

OPUNTIA 421



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KANANASKIS MOUNTAINS

photos by Dale Speirs

I made my second trip out to Kananaskis Provincial Park on July 20. The cover shows the south face of Mount Kidd. Although it looks like two separate mountains, it is actually just the one. It curves inward but that can't be seen from the angle I took the photo.

At right is Ribbon Creek, with Mount Allan in the distance. Below is a telephoto shot of the mountain, showing the alpine meadows.



A stop along the Kananaskis River.

Below: The first set of rapids at Widowmaker. No prizes for guessing how the name was chosen.

Above right: The second set of rapids about 50 metres downstream.

Bottom right: The third set of rapids, hardly worth the name except they contain underwater pinnacles that have torn open many kayaks over the years.



CONVENTIONAL FICTION: PART 9
by Dale Speirs

[Parts 1 to 8 appeared in OPUNTIA's #70.1A, 270, 285, 313, 364, 385, 398, and 414.]

Mundane Conventions.

The private detective series RICHARD DIAMOND ran on old-time radio from 1949 to 1953. He was an ex-cop who had a rich girlfriend. Not one of the better series, but worth listening to once. (This and other OTR shows are available as free mp3s from www.otrrlibrary.org.)

The 1950 episode “Chapel Hill Police Officer Symposium Speech” has a rather clumsy title. It was written by Blake Edwards, who went on to greater things with his Pink Panther movies. NYPD Homicide Lt. Walt Levinson had a spare ticket to a convention in North Carolina, and invited Diamond along.

On the train down, they meet a Swiss policewoman who is also going to the convention. The first event was a group photo, where the woman mutters that the photographer looked familiar. Jump to the next scene, where Levinson and Diamond stop by her hotel room and find her murdered. At a convention of police officers, this is rather embarrassing.

The local sheriff does his investigating, and so do Levinson and Diamond. The duo latch on to the photographer as the culprit, and spend most of the show building up an elaborate circumstantial case against him.

They approach the sheriff in triumph, but before they can detail their case about the photographer, he cuts the ground out from underneath them. It was the maid who did it. She had been caught by the deceased while rummaging through her purse, and in panic struck her with a vacuum cleaner, killing her. The train trip back to New York City is rather subdued.

SHADOW OF A SPOUT (2015) by Amanda Cooper is a novel in a cozy mystery series about Rose Freemont and her granddaughter Sophie Taylor, who operate a tea house in the village of Gracious Grove, New York.

Freemont is off to the annual convention of the International Teapot Collectors Society. The story begins at the opening ceremonies, where she and the rest of the audience sit in an overheated room listening to dull speakers droning

endlessly. I’m glad we never have that sort of thing at science fiction conventions.

There are the usual dramas playing out. Rival tea house operators with no love lost between them are quite willing to bring their feuds to the convention. Teapot collectors chasing after rare pots are elbowing each other in the dealer bourse. Club politicians are vying for the vacant presidency of the state chapter of the ITCS. Vicious remarks are exchanged, and at least one shoving match occurs between prima donas. Not at all like a science fiction convention, thankfully.

Freemont took a teapot to be appraised by self-proclaimed expert Zunia Pettigrew, who declares it a fake. The decision miffs Freemont but not half as much as what happens later, when someone kills Pettigrew by using the teapot as a blunt instrument. Freemont was involved in murders earlier in the series, so the police consider her as one of the usual suspects.

Taylor closes the tea house and rushes to the convention to help her granny. Lots of melodramas to be uncovered, mostly from the past. The convention politics continue, for no murder is going to stop the important things, such as electing the new chapter president. As Taylor and Freemont busily sleuth, the convention recedes into the background. They uncover romantic entanglements. They are inept detectives, and can be relied to stumble in and out of scenes without a clue as to what they just saw.

Following the new trend in modern cozies, there is an idiot plot where someone fails to check their cellphone for messages that would solve the case in thirty seconds. Alternatively, they leave their hotel suite without their cellphone or lose it in a park.

The culprit is caught because he couldn’t keep his big mouth shut, and blabs all in front of witnesses. The convention draws to a close. It was or was not a success, depending on whether you were murdered, arrested by the police, or were a friend of Freemont.

Festivals.

MURDER IN MINIATURE (2008) by Margaret Grace (pseudonym of Camille Minichino) is a novel in a cozy series about granny Geraldine Porter, the resident Miss Marple of Lincoln Point, California. This book premieres the

series. That is to say, in this novel she is a dear old lady innocently swept up by events. Several books further on, the residents of Lincoln Point become nervous if she is around, and the local police have her on a watch list.

Porter is the chairwoman of the annual Dollhouse and Miniatures Fair. She has an unreliable partner Linda Reed who disappears at an inconvenient time, leaving Porter to look after two tables at the Fair. The dealer bourse setup requires her to escort the vendors to their proper tables. Eddie the janitor, who doesn't like to give his surname, doesn't appreciate the extra work, and only does the minimum.

Outside in the real world, local politics are vicious over a proposal to redevelop some land. There are some soap operas among the inhabitants. Reed and her family are white trash, and mixed up in ugly doings. Then the bodies start showing up, full size, not miniature.

Porter has the traditional confrontation with the killer, one of Reed's ex-husbands (she had several). Fortunately for Porter and unfortunately for him, she had her crafting kit with her, which she used to stymie him. It's amazing how much havoc a glue gun can cause when a few drops of superglue are applied in the best places.

The murders were done to conceal a theft, one of those events that got out of control. Eddie and the ex-husband were in too deep to escape. The Fair, however, was a success.

Porter carries on several books later in the series when she attends a crafts fair in New York City. MANHATTAN IN MINIATURE (2015) moves the setting to the big city, the murder rate in Lincoln Point having begun to be the subject of comment by townfolk.

The story moves to a big crafts fair in Manhattan, where a murder or two more or less isn't even a blip in the daily statistics. Porter, who had grown up in the Bronx, was asked by a California dealer to represent them in the dealer bourse. She takes along her 11-year-old granddaughter Maddie.

The first murder is already waiting for them before they even arrive, so at least no one can pin it on her. The deceased is an elderly aunt of a friend of Porter, who is also exhibiting at the fair. Supposedly the dear old lady forgot to take her medication, but cash was stolen, and a fake suicide note left behind.

Meanwhile to business, the crafts fair, where Porter is asked by Security to help them identify a professional shoplifter who is hitting the dealer bourse hard. Porter's reputation as a sleuth had preceded her; they had been informed by others, which strongly suggests that she is definitely on a watch list.

Both investigations conclude successfully, although the murderer was more dangerous, trying to kidnap Maddie. Lots of useful information on how to construct miniature rooms (dollhouse style, but in dioramas or boxes). Christmas being near, Porter makes a miniature display with working lights on the Christmas tree and flickering flames in the fireplace. Or, for variety, a miniature scene inside a Santa Claus hat.

