

OPUNTIA

395

Halloween 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.

AROUND COWTOWN DURING HALLOWEEN

photos by Dale Speirs

At right is the front yard of a neighbour a few blocks away. I don't decorate my yard because it's just too much trouble considering how busy I am with other things. Other people go all out.





I took the photo at left on August 18 at a Safeway supermarket. I was in there a few days ago and was not surprised to see they've already set out their Christmas candy display.

Below: The Suncor building downtown is one of the few skyscrapers that was decorated in a big way for Halloween. I've never seen black pumpkins before. Most of the skyscrapers only decorate for the Stampede rodeo, Canada Day, and Christmas.



At right: Another neighbourhood display.

Below: Purdy Chocolates display in a mall. They have top-quality candy but I seldom buy them because they also have top-quality prices. The little coffins had eight chocolates and cost \$12.95 plus tax.



Not Halloweenish on the next page, but an autumn snapshot of hybrid roses in my yard setting fruit.

I've been saving my Lovecraft reviews for Halloween, and herewith present them.



IF YOU AREN'T SQUAMOUS, THEN WHY ARE YOU TRYING TO BE ELDRITCH?: PART 6

by Dale Speirs

[Parts 1 to 5 appeared in OPUNTIA's #298, 333, 340, 352, and 365. Issues #22 and 63.1A have related articles on H.P. Lovecraft.]

Alternative Lovecrafts.

H.P. Lovecraft couldn't or wouldn't hold a steady job to earn a living because he fancied himself a gentleman, in the landed gentry sense. Real landed gentry collected rents and toured their estates with their managers, keeping an eye on things. HPL lived off small inheritances directly or indirectly, and sponged from his mother and aunts, thinking that he was entitled to put on airs because he didn't have to work for a living.

Reality forced him into occasional jobs such as a ticket-taker at a movie theatre, or ghostwriting and editing. He died of stomach cancer at about the same time his inheritance ran out.

Which brings us to "A Monument To After-Thought Unveiled" by Paul Di Filippo (2003 Nov/Dec, INTERZONE). This short story is set in an alternative timeline where Robert Frost failed as a poet and instead became a pulp writer, churning out space opera and weird fiction. He lost his family to a house fire, and after some wanderlust eventually settles in Providence.

There he meets HPL, who also diverges and shakes free of his timeline after he married Sonia Greene. Instead of later divorcing her, they move to Chicago where HPL takes the editorship of WEIRD TALES. His success contrasts with Frost's self-hatred because he can only publish pulp fiction instead of his first love of poetry.

It doesn't help that HPL published Frost's stories until too much poetic description crept in and resulted in a "We regret" letter. Frost is devastated by what he sees as HPL's betrayal. An interesting pair of divergences down roads not taken.

Modern Mythos.

“At Home With Azathoth” by John Shirley (2014, from the anthology SEARCHERS AFTER HORROR, edited by S.T. Joshi) concerns a computer programmer named Frederic. He enters into a virtual reality space where a clump of automata cellulare has become sentient. *“It was squamous, wrigglingly ragged along the edges of the tank of images that floated over him. It just plain seemed alive.”* A tip of the hat to Shirley for managing to work the word ‘squamous’ into the text.

Frederic wants revenge against another programmer named Filrod, who drove Frederic’s brother Jackie into suicide. All three wind up together in the Azathoth space. Jackie was already there, Filrod is eaten by Azathoth, and Frederic escapes in the nick of time. Was he in Heaven or was he in Azathoth?

“The People In The Building” (2016 Oct/Nov, ASIMOV’S) by Sandra McDonald is set in a Florida office building newly constructed next to a pond. Those who work for the various businesses all have their set routines, the kind of boring office work so many people do for a living.

On the third floor are investigators secretly screening the pond sediments for pieces of Lovecraftian monsters. They snag a Great Old One, unfortunately. It scatters them into a spirit dimension and then makes it onto the second floor, where it kills all the office workers quickly, silently, and ravenously.

Now it is waiting in the stairwell the next morning but can’t open the door. As it lurks on the threshold, all the office workers come to work by elevator, unaware that the second floor was turned into an abattoir. Finally it happens that someone decides the stairs will be faster, and opens the door.

This is a well-structured story that builds up the mood of horror gradually and inevitably. The anticipation and foreshadowing are very well done. A good Lovecraft pastiche.

“The Cost Of Education” (2016) is a Season 2 episode of the television series THE LIBRARIANS. This action-adventure fantasy, set in today’s world, involves the adventures of the staff of The Library, a secret repository of magical artifacts and grimoires. The Head Librarian is protected by a Guardian, who is an Amazonian military officer formerly assigned to a NATO counterterrorist unit.

There is also an elderly Custodian who is centuries old, wears expensive business suits, and prefers to stay behind in the library stacks, understandable at his age. Rounding out the team are three young neophyte Librarians, whose enthusiasm often exceeds their competence. A well-produced series, with long story arcs spread over several episodes but many zero-reset or monster-of-the-week episodes within.

The episode at hand is set at Wexler College, Massachusetts, where students and staff frequently disappear but no one seems to be overly alarmed. The college was founded by an architect who didn’t just dabble in the occult. His memorial statue has the inscription *“They said I was mad”*.

The fraternities hold Satanic rites at their keggers. It is explicitly stated by the Custodian that Lovecraft based Miskatonic University on Wexler College, and that his mythos was based on events there back in his day.

The Librarians try to control outbursts of unregulated magic, and arrive at Wexler for same. They encounter Lucy Lyon, a physics student who built her own detection instruments after a power surge of unknown cause ruined one of her experiments on the campus particle accelerator, which is about the size of a microwave oven. Understandable, since they don’t have the same budget as CERN for its Large Hadron Collider.

The Librarians discover the how of the disappearances when one happens in front of them. A giant tentacled monster is reaching through an interdimensional rift and snatching its victims. Next up, they find that the campus buildings form a giant pentagram, and have foundations made of a rare black stone from a South Pacific island.

The rifts turn out to be triggered by Lyon’s particle accelerator. As to the monster, research among Lovecraft’s notes is unhelpful. The Librarians begin chasing rifts while trying to avoid tentacles. There is a big buildup about the other dimension, things we were not meant to know, and all that, but the actual results don’t live up to expectations as far as the viewer is concerned.

Lyon and one of the Librarians are caught and pulled through. The other side of the rift turns out to be a false-colour woodland. The monster is a giant terrestrial octopus. The SFX are excellent but a letdown since we were expecting something more impressive.

At this point, just as the giant octopus is about to eat the two women, there is a deus ex machina turn in the plot. The woodland meadow suddenly liquifies and the Lady of the Lake, yes, that one, saves the day. A very blatant setup for a future story arc that yanks the plot around 90°. Back on campus the finale is to shove the particle accelerator into the rift and let everything self-destruct. A disappointing ending.

Anthologies: Pastiches.

S.T. Joshi, well known as an HPL scholar, has been publishing an anthology series titled BLACK WINGS OF CTHULHU. Four volumes have appeared, with 17 to 21 stories each, and a fifth volume has been announced for early 2018. Most of the stories do not directly reference the Mythos, but are written in the style of HPL or set in the general milieu of his stories. I won't review each individual story but will pick out a few samples.

From Volume #3 is "Houdini Fish" by Jonathan Thomas, narrated by an archaeologist at a Providence, Rhode Island, university. No mention of dear old Miskatonic. Lately, some strange small fish have been appearing in liquid soap dispensers. No one knows how they got there, but they seem harmless enough living in the soap.

