

OPUNTIA 415



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.

THE CALGARY MILITARY MUSEUMS:
PART 1. THE KING’S OWN CALGARY REGIMENT
photos by Dale Speirs

This issue begins a series about the Calgary Military Museums, which I recently toured. I took far too many photos to squeeze into one issue, so I’ll serialize them by unit. The CMM is a single organization but uses the plural because it is a merger of all the museums that were previously individually operated in Calgary by army and militia regiments, navy stone frigates (as inland bases are called), and air force squadrons. The building covers the space of about three football fields and requires at least a half day to tour properly.

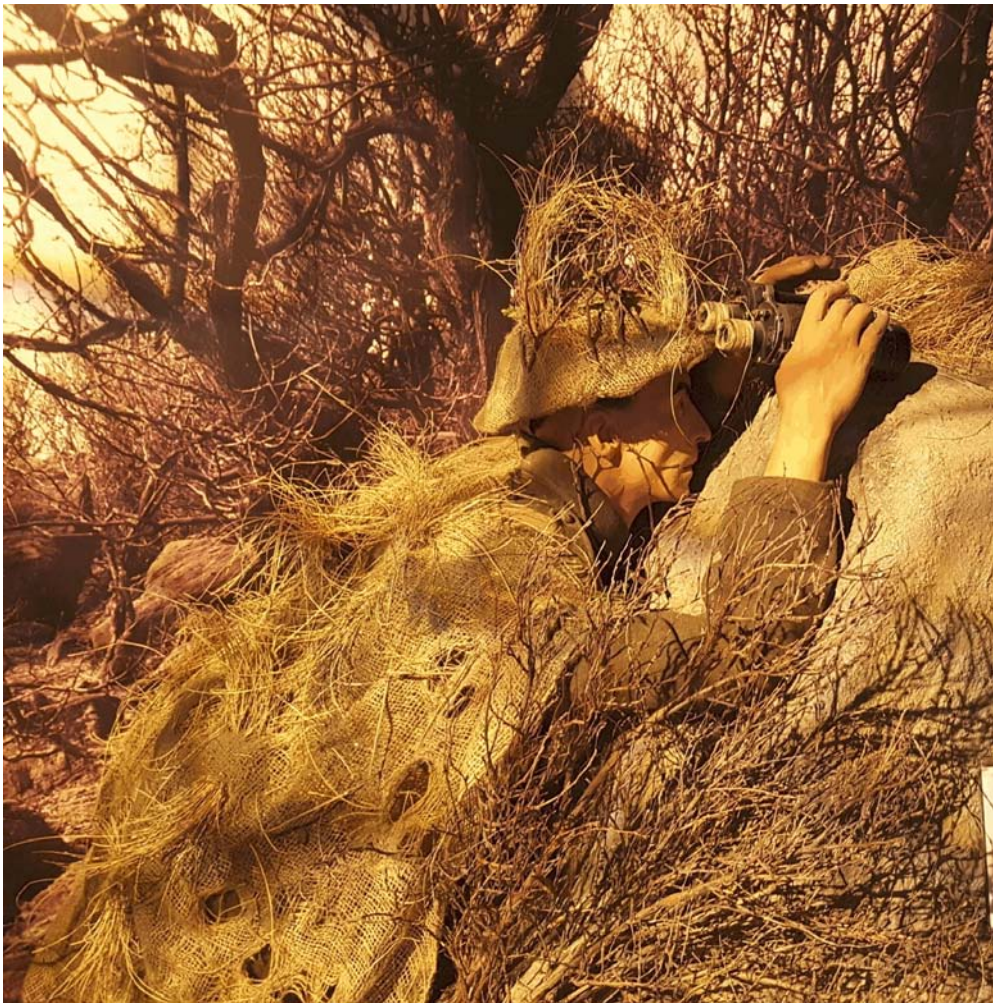
Just to start off, the cover and this page show a few of the statues and vehicles on display outside the CMM.



The King's Own Calgary Regiment is a militia (equivalent to an American Reserve unit) founded in 1910. It was originally an infantry regiment but was converted to an armoured unit in 1936, which it has been ever since. It was first blooded in World War One. These life-size dioramas show scenes from that war.

Below: An attack on a German pillbox.

At right: Forward reconnaissance. It doesn't show well in the photo, but the soldier is using periscope binoculars.



Next page: This is a miniature diorama showing the battle of Vimy Ridge, the first time Canadian troops fought under their own command and not as British colonials. Notice the puffs of smoke from shelling, simulated by cotton fluffs sprayed painted. They were very realistic. TKOCR were in the worst of it.



At right: A life-size diorama with an actual tank depicting the disastrous raid on Dieppe, France, on August 19, 1942. It was a complete failure and taught the Allies what not to do on D-Day. It also made the Germans over-confident that when another invasion was staged, they could handle it. The diorama shows a TKOCR tank coming off a landing craft. The Germans were waiting for them and none of the tanks made it into action.

Below: A miniature diorama showing a TKOCR tank pushing a portable bridge across a canal during the battle for Holland in 1945.



STATELY PILES: PART 3

by Dale Speirs

[Parts 1 to 2 appeared in OPUNTIA's #386 and 395.]

Where There's A Will.

Manor houses, especially when isolated on an island or during a storm, make a good setting for mysteries. Everyone is confined to the mansion, and there is a limited cast which usually shrinks in number as the story progresses.

THE MONSTER WALKS (1932), written by Robert Ellis, is available on the Mill Creek DVD box set titled 50 Horror Classics. It is a movie from the dawn of the talkies (the first sound movie was released in 1927). The pace is slow by modern standards. The actors speak in voices modulated for the stage, and pause before replying to someone else. They were still learning back in the early 1930s, and hampered by primitive microphone technology.

The plot is about Ruth Earleton and her fiancée Dr Ted Clayton coming to the manor house of her family for the reading of her father's will. Her crippled uncle Robert Earleton lives there, assisted by housekeeper Mrs Emma Krug (whom Ruth calls Auntie) and her son Hanns.

Herbert Wilkes, the family lawyer, is an unexpected overnight guest, trapped there by a storm that brewed up in the opening scenes. It's a full house, along with a black chauffeur to provide comic relief.

Pause for digression: One nice thing I noticed, which I don't recall seeing in any other movie with similar scenes, is that in this movie during the storm there are bright lightning flashes outside the windows but the thunder doesn't arrive until several seconds later. This is how we all know it in real life. The Hollywood standard, however, is that the light flash and the sound wave occur together, even when it is obvious the lightning is some distance away.

Against that, alas, is the matter of the gorilla. Ruth's father was a mad scientist who did some sort of experimenting with what were repeatedly mentioned as gorillas. The animal shown, to the contrary, is a chimpanzee, a real one, not an actor in a fur suit. *He can't possibly escape*, says Uncle Robert. We know better, don't we.

The reading of the will sets an ugly tone for what will follow. Her father left everything to Ruth except a small bequest to Mrs Krug. Hanns is not happy and was expecting more. The will specifies that if Ruth dies young, the estate goes to her uncle.

It takes everyone, characters and viewers alike, about two seconds to realize the implications and what direction the plot will head next. Everyone settles in for the night. As the viewer will correctly anticipate, the excitement begins after the hallway grandfather clock strikes midnight.

Uncle Bob (if I may call him that) is in a wheelchair and can't do much, but Hanns is his illegitimate son by Emma and does the dirty work for him. The mansion is riddled with secret passageways, through which Hanns herds the ape. The chimpanzee qua gorilla is released in Ruth's room but she survives the attack.

Mrs Krug, unaware of what her son and her one-time lover were planning, stays in the bedroom to calm Ruth down. Ruth is given a sedative by Clayton and falls asleep in an armchair, with Emma staying with her in case she needs help. The ape is brought back by Hanns, who doesn't realize that his mother is now sleeping in Ruth's bed. Its second attack is successful, albeit off target; it killed Krug.

When he learns what happened, Hanns is understandably broken up by his mother's death. In the heat of the moment he strangles the uncle, his father. Hanns then lures Ruth downstairs to the ape cage to finish the job on her. Almost but not quite; Clayton comes to the rescue. The ape turns on Hanns and kills him.

That pretty much clears the field for Ruth, who will be a wealthy young woman. Nothing is said about what will become of the ape, but in one night Ruth's uncle and illicit cousin have been cleared out of the line of succession. A fair to middling movie if judged as a B-movie.

DARK AND STORMY NIGHT is a 2009 bargain bin movie that parodies the subgenre of manor house mysteries. It is written and directed by Larry Blamire. It follows one of the standard plots, the group of people gathered for the reading of the will of the wealthy deceased, in his isolated mansion. As per standard plot, the telephone lines are down and the bridge has washed out.

