

OPUNTIA 392

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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.

AROUND COWTOWN: RILEY PARK

photos by Dale Speirs

I have a backlog of photos from the summer of 2017, one batch of which I will unload here, taken July 2. I spent 31 years with the City of Calgary Parks Dept., the first five working my way up the ladder, the next 15 as a District Foreman, and the last decade as Trouble Calls Supervisor before retiring in 2010. When first promoted to District Foreman, my initial assignment was in charge of the Riley Park district. The main park, where my office and depot were located, was named after the man who donated the land back in pioneer days, and is one of the oldest parks in Calgary.



When I was in charge of Riley Park back in the late 1980s, it was surrounded by walk-up apartments and boarding houses. Today it is surrounded by condominium towers and multistory townhouses. The dense population makes the park very heavily used.

I have no idea who is in charge nowadays, having been retired long enough to have lost track. They are doing a good job. For the Canada 150 celebrations, they had these floral displays. At right, note the dates 1867 and 2017.



The depot building (at left in photo below) is mostly unchanged since it was built 75 years ago, save for new electrical wiring, computer connections, and plumbing. Most of the building is hidden by the cottonwoods. The storage sheds are where the maintenance crews keep their equipment.





Far left: Century-old willows.

Left: Snowshoe hares have adapted very well to big city life.

On the northeast corner of Riley Park is a steep slope along 10 Street NW that became the Burns Rock Garden, named after another pioneer. Patrick Burns was originally a cattle rancher and meat packer, and was one of the founders of the Stampede rodeo back in 1912. His livestock brand was VL, hence the flower pattern below.



When I was the foreman in charge of this park, we were just advancing into the computer age in the early 1990s. One aspect was a land mapping system that showed the exact measurements of Parks Dept. properties.

It was then discovered that the odd bit of land the rock garden was located on had never been registered and was simply a blank space on the provincial Land Titles maps. There was a bit of hustle down at City Hall to have the land title recorded and registered in the name of the Corporation of the City of Calgary.



MATTHEW 24:6: PART 3

by Dale Speirs

[Parts 1 to 2 appeared in OPUNTIA's #389 and 391.]

Watch Therefore, For You Know Neither The Day Nor The Hour.

Hollywood doesn't do much of that old-time religion, but there are a number of small independent studios such as Faith Films translating the Book of Revelation into movies. If any text was ever made for SFX, it would be Revelation, with an assist from the Book of Daniel. Some make their appearance in DVD packs of disaster movies, because you can't beat the original Armageddon when it comes to Doomsday.

COUNTDOWN ARMAGEDDON (2009), written by David Michael Latt, is from a bargain bin DVD pack. It goes with the Biblical version of the End Times, although only as far as the initial phase. It is about a Los Angeles television newshen whose young daughter mysteriously vanishes, possibly because of the Rapture. The mother goes on a search that takes her to Israel, but that plot element comes across as implausible. It does, however, get her to the correct location for the final days.

The movie stumbles coming out of the gate by having a medium earthquake shake Los Angeles as a harbinger. Like hurricanes roaring into New Orleans, that is hardly ominous, merely situation normal. The SFX get going when giant tornados descend on Los Angeles, which seem like better forebodings.

The movie shifts to Israel and stays there. It was filmed on location; no California hills substituting for the desert. The heroine makes contact with some sort of doomsday underground movement. As she chats with one of their agents on a balcony overlooking the Dome of the Rock, it blows up. Israel goes to a war footing, she runs to and fro, is chased by the police, and meets up with other underground organizations.

The Arabs attack Jerusalem. Fighter planes drop sticks of bombs on the Jewish quarter. The aerial view, modified by SFX of burning buildings and fighter planes zipping past, impressed me. I had no idea that Jerusalem was that small in geographical size, compared with sprawling cities like Calgary.

And I saw, and beheld a white horse, and he that sat on him had a bow.

The movie ends with the journalist reunited with her daughter, presumably in the next life. She beholds a white horse, and it looks as if the old order of things has passed away. At that point the movie ends. Rather disappointing, I thought. I was waiting for more SFX of the End Times, but the producers must have run out of money.

LEFT BEHIND was a series of novels by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins adapted for two different series of movies, all under the same names, which certainly causes confusion. The DVD that I have is the original 2001 version with a bunch of no-name actors. LaHaye wasn't satisfied with the original series and successfully sued to get the movie rights back. A new series of movies was mooted, the first one of which was a 2014 version starring Nicholas Cage and not any better.

The sun became black as sackcloth of hair, and the moon became as blood.

The 2001 version begins in Jerusalem where an ace reporter is interviewing a scientist about a new miracle food. Not really News At Six stuff, but things become more exciting when the Arabs attack the city in the middle of the interview. Their planes are swept from the air as if by magic, and the Sun goes dark for a brief time.

Thou hatest the deeds of the Nicolaitanes.

Nicholas Carpathia, with a strong Slavic accent to match his name, is the new Secretary-General of the United Nations. He is secretly the Anti-Christ, and deftly maneuvers people to accept his evil ways in the guise of doing good. The actor playing him was the only good one in the movie. Carpathia is the best character in the film.

Jewish archaeologists have proven that the site of the Temple was not the Dome of the Rock as commonly believed but a nearby location. This means the Jews can rebuild the Temple without bothering anyone, thereby fulfilling one of the omens of the End Times.

There were sealed 144,000 of all the tribes of the children of Israel.

Then comes the Rapture, taking thousands of Christians instantly and leaving the rest to worry about the Tribulation. Some of the chosen ones were pilots or truck drivers, causing chaos in the ensuing crashes. Those who thought they

were good Christians but were left behind are understandably upset. They take up much of the movie, whining “Why me, Lord?” You can do a lot of fast-forwarding anytime a church scene appears or someone slumps down and puts their hands together in prayer.