The show is mostly a dealer bourse, and their troubles and tribulations will resonate with anyone who has ever sat behind a table at a convention. Perhaps without Miss Marple; I'm not aware of any murders that were ever committed at a real-life science fiction convention.

WICKED STITCH (2015) by Amanda Lee is a novel in a cozy series about Marcy Singer, proprietor of Seven Year Stitch, an embroidery shop in the village of Tallulah Falls, Oregon. It's not all sweetness and light, as her competitors Nellie and Clara Davis are mean sisters who tag-team her with nasty gossip and dirty tricks.

The village is hosting a Renaissance Faire, and the two competing shops have booths side by side. Clara in particular manages to insult so many participants that she quickly becomes known around the Faire as the dragon lady. European-style medieval dragon, not the Chinese type. She stops her rude behaviour after someone stops her breathing by strangulation with a knitted scarf.

Marcy is a trouble magnet. The killer has transferred his/her attentions to her, trashing her booth and its merchandise. Security at the Faire was much like security at fan-run science fiction conventions, in a word, laughable.

The denouement brings out a lot of soap opera in Clara's family, with motives that stretch back decades. Marcy has a last-minute rescue from the murderer, and all ends well for the survivors. An average read for a cozy.

WHEN WORDS COLLIDE 2018
by Dale Speirs

[Reports of previous WWC conventions appeared in OPUNTIA's #71, 253, 266, 282, 318, 350, and 387.]

Calgary's annual readercon took place at its usual venue in the Delta South Hotel, at the intersection of Southland Drive SE and Macleod Trail, on the weekend of August 10 to 12. An excellent convention as always. Details, including a free pdf of the programme book, are available at: www.whenwordscollide.org

I've sorted out my panel reports by theme rather than in chronological order. The programme book blurb is in italics, followed by my remarks in Roman type.

But First, Here Is The Weather Report.

Calgary has been baking under a hot spell with temperatures in the high 20s. It culminated on the Friday of the convention, August 10, when the afternoon high reached 36.4°C, an all-time record since Calgary was first settled. The heat broke during the night and scattered showers moved across Calgary over the weekend, with daytime highs more normal in the low 20s range.

This heat is laughable to Texans and Arizonans, where 36° is considered a lovely spring day, but it is unprecedented in southern Alberta. Medicine Hat, in the heart of the flatlands four hours east of Calgary on the Trans-Canada Highway near the Saskatchewan border, reached 40°.

The previous record for August 10 in Calgary was set in 1928 when the thermometer reached 32.2°C. Since records were first kept in 1881, when Calgary was a pioneer hamlet huddled against the walls of Fort Calgary, the all-time high had been 36.1°C set on July 15, 1919, and again on July 25, 1933. History was made at the WWC convention.

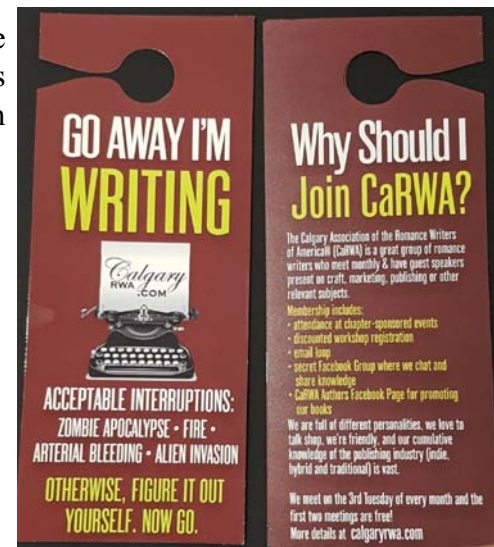
The Dealer Bourse.

WWC has a strict policy that only bookstores and publishers may exhibit in the bourse. The result is a very high quality room. I spent about \$300 on small-press books, mostly anthologies and novels. You'll be seeing reviews of these books over the next year or so as I work my way through the stack. Here are a few photos I took.





At right: The door tags were a freebie from the Calgary Romance Writers Association. This photo shows both sides.



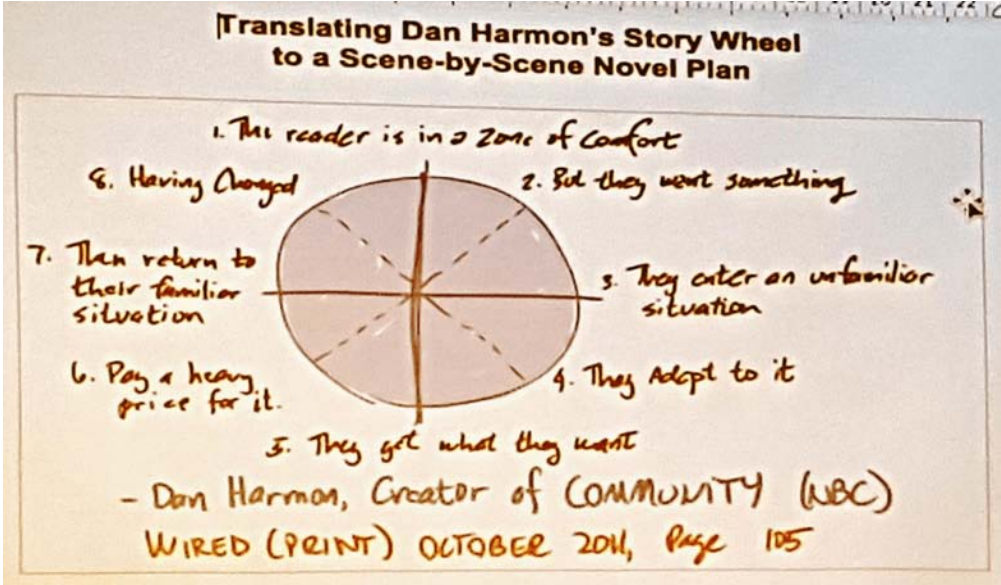
The Craft Of Writing.

“Translating The Story Wheel Into A Linear Plot”

presenter Susan Forest

Dan Harmon’s Story Wheel, based on the Hero’s Journey and the Three Act Structure, is a wonderful device for novel planning. Susan provides tips on how to translate the circular form to a linear novel plan.

Below is a screenshot of the main slide Forest used to illustrate her talk. When I say ‘screenshot’ I mean a real screen at the front of the room, photo taken by my smartphone.



Forest used the movie ROMANCING THE STONE as an example of how the heroine had to change, ditching her high heels and luggage while traveling in Columbia. Movies and television shows follow Harmon’s method. Any change in the character’s situation or the plot has to answer the question “Why now?”, and not just “Because”. The story can go around the wheel more than once.