The guests are murdered one by one. The reading seems to be turning into a tontine. The solicitor reading the will is the first fatality, but he didn't go to the grave alone. The movie parodies cliches, such as the lights going out just before the next murder. A secret passageway is opened by tilting a book in a bookcase but when three different guests tilt as many different books searching for the lever, they get whacked in the face.

Many of the gags run on just a little bit too long, and could have been edited. The actors generally overdid their roles, and would have been funnier with less mugging. Mildly amusing, and worth viewing once.

Murderous Mansions.

MYSTERY IN WHITE (1937) by J. Jefferson Farjeon is a recently re-issued novel, one of many by a forgotten author. It begins in the English countryside on Christmas Eve when a train is stopped by snow drifts during a blizzard. Help will be a long time coming. Five passengers disembark and seek shelter in a nearby country mansion rather than shiver in the cold train.

The door is unlocked, the table is laid out for tea, but no one is home. Shortly thereafter they are joined by a Cockney calling himself Smith, who refuses to explain why he was wandering about in the storm. Still later, another passenger arrives, carrying the news that a man was murdered on the train by persons unknown.

The seven strangers settle in for the night, picking out bedrooms and wondering where their hosts are. Sometimes they quarrel and sometimes they resolve to get organized and do things systematically.

The middle portion of the novel sets up the characters and their motivations. Trapped inside the manor house by huge snowdrifts, they are penned like a group of cattle in an auction mart, trying to sort out who is the alpha animal.

As they snoop about the house, bits and pieces of information come to light. They find letters which suggest a murder had been done there years ago and never solved. £5,000 in cash may be hidden in the house. Hypothesizing this, that, and the other thing becomes a major activity. It is discovered that some of the passengers had past links to the house, which they kept quiet about for good reason. The pace picks up when the first corpse appears.

Others depart this vale of tears. Eventually the events are unscrambled in a complicated epilogue. There are enough loose threads left to supply a knitting club. The police arrive, and the manor settles back into normalcy. Although the style of the novel is long obsolete, it does make an interesting read. A good book to curl up with on a dark and stormy night.

FOG ISLAND (1945) is based on the play "Angel Island" by Bernadine Angus, with screenplay by Pierre Gendron. It is on the Mill Creek 50 Mystery Classics DVD box set. The movie is about an embezzler Leo Grainger (name misspelled in the credits as Grainer but correctly pronounced by all the characters in the movie) who did five years imprisonment in a different type of big house and has now returned to this big house, his mansion on Fog Island.

His wife had been murdered by one of his cohort in the embezzlement, all of whom had testified against him at the trial. He gets them onto the island under a ruse and then begins his revenge. The mansion has assorted secret passageways, like any respectable manor house, and everyone makes good use of them.

Grainger has rigged a booby trap for his guests, who think the stolen money is still on the premises and hope to get it. His young stepdaughter Gail and her boyfriend are not in on his plotting but she is certainly sympathetic for him as she wants revenge for her mother's death.

Events turn ugly at night. Everyone is supposed to be in bed, but each is skulking around the house looking for the embezzled money. They begin taking each other out, and Grainger is the first victim, killed by the man who murdered his wife.

He gets his revenge from the grave though when, after a few more guests are killed by each other, the survivors reach the same hidden room at the same time. They trigger the booby trap and die the hard way. Only Gail and her boyfriend live to see the morning sunrise. The movie works quite well and is certainly busy enough once the night of the long knives begins. Well worth viewing.

"Murder Mansion" was a 1950 episode of INNER SANCTUM MYSTERIES, one of the most successful old-time radio series ever, with 527 episodes aired between 1941 and 1952. (This and other OTR shows are available as free mp3s from www.otrrlibrary.org.) Unfortunately whoever posted this mp3 clipped off the credits.

Many episodes, including this one, were introduced by a genial host named Raymond, who delighted in ghoulish puns. Each episode opened with the sound of a creaking door, the trademark of the show.

Raymond would warmly welcome the listener and invite him to step into the inner sanctum, but be careful not to slip in the splash of blood on the floor. ISM is not for the squeamish. Always good fun for campy mysteries, the kind where only one survivor makes it to the end.

This episode begins with a man named Burley buying the Crandall mansion, an elderly pile of bricks looming at the edge of a cliff. The Crandall family graveyard is immediately adjacent, a way of keeping the family together, as the real estate agent jokes. There is a stipulation on the land title that the graves could not be moved.

A moment after the deal closes, a deranged woman named Mrs Emily Robins appears, demanding that Burley sell the mansion to her. She says she was born a Crandall, and only a Crandall may live there. Anyone else will never spend a happy moment in the mansion.

Burley goes home to make arrangements for the move. His housekeeper Ada greets him and breaks the bad news that while he was away his wife suddenly died for no apparent reason. In the aftermath, he moves into the Crandall mansion, determined to stick it out despite threats from Robins. Ada comes along with him.

Assorted ghostly events force Burley to give in and sell the mansion. This time the real estate agent sells it to a friend of Burley, also a scoffer about the paranormal. Guess who's next? After him, more twists.

The real estate agent turns out to be the murderer, and not for the first time. He tries to kill Robins, thinks he killed Ada, and brags about having buried his wife in the cellar a long time ago. He can't afford to buy the house, so his plan is to frighten buyers enough that the price drops to something he can afford, and thus be able to stand guard over his victims. But he'll get what's coming to him in the final twist.

NO MALLETS INTENDED (2014) by Victoria Hamilton (pseudonym of Donna Lea Simpson) is a novel in the Vintage Kitchen cozy mystery series about Jaymie Leighton, of Queensville, Michigan. In this installment, she is

working for the Queensville Heritage Society, which is restoring Dumpe Manor, a big house that has seen better days.

While prepping the house for renovations, a batch of antique kitchen utensils is discovered, including assorted mallets that were used for mashing food or tenderizing meat. There is also a legend about a valuable piece of jewelry hidden in the mansion.

Leighton is working late one night in the manor when she surprises an intruder, who knocks her unconscious with one of the mallets. Nothing appears to have been stolen, so whatever the intruder was looking for he didn't find it. Life carries on after that brief flurry of excitement, including dealing with the restoration committee and its collection of giant egos, and squabbling members of the Dumpe family. They no longer have control of the mansion but that doesn't stop them from asserting themselves.

One of the characters is an outlander named Theo Carson, a hack writer hired to produce a book about the Dumpe family and the history of the house. He hints that his research has uncovered scandal in the family's not too distant past. Surprise! Carson doesn't make it past the end of Chapter 7, having had his head bashed in with a meat tenderizer mallet. Leighton, as the resident Miss Marple, found the body.

There is other loot hidden in the mansion, valuable antiques in this day and age. One of the family means to get the stuff out for himself, by fair or mostly foul means, and make some money. The problem is other people getting in the way, which much of the time means Leighton.

It all comes down to the usual confrontation with the murderer and an epilogue to tie up loose ends. Plus a recipe from the 1950s for turkey roulettes. A fair read for a cozy.

Haunted Houses.

The other widely used cliché of the big house is for haunting and ghostly doings. I'm not saying there aren't any, but stories of haunted one-bedroom condos seem scarce. They don't have the same glamour as a manor house.

THE SAINT was an OTR series that ran from 1945 to 1951, based on the novels and short stories by Leslie Charteris. Several actors played the role of

Simon Templar, but the last one, Vincent Price, was by far the best. His suave style, golden voice, and ready quips made his shows the best of any private detective series.

The Saint was an urbane man who lived well with no visible means of support. He was constantly stumbling into crime scenes and righting wrongs. “The Ghost Who Came To Dinner” was an example, a 1951 episode written by Louis Vittes.

The Saint is traveling in the wilds of Long Island en route to a dinner party when his car breaks down. Nearby is a deserted mansion, the Hawthorne house, which no one has lived in for a century. A man comes running down the driveway, and tells Templar that he has just seen ghosts in the house.

The mansion is lit up, a large group of people are in the dining room, and all are dressed in the style of a century ago. Templar investigates, since he is not going anywhere, and finds mystery. It is a group of Hawthorne heirs, not ghosts, who, in order to keep the inheritance income flowing, are required by old man Hawthorne’s will to meet in the house once a year for dinner and to dress in the style of his era.

The complications develop. It isn’t a manor house unless murder has been done. Templar does some sleuthing and dredges up divorces and greedy heirs. Tell the old, old story. Someone wants to circumvent the Hawthorne will. The story terminates rather abruptly, with a few loose ends dangling.

