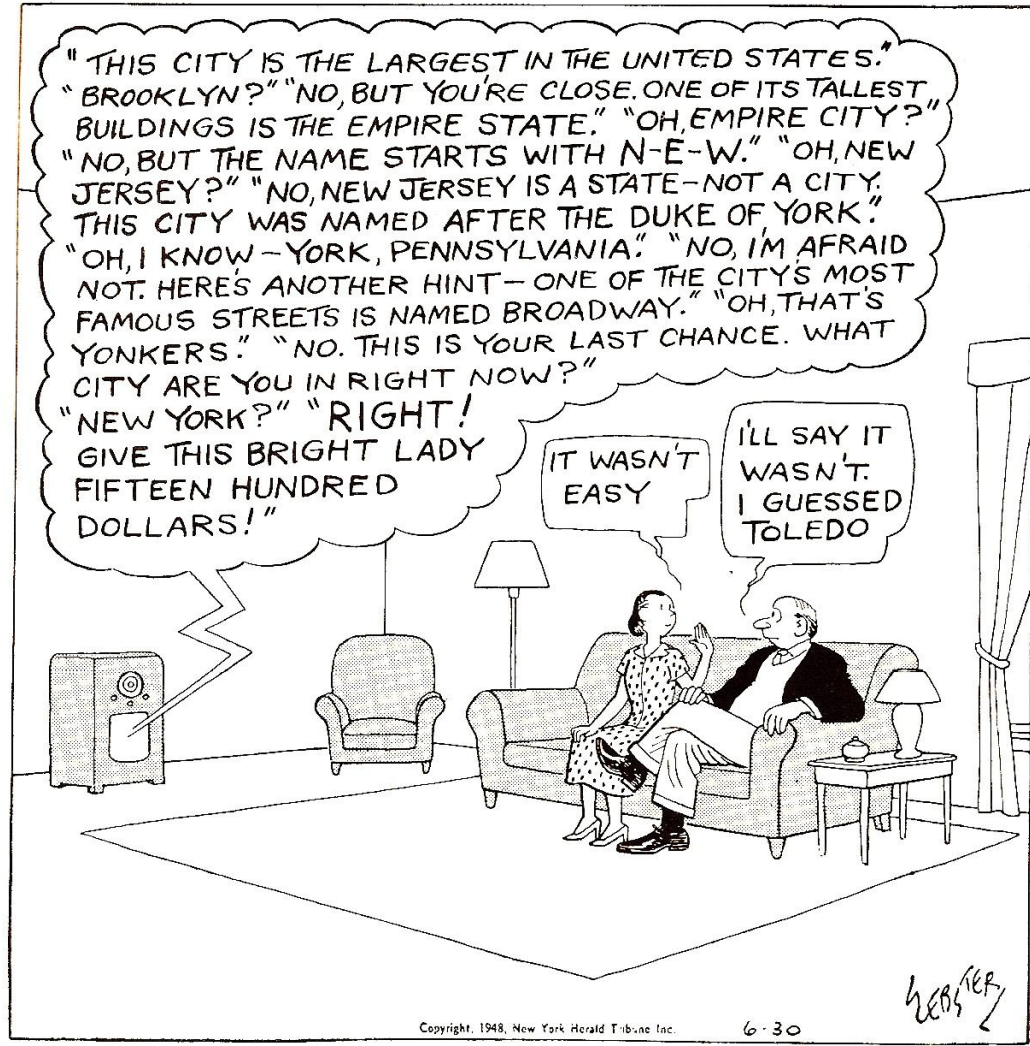
H.T. Webster (1885-1952) is forgotten today but he was a prize-winning newspaper cartoonist in his prime. He specialized in single-panel cartoons and had several different thematic series running simultaneously, such as “Life’s Darkest Moment” and “The Thrill That Comes Once In A Lifetime”. Webster was the creator of Casper Milquetoast, the name of which still survives today as an insult for a timid person.

During the golden age of radio, he poked fun at broadcast networks with a series of cartoons titled “Unseen Audience”. This initially angered the broadcasters, but the popularity of the cartoons aborted their attempts at suppressing Webster. The wheel eventually turned full circle. In 1949 he received the Peabody Award, radio’s equivalent of the Grammys or Oscars. It is amazing how easily the cartoons could be adapted to television today.



The above cartoon struck a familiar note for me. My father often fell asleep on the couch while the television set was blaring. Mom would send me down to the rumpus room to tell him that supper was ready. I tiptoed in and shut off the television set. The sudden silence would wake him.

At right: Tobacco commercials were often fully integrated into OTR shows. Health hazard? Doctors not only smoked them, but 9 out of 10 of them would recommend a particular brand.



At left: The contestants on today's television quiz shows aren't any brighter.

GO-O-OD EVEN-N-ING! AND ARE YOUR NERVES
 EQUAL TO A HALF HOUR OF UNDILUTED HORROR?
 ALL RIGHT, BUT IF YOU SHOULD FEEL SICK FROM
 SHEER TERROR A WHIFF OF AMMONIA WILL HELP.
 AFTER ALL THERE IS NOTHING QUITE SO UPSETTING
 AS MUR-R-RDER — HA! HA! HA! — ESPECIALLY
 WHEN IT HAPPENS IN A HAUNTED HOUSE, FULL OF BATS
 AND SQUEAKY DOORS. AS OUR STORY OPENS A
 THUNDER STORM IS RAGING. (RUMBLE-BUMBLE)
 IT IS MIDNIGHT. LISTEN!