The narrator eventually realizes that they didn't begin appearing until after his class had excavated a site on campus that was due for redevelopment, and where a century ago, a recluse mad scientist had his house and laboratory. They find bits of glowing machinery, non-radioactive and purpose unknown.

Other strange events begin occurring. Students vanish into thin air, then non-campus citizens, leaving behind piles of clothing. All of this was the doing of the glowing machine scraps. The narrator buries them back underground, hoping to eliminate the anomalies, but things keep happening. Something has been released into our world from the other side of the threshold.

In that same volume is "The Megalith Plague" by Don Webb, about the citizens of Flapjack, Texas, suddenly developing an interest in building megalith monuments a la Stonehenge. They are led on by a sculptor who is crazy but since he is rich he is just eccentric. All those stones call into existence some of the Old Ones, one of whom has a plan.

From Volume #4 of the anthology series is "Revival" by Stephen Woodworth. An Elder God decides to recruit acolytes in a more modern way by using a street church mission. The homeless derelicts who listen to the sermon are converted directly via transmutation to go out and do Cthulhu's work.

Another story in that volume is "Dark Redeemer" by Will Murray. A hush-hush American government agency is testing remote viewing. They get more than they bargained for when one of the viewers makes contact with Nyarlathotep, one of the Lovecraftian gods. The agency also discovers that sleep paralysis among humans is simply unsuccessful attempts by Nyarlathotep to break through into our world.

From there, the agency staff elaborates a hypothesis that all gods are holographic images imprinted into the fabric of the universe. There is much handwaving and talk about quantum mechanics. I didn't quite understand it. The result is that Nyarlathotep finally manages to break through and begins to clean house. The stars go out one by one, beginning with the Sun. Everything is dissolved back into the quantum field the gods live in.

The stories in these anthologies read well. The Lovecraft purist will be miffed that most do not make direct reference to the Cthulhu Mythos. However, a reader familiar with HPL's stories will recognize the elements of mood and setting as being part of the trope.

Non-Mythos Stories.

Not everything HPL wrote had to do with the Cthulhu Mythos. One of his most popular stories "The Colour Out Of Space" was published in the 1927 September issue of AMAZING STORIES. It was set in the hills west of Arkham, Massachusetts, and is about a meteorite that crashed long ago. It exerts a malign effect on plants and animals, creating monsters, and drives the inhabitants into insanity. Eventually a strange colour emitted by the meteorite forms a blob that launches to outer space.

In 2010, a German movie was produced, using that same title for the anglophone version but called DIE FARBE in its original release (meaning "The Colour"). It is a surprisingly good adaptation. The movie is filmed in crisp black-and-white throughout, excepting that the meteorite's 'colour' is the kind of purple seen under an ultraviolet light. That sole use of colour is appropriate and works very effectively.

The movie brings the story ahead to 1975, with numerous flashbacks to just after World War Two ended in 1945. It is relocated to the Swabian-Franconian Forest in Germany. Jonathan Davis, of Arkham, is looking for his father, who disappeared into the Forest. The father had been with the American occupation forces and had stumbled across something strange in an obscure valley in the Forest. Three decades later, the valley is about to be flooded for an hydroelectric project.

The story is told to Davis fil by a local farmer who had met the father after the war ended. Several years before the war, a meteorite had crashed into the valley. Its substance and behaviour baffled the scientists trying to examine it. The stone of the meteorite vanished as if evaporated.

As the seasons turned, the crops in the valley grew gigantic, but bore bitter fruit that was inedible. Plants had a strange unnatural tinge to them. The family whose farm had been cratered sank into melancholy, apparently from the contaminated water in their well. One by one, they see strange colours and then go insane. The valley becomes sterile due to the colour out of space.

Flash forward to just after V-E Day. Davis's father, an officer in the occupying army, is leading a small command who arrive in the valley. Just as they investigate, the colour pulls itself together into a giant blob of energy and then bursts back up into space, never to be seen again. It had only been visiting, and was now on its way elsewhere.

The movie is slow in several scenes, and the pace could have been picked up a bit with some judicious cropping. It is, however, quite faithful to HPL, not just a monster movie that ignores Lovecraft's emphasis on mood. The DVD has the German soundtrack but English subtitles are provided, below the letterboxing so they don't interfere with the picture. This is the best HPL movie I've seen and is well recommended.

STATELY PILES: PART 2

by Dale Speirs

[Part 1 appeared in OPUNTIA #386.]

Ghost Stories.

By far, ghosts prefer to inhabit manor houses and castles. They need endless corridors and rooms to haunt. You can't do much in a tiny open-plan condo. Few one-bedroom apartments have secret passageways, and certainly not dungeons festooned with spider webs.

From the Mill Creek DVD pack of 50 Mystery Classics comes TOPPER RETURNS, a 1941 movie based on characters created by Thorne Smith, with an original screenplay by Jonathan Latimer and Gordon Douglas. Cosmo Topper is the middle-aged hero, well-to-do, whose wife has a separate bedroom, and whose chauffeur is Rochester, better known to OTR fans as Jack Benny's valet.

Topper becomes embroiled in an adventure at Carrington Hall, a massive manor that makes Buckingham Palace look like an infill. The ghost of a young woman appears in Topper's house next door and demands that he come to Carrington Hall and find out who murdered her. He is the only one who can see her, which causes complications with everyone else.

The movie's SFX are very good for that era. Doors open and close by themselves, footprints appear from the invisible ghost, and she materializes and dematerializes in double exposure and dissolve shots.

The comedy is mild, mostly hearty chuckles with an occasional laugh out loud. No one believes Topper when he shows up at Carrington Hall, and his wife is understandably jealous when she thinks he is canoodling with a young woman there. After seeing too many doors open and close by themselves, Rochester says he is going back to working for Mr Benny.

There is a cloaked figure skulking about Carrington Hall who is not a ghost but trying to finish his business. He had killed the wrong young woman. The comedy is kept going with snappy dialogue, various misunderstandings, and running to and fro about the manor, often via its many secret passageways.

The ghost adds to the merriment after she discovers that when she materializes she can drink booze. As a result, she gets drunk and stays drunk even when invisible.

The murderer is identified. He makes a run for it but crashes his car. His ghost has a chat with the other ghost. She is going up to Heaven and he is going down to the other place. Not the funniest comedy, but a nice one to kill time with.

THE HAUNTED MANSION (2003), written by David Berenbaum, is a Walt Disney movie based on one of its theme park attractions. That pretty much establishes it as a B-movie, notwithstanding the colour cinematography and computer SFX. The actors were competent but they were fighting a script that couldn't decide whether it was scary or humorous, and as a result was neither.

Eddie Murphy played the lead, real estate agent Jim Evers. Murphy had outgrown the wild-and-crazy guy of his younger days, and only comes across as mildly humorous. Terence Stamp was the evil butler, and yes, he did it.

Jim and Sara Evers are both realtors, raising two young children in between hustling houses. They get a lead on a old mansion in the Louisiana bayous, for which the sales commission would be very substantial. A storm traps them overnight, and the eldritch lord of the manor, Edward Gracey, invites them to stay. He has designs on Sara and wants to make her his bride.

There are various ghostly manifestations, some of which are deadly serious and others humorous. One is just irritating, the head of a gypsy woman trapped inside a crystal ball. She won't shut up, constantly making vague prophecies in doggerel, and yammering on and on, annoying everyone around her. Jim eventually rescues Sara from Gracey, and all the ghosts are sorted out. The blessed rise up into heaven, while the butler is swallowed up by a pit of fire. An average movie, tending to blandness.