THE LIBRARIANS is a television series, available on DVD, about a ragtag group who work for a secret library that collects magical artifacts and tries to stop evil doers. “And The Heart Of Darkness” (2015) is a first-season episode written by Geoffrey Thorne.

The episode is set in Slovakia, where the Librarians have been mapping ley lines when they come across a haunted mansion in a forest. It is in the style of a 19th-century American frontier house. This naturally prompts one of the Librarians to ask what the hell it is doing in the middle of a Slovakian forest.

The mansion, it is learned, is the archetype of all haunted houses in the world. The haunted house moves from place to place, taking its victims and then moving to its next location somewhere else in the world. The Librarians investigate. Much roaming around deserted rooms, mysterious sounds, and

apparitions of assorted types. The corridors are longer than the house, and the interior measurements don’t match up with the external dimensions.

The standard horror movie cliches are made fun of, with appearances of Rosemary’s baby’s crib, teenagers who explored the house and died the hard way, and a demon made of smoke. There is a dollhouse into which a couple of the Librarians are sucked. Much running about up and down stairs, which certainly helps pad out the episode.

Once all the movie cliches are used up, the plot makes a right-angle turn. It seems the house is a misunderstood entity that only wanted to help. Long ago, the spirit of a serial killer took control of the house. The Librarians manage to kill it, and the house once again becomes benign. It vanishes to who knows where. The Librarians drive away, and all is happiness and light. Touches of humour but not as much as other episodes. Worth viewing once.

WORLD WIDE PARTY ON JUNE 21

Founded by Benoit Girard (Quebec) and Franz Miklis (Austria) in 1994, the World Wide Party is held on June 21st every year. 2018 will be the 25th year of the WWP.

At 21h00 local time, everyone is invited to raise a glass and toast fellow members of the Papernet around the world. It is important to have it exactly at 21h00 your time. The idea is to get a wave of fellowship circling the planet. Rescheduling it to a club meeting or more convenient time negates the idea of a wave of celebration by SF fans and zinesters circling the globe.

At 21h00, face to the east and salute those who have already celebrated. Then face north, then south, and toast those in your time zone who are celebrating as you do. Finally, face west and raise a glass to those who will celebrate WWP in the next hour.

Raise a glass, publish a one-shot, have a party, or do a mail art project for the WWP. Let me know how you celebrated the day.

SPRING HAS SPRUNG
photos by Dale Speirs

The street festival season begins in Calgary on the first Sunday in June, when the Mission district kicks off with its Lilac Festival. It is timed with the blooming of lilacs while hopefully avoiding the rainy season later in the month.

Mission is in south central Calgary. The main drag is 4 Street SW. The festival closes it off between the Elbow River and 13 Avenue, roughly a kilometre long. Attendance is about 50,000 people.

I arrived about 12h30. It took me about two hours to walk to its far end and back again, with one stop for a grilled bratwurst from a food booth.

The kiosks are about 25% food and the rest are small businesses and a few big ones as well. The stores and restaurants along the way do outstanding business, with lineups stretching out their doors. At each side street is a bandstand for musical acts, and at least one juggler.

The photo at right is looking north down 4 Street SW towards the downtown core.



Below is a view looking south. Lots and lots of food trucks.

At right: All the politicians come out for the festivals. The United Conservative Party was formed after the debacle in the last provincial election when the two right-wing parties, Wild Rose and Progressive Conservative, split the vote and allowed the NDP (labour-socialist) to come up the middle and take over Alberta's government.



Top: It never ceases to amaze me how some people think they can run an incredibly specialized business and make money.

Bottom: The modern age has arrived.



**IF YOU AREN'T SQUAMOUS,
THEN WHY ARE YOU TRYING TO BE ELDRITCH?: PART 8**
by Dale Speirs

[Parts 1 to 7 appeared in OPUNTIA's #298, 333, 340, 352, 365, 395, and 410. Issues #22 and 63.1A have related articles on H.P. Lovecraft.]

Now that the copyrights to H.P. Lovecraft's works have definitely expired and they are all in the public domain, a flood of pastiches is flowing into the marketplace. It used to be that even a single short story was big news, but lately I'm having trouble keeping up with all the new anthologies and novels making use of the Cthulhu Mythos.

SHOGGOTH (2016) by Byron Craft is about one of the critters of the Mythos, the shoggoth. As HPL described them, they were giant black amoeboid forms of limited intelligence, with multiple eyes floating at the surface. They could extrude tentacles or form organs at will.

They were created by the Elder Gods as servants, but as so often happens, got away on them and rebelled. The Elder Gods retreated to the oceans but shoggoths developed the ability to survive on land, hence their ability to plague humans who go where they should not go.

The novel at hand begins with a short piece of foreboding, about an alien who millions of years ago created a life form. A quick jump to the Mojave Desert in the 1800s, where an explorer working in secret with a couple of native helpers has found tunnels with a giant amoeboid inside. It wasn't giant when they first found it while exploring underground for artifacts.

The little amoeba grew when they first fed it, then became big enough to take guinea pigs. From there, it demanded hogs and cattle, and finally took the humans that had been sheltering it. The last man manages to trap it behind a thick barrier in the tunnel before he dies. No one else knew about it, and the secret dies with him.

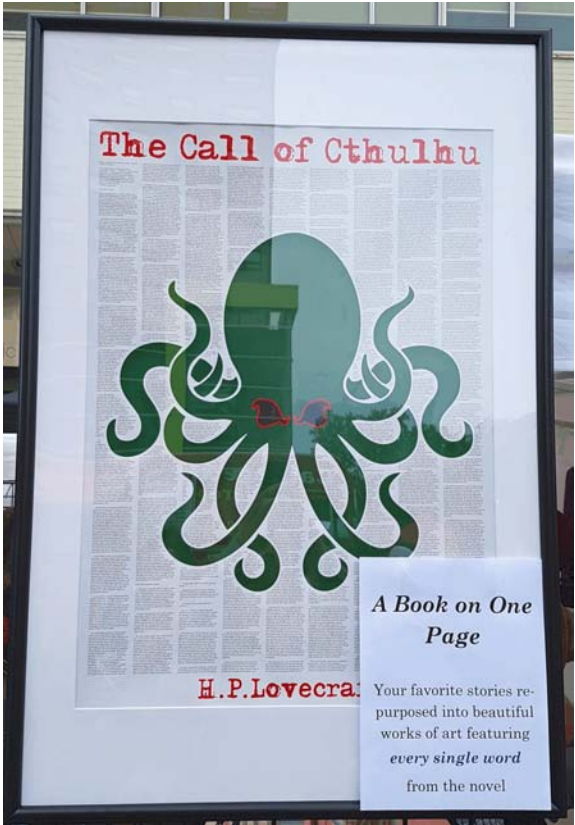
Jump forward again to modern times. A Navy Seabee team is doing preparatory work in the desert for a new testing site when they collapse the roof of the tunnel. Upon exploring it, they find a tiny little amoeba which nonetheless manages to grow quickly. It is, of course, the shoggoth, starved over more than a century back down to acorn size but hungry as ever. Then it begins growing.

There is a subplot where a greedy senator hires hit men to stymie the operations. He wants the shoggoths for his own evil ends, and almost succeeds.

The plot follows standard monster horror procedure. First the unwitting discovery, then the slow realization of what it is. After that, as a character once said in a Jurassic Park movie, the screaming begins. There are some scientists from Miskatonic University attending the scene and further reinforcing the Mythos. They manage to work out the basics of shoggoths, knowing the history of them from previous research.

The only good shoggoth is a dead one, and that can only be done with fire. The marines move in with flamethrowers to burn out the tunnels and resolve the matter once and for all. Somehow the containment operations trigger magma flows that fill the tunnels under the Mojave Desert. Convenient geology.

The book read reasonably well as far as the action-adventure plot, but was seriously marred by lack of proper copyediting and fact checking. There were many spelling, grammatical, and typographical errors that kept jarring the narrative. Not once but several times there were orphan quotation marks.



Since this book was published in the age of Google, the author could have easily verified facts. As an example, he refers to the Cretaceous era as being more than 50 million years ago when it actually ended 65 megayears ago.

Seen at a kiosk in the Lilac Festival. Since I already have the book, and this version requires a magnifying glass to read, I didn't enquire about the price.

TALES FROM THE MISKATONIC UNIVERSITY LIBRARY (2017) is an anthology edited by Darrell Schweitzer and John Ashmead about the world's most dangerous library. With all of its grimoires and arcana, it is a place where staff and readers must ever be on their guard, lest some Mythos creature check out a human instead of a book.