THIS GUY
 IS FUNNY

HE'S SIMPLY
 A SCREAM



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At left: This one is funnier if you've heard an episode of the OTR series INNER SANCTUM, which could be quite campy at times. (Available as free mp3s from www.archive.org)

HELP!
 PRIVATE EYE!
 BURGLARS!



THE RADIO WHODUNITS
 HAVE TAUGHT US THE
 FUTILITY OF CALLING
 THE POLICE

12-7- Copyright, 1949, New York Herald Tribune Inc.

It's Not AH Unless An Airship Floats By In The Background.

“The Zeppelin Pulps” by Jess Nevins (2009 September, INCOGNITO #6) is a well-written faux history of pulp magazines devoted to Zeppelin fiction that almost seems real. It begins in the 1930s with the U.S. Navy trying to increase recruitment and improve its image after the Macon disaster. They convinced a pulp publisher to produce COMPLETE ZEPPELIN STORIES, about the adventures of Professor Zeppelin. Not the German inventor who gave his name to rigid airships but a Doc Savage imitator.

The Professor fought adversaries such as the Nazi aviator Pontius Pilot and Wu Fang the Helium Mandarin. CZS was a success, leading the field by the summer of 1936. Other publishers rushed in with their pulps, such as DIME ZEPPELIN MAGAZINE, FLYING COWBOY STORIES, and the semi-pornographic SPICY ZEPPELIN STORIES.



Hollywood studios took note and began prepping dozens of Zeppelin movies.

Alas, the following year, on May 6, the Hindenburg disaster occurred, taking with it all the Zeppelin pulp magazines and movies. Others attempted to struggle on, but it was never the same, no matter how much helium they used.

A good read. Nevins mixes in just enough true history of the pulps to add verisimilitude to the AH and make it a plausible story. Indeed, an unwary reader might accept it as an actual history.

World War Two.

“The Court Of The Mad King” by Hilary Bailey (1966 December, THE SAINT MYSTERY MAGAZINE) is set in 1954 after the Nazis won the war and occupied Britain. The narrative becomes involved with a woman named Frenchy Steiner, a German national living in London. She is wanted back in Berlin because as a teenaged girl she had a mystic power that came to the attention of Hitler. She used it to sooth him in his manic moments, and gave him valuable advice which he actually heeded, such as not to invade Russia, which is why Germany won the war.

Steiner fled Berlin after the fighting ended, but is now dragged back to work her miracles on Hitler. He has degenerated into a foaming-at-the-mouth madman, and his sycophants don’t know how to interpret him. The problem is that she is no longer a virgin, so her powers are gone. When she announces that fact to the court of the mad leader, a civil war is immediately triggered as candidates to replace the Fuhrer come out into the open.

The Space Station That Never Was.

SPACE STATION 76 is a 2014 movie, written by five people from their stage play, that is mildly comic SF, almost a black comedy. It postulates that those gleaming white space stations from the movie 2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY came to pass several decades ago, instead of the International Tin Can we got in our timeline. The plot concerns itself with what it would be like to live on one of those orbiting stations, Omega 76, in orbit around a distant planet.

The space station is 1970s retro. There is artificial gravity as in Star Trek, and the shuttle pods were borrowed from SPACE 1999. Everyone wears the style of outfits seen in that television series or from the 2001 movie. There are small robots buzzing about doing chores, and people smoke cigarettes. There are holographic projectors for communication but all videos and data are recorded on cassettes.

Only one child is on board the space station, a 7-year-old girl named Sunshine, who understandably is bored living in a world with just adults. We see her in the opening sequence trundling along the endless circular corridors, dragging a purple crayon along the white bulkheads, the only way she can make her mark, and not just figuratively.

The protagonist is Jessica, the newly arrived 2-in-C of the space station. She finds the captain of the station, Glenn, withdrawn and uncommunicative. Later she learns that she is replacing his boyfriend Daniel, who left the ship in a huff after a spat with Glenn. It doesn't help that Glenn's job consists of sitting in a chair in the control room waiting for something to happen, staring out the window at the unchanging view of deep space.

Jessica's arrival triggers off a panoply of soap opera subplots among the station personnel. She tries to be helpful but each time makes the situation worse, usually without her recognizing what is happening. Everyone keeps hoping for a promotion to a more exciting posting, preferably a starship.

Sunshine's mother Misty is taking therapy from Dr Bot, a miniature robot whose standard solution to her difficulties is to prescribe yet more Valium. The girl herself is upset that her pet gerbil is eating its young one by one. Another couple are faced with the wife's postpartum frigidity. Jessica is a career woman who cannot have children of her own.

The psychological situation deteriorates to the point where everyone is so wrapped up in their miseries that they neglect their jobs. The boredom of the work isn't helped by the social drama they must face when they book off shift. As a result, an asteroid makes a close approach to the station, scraping it and destroying the shuttle. That acts as a catalyst, shocking the characters out of their ruts and making the changes they should.

The theme of retro 1970s is well done. The movie treats the problem that boring jobs in space are no different than boring jobs on the ground. This is a movie that deserves viewing.



Hologram envelope issued 1995 by USPS, depicting a space station that might have been.