Different genres have different obligatory scenes upon which the plot structure hangs. An obvious example is a murder mystery, where sooner rather than later a murder must take place. Magic must have rules, and so must technology. Bad examples common in science fiction movies are computer programmers fighting a villain or natural disaster who write, debug, and deploy fresh code in a few minutes.

“Blending Genres”

panelists Kelsey Rae Barthel, Kevin Weir, Patrick Swenson, Adam Dreece
How acceptable is it to blend genres within a single story? Detective + Paranormal. Sci-Fi + Fantasy. Is one genre considered ordinate and the others subordinate? Has blatant genre mixing become the new normal?



Blending technology and magic used to be awkward, but technology is now approaching the point where it will be indistinguishable, as per Clarke’s Law. Dreece said technology versus magic can be used as opposing forces. The problem though, is that blended novels may be a harder sell to both publishers and readers.

Weir said it was more cut-and-dried than that, for the instant that magic is introduced the book becomes fantasy, no excuses. He used the analogy of a drop-down computer menu, where you can only click on one option, compared to a radio-button menu where it is possible to check off two or more options. The crossover should be evident from the beginning of the book, not suddenly parachuted in halfway through in order to get the hero out of trouble.

Barthel said her stories tended to evolve during writing and cross between genres. All the panelists agreed that Star Wars is fantasy.

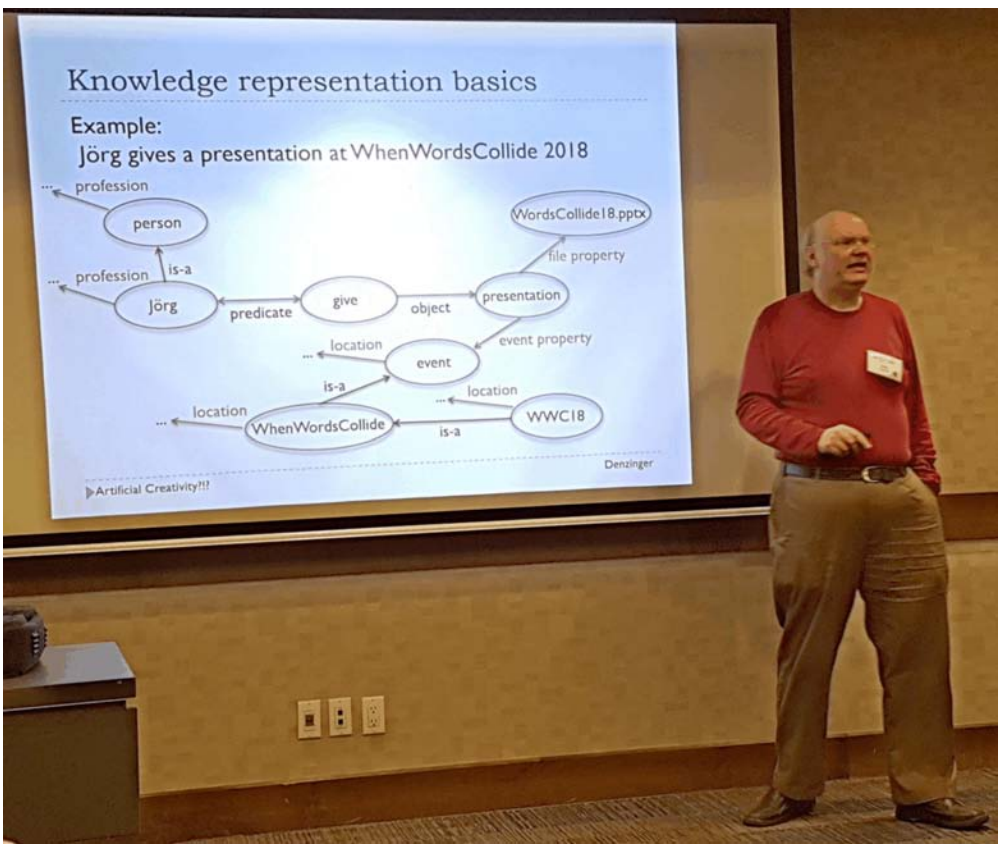
“Artificial Creativity ?!?”

presenter Prof. Joerg Denzinger (University of Calgary)

Recent advances in Artificial Intelligence (AI), like Natural Language Understanding and Machine Learning, make it highly likely that in the not so distant future we will have AI systems that can substantially help authors writing a book if not write a book (in an established series of an author) themselves. Similar systems may exist for all other kinds of artists. Joerg discusses the current research results that open the road to this computer

creativity, followed by some speculation how this path can be completed. He will look at opportunities such systems offer, and limitations such systems may have. Question: Can we call what these systems will do creative?

Denzinger's team at the University of Calgary are working on an artificial intelligence system that can write fiction. Generalized AI systems that can do a multiplicity of tasks are a long way off, but the average person is not aware of how fast AI is developing for single-task functions. Examples are face recognition and licence plate recognition systems, which are already in commercial production.



The result Denzinger's group is aiming for is to write fiction good enough that people will pay for it. Computer science is objective (either the code runs or it doesn't) but literature is subjective. To compile on computers, stories must be analyzed by characters, plot, setting, and language, all of which are relatively easy. More difficult is dialogue, characterization and behaviour, points of view, and reaction to intangible issues.

AI must have:
Knowledge - characters, places
Representation - the ability to group events, know the histories' effect
Processing - apply rules, make changes

Literary AI uses semantic networks, which have nodes, arcs/links/connections, and modifiers, which use rules to infer missing data or fill gaps, then apply actions. There is still much work to be done, but literary systems will eventually arrive.

Publishing And Marketing.

"Steps To Self Publish"
presenter Julie Hiner
Indie self publishing can be overwhelming. There are so many things to think about! This presentation will provide you with a powerful plan to simplify your path forward. The high level plan identifies the key steps to self publish and do the work yourself.

- 1. Create Content
- 2. Assemble
- 3. Submit/Publish
- 4. Launch
- 5. Market.

A look at the details within each step will reveal what goes into creating a cover and a manuscript, how to prepare, assemble and submit your book for publishing both for printed manuscripts and for multiple e- book formats, and much more! Walk away with a framework to build your plan and a set of templates to help you execute.

Hiner is a very systematic author, as shown by her presentation, which illustrated step-by-step the methods she used to publish her books. Self-publishing requires lots of work beyond the writing part. The process needs to be planned on charts, not just reacting to events.

Create the print version of your book first, because it is easier to edit ebooks from it. The plan must proceed from the manuscript to the cover to the title page, index, and/or table of contents (always the last part to edit because you don't have a summary of the book's data until then).