"Slowly Ticking Time Bomb" by Don Webb is about a book of spells which can only be used one section at a time, and inevitably pulls the owner/reader to a nasty conclusion. The OOL ATHOG CHRONICLES have some reasonable spells that are irresistible. If your mother is dying of painful cancer, then how can you resist curing her? Like alcoholism, one drink is too many and a thousand are not enough, and the use of spells for stronger and less worthy reasons destroys the reader.

"The Third Movement" by Adrian Cole is about a bookfinder named Artavian Wormdark who has been asked to locate a specific grimoire by Vermilion, a sharp-practice man. The scoundrel represents a group who will use it for evil. Wormdark doesn't want the job but Vermilion makes him an offer he can't refuse.

Wormdark gets even though, as he knows the guardian of the book, who advises him about a booby trap in the book's slipcase. The book is guarded by a demon who is trapped and wants to be free, needing only a replacement to take over the job. Vermilion doesn't know it, but he is going to change careers.

"To Be In Ulthar On A Summer Afternoon" by Dirk Flintheart follows a man tracking after a woman who has used a grimoire from the Miskatonic library to travel between the Lovecraftian spaces to Ulthar. She is a complete novice at spell casting and has gotten herself into trouble. The man is a proctor for the library, whose duty is retrieving overdue books. He doesn't care about her and strands her in Ulthar before returning to our dimension with the book. There is, however, a twist ending. Proctors are made, not born, from readers who racked up excessive overdue charges.

"Interlibrary Loan" by Harry Turtledove considers what happens when an Iranian borrows a copy of the NECRONOMICON from M.U. Library. The answer is to let them, secure in the knowledge that the book can defend itself and will eventually make its way back to the library. The Islamic radicals who try to use it in Syria against the Sunni mispronounce one of the words in a spell from the book. The crater where they stood is blamed on American bombing.

“A Trillion Young” by Will Murray considers what would happen if some idiot digitized the NECRONOMICON. The world’s most dangerous grimoire is held in the vaults of the Rare Book Room of the Miskatonic University Library to prevent anyone from using it. However, it only takes one young curator to unleash it on the world as a pdf.

From there, the damage spreads as both a computer virus and a human virus, for the elements of the NECRONOMICON can transmute on their own once liberated into the Internet. The end of the world is nigh as the eldritch parasites spread as an epidemic and convert the humans into slaves to await the arrival of the Old Ones.

A dud story was “The Paradox Collection” by A.C. Wise, about a new librarian at Miskatonic. He is a gutless weeper, always going on about his abusive childhood and alcoholic father, and unwilling to grow up and be an adult. An unsympathetic character who ran away from problems as a child and still runs away as an adult. Throwing in a shoggoth doesn’t make the story anymore interesting.

“The Way To A Man’s Heart” by Marilyn Brahen is about a faculty wife whose husband, a workaholic professor at Miskatonic, is not performing his manly duties in the marriage bed. A sympathetic librarian at the university points her to an eldritch cookbook with a recipe that will cure the problem. A vital ingredient is powdered shoggoth, which a local arcana store supplied. It succeeds, but the husband is now part shoggoth. However, she doesn’t consider it a bad deal, since shoggoths can extrude pseudopods at will.

“The White Door” by Douglas Wynne is about one of Miskatonic’s grimoires that won’t stay put. The book goes traveling on its own to other libraries around the world. Each person who happens to read it sees a different text, each one predicting that reader’s future. The call number is 133.9 ARM, in case your library uses the Dewey Decimal system. And no, it isn’t the NECRONOMICON.

“One Small Change” by P.D. Cacek is about a public library which borrows a copy of a grimoire from Miskatonic for a local professor who is researching things that he shouldn’t. An elderly librarian Eleanor McCormack deals with him and a new Head Librarian who is a young woman giving her a hard time. McCormack learns something about the grimoire that the other two don’t know and suffer for it; the book absorbs people and traps them inside as new chapters.

The story reads well but there were two small things that irritated me. The small change is repeatedly referred to, yet is never used in the plot. It is like a military story describing a tank in great detail and then spending the rest of the plot on fighter planes. There was one sentence which belongs in Thog’s Master Class over at the zine ANSIBLE, about a voice that: *broke into a million silent screams*.

“Recall Notice” by Alex Shvartsman is a trivial short-short about letters sent by the Miskatonic librarian to freshman H.P. Lovecraft III concerning books he checked out. The final letter is an unbelievable about-face in the plot.

“The Children’s Collection” by James Van Pelt is about a newly graduated librarian taking up his first job at Kingsport Public Library in the Miskatonic River Valley. The children’s library has some very strange books, which, however, doesn’t faze him. He reaches out to the old families of the valley, the ones who look eldritch even if they aren’t squamous.

They home-school their children, so the librarian encourages them to bring their spawn, pardon me, children to the library after hours so they can read books for fun. The plan works. A rather interesting story that puts an upbeat ending on what other authors would have used as a typical gloomy ending in the Mythos.

“Not In The Card Catalog” by Darrell Schweitzer is somewhat similar to Cacek’s story. It is about three Miskatonic librarians and their interaction with a grimoire THE BOOK OF UNDYING HANDS. Two eldritch factions are vying to possess it, with the humans trapped in the middle.

The librarians defeat one faction, at the cost of one of their lives and another being absorbed into the book, albeit voluntarily. Whoever was the last to be absorbed has their hands forming a clasp on the book. The book travels about on its own, mostly within the library, but when it moves, someone is about to depart this vale of tears.

“The Bonfire Of The Blasphemies” by Robert M. Price is the final story in this anthology. Someone has torched a wing of the Miskatonic Library containing its most eldritch and dangerous tomes. Prof. Ezra Pepperidge tries to find replacement volumes. After an out-of-body exchange with the conical aliens that Lovecraft had described, he begins a quest to locate replacements. He makes a deal with someone in the space between the dimensions to replace the books.

There was a bit of terminological inexactitude. What happens is that around the world all classical books, the great religious texts, Greek and ancient Roman books, and such, are replaced by the grimoires that once reposed in Miskatonic and have been magically reproduced. No one can remember anything of the missing books, but it isn't long before countless curious readers begin trying out the incantations of those grimoires. A new world is about to be born, and not in a pleasant way.

On the whole, this anthology was excellent reading, one of the best Mythos pastiche collections I have read. A couple of poor stories do not detract from the quality of the others. Well recommended.

THE MAN FROM MONTENEGRO: PART 18
by Dale Speirs

[Parts 1 to 17 appeared in OPUNTIA's #252, 253, 275, 278, 279, 289, 304, 307, 319, 332, 335, 337, 344, 355, 364, 365, and 382.]

Parodies.

Between 1964 and 1979, science fiction writer Randall Garrett published a series of short stories and a novel about Lord Darcy, who lived in an alternative universe where Richard III survived to a ripe old age in charge of the Anglo-French Empire, the Reformation never took place, and where magic had been codified to strict rules of science rather than random spell-casting and handwaving.

The Plantagenets are still on the throne, Poland is a menacing empire threatening the German and Russian states, and the Americas are loyal colonies or part of the Aztec Empire. Lord Darcy was a police detective who investigated murders and high crimes affecting the nobility.

Society is very stratified. The Church and the nobility are definitely in charge. There is no democracy, but average citizens live in a capitalist society and are generally free to live their lives without interference as long as they worship at a Catholic church of their choice. The stories took place at the times they were

originally published, that is, the late 1960s and 1970s, with a mixture of steam technology, gaslight, some electrical devices but no radio, and a bit of clockwork technology.

Most of the stories stand alone in the alternative history, but Garrett wrote a novel TOO MANY MAGICIANS (1967) that was a homage to Nero Wolfe. Lord Darcy is summoned to investigate a murder and meets up with his cousin, the gargantuan and lazy Marquis de London, an obvious Wolfe. His assistant is Lord Bontriomphe, an equally obvious translation into French of the surname Goodwin.

Besides the title, many phrases commonly spoken by the characters are paraphrases or outright duplicates of those used in the Wolfe novels. Words like 'flummery' or 'pfui' are almost a trademark of Wolfe but appear in this parody frequently and not necessarily spoken by him. After all the running about and investigating by both Darcy and Bontriomphe, there is a J'accuse! meeting in de London's brownstone where the killer is exposed.

The novel is quite serious and well written. Someone who has never read the Wolfe stories will completely miss the references and take the book at face value as an AH murder mystery. Either way, it is a good read, as indeed are all of the Lord Darcy stories.