Ten kings, which have received no kingdom as yet.

Carpathia sets up his council of ten people who will rule the world for seven years of peace before the end begins. At that point, the movie ends, to be followed by sequels which fill out the rest of the story. I never bought them because they didn’t show up in the bargain bins. I haven’t felt any need to complete the set.

The Fog Comes On Little Cat Feet.

I’ve been downloading books from www.gutenberg.org, among which is THE PURPLE CLOUD by M.P. Shiel. It was published in 1901 just as the Victorian era ended, but its wordy style and long trains of thought in a single sentence are those of the dear departed Queen’s world.

The story has a strange structure, that of notebooks recording a story of an elderly woman who was channeling the future. That future was about Adam Jeffson, who went off in a race to reach the North Pole. As he and his companions struggled across the ice, their ship frozen in, a meteorite passed over them and crashed somewhere in the far distance. Later, they noticed a purple haze glowing in the far distance over the horizon.

Events transpired that Jeffson was the only one who came back alive from the trek to the North Pole. To his growing unease, he finds that everyone on the ship is dead by some unknown cause that appeared to have struck them down suddenly. Jeffson slowly travels south, seeking to return to civilization. He finds increasing numbers of polar bears and birds lying dead on the ice.

The cause was the purple cloud, slowly moving south across the planet and killing every living animal it envelopes. It spreads wider and wider, and there is no escape. Jeffson manages to get back to Britain, but it is an empty island. The world appears dead. The purple cloud is still circling the planet, and eternal vigilance is the price of survival. He has to keep moving, and circumnavigates the planet. Eventually he meets a woman in his travels. They are to restart civilization. Adam and Eve. On that note the book ends.

The novel is not a bad read as long as one adapts to the style of writing of those days. The long road is always taken, as a single paragraph fills a page, and a single sentence fills a paragraph. The author explores all the side roads before continuing the narrative.

“The Night The Fog Came” is a 1953 episode of the old-time radio series HALL OF FANTASY, written by Richard Thorn. (This and hundreds of other OTR shows are available as free mp3s at www.archive.org) It begins in the laboratory, where two scientists discuss a sample of water that was sent from the backwoods on the western coast of Lake Superior. The sample was the condensate of a strange fog that killed every animal it contacted. In the lab, a drop of the water mixed with natural water killed off all the microbes and left a single strange organism.

The scientists wonder how it was that the fog suddenly came from nowhere and why it had never been reported before. Not having any answers, they head out into the field to collect more samples. The fog is still there, slowly spreading. It is still deep in the forest on a remote shoreline, but will inevitably reach civilization.

The death toll begins. Humans die in the fog. Their bodies and clothing are dry but their lungs are filled with water. They drowned standing in the middle of the forest on dry land. It’s the end of the world as we know it. On that spooky note, the story ends.

Things To Come: Miscellaneous Doomsdays.

A IS FOR APOCALYPSE (2014), edited by Rhonda Parrish, is an anthology of Doomsday stories. The problem was too many authors; 26 for a trade paperback. As a result, the majority of stories are short-shorts. They are reasonably good as far as the format allows them to be, but have to rely on shock or twist endings that do not encourage re-readings. Had some of them been thinned out, the remaining stories could have been developed better.

Not to be read in one sitting, as all those short-shorts are tiring if taken at once. Having written that, the anthology is a fair read. There is no point in reviewing individual stories because the reviews would be the same length as the stories. A wide variety of Armageddons are covered. I bought my copy at the 2017 When Words Collide readercon in Calgary, but I presume it is available online.

IF THE WIND COULD BLOW MY TROUBLES AWAY: PART 4

by Dale Speirs

[Parts 1 to 3 appeared in OPUNTIA's #326, 355, and 382.]

Twisting The Night Away.

TWISTER is a 1996 movie written by Michael Crichton and Anne-Marie Martin. It opens with a flashback scene of a young girl who sees a tornado kill her father. As a result, Jo Harding spends her life as a meteorologist obsessed with tornados.

The main plot is about the troubles that Harding and her gang of happy-go-lucky students have in deploying a new gizmo that will analyze tornados as they have never been analyzed before. They chase about the landscape trying to get it into position, followed closely by her estranged husband Bill, who wants her to sign the final divorce papers.

The SFX carry the movie quite well. They work up through a variety of tornados, crashes, flying cattle, sparking power lines, and other alarums. First there is a single F1 tornado that runs overtop the Hardings while they hide under a wooden bridge. That was just the prelude, as the next one is an F3.

Following that, the Hardings manage to get their truck caught between two F1s traveling side by side, and are spun around like a centrifuge. This scene includes the famous flying cow, mooing pathetically as it is swept through the air. *“There’s another cow!” “No, that’s the same one.”*

No rest for the wicked. The Harding team are relaxing at a drive-in late at night when an F4 smashes through and then goes after the town. Then the final tornado, an F5 that hurls a fully-loaded tanker truck at them, followed a short time later by a two-story house, which they smash through in their pickup truck. From there, the bad guys are taken out by the F5 when they get too close.

Also dashing about is a rival team of storm chasers stealing ideas, credit, and just about anything else they can get their hands on. The Harding team is frustrated because they can’t get their gizmo properly deployed in front of a tornado. The Harding plan finally works. The gizmo is successfully deployed, and the tornado is measured. Then it swerves overtop the Hardings, and they find themselves inside the tornado, and survive. All told, a good movie.