Perhaps not a manor house but certainly a large farm house is the setting for "The Ghost On The Newsreel Negative" (1946) written by Arch Oboler for his OTR series LIGHTS OUT.. (This and hundreds of other OTR shows are available as free downloads at www.archive.org) Two reporters are sent out to a farm to get newsreel footage of a haunting. They find an elderly coot who gives them a guided tour of the place. He tells them his elderly sister is in the house but she is bedridden and has to stay in darkness. They interview her, sans camera lights, but are so unnerved they run out and head back to the big city.

Their editor doesn't believe their story. The film is quickly developed and run through the moviola but shows no old man in the picture. The editor promptly fires the reporters but they beg him to turn on the soundtrack and try it a second time. This time the old man's voice is heard, even though he doesn't appear on the screen.

The plot, like most of Oboler's scripts, was predictable, but he relied more on sound effects and scene setting to keep the listener's attention. The reporters are quavery on the farm, and more so back in the office dealing with their editor. The old man has great fun when he realizes that the two men don't know he is a ghost, giving the uncredited actor who played the part plenty of opportunity for scenery chewing.

Where There's A Will.

Another type of big house mystery is the action that occurs when the lord of the manor departs to the next world and leaves behind a set of greedy heirs all grasping for his fortune. You don't see this kind of story set in semidetached houses because such people usually don't have much worth killing for.

"Summer Thunder" is a 1945 episode of the old-time radio (OTR) mystery series THE WHISTLER (This and hundreds of other OTR shows are available as free mp3s at www.archive.org) A cranky old millionaire, who should have been done away with years ago as a public service, is strangled after announcing to his parasitic relatives that he is bringing in a lawyer tomorrow morning to change his will and cut out all his kinfolk. He was, of course, signing his own death warrant.

The wife of one of the heirs thinks her husband did it, and destroys evidence that would send him to the gallows. She discovers to her horror that it turns out that evidence would have acquitted him. She had misinterpreted the meaning of the items she destroyed.

In defence of her husband, she begins sleuthing and decides that the butler did it. Her attempt to stage a J'accuse! meeting goes wrong, for the butler had been doing his own sleuthing. It was her Ladyship who did it. The butler had a police inspector listen in on the conversation, and all ends well. An interesting plot with several twists along the way.

ONE BODY TOO MANY is a 1944 comedy strangely mis-compiled by Mill Creek into its 50-pack Horror Classics DVD set. The original screenplay was written by Winston Miller and Maxwell Shane. An insurance salesman named Albert Tuttle is called to the mansion of millionaire Cyrus Rutherford to close a \$200,000 policy. He doesn't get there in time and finds the manor full of relatives waiting to cash in on the will. They mistake him for a private detective who was to guard the body.

As to why a corpse needed to be guarded, the answer is in the strange will that Rutherford wrote. He was an astrologer who had his own telescope observatory on the roof of the mansion. His will specifies that his coffin is not to be interred but instead a glass dome is to be built on the roof where he will forever be in view of the Sun and the stars. Until this was done, the relatives were to stay in the house. Anyone who left prior would be disinherited.

The will also specified that the bequests were not to be read out until after the sky burial was done, and that different members of the family and staff would receive different sizes of bequests. Some would get a fortune and others would get a pittance. Most of them were parasites and layabouts, and could figure out roughly who was where in the order. The will stated that if Rutherford was not laid to rest as specified, then the order would be reversed; the first would be last and the last would be first.

Rutherford had no illusions about his family and servants, and wrote his will to torment them from beyond the grave. He knew that some relatives would try to shorten the line of succession the hard way. Into all this, Tuttle stumbles, and finds himself in the midst of all sorts of alarums and excursions. The comedy is based on misunderstandings galore and slapstick.

The butler was played by Bela Lugosi, appropriately suspicious in his behaviour but not the one who did it. He and the housekeeper were mentioned in the will and probably would get small bequests. He is seen taking down a bottle of rat poison from the shelf as the housekeeper prepares a tray of coffee. He tells her: *"There are too many rats in this house. They should be done away with."* Throughout the movie, the two are constantly trying to serve coffee to the other legatees but never succeed. Either the guests are too upset to drink any because of the latest kerfluffle or else just as they are about to sip, they are interrupted.

All the cliches of manor house mysteries are trotted out and made fun of. It is a dark and stormy night, the phone lines are down, and the access road washed

out, isolating everyone in the mansion. Tuttle finds secret passageways that lead to various bedrooms. The problem is, he is clad only in a towel after stepping out of the shower, and in his efforts to get back into his bedroom keeps blundering into the bedrooms of women, who understandably get the wrong idea about his intentions.

The deceased gets around more dead than when he was alive, as the two factions of heirs play put-and-take with him, trying to bury him and break the will, or diligently recovering the corpse and putting it back where it belongs. A good comedy, well worth viewing.

ONE FRIGHTENED NIGHT is a 1935 movie written by Wellyn Totman, a manor house murder mystery leavened by humour. Tycoon Jasper Whyte is hosting a dinner at his mansion, mostly family members. And yes, it is a dark and stormy night. He tells his guests that each of them will get a million dollars before midnight. The reason is that a new state inheritance tax takes effect at midnight. Whyte wants to beat it by dispensing inheritances ahead of time. That's what I call real party favours.

Whyte's long-lost granddaughter arrives without warning. He then changes his mind and decides to give her his entire estate. The look on the other guests' faces when they realize they just lost their million is priceless. Things complicate when a second woman arrives, claiming to be the genuine granddaughter. So as you see, identity theft is no new thing. Photo ID was not commonplace in those days.

The first claimant is found murdered in her room, and with that the plot gets rolling. The sheriff suspects everyone and so do the guests. Paranoia abounds, and squabbling fills the mansion. A masked stalker is prowling the house trying to kill the second granddaughter. The old man watches from a distance and laughs.

There are plenty of idiots to sustain the idiot plots as they dash about the manor house, in and out of secret passageways. Whyte is the one who solves the case and identifies which guest did the deed. A fair to middling movie.

The Shadow, like many of his ilk, was a multimedia character with novels, pulp magazines, movies, and radio series. Trekkies who like to nitpick their series will go berserk trying to straighten out the continuity of all the incarnations of The Shadow. In the radio series, he had the power of invisibility and Margo

Lane as a girlfriend. In the movies he was an ordinary man, usually single. Not only was there no consistency between the formats, but even within a format the story line wavered all over the road.

There are some Shadow movies on the Mill Creek DVD pack of 50 Mystery Classics. I reviewed THE SHADOW: INTERNATIONAL CRIME, in which he was a radio show host whose identity as The Shadow was not secret (see OPUNTIA #310). Taking another one, from that same DVD box set, I'll discuss THE SHADOW STRIKES, a 1937 movie adapted for the screen by Al Martin, based on the story "The Ghost Of The Manor" by Maxwell Grant (a house name, not a real author).

In the radio series, The Shadow was the alter-ego of Lamont Cranston, wealthy young man about town. In the movie at hand, he is a middle-aged man named Lamont Granston, with a G, and so named in the scenes and credits. Granston has no power of invisibility but wears a black cape and slouch hat to hide his face.

When the movie begins, he is inadvertently caught up in the imposture of an attorney named Chester Randall. Not daring to reveal his true identity as Granston, he winds up at the manor house of a millionaire named Delthorn, who wants to write a new will. The mansion is filled with a variety of adult nephews and a niece, all of them anticipating the day they come into Uncle's fortune.

As Delthorn and Granston qua Randall sit in the study discussing how to rewrite the will, a shot is fired through the French doors, killing the millionaire. The old will therefore stands, which leaves the entire estate to the oldest surviving nephew/niece. One person obviously wants the old will to stand, while the others want to destroy it, including a casino owner to whom one nephew is indebted for \$11,000. That would leave the legacy intestate, which means that the probate judge would probably divide the estate evenly among the relatives.