"As Dark As Christmas Gets" by Lawrence Block (1997, reprinted in CHRISTMAS AT THE MYSTERIOUS BOOKSHOP, edited by Otto Penzler) is a humorous parody of Wolfe. The story is narrated by Chip Harrison, self-consciously playing the role of Archie Goodwin. He works for Leo Haig, a poor man's Wolfe, who lives on the top two floors of a brownstone and raises tropical fish.

They are hired by a bookstore owner to find a manuscript that went missing at a Christmas party. Haig stages a J'accuse! meeting in the bookstore on Christmas Day. When it is protested that no one would come on the day, Haig points out that the suspects are book collecting nerds who aren't doing anything anyway. The confab goes hilariously and sends up the Wolfe meetings with devastating accuracy.

Each suspect testifies as to the perambulations of the manuscript. It turns up on the bookstore owner's bedside table, but not before he is embarrassed by some revelations about the morning after the night before.

Pastiches: Novels.

Robert Goldsborough has been writing pastiche novels about Nero Wolfe, which I have reviewed in previous installments of this column. A few were uneven reading but he has been getting better at them, and the latest novel reads quite well.

THE BATTERED BADGE is set in the early 1960s. There has been a shake-up at both City Hall and One Police Plaza. The new Police Commissioner has suspended Lt Cramer from the Homicide Squad and replaced him with Capt. George Rowcliff, an unpopular martinet who can't handle the job.

A political reformer Lester Pierce was shot dead by a hit man, who in turn was killed by the Mafia for freelancing without permission. Pierce directed the Good Government Group, which campaigned against graft and organized crime. The organization had minor success against some City Hall bureaucrats but was ineffective against the Mafia.

Few believe the hit was done by the Mafia but no one can think of a better reason. Pierce was a womanizer who tried to be discreet, but his wife and their grown children knew about his affairs.

Wolfe doesn't care about Pierce and initially has no client, but he and Goodwin despise Rowcliff and would rather have Cramer back. Wolfe starts a few things in motion to reach that goal, but it takes time to stage the comeback. Indeed, Cramer is offstage for the first two-thirds of the novel and we hear nothing from him. Using some well-planted newspaper gossip to stir up trouble, events are set in motion. Rowcliff gets nowhere.

The widow of Pierce hires Wolfe to find out who killed her husband. Goodwin verifies that the Mafia had nothing to do with it, and the investigation concentrates on those who knew Pierce as family or business associates. In parallel to that story plot, efforts to reinstate Cramer finally succeed. Rowcliff gets what he deserves, and is shuffled off to a dead-end job in Traffic Division.

The ending is a twist in one way. Normally the J'accuse! meeting, where all the suspects are gathered together, is in Wolfe's office. Cramer persuades the big guy to not only have it down at Homicide, but to attend in person. If Mohammad won't come to the mountain, etcetera.

Mrs Pierce gets the bad news. It was one of her children who killed the father. He blabs all in the meeting but cleverly positions himself for an insanity defense. Whether or not it works is not decided by the end of the novel.

The book was much better written than some of its predecessors, and was a steady read. Well recommended.

SECRET HISTORY REVIEWS: PART 2

by Dale Speirs

[Part 1 appeared in OPUNTIA #367.]

Secret histories should not be confused with alternative histories. The former do not change our timeline, but are things not recorded in standard books.

The Victorian Legacy.

IN THE COUNTRY OF THE BLIND (1990) by Michael Flynn supposes that Charles Babbage, the father of computers, had not had the attention span of a butterfly and instead developed working mechanical computers in the Victorian era. A secret society is formed to use the computers for cliological analysis, that is, the study of history as a predictive science. Thereby hangs a tale.

Sarah Beaumont is a real estate developer who stumbles across traces of the Babbage Society while renovating an old building they once occupied. The society is still in existence and still underground, working to predict events and shape them for personal benefit. The conspiracy learns of her snooping and tries to eliminate her. But there are two societies, the result of a feud a century ago, and each working for their own ends.

Beaumont is drawn into one faction after the other one tries unsuccessfully to assassinate her and successfully to kill off people she talked to during her investigations. This provides the opportunity for her erstwhile allies to lecture about the Tide of History versus the Great Man effect on the flow of history. Since no reader can know all the obscure historical persons mentioned, there are

a lot of scenes in classrooms or boardroom meetings where someone learnedly discourses in the usual infodump style.

Calculations on the Babbage engines leaned toward history as an inevitable tide which can be deflected slightly by meddling but not changed in toto. In other words, if not Hitler, then some other rabble rouser would have led Germany into a second war. Beaumont, however, is more concerned with staying alive than learned papers on historical divergences.

Then a third secret society is suspected, then more branches. The Babbage Society members realize they overlooked one vital point. When a great discovery's time comes, there are many fathers. If not Darwin, then Wallace. So many secret societies are discovered, working at cross-purposes, that one of the cliologists proposes they form a league. Finally, one of them realizes that every government has its group of people who want to alter history with tax policies and military actions.

People begin disappearing as everyone tries to cover their tracks. Someone manages to dump the computer database of one society out into the Internet, a la the Panama Papers, which gets the news media interested. Everyone begins seeing conspiracies everywhere, and paranoia spreads out. Beaumont has to have plastic surgery and change her identity to survive.

The novel trickles to a close with Beaumont and her faction more or less winning, if only because they are the last ones standing. They decide the best way to resolve the problem is to expose all and get so many different new cliological groups created that they will cancel out each other's efforts.

World War Two.

“Project Trojan” is a 1956 episode of the old-time radio series DIMENSION X, written by Ernest Kinoy. (This and hundreds of other OTR shows are available as free mp3s at www.otrrlibrary.org) During World War Two, British counterintelligence decides to spoof the Nazi by inventing a nonexistent death ray and fabricating evidence of same. The idea was that once the Nazis got wind of the project, they would divert staff and resources into a futile chase.

A professional SF writer is brought in from the ranks to help polish up the idea and make it seem plausible to any spies. Like the real-world *The Man Who Never Was*, the details required a lot of thinking. An engineering battalion

spends time in the English countryside practicing with dummy death ray machines. An opposition member asks a question in the House of Commons and is put off by the Minister on grounds of national security. Civilian help in technical units are sworn to secrecy, so of course someone soon blabs in a tavern after one real ale too many.

The diversion works. Germany begins pulling scientists, engineers, and technicians off rocket projects. They are obviously worried about the death ray gap. British intelligence officers congratulate each other on a wonderful plan.

The congratulations are soon choked off when word comes that a German mountain seems to have disappeared, as if vapourized by a death ray. Other reports come in indicating that the Germans had actually succeeded in making a particle beam. If it goes into production, they will win the war.

As the Brits fret, news comes that a massive explosion has destroyed the laboratory where the death ray was created. Something to do with metal fatigue, as is later learned. All the personnel involved in creating the death ray are killed, and all the blueprints and devices are destroyed. The Germans are back to where they were. In the press of events, as the war turns against them, they don't have time to restart the project.

British intelligence decides to keep quiet about Project Trojan. As one officer remarks, they almost handed victory to the Nazis on a silver platter. It would not be good for the careers of those involved in the backfired deception. The files are ‘lost’ and everyone involved is returned to their previous assignments. It never happened.

The plot is predictable but the story progresses smoothly. Since the listener knows it never happened in our timeline, the only suspense is in how it will be explained away. Nonetheless, a good listen.

ROCKET SCIENCE (2005) by Jay Lake is a novel about a World War Two veteran who brings back a souvenir with him, a German spezialwaffen aircraft. Narrated by his friend Vernon Dunham, 4F because of a bad leg, they discover the machine was recovered from deep in Arctic ice by the Nazis in 1943. Foreign and American government agents quickly arrive, for it is difficult to smuggle in Nazi equipment, even if you label it as fertilizer manufacturing equipment.

That aircraft is indeed one special weapon. It begins speaking telepathically to Dunham, first in German, then English. It is an alien spacecraft that made a bad landing 437 years ago. Dunham calls it Pegasus and befriends it. The spaceship wants oil for lubricant in order to restore function and get back out into space.

There are assorted twists and turns in the plot. Having lost the war, renegade Nazis want Pegasus back to restore the Reich. The Soviets are on its trail, as is the American government.

The final few pages explain much of the back story. Pegasus is an autonomous scout ship, whose masters used Mars as a way station. The novel ends abruptly. Pegasus offers to take Dunham roving through the Solar System. It cannot travel to the stars, but there is still plenty to see in our local area. Everyone wants to keep quiet about Pegasus, hoping to use its powers for their cause. That is why you never heard about in this timeline.

THEY SHALL MOVE OUT OF THEIR HOLES LIKE WORMS OF THE EARTH: PART 7
by Dale Speirs

[Parts 1 to 6 appeared in OPUNTIA #307, 308, 331, 347, 390, and 399.]

