

OPUNTIA

380

Middle June 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.

WHAT, NO MOUNTAIN PHOTOS?

photos by Dale Speirs

For a change of pace, I submit for your consideration this photograph of a family of mallard ducks swimming in the Bow River at 12 Street SE in central Calgary.

The bridge? Oh yes, on May 29 at 08h00, the old Zoo bridge, built 1908, was removed. On the other side you can see part of the new bridge, still under construction. The old bridge has been closed for some time, beyond salvage after 108 years of road salt and overloaded trucks.

It wasn't even safe to be converted into a pedestrian bridge, so it had to go. Nor could it be dismantled over the river because of its countless coats of lead-based paint, so the scrapping will be done on shore.



There were hundreds of spectators on the shoreline, more than it would seem from this photo because the scrub willows hid the view. At bottom: A view of the new bridge still being born at left, and the old one about to die.



And so the lift begins.



The crane swung the bridge 270° counterclockwise to its final resting place. The reason it didn't do a shorter turn in the opposite direction was because the flying bridge would have then passed over the new bridge. It wouldn't do to drop it on the new construction, whereas the turn the other way was over a parking lot. The operation took 45 minutes, very slow but safety first.



Afterwards, I took this photo from upstream, showing the new bridge under construction.



The street festival season begins in Calgary with the Lilac Festival on the first Sunday in June, when lilacs are in full bloom. It is held in the Mission District on 4 Street SW, the main drag through the neighbourhood. It is also the biggest street festival in the city, extending more than twenty blocks from 12 Avenue to Elbow Drive, with about 100,000 attending through the day.



Wha's lak us? Nothing wrong with a punk piper. No sillier than wearing a bearskin hat.





At left: The Calgary Stampede is the world's largest rodeo, with 1.2 million paid admissions last year. The rodeo runs ten days starting the Friday after Canada Day, but people start warming up for it by middle June. The official Stampede mascot is Harry the Horse. Here he is drumming up business at the festival.

Below: I was very impressed by this choral group. These were employees of Car2Go; I can't think of any other employer in the city who could put together a group like this. Obviously very high esprit de corp in the company. Calgary has one of the biggest Car2Go franchises in North America.



Calgary businesses have to do displays for both Stampede and Canada 150 this year at the same time. A computer company on 8 Street SW in the Beltline district did it on adjacent windows as shown below.



This display was downtown in the TD Square atrium.



Meanwhile, elsewhere around Cowtown, was this scene on the #7 bus which I regularly take downtown. My neighbourhood is upper middle class and it passes through the real rich folk neighbourhoods en route to the core. I think of it as the Nanny Express because there are so many Filipino nannies taking their

charges downtown to see Mummy and Daddy at the office. Usually only a couple get on the bus when I'm taking it, but every so often there is a massive jam of strollers. The look on this nanny's face was priceless. This is why God gave us smartphone cameras.



BOTANICAL FICTION: PART 8

by Dale Speirs

[Parts 1 to 7 appeared in OPUNTIA's #316, 317, 320, 323, 325, 334, and 369.]

The Flowers That Be.

“The Flowers That Smelled Of Murder”, written by Herbert Little Jr and David Victor, is a 1948 episode of LET GEORGE DO IT, an old-time radio (OTR) series about a private detective named George Valentine. (This and other OTR shows are available as free mp3s from www.archive.org.) It begins with him receiving a letter from Louise Doraine, a student at Western State University, who is concerned that her botany professor is being targeted for death.

On arrival at WSU, Valentine gets a bit of a shock when he finds that Doraine is a middle-aged woman. She and her husband are both attending on the GI Bill, she having been a WAC during the war and he was something in the OSS. Their son is a sophomore and is greatly embarrassed at having his parents on campus as freshmen. One of the attractions of going to university, after all, is that of independence from one’s parents.

To make matters worse, the son is angry about the gossip over his mother and the professor, who are very good friends indeed. The professor has announced he is going to name a flower he bred after Louise. Her husband seems to be incredibly naive, and the professor’s wife is inflamed with jealousy. Academic rivals are aiming for the professor’s grants and prize money.

The flower is a new variety of orchid whose blooms glow in the dark. I’m not sure how much of a market there would be for such a thing, but the professor is in line for a \$50,000 prize in horticulture for that accomplishment. The phosphorescent pigments taint one’s fingers if the blooms are handled, an important plot device that is signaled to the listeners with semaphores, sirens, foghorns, flashing lights, and billboards.