Editing randomly back and forth will waste time on items that need backtracking to update. The process is complicated because different online platforms require different formatting, such as Kindle iBook, Kobo, and Nook. Use them all if you can because you want your book available in as many places as possible.

Hiner discussed many details that people don't think of, such as taxes. Both the CRA and the IRS are getting better and better at tracking your online income, and the publishers cooperate with them because they haven't a choice.



“Author Marketing and Branding: the Technical and Practical Aspects”
presenter *Laura VanArendonk Baugh*
Discoverability, branding, and marketing are critical to the success of a traditionally-published or self-published author, but there is still a startling amount of unhelpful or just plain wrong information being shared. Laura VanArendonk Baugh will discuss technical aspects of branding and marketing, with walk-throughs for setting up and maintaining an author website (including caveats for common mistakes and dangerous pitfalls for the novice) and tutorials for some of the scariest bits of marketing (learn to love the camera!).

A practical talk about the nuts and bolts of what software and methods she uses to market her books, focusing on the technical side of Website maintenance and selling. It is best to have your own Website domain name instead of using

WordPress or BlogSpot. Security matters; a recent study showed that only 22% of WordPress sites had the latest updates on the users' computers. Back up your Website after every change.



Social media is not for selling but for building friendly relations with your readers. If you knew someone who asked for money every time you met face-to-face, you would cut off that relationship. Social media are no different; do the selling elsewhere.

Post on themes related to your books but don't mention the books. Avoid trying to please everybody and aim for a specific audience. As an example, some of Braugh's novels are about mermaids, so she posts a lot of information about them.

“You Oughta Be In Audio!”
presenters *Dawn Harvey and Nina Munteanu*
While paper sales dwindle, audiobooks continue to be the fastest growing segment of the publishing world with sales increasing by 30% year over year for the past decade. With our fast past and connected society, audiobooks are the way of the 21st century and it's high time you got on this bandwagon! Join author Nina Munteanu and audiobook narrator and producer Dawn Harvey to learn what it takes to turn your masterpiece into an audiobook.

Harvey emphasized that audio books are not a do-it-yourself project. You may think you are a good speaker but will drive away listeners unless you have had voice training. You will have to pay for professional production and narrators.



Standards in the field must be met, and you can't change them to suit your opinion. Professionals will accept advice on the background of your book but you cannot micromanage them. Deadlines are real. Just because you are busy with personal problems or home life doesn't allow you to miss them. If you do, your book will go to the end of the queue or be rejected entirely.

Munteanu presented some interesting statistics. As print and ebook sales decline, audio book sales are increasing, from 42 million sold in 2012 to 108 million sold in 2017. CDs have dwindled to 6% of the market, while downloads are 93%. Fiction is down slightly in that period to 70% while non-fiction is up slightly to 30%. Last year 47% of listeners were on smartphones.

Audio books have become more popular because listeners can do other tasks at the same time. 65% listen while driving, 52% use them to relax before sleeping, and 45% listen while doing household chores. (The overlap in percentages is because many respondents to the poll listened for more than one type of activity.)

"Live Action Slush: Science Fiction Edition"
Timothy Gwyn (reader), panelists Michael Skeet, Rissa Johnson, Edward Willett, Tod McCoy
Bring the 1st page of your manuscript to be anonymously read aloud and receive comments from our editors.

There were several editions of this panel for different genres. I went to the one for science fiction. There were others for fantasy, mystery, young adult, etcetera. Wanna-be writers submit the first page of their novel or short story in anonymous format.

Four judges, who are editors or publishers, listen to the reader. When a judge hears something he doesn't like, he raises his hand. If three judges have raised their hands, then the reading stops. It is not a gong show. The event is done respectfully and no one makes fun of losers. After the reading has finished, the judges comment on what they heard and offer suggestions. When they are done, the reader calls out to the audience and asks if the author wishes to reveal himself; there is no compunction to do so, and some remain seated.



Willett said he always put up his hand when character names are numerals. That was a hokey cliché all the way back to Hugo Gernsback, with his novel RALPH 124C41+. That's Willett doing exactly that in the photo above.

Skeet remarked about another manuscript that it had too much exposition. Don't put an info dump on the first page. Background information should be introduced in small amounts as needed.

Mystery Fiction.

“Clues And Red Herrings”

panelists Susan Calder, Philip Vernon, Tasha Alexander, P. D. Workman
Overt, covert and hiding in plain sight: How soon in the story should there be a hidden clue? What are the ways to mask clues? Is it important to be “fair” with the reader about clues? What is the best hidden clue you can remember seeing? A discussion of one of the trickier elements of writing mystery and crime stories.

Vernon said the first clue in a mystery should appear as soon as possible. Clues should have connectivity with the flow of the story, not appear in isolation as random items.

Alexander preferred to use subtle clues that readers miss at first but then suddenly recognize what they were later in the book. Fairness is important, with no infodumps in the denouement revealing vital clues withheld from the reader. She also remarked that the whole story shouldn’t rest on a single clue.

Calder said don’t throw a smoking gun onto the floor and then forget about it. The story has to end with a resolution, not an ambiguous ending.

Workman mentioned that clues should not violate the original premise of the story. A cozy mystery should not end in a blazing gunfight with automatic weapons and car bombs.

Several panelists remarked that good clues are ones that can be interpreted in several different ways to implicate different suspects. This means the reader has to pick the correct interpretation.

“Murder, Murder, Everywhere”

panelists Ronald (R.J.) Hore, Patrick Swenson, Randy McCharles, Erin Lindsey
Be it in space, be it in tomorrow’s world, be it in a fantasy locations or in a steam-punk novel, do the mystery guidelines work in the other genres? And what about readers? If they like sci-fi, do they accept the mystery? If they are mystery readers, will that induce them to read a futuristic or space novel if the main plot is a mystery? Challenges and benefits of setting your mystery in a created world.

Hore started off by saying that murder always spices up a story, so it can fit into any genre. He likes to follow the lead of Agatha Christie and make the least likely suspect the killer.



Lindsey said the murders in her novels were preludes to greater threats intended to bring down others. She objected to the idea that the body must appear early in the novel, citing one of her books where it was a mysterious disappearance until the defunct was found late in the book. She set one murder during a time of the plague.

McCharles said before inserting a murder into a story, the question “Why?” must be answered. He tries to avoid using real-life killers as inspiration, and creates his own worlds. Hore interjected that he was the opposite and took his inspirations where he could find them.

An audience member who was a retired policeman said that what stayed with him the most from his murder investigations was the collateral damage that reverberated through the family, friends, neighbours, co-workers, and the place where it happened. People don’t shrug their shoulders and quickly go back to normal life.

Lindsey agreed and said the exploring of the consequences is seldom done in mysteries after the killer is apprehended. Once convicted, the case is closed, which is not real life.