SHERLOCKIANA: PART 24
by Dale Speirs

[Parts 1 to 23 appeared in OPUNTIA's #63.1B, 63.1C, 63.1D, 67.1D, 68.1C, 69.1E, 70.1A, 71.1B, 251, 253, 256, 261, 269, 270, 276, 288, 309, 333, 340, 348, 356, 359, and 365.]

The original Sherlock Holmes stories are referred to as the canon, while stories written by other authors in the Holmesian setting are called pastiches. Short-story pastiches compiled into a book are a collection if they are all done by one author, and an anthology if done by several authors.

Semi-Canonical Stories.

Doyle wrote two mystery stories in between the time he killed off Holmes at Reichenbach Falls and revived him a decade later. These are considered semi-canonical stories because they mention a detective who writes a letter of advice but is never named. However, there is little doubt who the detective is because he uses phrases associated with the Great Detective and attempts logical deductions to solve the case.

One such story is "The Lost Special", about a train that vanished into thin air while traveling along the tracks. I discussed this story and its old-time radio (OTR) adaptations in OPUNTIA #349. Doyle published the story in 1898 and that same year also another train mystery titled "The Man With The Watches".

The latter story begins on a train where a man occupies a smoking compartment, and a man and woman the adjacent non-smoking compartment. When the train pulls into the next station, the three of them are missing but another man, who was not a fare-paying passenger, lies dead in the non-smoking compartment.

All the other passengers are accounted for, so no one switched identities, and the train's porter knows for a fact that the dead man did not get on at a previous station, not did he pay a fare at any time. The defunct had six gold watches on his body, but wasn't a pickpocket because they were American-made brands not sold in Britain and three were identical.

What happened to the three missing passengers? They didn't get off at a stop because there was none between the time they were last seen and the discovery that they were gone. Much wild speculation, but the coroner's jury could only

say “*Murder by a person or persons unknown*” and throw the case back into the laps of the police.

The newspapers go to town on this mystery but have nothing to solve the matter. A Great Detective has a letter published in the DAILY MAIL suggesting an elaborate, but as it turns out unfounded, solution. We know who it is because his writing is a familiar style we’ve seen before.

“Whatever may be the truth,” said he, “it must depend upon some bizarre and rare combination of events, so we need have no hesitation in postulating such events in our explanation. In the absence of data we must abandon the analytic or scientific method of investigation, and must approach it in the synthetic fashion. In a word, instead of taking known events and deducing from them what has occurred, we must build up a fanciful explanation if it will only be consistent with known events. We can then test this explanation by any fresh facts which may arise. If they all fit into their places, the probability is that we are upon the right track, and with each fresh fact this probability increases in a geometrical progression until the evidence becomes final and convincing.”

The mystery isn’t solved until five years later when one of the parties in the mystery writes a letter from New York City to Scotland Yard. His explanation is every bit as elaborate but nonetheless fits the facts, for he was the man in the smoking compartment. The other two were con men, one dressed as a woman and who was the smoker’s wayward brother. There was a confrontation, the brother threw off his disguise, the other con man took a shot and killed him, and then the two men left standing fell out of the compartment from the moving train. The survivors both had something to hide, would rather not involve the police, and fled separately, one to Egypt and the other to New York City.

A strange ending. It is amusing though, to see S***** H***** mess up by violating one of his oft-stated rules; don’t theorize before the facts are in. The elaborate nature of the story is such that I have necessarily summarized it very briefly. There is a free download of the text from eastoftheweb.com which I recommend for reading. A Google search didn’t turn up this story on OTR, although audio books are available.

Fandom.

“Nightmare In Gillette Castle” is a 1980 episode of CBS RADIO MYSTERY THEATER written by Elizabeth Pennell. It and the entire run of this series are

available as free mp3s from www.archive.org. On this particular recording the sound is a bit muddy at the beginning but improves as the mp3 plays on.

William Gillette was a stage actor a century ago who made his career playing Holmes. More importantly, he shaped the image of Holmes in the public eye with the deerstalker hat and curved pipe. He built a manor house in Connecticut which is now an historic site, and is open for public tours.

The radio play is about a Holmes fan named Jim Watson, on a tour of the building with his wife Pamela. They are separated from the main group and find themselves in a corridor with the ghost of Gillette, who died in 1937.

The ghost is indignant and doesn’t believe they are tourists. He thinks he is still alive. He overcomes his annoyance and invites the Watsons for dinner and to stay the night. Assorted alarms follow, the kind that one expects in a haunted house, plus the appearance of Holmes himself. Not an overly dramatic story, but a pleasant way to pass a half-hour.

“Risk Taking” by J.N. Williamson (1986 April, ESPIONAGE MAGAZINE) is about a double agent who returns from the Soviet Union to America. He is taken into custody by a spy agency who think he is a ringer for the original man, reported dead in an accident. The real agent was a Sherlockian who knew the canon in great detail, so the ringer is closely interrogated by a controller who happens to be a member of the Baker Street Irregulars. The ringer is finally caught out by a trivial mistake on a trick question. The story isn’t believable even to the most fanatical Sherlockian.

“The Adventure Of The Disguised Passenger” (2017 Jan/Feb, ELLERY QUEEN) by Jonathan Turner is a pastiche set in 1894. Watson receives a letter from the Amlingmeyer brothers of Ogden, Utah. They are great fans of Holmes and set up a detective agency using his methods.