STORM CELL is a 2007 movie that opens with a flashback scene of a young girl who sees a tornado kill both her parents. As a result, April Saunders spends her life as a meteorologist obsessed with tornados. So as you can see, screenwriter Graham Ludlow fits in with Hollywood’s preference to make movies that are different than any previous work. It was different because Saunders lost both her parents, not just her father as did Harding.

The usual subplots are set up. Saunders is a single mother. She lives for her work as a meteorology professor. Everyone calls her the Tornado Lady. The Oklahoma licence plate on her car reads H2O 123. Her bratty teenage daughter gets in and out of trouble, distracts her mother from her professional work, and behaves so badly that the viewer actually begins to sympathize with Saunders, an otherwise unlikeable woman.

The plot shifts from Oklahoma to Washington State, where her brother, a police officer, lives. He identifies himself to other people as being from the Sheriff’s Dept. and works out of a building so identified, yet wears a state trooper uniform with shoulder patches clearly marked Washington State Police. His cruiser has only a generic Police marking, with no unit identification.

Saunders is the woman-of-the-hour scientist who predicts The Big One, a tornado, not an earthquake, that will lay waste, etcetera. None believe her, probably because she blames every tornado and hailstorm on global warming. That might actually make sense though, because the movie was filmed on location in the Pacific Northwest, not known for tornados.

The SFX would have been acceptable for a 1990s movie but not something produced a decade later. Satellite photos are shown which purport to be Doppler radar images of tornados. Instead of the classic J-hook radar returns, however, the images are of open-centre low-pressure systems, probably South Pacific cyclones from the looks of them.**

One of the screens is a phony satellite image which is obviously an overcast cloud photo swirled in Photoshop. The F5 tornado SFX is reused as a waterspout coming in over Seattle harbour, dark brown and spraying debris.

** I’m not a professional meteorologist, but I took several semesters of meteorology courses when I was in university.

There are several idiot plots. The standard response of the citizenry is to stare in awe at an F5 tornado bearing down on them. Only when the first pieces of debris whistle past their heads do they run for shelter. The devil and the tornado then take the hindmost.

The Big One finally shows up. It is the same size as the previous tornados, which disappoints those expecting something bigger. Much screaming, yelling, and dashing about by the leading characters. The storm blows over and the clouds part. Sunshine beams down on the happy survivors (tough luck for the extras) and the end credits kick in.

Not a believable movie. Stupid people behaving stupidly, and ridiculous subplots. Normally one expects the SFX to save movies like this, but the problem was that the biggest SFX was used first, instead of building up to a climax. When The Big One finally appears, we've already seen it several times.

A Great And Strong Wind Rent The Mountains.

“A Wind Is Rising” is a 1957 episode of the old-time radio series X MINUS ONE, based on a story by Robert Sheckley. (This and hundreds of other OTR shows are available as free mp3s at www.archive.org) The story takes place on the planet Karella, whose inhabitants are large spidery creatures, and talk in stereotyped flat voices like Injuns, heap big palaver. The Karellans are despised by humans and treated like serfs. What they think of humans is unknown, for the humans don't care.

The planet is notorious for its strong winds, averaging 200 km/hr. Human vehicles are heavily armoured tanks that can take the battering of wind-blown boulders. The headquarters of the humans is supplied with water from a distant source. Something is wrong up there, and the two men stationed there have to go out and fix the problem. That done, they get back into their tank but the engine won't start.

The wind is rising, and even by Karellan standards it will be a bad blow. The tank is equipped with sails and moves out. The wind begins bombarding the tank with boulders. After trouble and strife, the two men barely make it back to base.

Once back home, one of them takes it out on their Karellan servant, who is blamed for not giving them an accurate weather forecast and possibly

sabotaging the tank engine. The servant explains that the unusual wind is just the start of the stormy season, and the Karellans are going to ground in caverns. The humans are in shock after learning that the wind has only just begun. Their Karellan servant smirks and suggests that perhaps humans aren't suited for Karella and should abandon their colony.

RICH GIFTS WAX POOR WHEN GIVERS PROVE UNKIND

by Dale Speirs

Life-like wax figures date back to early medieval times when they were used for funeral displays or as tourist attractions to graves. By the 1700s, waxwork museums were found here and there in Europe, and reached their height in the late 1900s. Kids these days aren't so impressed with them, even the Chamber of Horrors that every waxworks museum has, but some still survive. Madame Tussauds is the most famous, but there have been many others.

Waxworks museums are an obvious favourite of mystery and horror writers, and of movie producers. HOUSE OF WAX was a 1953 movie filmed in 3-D that made Vincent Price famous as a master of horror. It is considered to be the classic of such movies, often imitated but never surpassed. Before and after that one though, there were many radio and movie productions set in wax museums.

Movies.

MIDNIGHT MANHUNT (1945) is a movie from the Mill Creek DVD pack of 50 Mystery Classics, set in the era when every large city had a half-dozen newspapers. It has an original screenplay by David Lang. New York City reporters are chasing after a story, led by spunky newshen Sue Gallagher. She plays the tough dame and has to, given the chauvinism surrounding her. The nickname her colleagues gave her, Jill Typewriter, is the least of her problems.

Gallagher lives above a waxworks museum specializing in gangster dioramas. A real gangster is shot in his apartment across the alley and manages to make his way over before inconveniently dying on the museum doorstep. Gallagher calls her newspaper and tells them to send over a photographer. Her ex-boyfriend, a reporter on a rival newspaper, shows up while she is making the call. He hides the body in a diorama in plain sight, like the purloined letter, until he can get his scoop and beat her into print.

Next up are the museum owner and his assistant, who are horrified to find the body in their display. They carry it out the back way and dump it into a boxcar down at the railroad yards. From there, the story is one of police, gangsters, and reporters all chasing after the corpse, who gets around more as a dead man than when he was alive. The museum becomes busier at midnight than it was during the day. It is all sorted out in the end. The convoluted plot is satisfactorily explained and the loose threads tied off. A good comedy.