“Sherlock Mythbusters”

presenters Jenna Greene, JR Campbell, Charles Prepolec, Keith Hann, Constantine Kaoukakis

A panel discussion on the do's, don't's and been-there's of pastiche. What are the essentials of Sherlockian fiction and how far has subsequent interpretations taken us from the Doyle's original vision of Sherlock Holmes.

The panel: Spot the real Sherlockian. Answers on a postcard, please.



Prepolec said pastiche writers are hampered by clichés that have grown up around Sherlock Holmes, such as the pipe or deerstalker hat. Conversely, some go too far, such as gunplay. Holmes did not shoot his way out of a case. Moriarty is supposedly a crime lord, but he would not deal with the trivialities of a crime as many writers show him doing. Moriarty would have someone else do the dirty work.

Pastiche writers can't resist mashups. The most popular one, because he was contemporary with Holmes, is Jack the Ripper. That one has been done to death, if you'll pardon the expression.

Hann said too many pastiche writers concentrate on standard Victorian dialogue cribbed from the canon (Doyle's original stories) instead of the plot. The standard theft or murder is boring. A pastiche case should have a weird element or some other unusual aspect.

Fantasy Fiction.

“Non-Medieval Fantasy and Alternate Fantasy Settings”

panelists Kelsey Rae Barthel, Kevin Weir, Laura VanArendonk Baugh, Peter V. Brett

Most readers of epic or medieval fantasy are familiar with the Tolkienesque tropes many fantasy novels cling to. What other alternate fantasy settings are available for readers? This panel will attempt to delve into some of the panelists' favourites.

Baugh said one of the problems of writing historical fantasy is nit-picking readers who don't understand that the background is modified to fit the fantasy, not the reality. Weir mentioned geologists criticizing a dragon's cave and how it could not have carried all its gold into it.

Brett discussed urban fantasy, which became over-saturated with big-city vampires to the point where some publishers refuse to consider them on general principles. He said for urban fantasy, there should be little background needed, and the emphasis should be on characterization. Military fantasy has governments rounding up magicians and putting them into commando forces.

Barthel said not all the background information of alternative fantasies would need to be infodumped into the story. Only bring the information forward as needed.

“Monsters: Classics And Newly Designed”

panelists Swati Chavda, Kevin Weir, Jim Jackson, Halli Lilburn

Where do they fit into our modern genres?



First, define ‘scary’. That kept the panelists busy to start with. Weir said the greatest fear is the fear of the unknown. Lilburn gave her example as creepy necromancers trying to hit on a woman. Jackson said the insectoid monster, single-minded and logical.

Chavda said don’t show too much of the monster, or else it becomes just another character.

Lilburn said that too many monsters aren’t really that scary anymore. Vampires can be fought against by shopping at the supermarket for garlic, or the hardware store for a wooden stake (surveyors use them). The modern version are sparkly vampires who are mildly dangerous, enough to provide a frisson of excitement, vulnerable enough to be converted into a stay-at-home husband, and, of course, handsome.

Science Fiction.

“When Worldbuilding Gets Weird”
panelists Jenna Greene, Kevin Weir, Adam Dreece, Laura VanArendonk Baugh
How would dragons affect the modern world? What would we really do if we could digitize matter? There can be unintended consequences to worldbuilding. Join the panelists as they discuss the weirdest or funniest ones that they have run into, and how these consequences can be used to actually enhance your story.



Weir extrapolates from basic concepts when world building. His example was a world where the water was contaminated by metals, so the fauna evolved to ingest them and burn them internally as food. He then mentioned a world where it rained glass, to which Greene pointed out that acid rain was much the same in bizarreness.

Greene said an easy way is to double the quantity of something and calculate the consequences. If a narrative is reversed so that the bad guys’ story is explained from their point of view, then a different world appears.

There followed a series of jokes from the panelists about dragons in our modern world, based on the record-breaking heat wave in Calgary that day. I won’t repeat them because you had to be there to get the full humour of 36.4°C, plus the smoke drifting in from British Columbia forest fires.

The panelists agreed an easy way to get a weird world is to add an extra layer to an existing one instead of building a totally new world from scratch. For example, vampires in the big city (done many times already) or dragons in the Old West.

“The Moral Dimension Of The Amoral Apocalypse”
presenter Allan Weiss
Most apocalyptic science fiction can be classified as follows, depending on the cause of the catastrophe: the moral apocalypse, the amoral apocalypse, and immoral apocalypse. In the amoral apocalypse, the disaster is the result of some natural or artificial force outside our control: celestial objects, geological changes, alien invasions, etc. However, even in these narratives, human beings often make things worse, through our greed, stupidity, or thoughtless technological advancement. I will discuss a few texts in which we human beings are not responsible for the initial problem but contribute somehow to our own destruction.



Weiss is working on a book about apocalyptic fiction history and analysis, which he joked he probably never will finish. He has classified apocalypses into three categories:

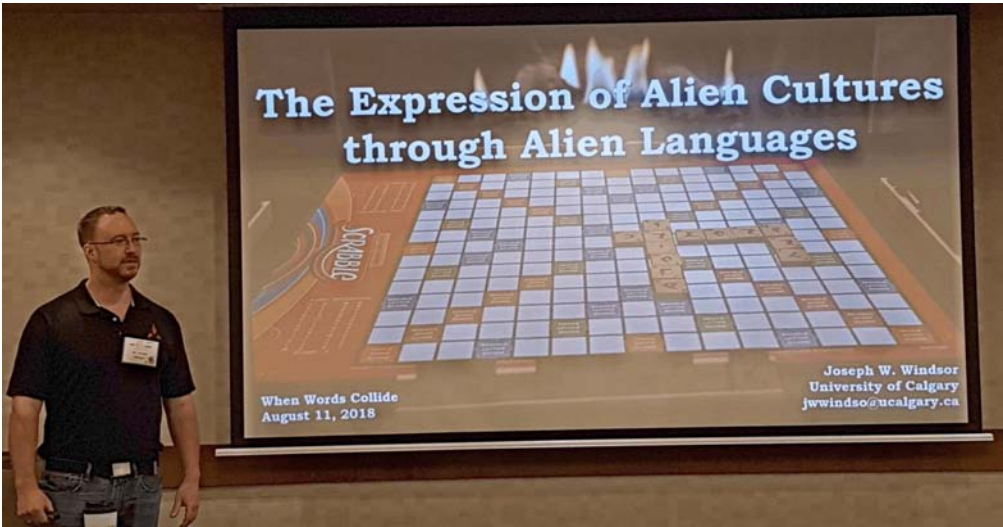
- 1) Moral apocalypses: based on God’s plan in the Book of Revelation, or the culmination of some other deity’s plan. A modern example is Arthur C. Clarke’s story “The Nine Billion Names Of God”.
- 2) Amoral apocalypses: based on natural disasters. In fiction, plagues are the most common, although floods are the oldest. An early example was THE LAST MAN (1826) by Mary Shelley, about a plague spreading through the world by ships. Jack London updated this in his 1912 science fiction novel THE SCARLET PLAGUE, which was the first to use air travel by dirigibles as the disease vector.
- 3) Immoral apocalypses: caused by human evil or failings. The most obvious is atomic warfare.