The brothers were on the trail of criminal mastermind Dr Leonidas Fox, who escaped the law and is now on a steamship. Holmes and Watson are asked to investigate. Fox is, of course, traveling under an assumed name, so Holmes has to meet the ship and figure out who he is. There are three suspects. Holmes interviews each and makes his deductions, with numerous twists and turns along the way. The ship was a passenger liner, not a fishing trawler, but just the same its decks were littered with red herrings.

The Strand Magazine.

THE STRAND MAGAZINE 1891-1950 is a history by Reginald Pound (1966) reviewed here because its fame in posterity relies almost entirely on the Sherlock Holmes stories it published. It was an illustrated general monthly of short stories, essays, and articles. It began in an era when such magazines were the only popular entertainment for the home and, like its competitors, died in the television era.

STRAND was founded in 1891 by George Newnes, who funded it with profits from his successful weekly newspaper TIT-BITS. Its origin began a year earlier when W.T. Stead convinced him to go halves on the magazine REVIEW OF REVIEWS. The partnership failed because of conflicting editorial viewpoints, so Newnes sold out to Stead and they went their separate ways.

Newnes still had magazine publishing in his blood. His next project was almost named THE BURLEIGH STREET MAGAZINE, but he finally went with THE STRAND MAGAZINE. It was just as well, for while the magazine offices were initially located at the corner of those two streets, they eventually moved further down the Strand to a different intersection. Greenhough Smith was appointed editor and stayed forty years in the job. The first issue was dated January 1891.

In the spring of 1891, two stories, “A Scandal In Bohemia” and “The Red-Headed League” arrived at Smith’s desk. After reading them, he was so excited that he rushed into Newnes’s office and showed him the manuscripts. STRAND was doing well, but Sir Arthur Conan Doyle made it do spectacularly well, helped by artist Sidney Paget, who gave the world its visual impression of Sherlock Holmes.

Doyle was paid 30 guineas for each Holmes story in the first series, and 50 guineas per story for the second run. (A guinea, now obsolete, was one pound sterling plus one shilling, or £1.05 in decimal currency.) He came to despise the Holmes stories, and felt that his historical fiction would be his real legacy. The latter are seldom read today, and if read once, are not read twice. When Doyle told his mother that he was thinking of slaying Holmes, she was quite indignant. That didn’t stop him, and in the November 1893 issue of STRAND, Holmes fell to his death at the Reichenbach Falls in Switzerland.

What is often overlooked is that Doyle had invented a new form of fiction, the series of linked short stories that could be read independently, yet formed a

coherent whole. Serial stories were quite common prior, but if the reader missed an installment he would lose a chunk of the narrative. The linked stories concept immediately became widespread among other magazines, so much so that it was forgotten that the Holmes stories were the first. Doyle’s brother-in-law E.W. Horning was one of many who copied Holmes, inverting the idea into Raffles, the gentleman thief.

By 1897, STRAND was selling 450,000 copies per month, and Newnes had become Sir George. Queen Victoria contributed a few pages to STRAND. When Doyle returned from a trip to continental Europe, he told Smith that every passenger on board the Channel boat had a copy of STRAND.

After Doyle revived Holmes in the October 1903 issue of STRAND, his income soared, and he became the highest paid author in Britain. THE HOUND OF THE BASKERVILLES was serialized at £480 to £620 per installment, and he subsequently never received less than £100 per thousand words.

STRAND received a flood of letters from Sherlockians, wanting Doyle or Holmes to help investigate a problem, asking for an autograph of either or both, and sending gifts of pipe tobacco. Not every reader understood that Holmes was fictitious. It must be remembered that Doyle wrote the stories set in contemporary surroundings. Only the passage of time has turned them into period pieces of the gaslight era.

Meanwhile, Newnes was sliding down a slippery slope lubricated by alcohol, Type 2 diabetes from too much gluttony, and stress from repeated bad investments that left him near bankruptcy at his death in 1910. STRAND continued on, publishing many bestselling authors who were famous at the time but are now forgotten. Other than Doyle, names that survived into posterity were few, such as H.G. Wells and P.G. Wodehouse.