Tremors.

The TREMORS franchise of movies and a short-lived television series have, on the whole been well done, with lots of humour and good SFX. I reviewed the first four movies in OPUNTIA #307 and the television series in #308. All were good viewing. The fifth movie, made in South Africa (reviewed in #347), was not as well done, lacking the comedic turns that relieved the tension of the graboid hunts.

Graboids are gigantic worms that can tunnel through sediments as fast as a man can run, and detects its surface prey by vibrations. They have an alternate life stage called ass blasters, a metamorphic winged form that is rocket propelled by methane. In the series and movies they are referred to as Precambrian life

forms. This can't be, because life was still microscopic and not yet organized into giant 20-tonne invertebrates.

Another movie is now out on DVD, and is better done. TREMORS: A COLD DAY IN HELL (2017), written by John Whelpley, moves the story to Nunavut. The movie repeatedly refers to Nunavut as a province instead of a territory and mis-spells the name as Nanavut. A jarring note for Canadian viewers.

The movie was filmed in a South African desert in a field of pure white sand dunes. Incredibly, it actually works. If you didn't watch the bonus feature explaining how the movie was made, then you would think it was filmed on a genuine ice field in Canada.

Besides bringing back some humour into the series, it also concentrates on the next generation of graboid hunters. Burt Gummer, the main protagonist through all the series, had a grown son Travis introduced in the fifth movie, who steps forward to carry the freight. A young girl from the earliest part of the series is now a woman working as a scientist when she and her colleagues discover that graboids can live in ice fields.

Gummer is suffering from a blood parasite he picked up from a graboid in an earlier movie when he was too close and personal with the beast. The infection has slowly developed over the years, and now he is spending as much time in a hospital bed as out in the field. He has trouble accepting the fact that it is time to step aside for a younger man. From there the story proceeds.

The humour has returned to the movies. There are running gags through the movie. Gummer changed baseball caps, to the Chicago Cubs, as a result of which all through the movie his friends are astonished, and keep asking him why he changed teams. He hates doing the paperwork to bring his firearms into Canada.

Global warming is trotted out again as the villain of the piece. Monster movies used to blame radioactive fallout for all those giant critters trashing cities, but since the threat of atomic war doesn't sell newspapers anymore, disaster epics have updated.

The graboids can travel through ice as they did in desert sediments, and as the ice fields melt away, they are spreading through the expanding fields of soggy permafrost.

DARPA is running a joint USA-Canada operation in Nunavut, thus providing the ever-paranoid Gummer with justification for his conspiracy theories. The locals don't look like any Inuit I've ever seen, but then again I would be surprised if any have been to South Africa.

Ass blasters take out aircraft and radio towers, isolating the scientists and Gummer in the valley with a group of graboids. The supporting actors are gradually winnowed by the beasts. Gummer gets his cure, and the sun shines gaily on the sand dunes qua ice fields. A bit more watchable movie.

Hollow Earths.

Flin Flon is a mining town that straddles the Manitoba-Saskatchewan border. It has the distinction of having been named after a science fiction character. Tom Creighton, the geologist who named the mine, had a copy of THE SUNLESS CITY, a novel by J. Preston Muddock published in 1905.

Creighton named the mine after the lead character in the novel, Josiah Flintabbatey Flonatin, who for obvious reasons was known to his acquaintances as Flin Flon. The town that later grew up around the mine took its name from it. I found a copy of the book at Wikisource and discovered that it was a hollow Earth story.

Flin Flon was a grocer whose heart wasn't in the business. His greatest joy was being named a Fellow of the Society for the Exploration of Unknown Regions. Having heard of a lake in the Rocky Mountains that was immensely deep but had no outlet, he decided to explore it with a submersible boat. He began his voyage with no human companions but did carry in the submarine six pigeons, a small goat, two fowls, six rabbits, a black cat, and a little white dog. One can imagine the pungent odour inside the ship after a short time.

Down he sinks into the lake. Just past 1,100 fathoms (a fathom is six feet) the ship is caught up in the suction of water draining down into the hidden outlet of the lake. After many hours, the underground river drops the ship over a waterfall and into a lagoon of a cavern. Flin Flon goes exploring and finds a fossilized forest. He gets lost, and further on discovers bones of giant humans and pachyderms. In a lake, there are eyeless fish.

He makes it back to his submarine, launches it back out into the river, and after a trip through a long tunnel arrives in another and far more immense cavern. He

goes out hiking to look at the marvels of the place, but on his return to where he had beached the submarine, it was missing. He was stranded with nothing. He eventually finds his ship further downstream and continues on his way.

What follows are a succession of tunnels and caverns. The light is supplied by electrically charged clouds floating at the tops of the caverns. In one such void, he meets with a giant house-sized turtle. He fires a gun at it, upon which the turtle slips back into the water. A few minutes later, loud thunder begins reverberating through the cavern, and he realizes it is the echo of his gun, circling about several times in the confined space until the sound waves finally fade away.

Finally he descends to a cavern with a tropical jungle. Adjacent to it is a plain, or shield rock rather, made of solid gold. The centre of the Earth is indeed paradise. Not long after, he meets with the natives, basically gnomes with tails. Their leader is King Gubmuh. They do not speak English, which is logical. What is less logical is they way they do speak.

A court official says to the King: *Tisrucco ot em ruoy ytsejam taht siht tsum eb emos suorobrab egavas morfemos trap fo eht htrae hcihw ruoy ytsejam swonk ton fo. Eht ecnesba fo a liat dluow dael em ot refni taht siht dehcterw erutaerc tsum tneserper a ecar yltsav roirefni ot eht denethgilne stcejbus fo ruoy s'ytsejam mlaer. Eno dluow tsomla kniht taht eh saw eno fo eht yradnegel stirips ohw era desoppus ot llewd no eht edistuo fo eht htrae.*

You don't have to do the translation, as a savant in the court mesmerizes Flin Flon and puts him in an hypnotic state such that he can understand the backwards speech. We learn that this was the kingdom of Esnesnon. Flin Flon gets into an argument with the savant, who tells him they know that people live on the outer crust, and that they are sinners of Esnesnon who have been condemned to Hell.

Everything is done backwards in the hollow Earth. Flin Flon is condescending, and cannot see that he is because of the plank in his eye. He continues to debate with the natives but cannot conceive that others might live better than him. Nor does he like their interpretation of his world. As the Chapter 16 heading reads: *It is not always pleasant to know what other people think about us.* Flin Flon is shocked and insulted that the natives consider him to be the primitive savage, when he is obviously an enlightened man from a great civilization. Worse yet, they treat him like a specimen collected by a scientist.

Flin Flon gets in and out of assorted troubles. Princess Yobmot takes a fancy to him. The novel detours through an extended account of Esnesnon customs and laws, poking fun at other utopian stories in the process. The men are the oppressed gender, and the customs are usually the reverse of up top.

Flin Flon manages to convince the government to fund an exploration trip, the idea being to explore a cavern that might have a passage to the surface of the planet. More trials and tribulations along the way. He finally emerges near San Francisco but his hopes for a grand reception are dashed. No one believes his story and he is judged a madman. Many think the real Flin Flon drowned in the bottom of the lake and he is an imposter. He goes into quiet and obscure retirement, a sadder but probably not wiser man.



The novel is a parody of all those utopian novels which even by 1905 had tried the patience of many a reader. Worth reading once.

AT THE EARTH’S CORE is a 1976 movie based on Edgar Rice Burroughs’s Pellucidar novel, with screenplay by Milton Subotsky. It was re-released on DVD in February 2018 with the usual bonus features. I got my copy from Amazon.

The movie isn’t bad if you consider it as a late 1950s movie done in colour. The SFX were about two decades behind the times. There were obvious split-screen views where the colour balancing of the background was different from the foreground. The monsters were rubber suits, rigid and lifeless.

Since it is an ERB story, the viewer knows it was not great literature but will be reasonably good action adventure, leavened with humour. The movie’s greatest asset is the delectable Caroline Munro, on leave from the usual sort of bad Italian SF movies she is remembered for.

The movie opens promptly with Dr Abner Perry and his handsome young sidekick David Innes drilling into a Welsh mountain with Perry’s giant tunneling mole. The machine goes out of control almost immediately and burrows straight down instead of leveling off. They find themselves inside a hollow Earth. On exiting the mole into a Carboniferous jungle, Perry remarks that this certainly doesn’t look like Wales on the other side of the mountain.

The two men are chased about by monsters, then captured by humanoids and made slaves along with a group of human cavemen, who conveniently speak English. They are taken to the masters, the Mahars, and put to work.