*“The Expression Of Alien Cultures Through Alien Languages”
presenter Dr. Joseph Windsor (University of Calgary)
To make an alien race (terrestrial or extra-terrestrial) come alive in fiction, there are two primary concerns a writer should have: i. What are the cultural values of the people, and how will those values translate into their words and actions; and, ii. What is the language of the people, and how will that language “translate” into the story?*

Since, in some ways, language can be thought of as an expression of cultures and values, the second concern becomes even more valuable. As story-tellers, we want to make Klingons, Dothraki, Na’vi, Elves, Dwarves, and countless other fictional races believable to audiences. So, we construct new languages for these peoples to express themselves in. Dr. Windsor discusses the role of conlanging (the art of creating languages) in fiction, a short history of the craft, resources for authors, and tips and tricks of the trade.

Creating artificial languages in common in science fiction and among social reformers and utopians. Today it has developed into a hobby known as conlanging, the word formed from “constructed languages”. Some people want to use it to reform the world, while others want to shield themselves from the world. Klingon is a popular conlang. Windsor mentioned the Language Creation Society, formed in 2007. Their motto is “Fiat lingua” and their emblem is a stylized Tower of Babel.

It is long been recognized by professional linguists and conlangers that language and culture go together. If you dress and speak Klingon, you are showing the world how you feel about your human persona. In writing science fiction, translation difficulties can be used as plot points. An example is the old joke about an alien message translated as “We want to serve humans”.



Hollywood studios have taken alien languages very seriously since the success of Klingon. Many movies and shows had specialists construct logical languages for their characters. Windsor’s advice is to first decide on the concept of the alien. If they have a warrior culture, they will have different idioms than the horse lords of the Dothraki. The types of sounds they can articulate determine the sound patterns of the language, and likewise with words.

*“The Third Space Live”
presenters Jeremy Verkley and Kevin Weir
Kevin Weir and Jeremy Verkley invite you to join them in the Third Space World Generator. Using this sophisticated machine built out of random generators (from the Internet!) they will design a brand new world in under an hour. Join for laughs, learning, and randomly generated fun!*

This was actually a live-audience recording of a comedy show for later podcasting. The premise was that the two hosts created a fantasy world from random chance and elaborated it into something halfway plausible. They began with a sentient moon stuck in orbit around a planet it hated.



The funniest part, because it resonated with something we've all been through, was that magic existed but before anyone could cast a spell, they had to send in a requisition to the government. Approval time varied wildly, depending on how many other applications were in the queue. You had to take a number and wait. Anyone who has ever dealt with the DMV knows what this is about.

For the monster, a mandrake was chosen which had a Noo Yawk accent and attitude. And so forth. This radio show was quite funny. To extemporize for 45 minutes in a coherent matter takes skill, and Verkley and Weir had it.

"Punking Past And Future"
 panelists Rex J. Leniczek, Rissa Johnson, Arthur Slade, S.G. Wong
Not all historical fiction fits the traditional mould. Let's talk alternatives from steam punk to speculative historical fiction and wilder genres.

Johnson said what she liked about steampunk was the ability to mess with history. Leniczek said he liked both the creativity and doing the research for steampunk, not just the history but the technology.



Slade remarked that the technology would have to be believable for the times, not more than a few decades ahead of its time. Refined metal was scarce and expensive in ancient times. No steam locomotives for the Romans unless you can explain where they got all the metal, and how they built the engines, which even today are heavy lifting. There have to be factories, but in that era, people worked in small shops custom making parts that were not interchangeable.

Wong said her research was in learning how plumbing operated in multi-story buildings centuries ago. She looked at the bright side of being caught in a mistake by dozens of readers, proving that someone was paying attention to her novels.

Historical Fiction.

"What Kings Ate And Wizards Drank"
 presenter Krista D. Ball
Based on the book by the same name, Krista D. Ball will walk you through the wonderful and wacky world of ancient take out, Victorian London's version of Starbucks, food preservation, and the use of food as a status symbol.

Ball is an historian who also recreates recipes from Roman Britain to Victorian times and has published cookbooks of them. Ancient recipes are generally not palatable to us, such as deer venison with ginger spice. Contrary to popular belief, food was not as bad back then as thought. Spices were added as medicines, not flavouring to cover up rotten meat. They were expensive, so the middle and upper classes used them in banquets to show off.

Sugar was scarce and expensive. Honey was only available in certain rural areas where beekeeping was practiced. As a result, ancient peoples generally

had little sugar in their diet, and diabetes was rare compared to today's epidemic. Fruits did not travel well and were only available in season for a few weeks.

Cooking was fairly sanitary. Beef was salted and/or smoked at the butcher's, then boiled when ready to eat to remove most of the salt. The cooking water of all foods was saved and carried forward for stews and pottage. Between the salt and the boiling, bacteria didn't have much chance to survive.

Travelers ate lots of cheese and oatmeal cakes, two foods that do not spoil if kept dry on the trip. Fast-food outlets are not a modern invention. The Romans had them, and every market town throughout Europe in the intervening centuries. The food was fried or grilled, which made it safe, and cabbage leaves were used as plates. Hedgehogs, sparrows, and starlings were popular snacks.

Ancient recipes are often difficult to reproduce on modern kitchen equipment because there is no wood smoke, an important flavour, and the heating patterns of the food are different. Ball advised from personal experience that if you get an ancient recipe wrong you won't realize it until you end up in hospital.

“Historical Research For Authors Of Fiction”
presenter Dr. Annette F. Timm (University of Calgary)
A practical introduction to doing historical research in preparation for writing historical fiction. Dr. Timm provides advice on finding reliable sources, judging the quality of historical arguments, and finding inspiration in the historical record. Learn how to find the current accepted wisdom on a given topic of historical scholarship, recognize and depict the contingency of history, and how to best use the internet for historical research.

Timm's talk was mostly specific to Alberta writers but she did mention some general information. It has never been easier to do historical research. Many library Websites are available, and there are others such as archive.org, scribd.com, and scholar.google.ca.

Peer-reviewed scholarly articles are the best but most are behind paywalls. They weed out some bad literature but be careful of fake sites that look like scholarly sites. Information should be verified from independent primary sources, not secondary sources that copy each other. There is no such thing as unbiased history, so it is helpful to know the slant of the author and adjust for it.