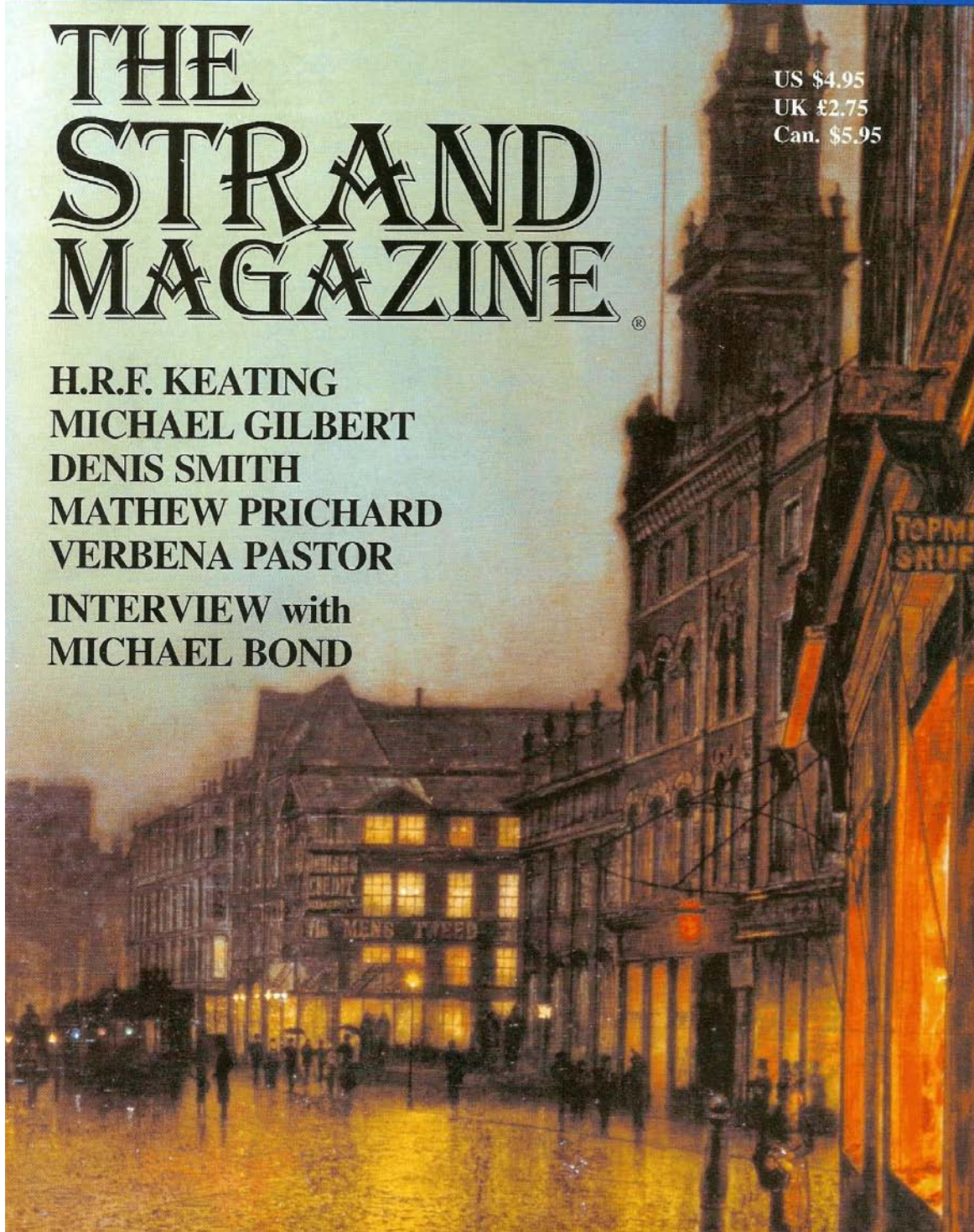
Doyle wrote, for £5,000, a series of articles on the major battles of World War One as they happened, but the readership was indifferent. They wanted the Holmes stories. Doyle was beset by personal problems, including bereavement of loved ones, and became interested in spiritualism. He wanted to believe, and convinced Smith to run an article on garden fairies in the 1921 Christmas issue. The photo of fairies was exposed as a fake, and Doyle’s reputation was ruined.

The final Holmes story, “The Adventure Of Shoscombe Old Place” appeared in the April 1927 issue. Having been told there would be no more, Smith had

THE STRAND MAGAZINE®

**H.R.F. KEATING
MICHAEL GILBERT
DENIS SMITH
MATHEW PRICHARD
VERBENA PASTOR**
**INTERVIEW with
MICHAEL BOND**

US \$4.95
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Doyle compile his list of twelve favourite stories in the canon. Readers then competed for £100 to correctly guess the list. The winner got ten out of twelve correct. Doyle's #1 favourite story was "The Speckled Band".

In 1930, Doyle died and Smith retired not long after. It was the changing of the guard in more ways than one. Monthly general magazines were slowly declining, although it would take another two decades to finish them off. Broadcast radio bloomed in the 1930s, then television in the late 1940s, both of which went a long way to killing general magazines.

During World War Two, the STRAND offices were frequently visited by American servicemen who couldn't find 221B on Baker Street and wanted better directions. (The street is real but not the house number.) Escalating postwar printing costs, declining advertising sales, and a falloff in subscribers finished off STRAND. The final issue was dated March 1950.

An attempt was made to revive the monthly miscellany with THE NEW STRAND MAGAZINE, the first issue appearing in December 1961. It struggled along for a short while and expired with the February 1963 issue.

A more successful revival by Americans began in 1998 under the old title as a quarterly, which has survived so far because it restricts itself to the mystery genre, and uses careful budgeting.

As a genre magazine, it is successful, but it remains to be seen whether or not the Internet will kill it. It runs several short stories in each issue and usually a Holmes pastiche. The covers are very well done, paintings of Victorian London in gaslight. The example shown at left is issue #2 from 1999. Unfortunately I am missing the first issue from my collection.

EDGAR GALLOPING POE: PART 5.

by Dale Speirs

[Parts 1 to 4 appeared in OPUNTIA #325, 332, 344, and 356.]

Variations On A Theme.

Many pastiches of Edgar Allan Poe are simple rewrites of his stories, updated for modern times. “The Cask Of Amontillado” seems to be a favourite. One such story is “The Fine Line Of Difference” by Leighla Whipper (1962 October, THE SAINT MYSTERY MAGAZINE), about the goings-on at the Scott Ruskin Graduate Library of Social Sciences. It has been ruled by Miss Agatha Lipton for lo! these many years, but the Board of Directors have ruled that she must take compulsory retirement on a generous pension.