Assorted trials and tribulations follow, with escapes and rebellions (where’s Spartacus when you really need him?). There are the obligatory giant carnivorous plants that inhabit every lost world. Battles with assorted rubber monsters alternate with battles against cavemen. The Mahars are not invincible, and Innes finds their weak spot. It all ends in fire and destruction. Perry and Innes escape back to the surface in their mole and re-surface in the White House lawn.

EMILIE AND THE HOLLOW WORLD by Martha Wells is a 2013 novel that explains itself in the title. Emilie is an orphan who runs away from her guardians. She intends to sneak aboard a steamship to seek refuge with a cousin in the big city. Things go wrong and she ends up on a different ship, one that isn’t going to the big city.

Lady Marlende has chartered the ship in search of a hollow world inside the planet, searching for her missing father and his lost expedition. Lord Engal is in command of the ship and is a busy man. The engines are rickety and his rival Lord Ivers is trying to sabotage the ship.

The ship is protected by a force field made of (insert handwaving here) aetheric currents, which allows it to submerge. It heads into the deeps, looking for a crack in the seabed which will take it down into the hollow world. They arrive and begin searching.

A series of assorted adventures follow, such as ghost ships, aquatic monsters, friendly and unfriendly natives, a drowned city, several kidnappings, and other assorted alarms and excursions. Eventually Marlende’s father is rescued and Lord Ivers gets his just desserts. Emilie begins a new life as Lady Marlende’s personal assistant. All’s well that ends well.

Tunnels And Caves.

“Sub-Basement”, written by Arch Oboler, is a 1943 episode of the old-time radio series LIGHTS OUT. (This and other OTR shows are available as free mp3s from www.otrrlibrary.org.) It begins with a husband taking his wife down to the sub-basement of a 20-story building where he works. She was nagging him about how she wanted to see what he did for a living.

He is angry at her for various reasons. Her submissive attitude only makes him angrier. They go down into a service tunnel, the gloominess of which makes her increasingly frightened. They argue but put aside their differences after they find the night watchman lying in the tunnel with his throat slashed. Fleeing the tunnel, they find the exit is blocked. Something is down there with them.

The wife turns into a blubbering ninny, while the husband tries to think the situation through. Then they see the monster. In the final moments, he turns into a blubbering ninny and confesses to her that he had brought her down to the tunnel to kill her. It is all a moot point, as the monster disposes of both of them. A typical Oboler story. If he had trouble thinking of an ending, he just killed off everyone.

Rex Stout is best remembered for his Nero Wolfe stories, which he didn’t begin writing until he was middle-aged. Prior to that, he had a few detective stories that were fair to middling, and as a young man he wrote a bad novel that can only be charitably attributed to inexperience. UNDER THE ANDES was published in 1914. I stumbled across it by chance at www.gutenberg.org.

The narrator and main protagonist is Paul Lamar, a wealthy New Yorker. He has a dissolute younger brother Harry, who runs off with a femme fatale named Desiree Le Mire, probably not her real name. Paul chases after them and catches them in Colorado. Instead of dragging Harry away, he decides to accompany them in their travels as a chaperone.

They reach San Francisco, then charter a yacht for Peru. From there, a trip inland to the Andes. Le Mire wanders into a cave, disappears, and the two brothers follow to rescue her. They fall into an underground river and are carried deep underground to measureless caverns.

Naturally there is a society of troglodytes down below, descended from ancient Incas and now evolved into short and nasty brutes. The three humans have

various adventures, are kidnapped, escape, fall into things, climb out of things, and so forth. Much the same as any other hollow world story.

Le Mire doesn’t survive, but the two brothers make it back to New York City, sadder but not necessarily wiser. The ending is atrocious, a twist that is completely unbelievable. The narrative has numerous factual errors and logic holes. It is often tedious, as if Stout was attempting to write in the Victorian style, which in 1914 wasn’t that long ago. I did a lot of skimming.

SEEN IN THE LITERATURE

Santarelli, S., et al (2018) **Earthquake building debris estimation in historic city centres: from real world data to experimental-based criteria.** INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF DISASTER RISK REDUCTION doi.org/10.1016/j.ijdr.2018.05.017

Authors’ abstract: *Safety and availability of urban paths in case of earthquake depend on buildings vulnerability and related produced debris on streets, especially in historic city centres. Predicting probable critical debris amounts on evacuation paths (i.e.: up to path blockage) can help safety planners to propose focused interventions on buildings, to design more effective emergency plans and to improve the effectiveness of rescuers’ actions while supporting evacuees during first emergency phases.*

This work proposes new experimentally-based correlations aimed at estimating the amount of external debris for historic masonry buildings (in terms of percentage of facing street area occupied by debris and related debris depth) depending on the vulnerability of these buildings, on the seismic magnitude, and (for the first time) on the combination of these two factors and the path geometric ratio (i.e.: building height versus facing street width), so as to consider the effect of different urban contexts. Different vulnerability assessment methods are also considered to generalise the proposed methodology.

Finally, starting from obtained experimental correlations, the method is tested on one case study to demonstrate its capabilities in post-earthquake scenario prevision. The method could be a fundamental tool for the assessment of possible paths blockages and “average” available space for evacuees’ emergency motion along paths. Localizing these emergency interferences on an urban map will allow planners to propose specific risk-reduction strategies in the urban scenario.

Speirs: Calgary is not in an earthquake zone but I was interested in this article because we do have a problem with gale-force chinooks peeling heavy glass windows and panels off skyscrapers. A few years ago, a 3-year-old girl was killed while walking down the street with her father, when a window pane broke loose and sailed three blocks during a chinook.

Kienzle, S.W. (2018) **Has it become warmer in Alberta? Mapping temperature changes for the period 1950-2010 across Alberta, Canada.** CANADIAN GEOGRAPHER 62:144-162

Author’s abstract: *When a Canada-wide daily climate time series, covering the period 1950-2010, became available, an opportunity arose to analyze the time series for trends of a variety of temperature indices. The 6,833 climate grid cells covering Alberta, each with an area of 10 km by 10 km, allowed the detailed mapping of 30 temperature indices across the province.*

From each time series, an annual series was computed, which then enabled trend analyses using the non-parametric Mann-Kendall and Sen Slope tests. New maps could be created at an unprecedented spatial resolution, and an associated website was developed to access all trends and changes between 1950 and 2010 for all grid cells at albertaclimaterecords.com. The confidence levels of some temperature trends exceed 99%, while others are below 80%.

In Alberta's south, annual average temperatures have increased by 1°C to 2°C since the 1950s, but in Alberta's north the increase is 2°C to 4°C. The growing season has lengthened by between one and five weeks since the 1950s, while the number of frost days has declined. The most significant trends observed were increases in mean annual and winter temperatures, and declines in the number of days below -20°C and heating degree days.

Juutilainen, J., et al (2018) **Magnetocarcinogenesis: is there a mechanism for carcinogenic effects of weak magnetic fields?** PROCEEDINGS OF THE ROYAL SOCIETY OF LONDON 285B:doi.org/10.1098/rspb.2018.0590

Authors’ abstract: *Extremely low-frequency (ELF) magnetic fields have been classified as possibly carcinogenic, mainly based on rather consistent epidemiological findings suggesting a link between childhood leukaemia and 50-60 Hz magnetic fields from power lines. However, causality is not the only possible explanation for the epidemiological associations, as animal and in vitro experiments have provided only limited support for carcinogenic effects of ELF magnetic fields. Importantly, there is no generally accepted biophysical mechanism that could explain such effects.*

In this review, we discuss the possibility that carcinogenic effects are based on the radical pair mechanism (RPM), which seems to be involved in magnetoreception in birds and certain other animals, allowing navigation in the geomagnetic field. We review the current understanding of the RPM in magnetoreception, and discuss cryptochromes as the putative magnetosensitive molecules and their possible links to cancer-relevant biological processes. We then propose a hypothesis for explaining the link between ELF fields and childhood leukaemia, discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the current evidence, and make proposals for further research.

Standen, V.G., et al (2018) **Prehistoric polydactyly: Biological evidence and rock art representation from the Atacama Desert in northern Chile.** INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF PALEOPATHOLOGY 22:54-65

Authors’ abstract: *A review of the bioarchaeological collections from the site Morro de Arica in northern Chile allowed the identification of two cases of human polydactyly. Both cases are from the Chinchorro culture, hunters, fishers, and gatherers with a maritime orientation who inhabited the coast of the Atacama Desert (9000-3400 BP). Additionally, the analyses of 75 rock art sites in the area, from the Formative to Late Intermediate Periods (3000-550 BP), allowed the identification of hands and feet with six digits.*

Given the bioarchaeological record of polydactyly, it is highly probable that the rock art images were based on real individuals with polydactyly. However, the Sr chemical signal in a juvenile with polydactyly is the same as the Sr chemical signal in the rest of the individuals buried in the same site, proving that all the

individuals were born and lived on the coast. We discuss the idea that, although these anomalies could have been the result of genetic mutations, endogamy and exposition to ecotoxic environments could also be at play within the Chinchorro groups.