One very jarring note about this movie is the terrible day-for-night photography. This matters because numerous scenes are outside the mansion on the grounds, and show the characters going in and out of the French doors of the study. Outside the mansion, the lawn and street are bright and sunny. Looking out from the study through the French doors, there is Stygian blackness. Characters hiding in the shrub beds are enveloped in darkness due to a deliberately under-exposed negative, but when they step out onto the turf, they cast shadows.

The complications and bodies pile up. The police investigation is a sham, with no pretense whatsoever at even the basic forensic procedures known back then. Granston's impersonation falls apart but ultimately it doesn't matter because the butler did it.

It may seem that half of the original Sherlock Holmes stories took place in manor houses. Leaving them be, and looking at pastiches on old-time radio, there is "Uneasy Chair", a 1946 episode of THE NEW ADVENTURES OF SHERLOCK HOLMES written by Denis Green and Anthony Boucher.

An elderly millionaire meets his end sitting at his desk in the manor house study. He had been stabbed at the base of the brain with an icepick or stiletto but there is no sign of the weapon and the room was locked. Lestrade arrests the nephew on general principles, but Holmes doesn't believe he was the culprit, again on general principles.

Holmes is hired to investigate and finds several people who stood to gain. The case breaks open when the chair is found to have a spring-loaded spike hidden inside the upholstery at neck level, which retracts afterwards. It is triggered when the victim sits in the chair and leans back.

Holmes and Watson chase about hither and yon. They eventually establish that the murderer really was the nephew. This astonishes Holmes, who is surprised that Lestrade actually got it right for once. It also astonishes the listener, who is used to the convention of mystery stories whereby the police always arrest the wrong man. A cute little trick by Green and Boucher.

Overnight Guests.

A popular plot is guests stuck in a manor house with a vengeful host, planning for revenge. The classic story of trapped guests is the 1945 movie AND THEN THERE WERE NONE, based on the 1939 novel by Agatha Christie.

That novel had a variety of title changes, and for good reason. The book was originally published in Britain as TEN LITTLE NIGGERS, where the N-word didn't have the same connotations. In America that would never do, so the book appeared variously as either ATTWN or TEN LITTLE INDIANS, the latter title not acceptable today. The novel became one of the best selling mysteries ever, with more than 100 million copies sold.

The movie was also a big hit, and that is the version I will review. It has a different ending, but Christie herself wrote the alternative endings between the novel and stage plays. In the novel, everyone dies, but the movie studios and theatre producers felt it was too grim, so Christie rewrote the ending.

The movie opens with eight guests lured to an island by various means. They find themselves trapped in the manor house overlooking the cliffs. No telephones, no boats back to the mainland, and a storm moving in and lashing the coast. There are also two servants who were hired for the occasion. All ten have pasts, either escaping punishment for crimes or doing something despicable that couldn't be dealt with by the law.

Their unknown host leaves a gramophone record to be played. On it, everyone's guilty secrets are exposed. Not long after, people start dying, one each day, and the secret host gleefully taunts them from a distance. The psychological impact is great, as the host intended, and turns the guests against each other. As the body count increases, the survivors become increasingly paranoid, as well they might.

The major change in the movie is that two of the guests, a young woman and a young man, fall in love and plot to escape. The man fakes his death and the woman is confronted by the host. He tells her that he will die as well from poison and leave proof to the police that she murdered everyone. Just as he commits suicide, the man walks in and makes the host realize he has been cheated of his revenge. The host will be blamed. A nice twist ending, and a better one than the novel, where no one was left standing.

The acting is good, particularly the butler, who comes across as a sniveling sycophant. The guests all put in good turns. Their increasing unease, then fear, then paranoia, is well handled, and gradually speeds up the pace of the film.

From the sublime to the ridiculous is a 1939 manor house movie THE GORILLA, based on a play by Ralph Spence. It is on the Mill Creek DVD pack of 50 Horror Classics. The movie stars the three Ritz brothers, deservedly forgotten today but who were big in their time for slapstick comedy that made Jerry Lewis look nuanced.

The plot is about a killer who disguises himself in a gorilla costume. He threatens lawyer Walter Stevens, who hires the Ritz brothers as bodyguards to stay the night in the manor house. Also guests are Stevens niece Norma Denby

and her fiancée, who are to be married the next day. She may be an intended target of The Gorilla as well.

Bela Lugosi is the butler, but he didn't do it. He keeps turning up suddenly out of nowhere, frightening the bejesus out of people. The cook supplies all the screaming when Denby isn't in the scene.

It is a dark and stormy night, with lots of lightning crashing in between the dialogue and torrential rains. Even for a manor house, there are lots of secret passageways. It seems that every other panel in the walls is an entrance. This provides comic relief as the Ritz brothers dash hither and yon, taking pratfalls while The Gorilla skulks about. Mysterious strangers come and go, so much so that the residents of the house have to keep asking them who they are.

It all sorts out well in the end as the tangled subplots play out. The movie wouldn't succeed today but judged as a period piece of screwball comedy it does okay.

As another example of the hazards of malignant hosts in manor houses, there is the movie HOUSE ON HAUNTED HILL (1959), written by Robb White. This movie is considered one of the best such made, although the Christie influence is unmistakable. It established Vincent Price as a star beyond any doubt. My copy is on the Mill Creek DVD pack of 50 Horror Classics.

The movie opens with a black screen, intended to lull the audience as they settled into their seats and began to nibble their popcorn. Abruptly, full-volume screams of woman erupt from the dark screen. One can easily guess how not a few people in the theatre would have jumped in their seats.

In the opening narrative, the manor house is said to be more than a century old, but the visuals show a Frank Lloyd Wright mansion in Hollywood (an actual house built in 1924) that is all concrete slabs and cantilevers in the Mayan pyramid style, nothing like the normal stately pile. It is, however, big enough for a dozen people to stay the night, and therein lies the tale.

Frederick Loren, played by Price in his trademark suave and witty style, is the genial millionaire host of a party. Each guest, strangers to each other, will get \$10,000 if they manage to stay the night. (Remember that \$10,000 was a lot more money in 1959.) The five guests all have something to hide, not to mention Loren and his gold digger wife.

The servants are none too friendly either. The house has a long history of murder, and there are still a couple of decapitated heads unaccounted for by the police.

After a private spat with his wife, Loren meets his guests and gives them each a pistol as party favours. The guests are locked inside the mansion, with no telephones. They are told that if anyone dies, the defunct's share will be divided among them. That's what is known as incentive.

Loren begins to tease and torment the guests from hiding, isolating each of them at a time and using homemade SFX on them. Doors open and close by themselves, skeletons and ghosts float about, an organ plays a mournful tune by itself, and ropes move after characters like snakes. In particular, Loren drives a young woman to murder by constantly harassing her with fake ghosts and ominous SFX when no one else is around.

Eventually Loren gets to the point. He kills his wife and her lover, who was one of the guests. He dissolves both of them in a vat of acid, faces the guests, and solemnly tells the remaining guests he is willing to face justice. Since Loren is a millionaire, back when a million was real money, he may get off murder charges with the help of a good lawyer. On that ambiguity, the movie ends.

When the movie was released, the studio used a gimmick called Emergo in some of the theatres. At just the right moment, a skeleton would fly across the audience, glowing in the dark from an ultraviolet lamp. It produced spectacular responses from the audience.