Radio.

“Murders In Wax” is a 1938 episode of the old-time radio series THE SHADOW, no writer credited. It opens in a circus waxworks museum where the prize tableaux is a depiction of the recent arrest of gangster George Keegan, showing him being taken into custody by the Mayor, the District Attorney, and the Police Commissioner. Also shown is Keegan’s gun moll (so referred to by the circus barker). Keegan was sent up the river to the state prison for good.

Pause for digression. On many radio and television shows, investigations and arrests are carried out by police commissioners and public prosecutors. This is nonsense. Both are high-level bureaucrats who have no business out in the field doing something that should be done by uniforms and plainclothes operators. A city mayor running about on police raids is even sillier.

As the crowd gawks at the wax tableaux, the figure of the gun moll topples over. Not a wax figure, but the actual woman. Keegan has sworn revenge on those who betrayed him or arrested him. The District Attorney is the next to show up in the tableaux. The Shadow knows who did it, but if Keegan is in the penitentiary, then how did he kill the two victims and move their bodies into the wax museum?

Eventually the Shadow discovers that the prison warden is allowing Keegan to slip away at night for revenge, in exchange for which the deaths will open up political offices for the warden to stand as a candidate. Keegan goes after the Mayor next, but after shooting him in his office, finds that it was the wax dummy from the tableaux. From there, events unfold and both Keegan and the warden get their just desserts.

“Murder In Wax” (singular) is a 1951 episode of the old-time radio series BARRY CRAIG, CONFIDENTIAL INVESTIGATOR. As this episode opens, Craig is accompanied by Mona Gale, a journalist who is doing a profile on him.

Hardly a confidential investigator, but he wants the publicity to garner a better class of client.

A preliminary investigation into a murder suddenly takes a right-angle turn when Craig receives a circular from a waxworks museum advertising a new exhibit showing the brutal murder of Vincent Loren.** That is the murder Craig is investigating, which only happened the day before. The circular had to have been mailed before the murder occurred.

Craig visits the museum and finds the exhibit is accurate. Just then, a thug knocks him unconscious and torches one of the wax figures. The one that shows the thug as the murderer. The plot complicates. The museum has just been sold. Craig visits the sculptor Hernando Scala, who proclaims his innocence and lack of psychic ability to produce wax figures of someone just murdered.

A half dozen supporting characters who had been mentioned in passing suddenly come to the fore in a tangled web of assumed identities, blackmail, revenge, and grand theft. The man who bought the waxworks museum was being blackmailed by the previous owner. She had him buy it so she could get free of the money-losing proposition and enjoy the loot her dead husband had stolen.

In the final explanation, Craig basically goes through the telephone book naming names and explaining who did what to whom. It does fit together but a flow chart is needed to keep everything straight. He does have one failure though; Gale is not interested in him despite his overtures.

“The Murder In Wax” is a 1946 episode of the radio series THE NEW ADVENTURES OF SHERLOCK HOLMES. The end credits announce the writers as Denis Green and Anthony Boucher, and specifically state that the story was suggested by an incident in the canon story “The Adventure Of The Second Stain”. I was prompted to go back and re-read that story but couldn’t find the connection. The plot and characters are completely different.

Be that as it may, the radio episode is about the Hampstead Heath Killer, a serial murderer who has slashed the throats of fifteen young women. During the last murder, he lost his knife.

** The name Vincent seems extraordinarily frequent in the fictional universe of waxworks museums.

The police turn it over to Holmes for analysis. It is a rare collectible knife, more than a century old. Studying it under a microscope, Holmes finds tiny bits of coloured wax in the knife serrations.

Holmes and Watson tour the waxworks museums of London, which gave them a chance to see some of the culprits from their previous cases who had been hanged and whose waxen imitations were now on exhibit. At one museum, Holmes takes up an offer by the proprietor to spend the night in the Chamber of Horrors with the lights off and only moonlight through the windows.

As the listener soon suspects, if not immediately when the offer was made, the murderer was hiding in the museum as a waxworks figure. He tries to kill Holmes but is captured. In the struggle, the museum is set alight and burns down. During the epilogue, Watson explains the loose ends but not very well.

“The Waxwork” is a 1956 episode of the radio series SUSPENSE, based on a story by A.M. Burrage. A newspaper reporter takes a dare to spend the night alone in a waxworks museum amidst a display of murderers. William Conrad read all the parts in different voices and narrated. It was intended as a tour de force of his acting abilities, but it was a stunt which detracted from the story. The script writer who adapted the story, Mel Dinelli, was sloppy in his adaptation. The phrase “The manager smiled.” was repeated so often that it quickly became noticeable. One could use it for a drinking game.

The manager of the museum takes the reporter on a tour of the murderers’ room, enumerating one by one all the waxwork characters, all of them real. At the final one, he mentions that this particular murderer, a fictional mad doctor, was never caught. He seems to have disappeared, and several murders since have been blamed on him. The listener is at once on the alert for an obvious plot.

The manager departs, leaving the reporter alone in the gloom with his thoughts, which are detailed in the narration. He imagines the waxwork figures are slowly moving. The reporter finally sees the mad doctor effigy move. It is indeed the murderer, who has found a perfect place to hide from the police. He explains at length to the reporter that he is a collector of souls, and then takes out a razor blade.

The next morning, the reporter is found dead, sitting in a chair in a tableaux. The mad doctor watches from across the aisle, if a waxwork figure can be said to watch. The reporter doesn’t have a scratch on his body.