She does not approve of her designated successor, her assistant Mrs Dickinson, and would rather that the Directors post a countrywide competition instead of promoting from within. The Ruskin Library is located in the mansion of its founder. Sometime prior, Lipton had discovered a secret walk-in vault behind a panel in her office that Ruskin had used and which was later forgotten.

Being a literary woman and well read on Poe, on her last day of work Lipton invites Dickinson for a glass of Amontillado. She shows Dickinson the vault, slugs her on the head from behind, and locks her inside it. Sliding the panel back into place, no one can see or hear anything within the vault. The denouement can be guessed the instance the Amontillado is mentioned, but the story reads well as a perfect crime tale.



Imitation Is The Sincerest Form Of Flattery.

“Adventure Of The Spurious Tamerlane” by August Derleth (1964 December, THE SAINT MYSTERY MAGAZINE) is part of Derleth’s Solar Pons series, an imitation of Sherlock Holmes. Pons’s assistant and narrator is Parker. Derleth was a sharp-practice man who had many sins, but against those he played the largest part in keeping H.P. Lovecraft in print and ensuring his place in posterity. Derleth was also noted as a regional writer in Wisconsin. The Solar Pons series was reasonably well written as serious stories, not music hall parodies like so many Holmes imitators.

The story at hand begins with an enquiry by a bookseller friend Joshua Bryant, who has a barrow in the marketplace. Instead of a book thief, Bryant is bothered by someone adding books to his barrow, specifically what appears to be a copy of TAMERLANE AND OTHER POEMS. This is the rarest of EAP’s books, and only about a dozen copies have survived since publication in 1827.

If genuine, Bryant could buy a manor house with the proceeds, but Pons has little trouble proving it a fake. His investigation reveals that it was produced for a lady of quality, who substituted it for her husband’s genuine TAMERLANE, which she then pawned. She was being blackmailed and needed the money. However, she managed to get money elsewhere and redeemed the genuine book, after which she disposed of the fake rather whimsically. Pons helps her defeat the blackmailer. There are a couple of twists in the story but all ends well.

The Colophon Articles.

I have reviewed elsewhere the history of the hardcover magazine THE COLOPHON (see OPUNTIA #366). It had a number of articles about Poe, enough to justify moving my mentions of them into this column.

In THE COLOPHON #2, published 1930 May, Carl F. Schreiber’s “Mr Poe At His Conjurations Again” discusses the few times that Poe used a German phrase in his review articles. He concludes that Poe used other people’s translations. And what of it?, you may ask, as I did.

Volume 1, Number 1 of the new series (TCNS) was dated 1935 Summer. In it, J.A.T. Lloyd discusses the pseudonymous author of ENGLISH NOTES, and

concludes it was Edgar Allan Poe, who spent part of his childhood in England. Poe wrote it in retaliation for Charles Dickens's book about Americans.

In those days, British authors would make a brief tour of the USA and/or Canada, and upon returning home would publish a travelogue loaded with misapprehensions and insults about the colonials. It was a two-way street; Americans would tour Britain and write likewise about the primitive living habits of the English and the atrocious weather.

Poe re-appears as a topic in the second issue of TCNS, dated 1935 Autumn. "Poeana", in two parts by two authors, looks at sidelights in Poe's life. Sydney R. McLean discusses a handwritten valentine Poe gave to a graduating schoolgirl. Whether anything might have come of it (Poe was a ladies man) was moot because he was in the final part of his life and died not long after.

More remarkable is J.H. Whitty's discussion of how Poe learned his languages. As a three-year-old, he learned the English alphabet from a family pet, a parrot that had been taught to recite it but spoke it with a lisp. Poe makes reference in one of his writings that as a result he quoted the alphabet with a lisp.

Poe's family moved to England for several years during his childhood. His father and family friends ran a business that frequently dealt with the French. When he was old enough, he would accompany his elders to Paris and thus learned French quite well, presumably without a lisp. Years later, someone wrote to him asking the best method to learn a new language. His advice was sage; the best procedure is immersion, not out of a textbook or in a classroom.

TCNS V2#2 is dated 1937 Winter. Edgar Allan Poe shows up again in an article by Robert Almy about a deluded explorer named Jeremiah N. Reynolds. Poe died of delirium tremens in a Baltimore hospital. In his last hours, he kept shouting the name "Reynolds". Almy points out that the explorer was a student of Capt. Symmes, known for his belief that Earth was hollow and the entrances were at the poles, each protected by a ring of ice. Poe had a nodding acquaintance with Reynolds and incorporated some of his Symmesian beliefs into his fiction.

Reynolds's other claim to fame is that he returned from an Antarctic expedition with a legend that whalers had told him about an albino whale known as Mocha Dick. He wrote that story up as a novel titled MOCHA DICK. Sometime later, another author named Melville, who had also been to sea, heard a variant of this

legend. He wrote it up as well, and had better sales with the title MOBY DICK. Poe didn't write about albino whales but some of his stories have ice in them. He probably got some ideas from Reynolds.

TCNS V3#4, dated 1938 Autumn but not actually issued until December, was the final issue of this series, although the magazine was later revived in another form. It contains an article "Footnote On A Minor Poet" by David A. Randall, who was writing about a now forgotten poet named William Wilberforce Lord. This American poet had a brief vogue in the middle 1800s just before the Civil War. In 1845, the Appleton publishing firm issued a book of his poems, advertising him in advance as one of the greatest poets of all time.