Science Fact.

“Could We Communicate With Extra-terrestrials If We Got The Chance?”
presenter Dr. Joseph Windsor (University of Calgary)
Accompanied by greetings in more than 50 languages, the songs of creatures like whales and crickets, and music such as Navajo chant and Chuck Berry's Johnny Be Good, this was our message to those who might live beyond the reaches of our solar system on the Golden Record aboard Voyager. But would “greetings from the children of planet Earth” be in anyway meaningful to non-humanoid beings? So, we also left diagrams indicating our position relative to a stable pulsar in the event that beings capable of inter-stellar travel might find Voyager and want to pay us a visit.

Language is considered a uniquely human ability (here on Earth), but to amass the knowledge needed for inter-stellar travel, non-humanoids would need a complex way to convey information as well. Given that a non-humanoid language is unlikely to resemble anything that humans have evolved, do we have any hope of communicating with extra-terrestrials if we encounter them? Dr. Windsor explores examples of alien languages from popular culture (e.g., Klingon, Na'vi, Heptapod) and sees if anything measures up to how linguists might try to communicate with people from outer space, or if it's all a convenient, human-centric fiction.

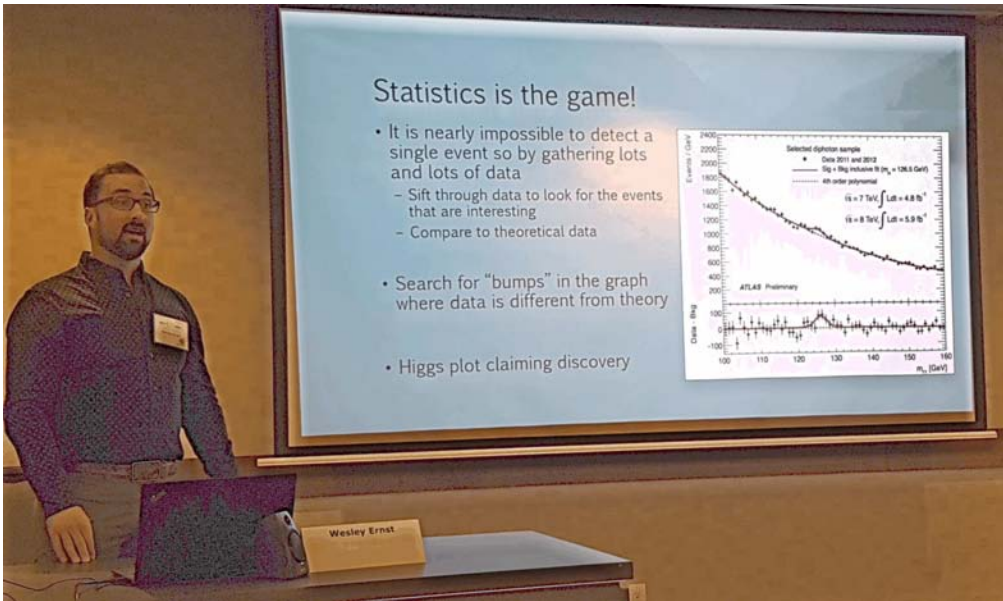
The ultimate in field linguistics. Body language is a problem between humans or between humans and animals, and would be worse with aliens. Auditory sounds are extremely difficult to analyze. For example, no words or phrases have been found in whale songs. Instinctive behaviour might be confused with deliberate intent. For the first contact with aliens, written language will be the best since it avoids other cues that might be misunderstood.

Aliens will have a written language since no civilization can build starships by verbal instructions alone. Science is an accretionary process that grows from one generation to the next by passing on written knowledge. Mathematics is impossible without written notation. Therefore the aliens will have writing.

“Particle Physics”

presenter Wesley Ernst (University of Calgary)

Do you ever wonder what nature is made of? Or what we humans are made of? Come and delve into the unseen realm of our world with Wesley Ernst. Explore the fundamental building blocks of nature, and of us, discover what they are, how they work, and how they are found.



Particle physics began in the late 1890s and took off in the early 1900s as experimental equipment improved. Electrons were discovered in 1897, protons in 1919, and neutrons in 1932. Now there are a plethora of subatomic particles.

The vast majority of particles only exist in high energy environments such as the Big Bang or particle accelerators.

The Standard Model of particle physics divides subatomic particles into fermions, which make up solid matter, and bosons, which transmit forces. There are four fundamental forces which act in the universe: strong, weak, electromagnetic, and gravity. We can only perceive the last two; the first two are subatomic forces.

Antimatter is absent from our part of the universe. It may exist elsewhere in clumps, just as matter does for us. Alternatively, during the Big Bang, more matter may have formed than antimatter, and after canceling each other out, there was a surplus of matter. A collision between a matter particle and an antimatter particle produces photons.

“Your Velociraptors Are Broken: How Pop Culture Screws Up Science And Why Correct Is Cooler”

presenter Laura VanArendonk Baugh

We all know about alpha wolves, scary monsters, and sexy romantic leads, right? Well... maybe not. Most film and fiction get it wrong. Join Laura VanArendonk Baugh for a science-based view of how social behavior actually works, what “alpha males” really are, and what to do if you meet a hungry dino.

Baugh’s day job is behavioural studies. “Everyone knows that” is a red flag. She cited the classic belief in alpha males, based on studies done in the 1940s in artificial situations but later found to be inapplicable to natural situations. Real alphas are simply parental figures who have more life experience than younger animals in the herd and are thus followed. They do not lead or control the actions of the herd or pack.

One of the basic rules of behavioural science is that the more an animal or human tries to assert its status, the less it actually has.