THE BAT (1959), written by Crane Wilbur, is another Vincent Price in a manor house movie. The owner of the mansion was an embezzler who hid his loot somewhere within but was killed before having the fun of using it. The chase is on to retrieve it. Also starring was Agnes Moorehead in her typical battleaxe role. She plays Cornelia Van Gorder, a mystery novelist who leases the mansion while writing her next book.

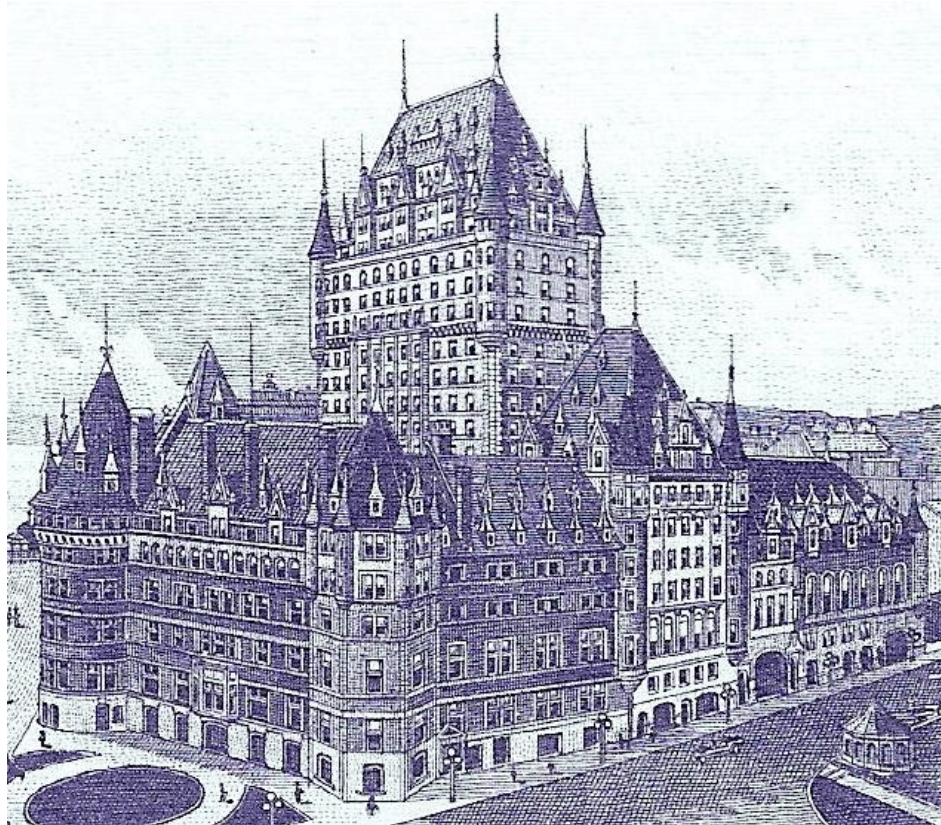
The movie starts off with a bank embezzlement and a double-cross murder. A handsome young bank executive is arrested for the crime, which he didn't commit. Meanwhile, a masked man, tagged by the press as The Bat, is prowling about killing women. Price is everybody's family doctor, the county coroner, and a murderer. But a very suave and polite murderer.

Various suspects have all got the same idea, that the stolen money is in the big house. In between hunting for secret passageways, they kill each other off. The local constabulary who stand watch in the mansion aren't competent in catching any of the prowlers. There is more traffic upstairs than out on the highway, as murderers, housebreakers, servants, and guests scurry to and fro.

The mystery boils down to a discrepancy in room measurements, as all the treasure hunters eventually realize. The third floor rooms don't match up to the doors and windows. Van Gorder finds a secret room in between two normal rooms. It has a safe, and from there the end is nigh.

The Bat soon shows up, gunfire erupts, and a couple more corpses are added to the total, including The Bat. He is unmasked in death, and we discover why the local detective couldn't catch the culprit. All ends well. Van Gorder has the plot for a new mystery novel. The restored money gets the young banker out of jail.

An enjoyable movie. Price and Moorehead carried it well with their performances.



COZY MYSTERIES: PART 3

by Dale Speirs

[Parts 1 to 2 appeared in OPUNTIA's #361 and 379.]

Cozy mysteries have evolved into a standard format from their distant origin in the Miss Marple series. The book titles usually are puns. The main protagonist is an amateur sleuth who busily snoops about contaminating evidence, indirectly obstructing police, and getting into the line of fire from the murderer.

All Hallow's Eve.

BLACKWORK (2009) by Monica Ferris is set in Excelsior, Minnesota, where a needlework shop is run by Betsy Devonshire. This is part of a series of novels relating to needlework. The novel has a free needlework pattern of a witch's hat at the back of the book.

The local Halloween Committee is busy for the impending holiday. Leona Cunningham is a self-proclaimed witch and co-owner of the Barleywine microbrewery. A local boozer, Ryan McMurphy, blames her for various accidents around town. When he is found dead in suspicious circumstances, the townsfolk know who to blame. McMurphy was an alcoholic and known to police. His death, as devoutly to be wished for as it may have been, is classified as murder. Devonshire thinks otherwise and takes on the Miss Marple role.

Meanwhile, life goes on, including the Halloween party. The theme is "The Poe Tree" (say it out loud to get the pun), a recitation of Halloween poems by guests who are to be suitably garbed to match their chosen poem. This gives the author a chance to pad out an entire chapter with recitations of poetry.

Not quite as exciting are the special Halloween patterns the needleworkers are designing for the holidays. All of those events are trumped by the Halloween parade down the main streets of Excelsior. It turns out to be more exciting than planned. As Devonshire watches the costumed celebrants go by, she realizes who the culprit is, and the chase is on.

The epilogue can't live up to the excitement. It is instead an infodump about how the murderer dunnit, using an elaborate method involving dry ice pellets. An average read for a cozy.

SCRAPBOOK OF THE DEAD (2015) by Mollie Cox Bryan is part of a series of cozy mysteries about women in Cumberland Creek, Virginia, who belong to a scrapbooking club. Given the death rate of this particular demographic, I'm surprised the state legislature hasn't banned the hobby.

The novel gets to the point immediately, with the body of a young Mexican woman who had her throat slashed and was found with a scrapbook page clutched in her hand. The following day, ditto her sister.

The heroine is news reporter Annie Chamovitz. The townsfolk are getting ready to celebrate Halloween. The smell of pumpkin this, that, and spicy latte, is everywhere. In between scrapbooking, the women are aflutter over the news that the slayings might be gang related.

The discovery is made that the two sisters were part of an Hispanic scrapbooking club. However, the novel mostly dwells on gangs, an assortment of suspects, and other diversions. Only near the end is a completely unrelated motive brought in. There was a rich relative who had changed her will and inadvertently signed a death warrant for the heirs in between her and the murderer.

The novel is rather bizarre in the way that the women respond to stress, working it off by scrapbooking for the Halloween holiday. Displacement activity, the psychologists call it. An average read.



A filler, since some readers don't like blank space.

No prizes for guesses about who the selfie taker is.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

[Editor's remarks in square brackets. Please include your name and town when sending a comment. Email to opuntia57@hotmail.com]

FROM: Lloyd Penney
Etobicoke, Ontario

2017-10-18

OPUNTIA #388: [Re: Paint Pots in Kootenay mountains] More great pictures. I never knew such sources of ochre and quicksand existed. I am sure the fact there's bound to be a stupid hiker here and there means there's at least one skeleton in those quicksand pits. I know, no one should be able to die from quicksand as they do in the movies, but still.