Valentine is called in to investigate the accidents befalling the professor, which seem more like unsuccessful murder attempts. Surprisingly, it is the professor’s wife who is the first victim, stabbed in the back in the greenhouse. She was wearing her husband’s overcoat against the cold. Was she the intended victim or did the killer become confused in the dark?

The case breaks open when the killer tries to kill off the glowing orchids by smashing the greenhouse glass and freezing them. Valentine calls in all the possible suspects into a dark room. It is easy to identify the culprit, as he has glowing fingers from trying to kill the orchids.

THE OUTER LIMITS was a 1960s SF anthology television series that presented a few good scripts but was hampered by a budget designed for mundane shows. As a result, the SFX in the episodes were seldom above the level of 1950s B-movies.

“Specimen: Unknown” was a 1964 episode written by Stephen Lord about vacuum flowers growing on the hull of a space station. The “spores”, as they were referred to, were brought inside for inspection in complete disregard for even a basic biocontainment procedure. The so-called spores were actually a mushroom thallus, which then grew out a flower that spit seeds and toxic gas.

There is no pretense at any time among the astronauts to observe quarantine. As a result, they bring back the deadly mushrooms qua flowers to Earth. Their shuttle crashes into a wooded area and spills the seeds of the space plants about.

The plants have a reproductive cycle of about one minute, which begs the question of how they could grow so fast and gain sufficient nutrients. Be that as it may, within half of Act 4, they have carpeted the woods and are spewing out seeds and poisonous gas. The word ‘exponential’ doesn’t even come close to describing how fast the plants reproduce.

The recovery team races to the shuttle crash. It consists of two officers, two paramedics, one private to do the actual work, and an astronaut’s wife to do the emoting. The sunny skies light up the scene until all seems lost, at which point a thunderstorm comes out of nowhere and soaks everyone and everything. It turns out that liquid water is deleterious to the alien flowers, which shrivel up and die in the rain.

Humanity is saved. Hopefully there will be an inquiry to make certain that in the future astronauts will read the instruction manual on what to do in case of a biological hazard. This episode has all the cliches, inconsistencies, and poor SFX of a stereotypical 1950s movie. Best viewed while under the influence of alcohol. I’m a teetotaler so I had to watch it sober.

Why We Have Plant Quarantine Laws At The Border.

“The Moon Weed” by Harl Vincent (1931 August, ASTOUNDING) is an example of bad pulp fiction that shouldn’t have made it to the 1930s, much less survive our viewpoint in the new millennium. The Moon has always been a lifeless planetoid with no atmosphere; that much was known even back then. It doesn’t stop the hero from using his superscience device, a matter transmitter that hooks up to a telescope, from bringing back diamonds, humanoid artifacts, and, most importantly for the plot, seeds from the Moon.

The result is inevitable. *“The entire clearing seemed to be alive with wriggling things, long rubbery tentacles that crawled along the ground, reaching curling ends high in the air and had even started climbing the trees at the edge of the clearing. Blood red they were, and partially transparent in the light of the setting sun; growing things, attached by their thick ends to swelling mounds of red that seemed anchored to the ground.”*

“Translucent stalks rose from the mounds and sprouted huge buds that burst and blossomed into flaming flowers a foot in diameter, then withered and went to seed in a moment of time. But always the weaving tendrils shot forth with lightning speed, reaching and feeling their uncanny way along the ground and over tree stumps into the woods. One of them emerged from a hollow stump with its slender end coiled around the tiny body of a chattering gray squirrel.”

Weeds they certainly are. The spread is exponential, measured in minutes or hours. The government mobilizes its forces the next day (which tells you this is a fantasy story) but what is to be done? Bombers make things worse, as the explosions scatter the plant tendrils and seeds further. Water doesn’t stop them, and they spread across the rivers. Soon entire counties are covered.

“At some points fire had been used with considerable success as a barrier, hundreds of acres of forest lands being destroyed in the endeavor to stem the crimson tide. But, after the ashes were cool, germination would recur, and the weed would continue on its triumphant way. Acid sprays and poison-gas of various kinds had been tried without appreciable effect.”