“The Murder Museum” is a 1974 episode of CBS RADIO MYSTERY THEATER, written by Henry Slesar. (Available as a free mp3 from www.cbsrmt.com) It is set in a waxworks museum that specializes in reenacting murder scenes. A young woman wants to see a particular exhibit, the John Raymond case, because she knew his son Vincent back in San Francisco.

The proprietor tells her the exhibit is closed for repairs, but takes her to a coffee shop where she unburdens herself about the past. It is a long story about Vincent. His mother never loved him, he failed as an artist, he was too proud to accept money from his girlfriend, and, above all, as a young boy saw his father John murder his mother. The girlfriend had a tempestuous relationship with Vincent. It seemed to get better, until the museum unveiled its latest tableaux, the Raymond axe murder.

Vincent goes berserk to see his parents depicted thus, but as the proprietor tells him: “*Murder is in the public domain.*” Vincent sneaks back in after hours and takes the axe out of the hands of the wax dummy of his father. Instead of smashing the whole exhibit, he destroys only the effigy of his mother, blaming her for all his problems. The sculptor arrives on the scene, and they fight.

The proprietor takes pity on the girlfriend and agrees to show her the closed exhibit, warning her that she may be shocked. She is, for the new exhibit now depicts Vincent strangling the sculptor to death. A nice double twist ending.

TRANSIT FANNING IN CALGARY: PART 19

by Dale Speirs

[Parts 1 to 18 appeared in OPUNTIA's #256, 258, 260, 264, 269, 275, 283, 298, 302, 327, 333, 341, 348, 357, 359, 365, 369, and 371.]

Distracted Pedestrians.

On February 20, 2017, a young man was killed by an LRT train as he walked across the tracks. He was wearing headphones and had his head down while he texted on his smartphone. He wasn’t the first, and wasn’t the last, as it happened again on May 16. This time it was a 60-year-old woman who was fiddling with her smartphone. A few years ago, Calgary police had to add a new category to their accident statistics, that of distracted pedestrian.

Fiction.

MURDER UNDERGROUND by Mavis Doriel Hay is a cozy mystery originally published in 1934 and now available again as a 2016 trade paperback. Miss Euphemia Pongleton is the suddenly defunct who gets the mystery rolling. She was strangled on the steps of the Belsize Park underground station in London, England.

Pongleton was a resident of the Frampton Private Hotel and was none too popular with her fellow boarders. The general rules of cozy mysteries are followed. Suspicion is thrown about like rock salt on an icy road. The police arrest or interrogate anyone who might look like a Usual Suspect. The residents of the boarding house are all wanna-be Miss Marples, and begin their own investigations while the police are still making enquiries.

The boarders bustle about, each competing to be the one to break the case. They do not suspect that one of their own is the culprit. Pongleton had some wealth, and several of her family and friends were hoping to be mentioned in her will. The competitors break the case simultaneously from several different directions. Instead of the traditional J'accuse! meeting, they swarm the police station, much to the annoyance of the inspector in charge.

The culprit used the underground trains to establish an alibi. For years, the murderer had been taking the train each weekday morning at the same time, becoming known to fellow commuters who were also creatures of habit.

On the day of the crime, the murderer took an earlier train, where no one knew him, and killed Pongleton at the station further down the line. The criminal then doubled back, took his regular train, and thus had fellow commuters provide an alibi.

This novel is a pleasant read as a cozy mystery. It is surprising how well it stands up to the test of time. Well recommended.

“Riding The Blue Line With Jack Kerouac” by Sandra McDonald (2017 Sep/Oct, ASIMOV’S) takes place on Boston’s MBTA subway system. The narrator is a train driver who sees ghosts along the transit lines. Edgar Allan Poe isn’t so bad because he just sits on a passenger seat, stares moodily out the window, and occasionally scribbles something on bits of paper. “*He might be writing a book or something.*”, says the train driver.

The most annoying ghost is Jack Kerouac, who barges into the driver’s compartment and wants to drive the train. He has to be told firmly that it’s not allowed. Sylvia Plath is another regular ghost. Other drivers see ghosts as well, but keep it among themselves. The story sets up various characters, both ghosts and real, but then peters out with nothing happening. It is an extended vignette, not a short story.

Comedy.

Bob Newhart became famous in the early 1960s for his stand-up comedy monologues, and had the first comedy LP record to make the Top Ten charts. He was a storyteller, not a gag-a-minute comedian who jumped about from topic to topic. One of his funniest routines was “Bus Driver Training”.

I ride Calgary Transit buses several times daily because it is easier on the nerves than fighting Calgary traffic. Since I retired, I only use my car for evening events, grocery shopping, or going out to the mountains.

Although CT drivers on the whole are pretty good, not a week of riding the buses goes by that I don’t get a driver who has two speeds: jackrabbit starts and jam-the-pedal stops. Even just sitting in a seat, one gets thrown around by such a driver. It is at times like those that I think of Newhart’s routine.

Newhart began his routine by supposing that there was no way bus drivers could be that vicious unless they were actually taught to do so. He takes the role of a trainer who is instructing new drivers on the proper procedures in dealing with passengers. Mrs Selkirk is an assistant who plays the part of a passenger.

The first lesson is a scenario where a driver has stopped to discharge passengers. He sees Mrs Selkirk running to catch his bus. Newhart instructs the driver not to take off suddenly but let her think she has a chance. Just as she reaches the bus, he is to slam the door in her face and takes off like a rocket. If he leaves too soon, she will give up and stop running, The idea is to make her run the entire length of the block.

Another lesson is to have Mrs Selkirk board the bus while carrying some packages in her arms. As she fumbles for her fare, Newhart tells the driver to hit the accelerator, then brake hard, and repeat until she and her packages are strung out along the aisle. It’s funny because it’s true.