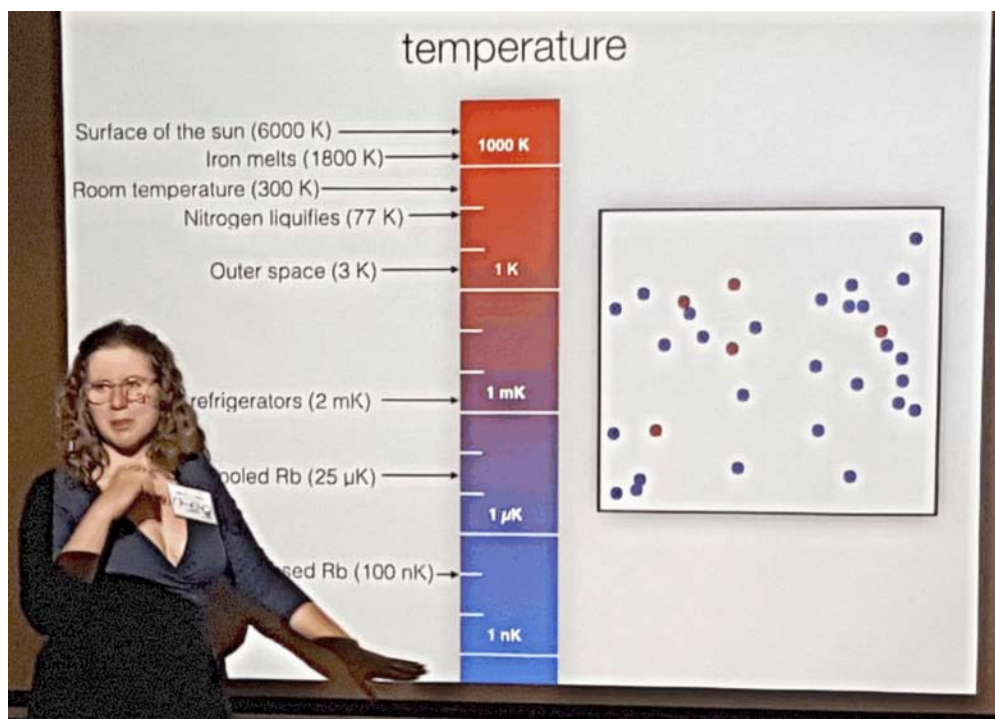
Predators don’t roar when chasing prey because that wastes breath and lets the prey know where they are. They don’t hate their prey anymore than humans hate a hamburger personally while eating it. Birds are the best guide to dinosaur behaviour since they are collateral descendants. Carnosaurs would not have roared constantly, contrary to all those Jurassic movies.

“Quantum Mechanics For Future Technologies”

presenter Prof. Lindsay Leblanc (University of Alberta)

Just over a century ago, our understanding of the physical world was transformed by the introduction of a new framework: quantum mechanics. Early experiments readily established the quantum nature of small particles and principles like “superposition”, in which a particle can exist simultaneously in two diametric states.

Despite significant progress made over a hundred years of research in engineering, controlling, and measuring quantum particles, questions still remain as to why many of these interesting quantum effects are lost on length scales that are readily accessible to humans. Current research continues to explore this question and to look for ways of harnessing the power of quantum mechanics for next generation technologies.



Leblanc began her talk with a brief history of how our concept of the atom evolved from a solid ball to a plum pudding with raisins in it to a miniature stellar system to a fuzzy blob.

She then discussed trends in quantum computing, communication, and sensing, all of which can be summed up as “We’re working on it. Real soon now.” Conventional computers are deterministic, while quantum computers calculate probabilities, which makes them better for qualitative computing.

Missed With Regrets.

As every convention member knows, there are always panels you have to miss because of schedule conflicts. Here are a few I would have liked to attend but couldn’t be in two places at once to do it.

“So, You Want To Make A Language?”

presenter Thea van Diepen

Some make up languages for noble purposes, like epic fantasy and world peace. Others because they were bored and needed something to do (your presenter, Thea van Diepen, is a guilty party). Whatever your reason, we’ll go at it from three directions: how /not/ to make a language, how to make a language that fulfills your goal, and how to grow your language using Ikea instruction manuals... among other tricks. May the conlanging bug bite you hard!

“The Seven Year Itch: Novel Idea To Publication”

presenter Dwayne Clayden

In fall 2010 I had an idea for a novel. I thought it was a good idea. But I’d never written a novel. I had four paramedic textbooks to my name, more than 100 paramedic articles in Canadian and US journals, and research papers, but no novels. One October night I walked into my first writing class. Many more writing courses later, after numerous heart aches and breakthroughs, editing, then more editing, query letters, finalist in a novel competition, an agent, almost publishing contracts, and finally indie publishing. Now that novel is in print, in my hand, I can hold it and see it, and read it. Join me in this session where I share that journey of perseverance, what I learned, what I know now, I wish I’d known then.

“When Your Editor Is An Algorithm”

presenter Craig DiLouie

The publishing world is increasingly becoming computerized. From writing to marketing, computers have simplified and democratized publishing. In this presentation, Craig DiLouie describes various tools used to analyze writing, how AIs are writing novels, and how sophisticated algorithms can predict bestsellers and may be the future of the slush pile. He’ll then walk through an

editing process in which an algorithm developed by Jodie Archer and Matthew Jockers, authors of THE BESTSELLER CODE, provided an insightful conceptual edit of his latest novel, which will be published by Orbit in 2019.

“Women Of Stampede”

panelists Katie O’Connor, Shelley Kassian, Alyssa Linn Palmer
Readings and discussion of this group effort. Group projects can be a blessing or fraught with problems. Join the authors of the Women of Stampede romance series as they talk about their books, and the joys and pains of working in unison with other authors. They’ll read excerpts and answer your questions about this runaway success series. Featured Authors: Katie O’Connor, Shelley Kassian, Alyssa Linn Palmer, Brenda Sinclair, Nicole Roy, C.G. Furst and Maeve Buchanan.

“From Black Holes To Time Travel: The Merging Of Science And Fiction”
presenter Dr. Sean Stotyn (University of Calgary)
Since the advent of the General Theory of Relativity by Albert Einstein over 100 years ago, there has been wild speculation about the possibility of time travel, parallel universes, and faster than light travel. Einstein’s theory predicts a plethora of strange phenomena that is currently only able to be implemented in the realm of science fiction. From traveling backward in time to hiding yourself in a “pocket” of spacetime to achieving warp speed. Sean brings some of these currently purely theoretical ideas to life and discusses ongoing attempts to make them a reality.

Seen In The Hotel Parking Lot.

Top right: A Tesla from Indiana. I wonder how much trouble there was recharging it en route?

Bottom right: Alberta is landlocked, so this must refer to science fiction.



See You Next Year!

On the last day of the convention, memberships for WWC 2019 went on sale for \$45. I bought one, of course, and so did many others. It will be held at the same venue on the weekend of August 9 to 11. If you're thinking of coming out west, and I'd love to see you here, be aware that the membership is capped at 750 and is always sold out by late May. (And the hotel rooms are booked up as well.)

I mentioned at the beginning of this report that I bought a lot of books. Real books, not e-thingys. The stack is shown below. It'll keep me busy for a while, and you'll see reviews thereof over the next year or so.



SIGNS, SIGNS, EVERYWHERE A SIGN: AROUND COWTOWN
photos by Dale Speirs

Mount Royal University, in B Wing. I've never seen such a sign at the University of Calgary, or my alma mater in Edmonton, the University of Alberta.



COWTOWN WILDLIFE
photos by Dale Speirs

The squirrels use the roof of my house as a shortcut between big trees on my lot and my neighbour's trees. The snowshoe hare was just around the corner.