“The casualty estimates already ran into the tens of thousands; rumor had it that nearly one hundred thousand had lost their lives in the city of Newark alone. There was no way in which the figures could be checked while everything was in a state of confusion.”

Van, the scientist who caused all the trouble and is now searching for a remedy, has come up with an answer, another superscience machine that generates invisible light in the ultra-indigo range. Van explains:

“Because there is no atmosphere surrounding the moon, and the sun’s rays are not filtered before they reach its surface as they are here. The invisible rays, ultra-violet and such, are present in full proportion. And the moon weed can not flourish when subjected to light of the higher frequencies. It died out when the moon lost its atmosphere, and only revived on being brought to Earth, probably a million times more prolific in our dense and damp atmosphere and rich soil. The thing’s a cinch to dope out.” “Yeah!” Bart commented drily. Van was now talking and he could have bitten off his tongue for interrupting him.

This machine of Van’s was a generator of invisible light in the ultra-indigo range, Van explained. You couldn’t see its powerful beam, but they had proved in the laboratory that it was certain doom to the moon weed. They had grown the stuff from seed in steel cages, and played with it until they were all satisfied. Now would come the final test. Ten thousand planes were being equipped with the new generator, which was merely an adaptation of standard directional television transmitters, and tonight these would start out to fight the weed. It was a cinch!

The Moon never had an atmosphere to begin with, but let that pass. I especially enjoyed the part where 10,000 aircraft are equipped with anti-moon weed devices in one day. It reminds me of Orson Welles’ version of THE WAR OF THE WORLDS, when several million people were evacuated from New York City within a half hour as the Martian invaders approached.

It all works out in the end. I have left out a subplot where Van flies to Toronto to catch a bad guy who has been spreading the moon weed, as that was entirely too fantastical. Not the part about the moon weed, but that Van could arrive in Canada as a private citizen and be taken seriously by Toronto police in the quest for the bad guy. The villain meets his end in Cooksville, which will be funnier to my readers in Etobicoke and Mississauga than for American readers.

The moon weed is eradicated, a million or so citizens are buried and their estates settled, and life returns to normal. The probate courts would be plugged up for years, but that is a detail I’ve never seen mentioned in any disaster movie or novel.

Nobody Likes A Smart Tree.

“The Talkative Tree” by H.B. Fyfe (1962 January, WORLDS OF IF) begins with a spaceship being wrecked on an alien planet, fortunately with a breathable atmosphere. As the flight and engineering crews try to repair the ship, others are detailed to scout around and see if there is safe drinking water and edible food.

Steward Peter Kolin is among those sent out to explore. His party wind up in a jungle where the rest are incapacitated because they were foolish enough to eat what appeared to be purple berries. Kolin climbs up a massive 40-metre-high tree to get a better view of the land. He finds himself in conversation with the tree, which has air holes in its bark with which to enunciate words.

As to why a tree can speak English, the answer is that centuries ago another spaceship also crashed on the planet. There was only one organism growing there, covering the entire planet, calling itself The Life. It produced clouds of spores that changed those crew members into whatever they desired. One crewman wanted to be a tree, on the grounds that it would live a long time and have a quiet peaceful life. Over the years, more spaceships crashed and the planet built up quite a biota, all individuals of which were humans altered into birds, ground animals, or different types of plants, whatever fit their personality.

Kolin is not immune to the spores, but he suggests to The Life that it could assure its immortality by keeping all the crew in their present forms, then use them to spread spores to other planets. Slowly at first, then exponentially, The Life will take over the galaxy. And so it begins.

Gardening And Murder Made Easy.

“Find And Replace” by Marjorie Eccles (2017 May/June, ELLERY QUEEN) is formatted as an exchange of emails and letters between Tanya Maddigan and a gardening columnist for a local newspaper. She has been having problems with deer getting into her yard, plus a nosy neighbour making advances at her.

The columnist suggests a thorned barberry hedge along the property line, and from there a correspondence develops. The hedge works against the deer but not the neighbour, so the columnist sends Maddigan seeds of the castor oil plant. The plant has beautiful flowers and foliage but its seeds, which resemble kidney beans, are deadly poison. Maddigan decides to invite her neighbour over for dinner, the main course of which will be chili con carne. The rest will follow.

EXO BIOLOGY

by Dale Speirs

Fun With Saucers.