Articulata.

I seldom ride Calgary Transit's double-length articulated buses because they are only used on major crosstown routes that I have little reason to ride. I do photograph them passing by on the street when I get the chance.

It happened that this summer I was taking the #3 crosstown route when I got this sequence of the bus bending from the inside (a different bus than the exterior photo below).



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: Joseph Nicholas
London, England

2017-09-20

Your rate of publication has certainly speeded up since you went to electronic-only a couple of years ago, so much so that I can barely keep up with reading OPUNTIA, never mind responding to it. In addition, there is (I think) less pressure to respond to an electronic-only fanzine, especially one that's available on the Web rather than sent to one's in-box. One knows it's there, one makes a mental note to comment, but then a month goes by and the opportunity has been lost. A paper document sitting on the corner of one's desk, on the other hand, is a nagging presence that demands a letter of comment, right away, this instant. Sort of. I leave aside for the moment that, er, one or two issues of some paper fanzines, they still exist, amazingly, have been sitting on my desk for more than a month now.

[I wish I could still publish a print issue but the massive postage rate increases by Canada Post in March 2014 have killed that. The cheapest increment of postage for overseas mail is \$2.50.]

I was caught by your review of THE NEW NATURALIST in OPUNTIA #188. This title is familiar to me not because I have those same six volumes but because the series continues to this day, as individual books, still published by Collins, in each case covering a single topic, either a particular species or a particular geographic area. Indeed, the series started and has continued in book form, but also had, running in parallel, a series of occasional monographs, which discontinued many years ago. What may be the case in respect of the six issues of the journal that you have, although half a morning's Googling has failed to track down anything that would confirm this, is that these are bound volumes of the first six monographs. In which case, they may be quite rare. Collins's own Website says of the books that "*being a numbered series, with a very low print run for some volumes, they are highly collectable*" with the result that "*second-hand copies of the rarer volumes, in very good condition, can command high prices*". So treat your copies well!

Your review of the first of these magazines concludes with the rather gnomic utterance that "*Climate change is nothing new but it is politically incorrect to mention that in public*". At first I thought that you might be referring to the climate denialism of certain US (and Canadian?) politicians, but a closer reading suggests that what you may be doing, as climate denialists certainly do; as fossil fuel interests always do; as politicians beholden to the corporates also do, is conflating natural climate variations with anthropogenic global warming.

[It's not a matter of conflating but refusing to recognize that both processes are underway. Too many people in the debate argue that it is one or the other only.]

Nobody disputes that there are natural, long-term variations in the Earth's climate, attributable to very long-period changes in, for example, its degree of axial tilt and incremental changes in the exact path of its elliptical orbit about the Sun, and even shorter-period changes such as the Younger Dryas and the Piora Oscillation (10,000 years BCE and 3000 years BCE, respectively). There's some interesting discussion en passant about the potential effects of these climatic variations on the development of Eurasian steppe and related cultures since 10,000 BCE in Barry Cunliffe's BY STEPPE, DESERT AND OCEAN: THE BIRTH OF EURASIA, but one perhaps has to have a prior interest in this period of history to fully grasp how interesting and important.

These are entirely different and quite separate from the anthropogenic forcing to which the Earth's climate has been subjected for the past century or more. Essentially, the evidence is in, and all points in the same direction, to the same conclusions. The statistical significance of the observed data is impeccable. The scientific consensus is well established. The hold-outs are few (and fewer) in number, and driven to ever-more contortions of argument and distortions of the data to sustain their case. The latest being their appropriation of the pause in the warming trend due to the Pacific Decadal Oscillation, which drew warmer surface water into the deeper ocean, to claim that this proved that the warming had come to an end, but the PDO is now over, and the warming trend has resumed.

It's notable that few if any of the denialists have any grounding in climate science, yet pretend to greater knowledge of it than the actual climate scientists. Would the denialists claim the same expertise in evolutionary biology, or planetary mechanics? Of course not; their agenda is entirely political, not remotely scientific.

[That argument also applies to the other side. The carbon tax is an example, an excuse for governments to increase tax revenues while doing little to reduce warming emissions.]

So perhaps I should just come right out and ask you directly: should your gnomic utterance quoted earlier be taken as indicating that you're a climate denialist, or do you accept the evidence for anthropogenic global warming?

[I agree that climate change is taking place but believe that most of it is natural because Earth is still in an interglacial period. Anthropogenic changes are magnifying the amplitude of the changes but did not cause them. To me, however, and this is a point I never see mentioned in the debates, climate change is a red herring. The difficulty is that humans refuse to recognize the risks.]

[Humans lived through far worse climate changes as they evolved. The problem is that since World War Two there are billions of people now putting themselves in harm's way by living on hurricane coasts and floodplains but refusing to adapt to those environments. Houses, for example, can be built with sloped outer walls so that winds flow smoothly over them instead of pushing over vertical walls. The standard house on a floodplain should be built on pilings with a carport underneath, utilities on the second floor, and no basements.]

[Just to take my home province of Alberta as an example, there have been two major weather disasters in the last four years but it wasn't climate change that caused them. On June 21, 2013, southwestern Alberta, including my hometown of Calgary, had 250 mm of rain in one day, unprecedented since records were first kept. 100,000 Calgarians lost their homes and the entire city of High River (12,000 pop.) had to be evacuated as it went under metres of water. All of those who lost their homes lived on floodplains. In Calgary, the other 1.1 million residents, such as myself, whose houses are up on the plateau or in the foothills, didn't lose our homes. See OPUNTIA #264 and 265 for details.]