This naturally prejudiced the public against him, since the poems were average at best. What killed the book was that it contained a burlesque of "The Raven", a poem titled "New Castalia". Poe was an editor for BROADWAY JOURNAL, and gave the book a KTF review. He accused Lord of bad grammar and plagiarism. Poe wrote: "*The fact is that the only remarkable thing about Mr Lord's compositions are their remarkable conceit, ignorance, impudence, platitude, stupidity, and bombast.*" From there, it got worse.

Poe-Faced Movies.

Poe's stories were frequently adapted for filming, invariably with great liberties taken with them. One of the earliest is the bizarre 1934 film MANIAC, written by Hildegard Stadte, who borrowed heavily from Poe for the script. She threw in a joking reference to "The Murders In The Rue Morgue", and used "The Black Cat" for the ending, with a splash of Amontillado. My copy of this film is in the 50-movie boxed set MAD SCIENTIST THEATER from Mill Creek.

Everyone overacts. Nothing is said that can't be shouted, and no gesture made that can't be exaggerated by windmilling the arms or tearing at one's hair. The use of face-the-camera soliloquies is common for characters to explain their anguish about something or other. Another technique was to superimpose graphic images over the character via double exposure to show what they were thinking.

To be reasonable, sound movies were still in their infancy, both in microphone technology and acting techniques. (The first commercially successful talkie was released in late 1927 and by 1930 the silents were extinct.) Actors had to learn that it wasn't necessary to shout their lines so the balconies could hear them.

Screenwriters had to learn there were better methods to expound the plot instead of having all the characters stop every ten minutes, face the camera, and commence an extended soliloquy.

The film has a startling amount of nudity and rape scenes, something I didn't expect of that era. The flow of this movie is constantly interrupted by scrolling texts explaining in detail the psychology of manias and what today we call bipolar depression. This seems to have been an attempt to make it look like an educational film, showing step by step the descent into madness and paranoia, and thus escape an outright ban by censors.

The plot is about a mad scientist named Dr Meirschultz busily working on reanimating the dead. He is murdered by his assistant Don Maxwell, who previously was a vaudeville impersonator before becoming a laboratory technician. People keep asking Maxwell where Meirschultz is, so he uses his theatrical makeup kit and impersonates the doctor. One woman asks him to attend her husband, who is suffering from the delusion that he knows how a locked-room murder was done over on Rue Morgue. He says an orangutang did it, so everyone agrees he should be committed to an asylum.

Another annoying problem is that you can't leave a corpse lying on the lab floor where people trip over him. Maxwell hauls the defunct into the basement and bricks him up behind a wall. No Amontillado casks lying about, but a black cat that Maxwell mistreated is walled in with the defunct.

The police get involved and eventually everyone winds up in the basement. That was the result of a fight between two women which allowed them to strip each other's clothes off. Again, something that seems surprising for a censor to let by in that era. Maxwell qua Meirschultz almost gets away with it, but just as the police quiet things down, they all hear the cat yowling from behind the brick wall. It is torn open and the body of Meirschultz discovered. It's up the river for Maxwell to the hot seat.

Taking into account the times, and ignoring the gratuitous nudity, the movie isn't that bad. It does not follow any Poe story as such, but pillages elements of several of his stories and stitches them together into a mad scientist plot. Fans of Poe will have fun recognizing the extracts from his stories.

SEEN IN THE LITERATURE

Pratt, B.R., and J. van Heerde (2017) **An arborescent lycopsid stem fragment from the Palliser Formation (Famennian) carbonate platform, southwestern Alberta, Canada, and its paleogeographic and paleoclimatic significance.** CANADIAN JOURNAL OF EARTH SCIENCES 54:141-145

Authors' abstract: "*A partially silicified stem fragment of an arborescent lycopsid, tentatively identified as Leptophloeum rhombicum, is documented from peritidal carbonates in the Palliser Formation (Upper Devonian; Famennian) of southwestern Alberta. An unlikely inhabitant of these tidal flats, the log must have rafted in from a relatively nearby land area. The most probable candidate sources are either the Kootenay island arc to the paleo-northwest or hypothetical Montania to the southwest. The specimen is evidence that either or both these equatorial areas had a humid paleoclimate and vegetated coastal marshes and swamps.*"

Speirs: A major problem of palaeobiology is that only a few types of habitats are conducive to preserving fossils, such as swamps and ocean floors. There was a lot going on in highlands and deserts that we will never know about because fossils were not preserved in such environments. Occasionally, as in the case reported by this paper, a fossil can be preserved in an adjacent area. Lycopsids were giant tree-sized horsetail ferns found in Devonian era deposits about 300 to 400 megayears old. A lycopsid log washed into the sea from adjacent lands, was preserved as a fossil, and thus gives a hint of what was growing in that terrain.