[There is no doubt that many mysterious disappearances in the mountains are due to a lone hiker falling into a crevasse or pit and whose remains will never be found. The park wardens in the mountains inspect the parking lots at trailheads once a day and record the licence plate numbers of vehicles precisely in case the car sits there for several days, indicating a hiker may have come to grief. I always text my brother where I am hiking, and at the end of the day when I'm back home I check in with him.]

I need to discover where the used book stores are again in Toronto. I can think of three offhand, but some of the big ones on Yonge St. have gone under after 30 years or so. Books in, books out; we have eight boxes of books that will be going to an exchange near the beginning of next month.

[I've gotten rid of half my library so far but it is frightening how many books I still have left.]

OPUNTIA #389: With all these end-of-the-world movies, one to tag onto the list is one coming out shortly, GEOSTORM. I don't know the movie's plot, and I don't really care to, but it does look quite disastrous. Perhaps the box office will prove to be this movie's true disaster.

[I'll keep an eye on the bargain bins.]

I still quite enjoy the use of my relatively new candlestick phone. It is a push-button version, but I do still have to hold it by the centre shaft, and pick up the receiver to hold it to one ear.

OPUNTIA #390: [Re: BNAPEX stamp show] Wonderful stamps, and I may have one or two of them. I am sure there is a major philately club in Toronto, but it is probably as political as any other organization I've belonged to. I will happily pass on it. Once fandom has lost its appeal (not long from now), I might embrace our stamp collections again. Clubs these days are simply Facebook pages, where you can join, and do very little, just like most of the members.

[I'm not aware of politicking in stamp clubs, since philatelists are generally more mature. I just checked the latest issue of CANADIAN PHILATELIST to see how many stamp clubs there are in Metro Toronto. Unfortunately they list Canadian stamp clubs alphabetically, not geographically. Out of about 200, I would guess from a quick skim of the list that about a dozen clubs exist in Metro Toronto.]

OPUNTIA #391: I remember when I was looking for a suitable school to get my journalism degree at, and one of my choices was SAIT. If it's become a trade school, it probably doesn't have its journalism courses anymore.

[SAIT has always been a trades school from its beginning more than a century ago. In your time, Mount Royal College, today Mount Royal University, had a journalism degree programme.]

[Re: mad scientist fiction slowing down Earth's rotation.] The Earth is slowing down and will stop? Good news for those who'd like to stay up all night, for night would be endless. I suspect Earth would be relatively lifeless at the time, so finding something to do in that endless night might be difficult, especially if you are struggling to stay alive.

OPUNTIA #392: [Re: Calgary park floral displays for Canada 150.] The floral designer is working overtime. We live just down the street from the Etobicoke Civic Centre, Etobicoke's old City Hall, and the local Parks Department workers keep the grounds very flowery, and pleasing to look at. We still have much of it, because of abnormally high temperatures for this time of year.

Re: the distracted pedestrian: We have dozens of them here every year. A past episode of CSI refers to this kind of passing as Death by Stupidity. I do, too. One of the best clips I have seen online shows a young lady too concerned with her smartphone to pay attention where she's going, and she flips herself right into a deep fountain.

I see a letter from Milt Stevens here. Another friend gone.

OPUNTIA #393: Interesting article on early steampunk literature. Modern stuff can be difficult to wade through, so I might hope that the early stuff might be better.

[Most of it is juvenile fiction, but bear in mind that juvenile fiction then would be equivalent to most modern adult fiction. The dumbing down that started in recent decades continues apace. The price is right for those old books, free in a variety of formats from www.gutenberg.org]

FROM: Joseph Nicholas
London, England

2017-10-23

Looking at your photographs of the Riley Park commemorative flower displays in OPUNTIA #392 reminds me of the very worst of what is here referred to as “municipal planting”, garish, clashing displays of brightly-coloured flowers in urban parks, usually of reds, yellows and blues, very often wallflowers. I have no idea whether this is because these flowers are cheaper and easier to grow than others, or because it's thought necessary to show to park users that the parks are being planted up. Having said that, there seems to have been less of it during the past few years, I suspect because the continued expenditure cuts to which local authorities have been subject since the Conservatives took office in 2010 means that flowers displays have fallen well down the priority list.

In fact, parks in general have slipped down the priority list, because their provision and maintenance is a discretionary rather than a statutory duty. In many cases, certainly in our borough of Haringey; probably in other London boroughs which are ranked equally on various quality indicators; also probably in many post-industrial cities in the north of England; the planting has been taken over by friends of parks groups initially established to represent the interests of parks users to the local authority but now a reserve army of park keepers. Not good. Indeed, the state of England's parks was the subject of a recent investigation by a House of Commons committee, sparked by the dereliction into which they were falling as a result of the continuing expenditure cuts, and perhaps also inspired by a recent study of their history and future, *A WALK IN THE PARK; THE LIFE AND TIMES OF A PEOPLE'S INSTITUTION*, by Travis Elborough.

I note your comment in response to me in OPUNTIA #392 that you agree that climate change is occurring but that “*most of it is natural because Earth is still in an interglacial period*” and also that “*anthropogenic changes are magnifying the amplitude of the changes but did not cause them*”. The Earth may be in an interglacial period. It was once thought that the invention of pastoralism and then arable farming around 11,000 years BP (Before Present) prevented the Earth from tipping back into a glacial period because of the impact on its climate of the clearance of forests and the domestication of livestock, but the archaeological and palaeo-environmental evidence no longer seems to support that.

But that aside, you will surely be aware of the developing case for the Anthropocene, the new sub-division of the Holocene and so-called precisely because of the measurable impacts that the human species is having on the world as a whole. There are seven to eight billion of us at present; by the middle of this century our numbers will have increased to ten to twelve billion; some statisticians and population demographers argue that by then we will have reached “peak population” (for various reasons connected with GDP per head, healthcare and education, especially in the developing world) and that our numbers will then begin to decline, but it seems to me obvious that whether or not they fall these numbers must have an impact.

It's been argued since at least the 1970s that we're at the onset of what was once referred to (and I think still is) as the Sixth Great Extinction Event (there having been five previous such events in the Earth's geological history). Even in my own lifetime and in my own locality I've seen changes attributable to the human species.

When we first moved to Tottenham, a quarter of a century ago, we had large flocks of house sparrows visiting our garden, and the gardens of the houses around us; within a decade (and this is true for London as a whole) those birds had gone entirely. The reasons are poorly understood, but air quality, aka vehicle pollution, has been suggested as one cause. We used to have wasps in our garden in the summer; but I have not seen a single wasp for two summers now, and others report the same. Again, the reasons are unknown, but one never really notices these changes until after they have occurred.

[House sparrows are still a pest bird in Calgary, and wasps are as common here as they ever were. The only air pollution we have is forest fire smoke drifting in from British Columbia during summer, otherwise skies are normally clear.]

You may be aware of a recent report by some German entomologists of catastrophic declines in various invertebrate populations in a couple of German nature reserves. Admittedly, this is only one study, but that such population declines have been discovered in protected areas surely points to the population collapses that will have occurred in our herbicide and insecticide-drenched farmlands. Indeed, the plummeting fortunes of farmland bird species throughout England is a consequence of the eradication of the insects on which many of them depend.

You also refer to people “*putting themselves in harm’s way by living on hurricane coasts and floodplains but refusing to adapt to those environments*”. True, but of course a warmer world, through thermal expansion of the upper layers of the oceans and the enhanced moisture load that warmer air conveys, intensifies the impact of hurricanes and floods, transforming what were formerly once in a century events into once in a decade events.