Seifart, F., et al (2018) **Nouns slow down speech across structurally and culturally diverse languages.** PROCEEDINGS OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES USA 115:5720-5725

Authors’ abstract: *When we speak, we unconsciously pronounce some words more slowly than others and sometimes pause. Such slowdown effects provide key evidence for human cognitive processes, reflecting increased planning load in speech production. Here, we study naturalistic speech from linguistically and culturally diverse populations from around the world.*

We show a robust tendency for slower speech before nouns as compared with verbs. Even though verbs may be more complex than nouns, nouns thus appear to require more planning, probably due to the new information they usually represent. This finding points to strong universals in how humans process language and manage referential information when communicating linguistically.

By force of nature, every bit of spoken language is produced at a particular speed. However, this speed is not constant; speakers regularly speed up and slow down. Variation in speech rate is influenced by a complex combination of factors, including the frequency and predictability of words, their information status, and their position within an utterance.

Here, we use speech rate as an index of word-planning effort and focus on the time window during which speakers prepare the production of words from the two major lexical classes, nouns and verbs. We show that, when naturalistic speech is sampled from languages all over the world, there is a robust cross-linguistic tendency for slower speech before nouns compared with verbs, both in terms of slower articulation and more pauses.

We attribute this slowdown effect to the increased amount of planning that nouns require compared with verbs. Unlike verbs, nouns can typically only be used when they represent new or unexpected information; otherwise, they have to be replaced by pronouns or be omitted. These conditions on noun use appear

to outweigh potential advantages stemming from differences in internal complexity between nouns and verbs.

Our findings suggest that, beneath the staggering diversity of grammatical structures and cultural settings, there are robust universals of language processing that are intimately tied to how speakers manage referential information when they communicate with one another.

Walker, C., and T. Christidis (2018) **Activists against research: Experiences studying wind energy in Ontario.** CANADIAN GEOGRAPHER 62:282-287

Authors’ abstract: *Whether because instances are rare or because academics are uncomfortable writing about them, descriptions of activism against academic research cannot be easily found within the existing literature. In this paper, we share our experience of being young geographic researchers faced with impassioned opposition against our work. Studies we conducted of wind energy development in rural Ontario spurred backlash; activists used several means of opposing our research and attempted to discredit us as capable academics.*

Summary of certain points in this article: The authors were accused of working for the energy industry (they were not), letters were sent to their university demanding they be fired and their research suppressed, and false rumours were spread about their competence and personal lives.

Speirs: This is a free open-access article available online at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/cag.12453> It is an eye-opening read on the tactics used by activists. Those who follow the controversies about science fiction conventions will see the similarities.

UTILITY BOX ART
photos by Dale Speirs



This electrical box is at the intersection of Crowchild Trail SW and Glenmore Trail. (Two views shown.)



Parks Dept. is moving full speed ahead painting its garbage bins. This one is on the Bow River north bank by the Centre Street bridge.



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

2018-06-07

‘Tis election night in Ontario, and the dumbest politician in the province is now the premier. We have lost all rights to criticism for the Orange Fool in Washington, for we have elected Doug Ford, schoolyard bully, drug dealer, professional thug, to be the new premier. We all expect four years of cutbacks, and the main plank of his meagre platform? Beers for a dollar a can. We’ve sold away our future, or at least four years of it. I have turned off the TV, and have called up fanzines that need response.

[For the benefit of my non-Canadian readers, the Ontario provincial election on June 7 turfed out the Liberals, led by Kathleen Wynne, who had bankrupted the province and given it the highest electricity rates in North America. She won her riding but resigned as party leader after the debacle. The Tories, led by Doug Ford, won 76 seats. The NDP (labour-socialist) will form the Official Opposition with 40 seats. The Liberals went from a majority government down to 7 seats. The Green Party, as they seem to do in every province, elected one member. Voter turnout was 57.2%. Doug Ford represents the Etobicoke North riding, so Lloyd and Yvonne will have front row seats to watch the fun.]

OPUNTIA #411: We don’t have too many parades in Toronto, not many beyond the events at Christmas and St. Patrick’s, and I think a Sikh parade. There’s too much traffic for most roads, and road closure could seriously impact people getting home from work.

[Other than the Stampede parade, the other parades are in the middle of the day. The small parades I mentioned, such as the military units and the cosplayers, march down 8 Avenue South, which is not a through road in the downtown.]

Congrats to Calgary on hosting the 2019 Grey Cup. Let’s see if they hoist the Cup at the game.

[The Calgary Stampeders football team has a reputation for going undefeated or nearly so during the regular season, then choking during the final game.]

I've always found it funny that getting into facepaint and a costume is okay at a sporting event, but worth making fun of the people in facepaint and a costume at an event like the Calgary Comic Expo. Many of the people at the latter event get into costume and facepaint, and then go to the event. If they get cornered because they no longer look like adults, they get what they deserve. I hate to say it, but I am sure there are a number of costumers who are attacked by bystanders in most Canadian and American cities every year. This year at Anime North in Toronto, it was different; the convention was picketed by a Westboro Baptist Church-like group who held up huge signs to warn us all that our souls were in mortal peril, among other things.

[You've mentioned that before but I've never seen any reports in the news media anywhere about such physical attacks. Can anyone cite references?]

It's been a while since I have explored old time radio. Here are some fresh leads, and thank you. I find little entertainment on radio, but I do need the news, which is probably why I left Top 40 radio a long time ago, and I listen to CBC Radio 1.

[I highly recommend downloading free mp3s of OTR shows from www.otrrlibrary.org or www.archive.org. The old-time programmes are much better than any audio books read in a monotonous voice. Thousands of episodes are available for mystery, SF, drama, or comedy shows.]

My previous letter: We've had some temperatures in the high-20s Celsius, but right now, we are having cool temperatures again. I shouldn't complain; there are still reports of snow in Newfoundland and the BC interior. I keep seeing the term Juneuary.

OPUNTIA #412: [Re: public chess sites in Calgary] I've never had anyone teach me how to play chess, in spite of asking about it in high school. The chess club wanted to play, not teach. There are a few chess areas in downtown Toronto, but more and more, they are vandalized, or the city removes them for a particular project.

[Re: BARNEY MILLER disaster planning episode] Disaster planning would be a disaster in itself. I doubt anything like that would happen in Toronto, but we are quite familiar with the highways leading north, and where they would go to. Yvonne has relatives in North Bay and Sturgeon Falls, and I think we could stay with them. Just a guess at this point.

I follow the Girl Genius strip by the Foglios regularly, and I find it quite enjoyable. I haven't bought any of the Girl Genius collections, but if you're willing to start at the very beginning, it's quite a good tale. I rarely get to read other steampunk books; I find them overpriced, and the local library branch doesn't stock anything like them.

Another previous letter of mine: now that spring is presumably here, I hear more red-winged blackbirds than I do robins or any other species.

OPUNTIA #413: Sounds like Calgary is getting as expensive as Toronto. Saw an article today saying that Toronto is now the fifth most unaffordable city in the world. Something not to be proud of, a bit of world-class we don't need. I was born here, and soon, I won't be able to afford to live here.

[Even in Calgary's sinking housing market, I couldn't afford to buy my own house if I was starting over.]

We have few bookstores now. Even the Chapters and Indigo stores are shrinking their book stock, and increasing the number of gifts they offer. Magazine stores? Few and far between.

[I buy almost entirely online now. I love reading and go through a novel a day at the library since I retired, but I have no nostalgia for bookstores in themselves.]

[Re: Future Wars event] I think I know some of the Klingons on page 9.

[They all look alike to me. Seriously, if you've seen one fat Klingon with a plastic forehead, you've seen them all.]

We were vendors at Anime North, the huge anime convention in Toronto every year, and we had great sales, the second-best AN for ourselves. Right after that, we celebrated our 35th wedding anniversary, and then we marked my 59th birthday. Now that all the spring celebrations are done for the moment, we can get back our regular schedule. We have some travelling to conventions and other events planned, and will probably see more of the province over the next few months. We are making more jewelry and Hawaiian shirts, so we are pleased to be productive again.