Zhang, G., et al (2017) **Redox chemistry changes in the Panthalassic Ocean linked to the end-Permian mass extinction and delayed Early Triassic biotic recovery.** PROCEEDINGS OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES 114:1806-1810

Authors' abstract: "*The end-Permian mass extinction represents the most severe biotic crisis for the last 540 million years, and the marine ecosystem recovery from this extinction was protracted, spanning the entirety of the Early Triassic and possibly longer. Numerous studies from the low-latitude Paleotethys and high-latitude Boreal oceans have examined the possible link between ocean chemistry changes and the end-Permian mass extinction.*"

“However, redox chemistry changes in the Panthalassic Ocean, comprising about 85 to 90% of the global ocean area, remain under debate. Here, we report multiple S-isotopic data of pyrite from Upper Permian-Lower Triassic deep-sea sediments of the Panthalassic Ocean, now present in outcrops of western Canada and Japan. We find a sulfur isotope signal of negative change in ^{33}S with either positive $\delta^{34}\text{S}$ or negative $\delta^{34}\text{S}$ that implies mixing of sulfide sulfur with different $\delta^{34}\text{S}$ before, during, and after the end-Permian mass extinction.”

“The precise coincidence of the negative ^{33}S anomaly with the extinction horizon in western Canada suggests that shoaling of H_2S -rich waters may have driven the end-Permian mass extinction. Our data also imply episodic euxinia and oscillations between sulfidic and oxic conditions during the earliest Triassic, providing evidence of a causal link between incursion of sulfidic waters and the delayed recovery of the marine ecosystem.”

“This study illustrates how environmental changes could have had a devastating effect on Earth’s early biosphere, and may have present-day relevance because global warming and eutrophication are causing development of sulfidic zones on modern continental shelves, threatening indigenous marine life.”

Speirs: The Permian mass extinction 250 megayears ago was the greatest of all mass extinctions suffered by Earth. 97% of all species disappeared. The dinosaur extinction at the end of the Cretaceous 65 megayears ago was just a minor blip. This paper suggests that whatever the cause may have been (probably massive lava floods overheating the planet), the continental shelves of the ocean, where almost all marine life is, were saturated with poisonous hydrogen sulfide, and the oxygen in the water boiled out.

Fondevilla, V., et al (2017) **Skin impressions of the last European dinosaurs.** GEOLOGICAL MAGAZINE 154:393-398

Authors’ abstract: “Southwestern Europe is one of the best regions for characterizing the dinosaur assemblages that prevailed just before the end-Cretaceous extinction. Aiming to better document this scenario, we provide the first evidence of dinosaur skin impressions in the red-beds of the Tremp Formation (southern Pyrenees). The impressions are assigned to sauropods (probably titanosaurians) on the basis of their scale morphology, arrangement and size. They represent a valuable tool for analysing the last occurrences of the sauropod clade before the Cretaceous-Palaeogene extinction, as they fall

within chron C29r (latest Maastrichtian), thus representing some of the last in situ remains of this clade worldwide.”

Watling, J., et al (2017) **Impact of pre-Columbian geoglyph builders on Amazonian forests.** PROCEEDINGS OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES USA 114:1868-1873

Authors’ abstract: “Amazonian rainforests once thought to be pristine wildernesses are increasingly known to have been inhabited by large populations before European contact. How and to what extent these societies impacted their landscape through deforestation and forest management is still controversial, particularly in the vast interfluvial uplands that have been little studied. In Brazil, the groundbreaking discovery of hundreds of geometric earthworks by modern deforestation would seem to imply that this region was also deforested to a large extent in the past, challenging the apparent vulnerability of Amazonian forests to human land use. We reconstructed environmental evidence from the geoglyph region and found that earthworks were built within man-made forests that had been previously managed for millennia. In contrast, long-term, regional-scale deforestation is strictly a modern phenomenon.”

“Over 450 pre-Columbian (pre-AD 1492) geometric ditched enclosures (geoglyphs) occupy about 13,000 km² of Acre state, Brazil, representing a key discovery of Amazonian archaeology. These huge earthworks were concealed for centuries under terra firme (upland interfluvial) rainforest, directly challenging the “pristine” status of this ecosystem and its perceived vulnerability to human impacts. We reconstruct the environmental context of geoglyph construction and the nature, extent, and legacy of associated human impacts. We show that bamboo forest dominated the region for about 6,000 years and that only small, temporary clearings were made to build the geoglyphs; however, construction occurred within anthropogenic forest that had been actively managed for millennia. In the absence of widespread deforestation, exploitation of forest products shaped a largely forested landscape that survived intact until the late 20th century.”

Speirs: There is a myth that the Americas were covered with wilderness and that the indigenous peoples lived in harmony with nature before the arrival of the Europeans. It wasn’t true in North America and now we see it wasn’t true in South America.

WHEN WORDS COLLIDE 2017

Calgary's annual readercon When Words Collide will be held this year on the weekend of August 11 to 13, at the Delta Calgary South Hotel on Southland Drive SE and Fairmount Drive. Details from www.whenwordscollide.org

WWC has a membership cap of 750 and usually sells out by June. The hotel is fully booked by then as well. As of middle March, the convention was 63% sold, and only 38 banquet tickets were left.

I've been to all of the WWCs since the first one in 2011 and enjoyed all of them. The reports are in OPUNTIA's #71, 253, 266, 282, 318, and 350. The conventions are strictly literary stuff, with panels by authors, editors, publishers, and screenwriters. The dealer bourse is books only, with lots of small-press publishers hawking their wares. The Website has podcasts of some of the panels from previous years, free to download.

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. 2017 will be the 24th 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. 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.

At 21h00, face to the east and salute those who have already celebrated. 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 zine, have a party, or do a mail art project for the WWP. Let me know how you celebrated the day.

SIGNS, SIGNS, EVERYWHERE A SIGN

photo by Dale Speirs

Seen in the men's room at Westbrook Mall in southwest Calgary.