SHOCKINGLY CLOSE TO THE TRUTH (2002) by James W. Moseley and Karl T. Pflock is almost entirely written in the first-person voice by Moseley. He was famous in UFO circles from the beginnings of the modern era of UFOology, dated from the 1947 sighting by Arnold. He published the longest-running UFO zine for decades, under various titles, mostly as SAUCER NEWS and, near the end, SAUCER SMEAR. He died in 2012 aged 81.

Moseley wanted to believe but had a natural skepticism that he used to expose numerous fakers. In 1950, when 19 years old, he inherited a fortune and dropped out of Princeton University. He spent most of his life in saucer circles, excepting a lengthy period in Peru where he was a grave robber, at that time mostly legal, specializing in pre-Columbian artifacts.

In the early 1950s, he developed an interest in the reports of flying saucers. Since he not only didn’t have to work for a living but could indulge himself spending money like water, he went on a long road trip interviewing UFO nuts. He compiled a list of UFO news reports and the people mentioned in them, got their addresses, and went on a long trip across America to track them down and get their stories firsthand. He also visited many UFO sites.

What he learned on that road trip changed his life. He found that the witnesses were, without exception, mistaken (the planet Venus is the most common UFO), gullible, or fraudulent. No one then or in later decades ever had scientific proof in hand. Moseley began publishing a zine devoted to the subject.

Despite being a skeptic and considered by UFO nuts as their court jester (his words), he was accepted by the community because he at least listened to them. He particularly enjoyed publishing letters between opposing UFO factions angrily denouncing each other, much like anarchist zines spend more time trashing each other instead of their mutual enemies. The UFO community operates like the Communists. It is a mortal sin to waver from the Party line; one must always waver with the Party line.

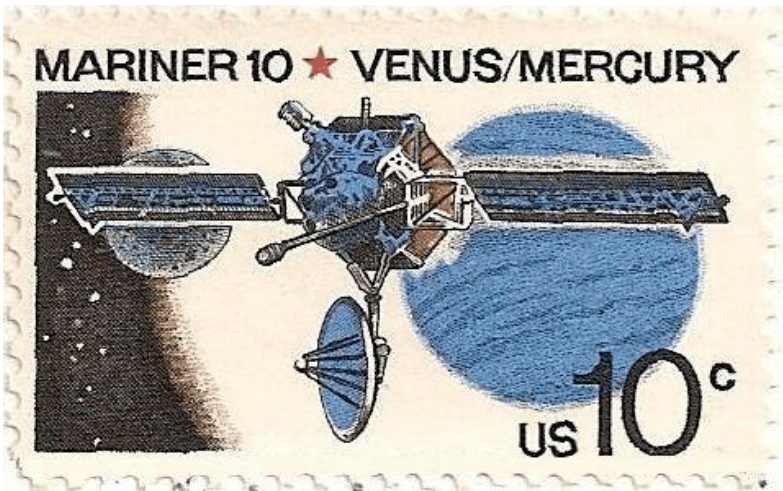
Moseley noticed that, in general, UFO nuts seldom stayed in the field more than a couple of decades, and usually left in less than a decade. They were first

attracted by the main joy of conspiracy theory, that of taking pride in being on the inside and the possessor of powerful knowledge. It made their daily drudgery on the farm or assembly line easier to take. One could also gain prestige by volunteering for the executive or committee positions of a UFO organization. A middle-aged woman might be a lonely housewife at home, but she could gain status as Secretary-Treasurer or Convention Committee chairwoman.

After several years, UFO followers will notice that predictions made by grand poobahs in the field never come true. No matter how many blurry photos with lens flare are taken, no real undisputable proof of UFOs ever surfaces. When they attend UFO conventions and met the current Great Names, they discover their idols were just hucksters selling books or visibly insane, sometimes both.

The UFO field cycled through trends, which reflected the popular psychology of the times. In the 1950s, it was saucer men and the threat of imminent invasion, an obvious consequence of the Cold War. In the 1960s and 1970s it was saucer crashes and cattle mutilations, all obvious cover-ups by the government in the era of Vietnam and Watergate. Abductions became popular, and by the 1990s that was the main growth area in an age of paranoia.

Up until the middle 1960s, there were many fraudsters who claimed they had been contacted by Venusians, or in some cases, were Venusians. The Venus lander space probes killed off that branch of UFOlogy. Roswell was almost unknown, even to UFO nuts, until 1989, when it suddenly received television publicity, which the town fathers cashed in on to milk the tourist trade, there being no other reason for outlanders to visit Roswell.