[In May 2016, the entire city of Fort McMurray, the capital of the Athabasca Tar Sands, had to be evacuated because of the largest forest fire in Alberta history, which eventually burned over an area the size of England. There is only a single two-lane highway out of the city, and 80,000 people had to jam onto it in one day. It wasn't because of climate change, because forest fires are an intrinsic part of the boreal forest ecology. The problem was that Fort McMurray suburbs were built out into the forest with little or no clearance, and with wood shake or asphalt shingle roofs. Not surprisingly, half the city was burned down. See

OPUNTIA #340 for details. Visit YouTube for a dashcam video "Welcome to Hell - Driver escapes Fort McMurray fire" which shows the traffic fleeing down a suburban road with burning spruces right at the edge. There was much talk about how these disasters were to be blamed on climate change, but had proper construction procedures been used, these two events would not have been disasters but only nuisances.]

Reading your list of terrible films in OPUNTIA #189 about novas and supernovas that have a catastrophic effect on the Earth reminds me of an observation I heard some years back, by an astronomer or astrophysicist, that a stellar explosion close enough to have an adverse effect on the Earth would not leave us any time at all to prepare for it. The blossoming of a bright light in the daytime sky would be accompanied by a radiation shockwave that would strip away our planet's atmosphere and end all life on it. Only those in the International Space Station might survive, if it was on the other side of the planet from the radiation impact, but in the absence of communication with or resupply from Earth the inhabitants might soon be wishing that they had perished with everything else.

Your long piece in OPUNTIA #190 about the Calgary philatelic convention, and the possible overlaps between that and SF fandom, reminds me of a period in the early to middle 1980s in the UK, when various SF fans got involved with the anti-nuclear movement (meaning weapons, not reactors). Almost invariably, any fan who got involved with their local anti-nuclear group would take over the editing of the newsletter, and transform it from a scruffily-duplicated two-sider into a coloured photocopied four-page or more thing of beauty. I put my hand up: I too edited the newsletter for the local group (we then lived in Pimlico) for a number of years. I still have my file copies of the published issues.

I should close by saying that I always enjoy the photographs in OPUNTIA. That is, of course, the freedom that electronic publishing confers on the publisher and editor: the ability to include lots and lots (and lots) of colour, at no cost to anyone. Except, perhaps, some extra bytage on the server hosting the publication, and a second or so longer in the download time.

[Let me include a note of thanks to the Websites that host fanzines. Their work is greatly appreciated. For those who like reading zines, spend some time browsing through the free archives of www.efanzines.com and www.fanac.org. They have a wealth of material in them.]

FROM: Theo Nelson
Calgary, Alberta

2017-09-20

FROM: Milt Stevens
Simi Valley, California

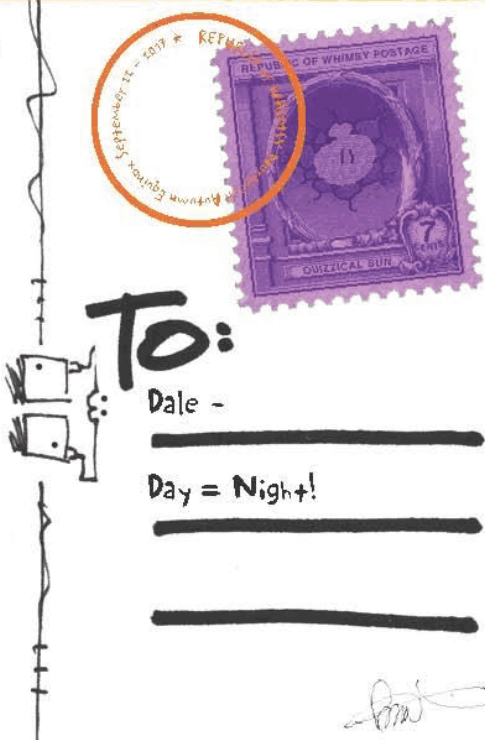
2017-09-21



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Equinox - for us the Fall,
And Spring for the South.
Here the colours of growth
Make their change
To the colours of harvest
And of passing,
As the North shifts,
To the arrival of Winter.

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"Seasonal
Greetings!"

Autumn Leaves

OPUNTIA #386: Mansions and manor houses are fascinating in their way. I recall there was a TV show titled AMERICA'S CASTLES. The title was something of a misnomer, since the show didn't deal with fortified structures of any kind. The show really should have been titled AMERICA'S PALACES. Most of European nobility would have drooled over some of the residences that were shown. In a weird quirk of something or other, many of these palaces were referred to as 'summer cottages' by their owners.

I recall enjoying a number of mystery movies set in manor houses. Alfred Hitchcock didn't invent this sub-genre, but he certainly knew why it worked. Hitchcock believed moviegoers wanted to see attractive people with great clothes and cool cars in really fancy locales. They wanted escapism. They didn't want to look at common slobs like themselves.

OPUNTIA #387: I don't think I'm likely to ever attend a When Words Collide convention. Too bad, since it sounds like my sort of a con. As of 2017, Loscon which was the only print-oriented con in Los Angeles has decided to become a pop culture con. I recall we used to have trouble defining science fiction. It must be ten times more difficult to define pop culture. Maybe you can only define it in negative terms. You can't say what it is. You can only say what it isn't.

[Calgary has a population of 1.2 million, with another 100,000 or so in surrounding areas, but When Words Collide draws from across Canada because it is the nation's most successful readercon. I'm surprised Los Angeles, with about 20 million people to draw on within a day's drive, can't support a small tightly-focused readercon. WWC caps its membership at 750 and sells out early, with no art show, video room, or cosplaying allowed. The dealers in the bourse can only sell books and nothing else.]