[In a meteorology course I took as a university student, I recall the professor working himself up into a blind fury over the mis-use of the phrase “once in a century storm”. What the general public fails to understand is that it doesn't mean a storm only occurs once and then everyone can sit back in relief for 99 years. It means that over a period of centuries, a given level of storm averages out to that frequency, but it could be five successive storms and then nothing for several centuries. The other problem is that these frequencies are calculated on the past few centuries, based on the assumption that the climate won't change.]

Four winters ago, the UK was struck by a succession of severe winter storms (the first time such storms were given names, because they were so more intense than usual), with catastrophic flooding in the Somerset Levels in the southwest and the Lake District in the northwest. In the former case, it was because the Levels are at and in some parts below sea level. They had for centuries been farmed (for sheep and cattle) in a manner which took account of this and allowed for periodic winter flooding, but the intensification of UK agriculture since the Second World War saw the land criss-crossed with drainage channels and the rivers embanked, with the obvious consequence that when the floods arrived they were worse than they might otherwise have been.

Those 2013 floods were themselves only a few years after a previous winter flood event, with people reacting in the same way as then, urbanites demanding more flood protection and farmers demanding higher river embankments. The Lake District floods were attributable to the hills having been denuded of their

tree cover by grazing sheep, with the 2013 floods again being a repeat of those a few years previously (and in one town washing away the same, rebuilt river crossing).

Everyone had been told that trees on the hills help retain rainwater, and been shown the success stories elsewhere where tree cover had been restored; but the shrieking from urbanites and farmers was the same: more money. The farmers in particular claimed that if the hills weren't covered with sheep they'd go out of business, but they're only in business in the first place because of the subsidies they receive. These subsidies will certainly have to be adjusted post-Brexit, because the EU will no longer be paying them under the Common Agricultural Policy, and perhaps because people will start to demand more environmental sensitivity from UK farmers once it is understood what a colossal money sink they are. Amazingly, this degraded landscape was recently given UNESCO World Heritage status.

[Calgary has a population of 1.2 million. The great flood of June 21, 2013, left 100,000 houses destroyed, all of them on bottomlands within a five-minute walk of either the Bow River or the Elbow River. The rest of us live up on the plateau or in the Rocky Mountain foothills. Those ruined houses have all been rebuilt, ready for the next flood to destroy them. Against stupidity, the gods themselves contend in vain.]

I have seen the YouTube video you mention, it was one of several such pieces of footage, of cars escaping from Fort McMurray in May 2016, reminding me very much of what's a common occurrence in parts of Australia. Not that we've ever had first-hand experience of forest fires when we've visited, which is more often now that we're retired, but I have seen text messages stripping across the bottom of Western Australian evening news broadcasts telling people in X, Y or Z to get out, and in one case telling people that it was too late to escape from wherever it was. Ditto footage of the June 2013 flooding.

I would argue that the intensity of such events is directly attributable to the anthropogenic impact, additionally, although the Calgary floods may have been “*unprecedented since records were first kept*”, Calgary is, relatively speaking, a young settlement and the records may simply not go back far enough to cover previous such events. In any case, you should probably expect more of them, more frequently.

[The citizens of Fort McMurray have returned and are busily rebuilding their city, half of which was burned over by the forest fire. The new houses are, as per usual in western Canada, wood frame, wood siding, and asphalt or pine shake roof shingles. Will a kilometre-wide fire break be cleared around the city? Of course not.]

I'll close by noting that the film referred to by the late Milt Stevens in his letter in issue #392, based on the Kuttner and Moore novella "Vintage Season", is **TIMESCAPE** (variantly titled **GRAND TOUR: DISASTER IN TIME**, which rather gives away not just the plot but the rationale for it). You can find a full summary of the storyline on Wikipedia; as he said, it's worth seeing, at least the once.

But now it's time to spend a few hours at the allotment, cutting back the raspberries. The autumn's been so mild, up until the past few days and the arrival of the tail-end of Hurricane Ophelia, one tantalising prediction for an Anthropocene, warmer world is that the cross-Atlantic tracks of summer and autumn hurricanes may shift north and east, and then Storm Brian, that they've continued fruiting until the beginning of October, with the perpetual strawberries delivering a few fruits as well. But we need some overnight frosts at some point, or the parsnips won't be triggered into setting their sugars.

SEEN IN THE LITERATURE

Baccini, A., et al (2017) **Tropical forests are a net carbon source based on aboveground measurements of gain and loss.** **SCIENCE** 358:230-234

Authors' abstract: *The carbon balance of tropical ecosystems remains uncertain, with top-down atmospheric studies suggesting an overall sink and bottom-up ecological approaches indicating a modest net source. Here we use 12 years (2003 to 2014) of MODIS pantropical satellite data to quantify net annual changes in the aboveground carbon density of tropical woody live vegetation, providing direct, measurement-based evidence that the world's tropical forests are a net carbon source of 425.2 ± 92.0 teragrams of carbon per year (TgC year). This net release of carbon consists of losses of 861.7 ± 80.2 Tg C year and gains of 436.5 ± 31.0 Tg C year. Gains result from forest growth; losses result from deforestation and from reductions in carbon density within*

standing forests (degradation or disturbance), with the latter accounting for 68.9% of overall losses.

Speirs: This paper points out that forests are net emitters of carbon dioxide. In the middle 1970s when I was a university student, I took a number of courses in plant and soil ecology, long before anyone heard the term "global warming". Among the basic facts of soil science were that forest soils are poor in nutrients and carbon because those are held aboveground in the wood and leaves. Grassland soils, by contrast, are rich in nutrients and organic material because the majority of grass biomass is in the roots. Therefore, to increase carbon storage would mean cutting down as many forests as possible and seeding them to grass.

Devièse, T, et al (2017) **Direct dating of Neanderthal remains from the site of Vindija Cave and implications for the Middle to Upper Paleolithic transition.** **PROCEEDINGS OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES USA** 114:10606-10611

Authors' abstract: *Radiocarbon dating of Neanderthal remains recovered from Vindija Cave (Croatia) initially revealed surprisingly recent results: 28,000 to 29,000 B.P. This implied the remains could represent a late surviving, refugial Neanderthal population and suggested they could have been responsible for producing some of the early Upper Paleolithic artefacts more usually produced by anatomically modern humans.*

This article presents revised radiocarbon dates of the human bones from this site obtained using a more robust purification method targeting the amino acid hydroxyproline. The data show that all the Neanderthal remains are from a much earlier period (>40,000 cal B.P.). These revised dates change our interpretation of this important site and demonstrate that the Vindija Neanderthals probably did not overlap temporally with early modern humans.

Williams, F.S., et al (2017) **Intestinal parasites from the 2nd to 5th century AD latrine in the Roman Baths at Sagalassos (Turkey).** **INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF PALEOPATHOLOGY** 19:37-42

Authors' abstract: *We analyzed five samples from the latrines of the Roman bath complex at Sagalassos, Turkey. Fecal biomarker analysis using 5β-stanols*

has indicated the feces were of human origin. The eggs of roundworm (*Ascaris*) were identified in all five samples using microscopy, and the cysts of the protozoan *Giardia duodenalis* (which causes dysentery) were identified multiple times in one sample using ELISA.

The positive *G. duodenalis* result at Sagalassos is particularly important as it represents the earliest reliable evidence for this parasite in the Old World (i.e. outside the Americas). As both these species of parasite are spread through the contamination of food and water by fecal material, their presence implies that Roman sanitation technologies such as latrines and public baths did not break the cycle of reinfection in this population. We then discuss the evidence for roundworm in the writings of the Roman physician Galen, who came from Pergamon, another town in western Asia Minor.