Like modern SF fandom, each succeeding generation was by and large ignorant of what went on before. Each cycle started *de novo* from some fresh discovery or sensational claim, often contradicting what came before. Moseley notes with a tinge of regret that the modern generation of UFO nuts are gloomier and look at the world more darkly. The original post-war generation looked upon aliens as they who were about to save us from our sins and lead us to a brighter future. Now the aliens are just stealing our DNA and giving rednecks enemas.

Moseley watched all these cycles and the people in the field come and go. He concluded that after fifty years there would never be any real proof, and that the field was a branch of abnormal psychology, not para-science. The book is a good read, humourous, and written by an authority who was there. Well recommended.

Academia.

University researchers shy away from UFO studies in general, having learned that it is not a path to tenure or favourable annual reviews. A few peer-reviewed studies appear from time to time.

Tromly, L. (2017) **Race, citizenship, and the politics of alien abduction; or, why aliens do not abduct Asian Americans.** JOURNAL OF POPULAR CULTURE 50:276-292

Author’s extract: “*Alien abduction is an inherently American experience. The vast majority of people who report abduction by aliens are American, a fact that is somewhat surprising given that, if contemplated practically, nation as a legal, social, or political structure should have no relevance to the business of abduction. What could be of less significance to aliens intent on capturing humans for study or breeding than national borders that can be flown over effortlessly and with a speed that makes detection all but impossible? ... And yet, the topocentrism of alien abduction remains persistent, and although recent criticism has explored its politically overdetermined nature, this counterintuitive primacy of nation to abduction narratives has yet to be accounted for.*”

The above paper discusses one of the puzzling aspects of UFOs. They have a thing for kidnapping rednecks on backwood country roads in continental USA. If they were doing it for scientific purposes, one would think they’d use random sampling across the planet, and grab a few Hindus or Chinese.

I MUST GO DOWN TO THE SEA AGAIN

by Dale Speirs



The oceans have long been populated with monsters by the imagination of mariners, sometimes based on fragmentary glimpses of real creatures. The tales of the kraken are based on rare encounters with giant squids capable of dragging sailing ships under the water.

“Out Of The Dreadful Depths” by C.D. Willard (1930 June, ASTOUNDING) doesn’t really belong in an SF magazine, but it is a rousing story about the search for a kraken and, worse yet, finding it. The hero, Robert Thorpe, is an idle young man who, on hearing stories of abandoned and damaged ships in a region of the South Pacific, decides to sail out and see what there is to see.

He finds a derelict ship, its crew gone but leaving behind evidence of a terrific struggle. More ships meet the same fate. Thorpe knows an Admiral in the U.S. Navy out of Manila, and gets a destroyer for help. The kraken is confirmed as a giant squid when a yacht is attacked:

“A huge rope of slippery, throbbing flesh stretched its twisted length toward the stern. It contracted as he watched into bulging muscular rings and withdrew from the afterdeck. The deadly end of it stopped in mid-air not twenty feet from where he stood. The jaw-like pincers on it held the limp form of an officer in its sucking grip, while above, in a protuberance like a gnarled horn, a great eye glared into Thorpe’s with devilish hatred.”

“The beak opened sharply to drop its unconscious burden upon the deck, and the watching man, petrified with horror, saw within the gaping maw great sucking discs and beyond them a brilliant glow. The whole cavernous pit was aflame with phosphorescent light. Dimly he knew that this light explained the ability of the beastly arms to grope so surely in the dark.”

“The eye narrowed as the gaping, fleshy jaws distended, and Robert Thorpe, in a flash that galvanized him to action, was aware that his fight for life was on. He fired blindly from the hip, and the recoil of the heavy gun almost tore it from his hands. But he knew he had aimed true, and the toothless, seeking jaws whipped in agony back into the sea.”

The destroyer shows up in the nick of time and depth charges the beast. Thorpe and the Admiral decide to keep the whole thing a secret for some strange reason. The story is not literature but it is a good action-adventure story.

“The Sea Terror” by Capt. S.P. Meek (1930 December, ASTOUNDING) follows on with another kraken, this one off the coast of eastern USA. A ship mysteriously sinks while anchored off Staten Island. It was carrying a fortune in gold bars.