OPUNTIA #389: While not exactly an end-of-the-world movie, your article reminded me of a made-for-television movie from the Kuttner/Moore story "The Vintage Season". I don't recall the title

and can't locate it on IMDB. The setting is a lodge in rural Maine. The proprietor comes to realize that the group of tourists currently at his hotel are time travelers who seem to like visiting disasters. He has to figure out what sort of a disaster could visit rural Maine and try to stop it. It's a good story and makes a pretty good movie.

OPUNTIA #390: SF fans aren't as cheap as they once were. They also aren't as young as they once were. Overall, we're not so bad in comparison with some other conventions. At one time, American Legion Conventions had become so violent and destructive that no city would have them. By comparison, I once heard a representative of the Sheraton chain comment that the most fun conventions were SF conventions and little people's conventions. (I suppose if you combined the two you could call it Munchcon.") He also said the worst conventions for hotel damage were church conventions.

Quoted in a fanzine, an English hotel manager commented that fans "*drank like the rugby club but fought like the chess club*".

It seems like everybody has their own convention these days. I've read about tattoo conventions. Think about it, a con where saying "*I'll show you mine if you show me yours*" isn't sexual harassment. At one SF con, I heard one fellow say he also attended conventions for the mentally disturbed. By appearance, the guy looked like a psycho street person. I can think of all sorts of program ideas for such a convention. Come to think of it, what if you had an SF con with the theme "They said I was mad!!!" Maybe the world is lucky that I'm not running cons anymore.

[On March 25 and 26, 2017, the Grey Eagle casino in the Tsuu T'ina Reserve adjacent to southwest Calgary hosted a new comics cosplaying convention called Not Safe For Con. Adults only, and risque costumes that would be banned elsewhere were standard. The organizers defined themselves as 'nerdlesque', a word synthesized from 'burlesque'. Arabella Allure was quoted by the METRO CALGARY free newspaper (2017-03-24, page 16): "*Not everything should be family-friendly*." The focus of the convention was described as beer, comics, and cosplaying with lots of skin. I did not attend. Given the body mass of the average comics fan, the sight of all that spandex and skin would have given me nightmares for weeks.]

SEEN IN THE LITERATURE

Sanderman, J., et al (2017) **Soil carbon debt of 12,000 years of human land use.** PROCEEDINGS OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES USA 114:9575-9580

Authors' abstract: *Land use and land cover change has resulted in substantial losses of carbon from soils globally, but credible estimates of how much soil carbon has been lost have been difficult to generate. Using a data-driven statistical model and the History Database of the Global Environment v3.2 historic land-use dataset, we estimated that agricultural land uses have resulted in the loss of 133 Pg [petagrammes] Carbon from the soil.*

Importantly, our maps indicate hotspots of soil carbon loss, often associated with major cropping regions and degraded grazing lands, suggesting that there are identifiable regions that should be targets for soil carbon restoration efforts.

Human appropriation of land for agriculture has greatly altered the terrestrial carbon balance, creating a large but uncertain carbon debt in soils. Estimating the size and spatial distribution of soil organic carbon (SOC) loss due to land use and land cover change has been difficult but is a critical step in understanding whether SOC sequestration can be an effective climate mitigation strategy.

In this study, a machine learning-based model was fitted using a global compilation of SOC data and the History Database of the Global Environment (HYDE) land use data in combination with climatic, landform and lithology covariates. Model results compared favorably with a global compilation of paired plot studies. Projection of this model onto a world without agriculture indicated a global carbon debt due to agriculture of 133 Pg C for the top 2 m of soil, with the rate of loss increasing dramatically in the past 200 years. The HYDE classes "grazing" and "cropland" contributed nearly equally to the loss of SOC. There were higher percent SOC losses on cropland but since more than twice as much land is grazed, slightly higher total losses were found from grazing land.

Important spatial patterns of SOC loss were found: Hotspots of SOC loss coincided with some major cropping regions as well as semiarid grazing regions, while other major agricultural zones showed small losses and even net

gains in SOC. This analysis has demonstrated that there are identifiable regions which can be targeted for SOC restoration efforts.

Wallace, I.J., et al (2017) **Knee osteoarthritis has doubled in prevalence since the mid-20th century.** PROCEEDINGS OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES USA 114:9332-9336

Authors’ abstract: *Knee osteoarthritis (OA) is believed to be highly prevalent today because of recent increases in life expectancy and body mass index (BMI), but this assumption has not been tested using long-term historical or evolutionary data.*

We analyzed long-term trends in knee OA prevalence in the United States using cadaver-derived skeletons of people aged 50 years or older whose BMI at death was documented and who lived during the early industrial era (1800s to early 1900s; n = 1,581) and the modern post-industrial era (late 1900s to early 2000s; n = 819). Knee OA among individuals estimated to be 50 years or older was also assessed in archeologically derived skeletons of prehistoric hunter-gatherers and early farmers (6000 to 300 B.P.; n = 176). OA was diagnosed based on the presence of eburnation (polish from bone-on-bone contact).

Overall, knee OA prevalence was found to be 16% among the post-industrial sample but only 6% and 8% among the early industrial and prehistoric samples, respectively. After controlling for age, BMI, and other variables, knee OA prevalence was 2.1-fold higher (95% confidence interval, 1.5-3.1) in the post-industrial sample than in the early industrial sample.

Our results indicate that increases in longevity and BMI are insufficient to explain the approximate doubling of knee OA prevalence that has occurred in the United States since the mid-20th century. Knee OA is thus more preventable than is commonly assumed, but prevention will require research on additional independent risk factors that either arose or have become amplified in the post-industrial era.

CALGARY UTILITY BOX ART

I photographed this electrical box at 5 Avenue SW and 7 Street.