Tukiainen, T., et al (2017) **Landscape of X chromosome inactivation across human tissues.** NATURE 550:244-248

Authors' abstract: Mammalian female tissues consist of two mixed cell populations, each with either the maternally or paternally inherited X chromosome marked for inactivation. X chromosome inactivation (XCI) silences transcription from one of the two X chromosomes in female mammalian cells to balance expression dosage between XX females and XY males. XCI is, however, incomplete in humans: up to one-third of X-chromosomal genes are expressed from both the active and inactive X chromosomes (Xa and Xi, respectively) in female cells, with the degree of 'escape' from inactivation varying between genes and individuals.

The extent to which XCI is shared between cells and tissues remains poorly characterized, as does the degree to which incomplete XCI manifests as detectable sex differences in gene expression and phenotypic traits.

Here we describe a systematic survey of XCI, integrating over 5,500 transcriptomes from 449 individuals spanning 29 tissues from GTEx (v6p release) and 940 single-cell transcriptomes, combined with genomic sequence data.

We show that XCI at 683 X-chromosomal genes is generally uniform across human tissues, but identify examples of heterogeneity between tissues, individuals and cells. We show that incomplete XCI affects at least 23% of

X-chromosomal genes, identify seven genes that escape XCI with support from multiple lines of evidence and demonstrate that escape from XCI results in sex biases in gene expression, establishing incomplete XCI as a mechanism that is likely to introduce phenotypic diversity.

Boxell, L., et al (2017) **Greater Internet use is not associated with faster growth in political polarization among US demographic groups.** PROCEEDINGS OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES USA 114:10612-10617

Authors' abstract: We combine eight previously proposed measures to construct an index of political polarization among US adults. We find that polarization has increased the most among the demographic groups least likely to use the Internet and social media. Our overall index and all but one of the individual measures show greater increases for those older than 65 than for those aged 18 to 39. A linear model estimated at the age-group level implies that the Internet explains a small share of the recent growth in polarization.

Quillian, L., et al (2017) **Meta-analysis of field experiments shows no change in racial discrimination in hiring over time.** PROCEEDINGS OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES USA 114:10870-10875

Authors' abstract: We assess trends in hiring discrimination against African Americans and Latinos over time by analyzing callback rates from all available field experiments of hiring, capitalizing on the direct measure of discrimination and strong causal validity of these studies. We find no change in the levels of discrimination against African Americans since 1989, although we do find some indication of declining discrimination against Latinos. The results document a striking persistence of racial discrimination in US labor markets.

We perform a meta-analysis of every available field experiment of hiring discrimination against African Americans or Latinos ($n = 28$). Together, these studies represent 55,842 applications submitted for 26,326 positions. We focus on trends since 1989 ($n = 24$ studies), when field experiments became more common and improved methodologically. Since 1989, whites receive on average 36% more callbacks than African Americans, and 24% more callbacks than Latinos.

We observe no change in the level of hiring discrimination against African Americans over the past 25 years, although we find modest evidence of a decline in discrimination against Latinos. Accounting for applicant education, applicant gender, study method, occupational groups, and local labor market conditions does little to alter this result. Contrary to claims of declining discrimination in American society, our estimates suggest that levels of discrimination remain largely unchanged, at least at the point of hire.

Pikul, J.H., et al (2017) **Stretchable surfaces with programmable 3D texture morphing for synthetic camouflaging skins.** SCIENCE 358:210-214

Authors' abstract: Technologies that use stretchable materials are increasingly important, yet we are unable to control how they stretch with much more sophistication than initiating balloons. Nature, however, demonstrates remarkable control of stretchable surfaces; for example, cephalopods can project hierarchical structures from their skin in milliseconds for a wide range of textural camouflage.

Inspired by cephalopod muscular morphology, we developed synthetic tissue groupings that allowed programmable transformation of two-dimensional (2D) stretchable surfaces into target 3D shapes. The synthetic tissue groupings consisted of elastomeric membranes embedded with inextensible textile mesh that inflated to within 10% of their target shapes by using a simple fabrication method and modeling approach. These stretchable surfaces transform from flat sheets to 3D textures that imitate natural stone and plant shapes and camouflage into their background environments.

Dzidek, B., et al (2017) **Why pens have rubbery grips.** PROCEEDINGS OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES USA 114:10864-10869

Authors' abstract: Why does gripping a pen, tool, or handle feel more secure when it is coated with a rubbery material? The keratin of the skin outer layer is stiff and rough at a small scale. When encountering a smooth, stiff, and impermeable surface, such as polished metal or glass, the actual contact area is initially small as is the friction.

Because the keratin softens when it is hydrated by the moisture secreted from the sweat pores, it requires many seconds for the contact area to increase to the

value reached almost instantaneously with a soft material, such as a rubber. This mechanism might be used by our tactile sense to identify materials and has implications for the design of tactile displays.

The process by which human fingers gives rise to stable contacts with smooth, hard objects is surprisingly slow. Using high-resolution imaging, we found that, when pressed against glass, the actual contact made by finger pad ridges evolved over time following a first-order kinetics relationship. This evolution was the result of a two-stage coalescence process of microscopic junctions made between the keratin of the stratum corneum of the skin and the glass surface.

This process was driven by the secretion of moisture from the sweat glands, since increased hydration in stratum corneum causes it to become softer. Saturation was typically reached within 20 s of loading the contact, regardless of the initial moisture state of the finger and of the normal force applied.

Hence, the gross contact area, frequently used as a benchmark quantity in grip and perceptual studies, is a poor reflection of the actual contact mechanics that take place between human fingers and smooth, impermeable surfaces. In contrast, the formation of a steady-state contact area is almost instantaneous if the counter surface is soft relative to keratin in a dry state. It is for this reason that elastomers are commonly used to coat grip surfaces.

Silver, D., et al (2017) **Mastering the game of Go without human knowledge.** NATURE 550:354-359

Authors' abstract: A long-standing goal of artificial intelligence is an algorithm that learns, tabula rasa, superhuman proficiency in challenging domains. Recently, AlphaGo became the first program to defeat a world champion in the game of Go. The tree search in AlphaGo evaluated positions and selected moves using deep neural networks. These neural networks were trained by supervised learning from human expert moves, and by reinforcement learning from self-play.

Here we introduce an algorithm based solely on reinforcement learning, without human data, guidance or domain knowledge beyond game rules. AlphaGo becomes its own teacher: a neural network is trained to predict AlphaGo's own move selections and also the winner of AlphaGo's games. This

neural network improves the strength of the tree search, resulting in higher quality move selection and stronger self-play in the next iteration.

Starting tabula rasa, our new program AlphaGo Zero achieved superhuman performance, winning 100 to 0 against the previously published, champion-defeating AlphaGo.

ZINE LISTINGS

[I only list zines I receive from the Papernet. If the zine is posted on www.efanzines.com or www.fanac.org, then I don't mention it since you can read it directly.]

THE FOSSIL #373 (US\$10 per year, from The Fossils Inc, c/o Tom Parson, 157 South Logan Street, Denver, Colorado 80209) A zine about the history of zinedom. This issue makes the point that if you don't leave a written legacy then you will soon be forgotten. There are some biographical accounts to illustrate this. Also included are news from various amateur press associations, as well as an account of surviving the recent Houston flooding.

ONE FINAL BIT OF HALLOWEEN



I see this Bigfoot jujube candy in the stores from time to time. Why he should be playing a banjo is something for conspiracy theorists.

I've done enough hiking in the mountains to know that Bigfoot photos are fakes, or, which probably got the legend going, a black bear walking on its hind legs.