Not long after, those gold bars, sans mint marks, are sold by a Communist front to the U.S. Mint to finance its activities. This may puzzle a modern generation, but until 1933, anyone could present gold or silver bars to the Mint and receive back equivalent coins known as specie, minus a service fee called seigniorage. This was known as free coinage, free in the sense that the people had the freedom to own gold and silver bars and bullion coins.

Roosevelt changed all that when he expropriated the gold of American citizens in 1933, although the mints of other countries continued to have free coinage. (And still do; the Royal Canadian Mint will accept gold bars in exchange for Maple Leaf gold coins, minus seigniorage.) Americans could not legally own gold bars again until 1974, although other countries like Canada never had such restrictions.

Nothing can be proved in court about the Communist gold bars, but Secret Service agent Carnes and resident mad scientist Dr Bird are assigned to investigate. The stories of sea serpents and giant monsters are soon corroborated, and it is established that a kraken is on the loose. The problem is finding its lair and who is controlling it, since krakens don’t loot sunken ships for gold bars. There are no prizes for guessing which organization is behind it.

After chasing the kraken up and down the Massachusetts coast, Carnes and Bird, with the assistance of the U.S. Navy and Coast Guard, take out the secret underground (and partly underwater) lair of the Party. The problem remaining is that the kraken is still on the loose.

Dr Bird has invented a bathysphere made of vitrilene, a superscience substance that will not collapse from the immense pressures of the ocean deeps. Unobtainium hadn't been invented yet. Down he and Carnes go to find the kraken. They are also carrying several hundredweights of cyanide solution, strapped to injectors on the outside of the bathysphere. The plan is pure simplicity; find the critter, provoke it into swallowing the bathysphere, and then kill it. The result is foreordained. The kraken is dead, and the Communist front broken up.

The story is not that plausible outside a pulp magazine. As I have mentioned before, it is difficult to believe that anyone could build a giant lair with laboratories, underwater tunnel entrances, and all the other fittings without the local residents noticing.

“The Kraken” was first published in the 1940 June issue of UNKNOWN FANTASY by Frederick Engelhardt, a pseudonym of L. Ron Hubbard, who later decided he could make more money with his own religion. I don't have that issue of the pulp magazine but I do have the mp3 of its adaptation for a 1944 episode of the old-time radio (OTR) series AUTHORS PLAYHOUSE. (This and other OTR shows are available as free mp3s from www.archive.org.)

The story takes place during World War Two when a British submarine in the Mediterranean Sea dives to escape an enemy destroyer. After doing so, the submarine then continues running silent and deep until something causes it to slow for no apparent reason. The submarine surfaces but upon inspection, nothing can be found. It backtracks on the surface until the ship suddenly stops again. As it bobs about, a tentacle suddenly reaches out of the water and snatches a sailor away. The submarine crash dives with the kraken wrapped around it, but can't shake it free.

From that point, they try to wait it out, hoping the kraken will become bored and go away, but instead it pulls the submarine into an underwater cave. After assorted adventures, the submarine is lost and the Captain is the only survivor. He tells the Board of Inquiry that the ship was lost by depth-charging from an Italian destroyer, because he knows they will not believe the truth. He then commits suicide. A routine action-adventure story with a weak ending, but it moves along briskly.

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
Plattsburgh, New York

2017-06-06

OPUNTIA #378: Great shots of the mountains. I wish I could travel to other places to get shots like that but without a car I'm pretty much confined to the Plattsburgh area.

[One reason I do so much photography like that is that I know the day is coming sooner than I think when car travel will be beyond me. Then I can go back and browse through my photos and remember what once was.]

I enjoyed the typewriter article, part 3. I don't know if you mentioned it in the previous parts but there's an episode of the PERRY MASON television series from 1963 in which an interchangeable typewriter ballhead plays a key role, “The Case of the Elusive Element.”.

I have to respectfully disagree with you that the movie THE HEAD THAT WOULDN'T DIE was a good movie. The first time I saw it I was laughing my head off. And I laughed again when Mystery Science Theatre 3000 gave it the snarky treatment: www.youtube.com/watch?v=I71OIRUDCQQ . The acting, script, gory special effects; way over the top. I must admit that the use of a folded-up baloney slice covered with ketchup during the conclusion was clever.

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 your 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.