

# OPUNTIA 422



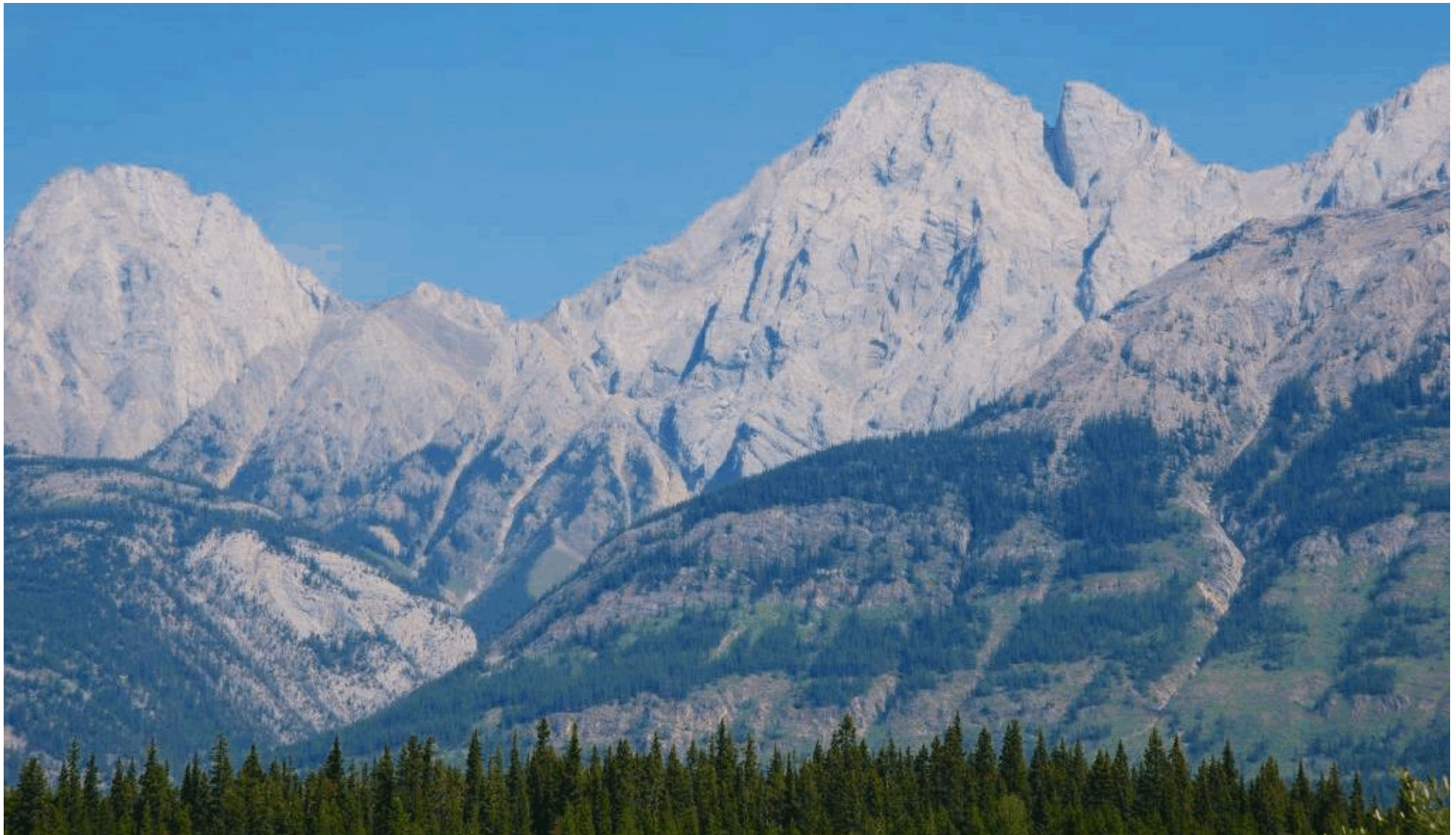


photos by Dale Speirs

**Opuntia** is published by Dale Speirs, Calgary, Alberta. It is posted on [www.efanzines.com](http://www.efanzines.com) and [www.fanac.org](http://www.fanac.org). My e-mail address is: [opuntia57@hotmail.com](mailto:opuntia57@hotmail.com) When sending me an emailed letter of comment, please include your name and town in the message.

About the cover: Now you know why they call them the blue Canadian Rockies. I took this photo, with normal lens, looking west across Upper Kananaskis Lake. Mount Lyautey forms the far shore, and Mount Sarraill is at left. Notice the snow patches still on the upper slope of Mount Lyautey.

Below: This is an extreme telephoto shot of the Opal Range, on the east side of the Kananaskis valley. Taken from the same location as the cover shot, looking about 10 km to the northeast.





**PRINCE'S ISLAND PARK FLOWERS**  
photos by Dale Speirs

Prince's Island is in the Bow River, adjacent to the downtown core of Calgary, and hence is very heavily trafficked. The Parks Dept. has a substantial flower budget for the park. Herewith are some photos taken in early August.







And now for something completely different ...



**IF YOU AREN'T SQUAMOUS,  
THEN WHY ARE YOU TRYING TO BE ELDRITCH?: PART 9**

by Dale Speirs

[Parts 1 to 8 appeared in OPUNTIA's #298, 333, 340, 352, 365, 395, 410, and 415. Issues #22 and 63.1A have related articles on H.P. Lovecraft.]

**Pastiches: Novels.**

THE MALL OF CTHULHU (2009) by Seamus Cooper brings together FBI agent Laura Harker and barista Ted (no last name given). They were classmates in college, dealing with vampire sorority sisters and the like. Laura graduated law school and went on to better things, while Ted spent his life making lattes.

The coffee shop where Ted works is turned into a bloodbath one day, courtesy of cultists who are planning to wake up the Old Ones, using a copy of the NECRONOMICON. Only Laura and Ted can stop them, which involves chasing about from Boston to Providence. The cultists use a videogame Website as a cover for their activities, since anyone browsing it would assume they were just Lovecraft fans. After all, HPL only wrote fiction.

The FBI gets a tip that an attack is planned for a Providence shopping mall. Laura and other agents are sent to investigate. Ted stumbles through the mall on his own search. The FBI think they're looking for terrorists, but Laura and Ted know better.

Ted muses about what would happen if the cultists succeed: *Would it really be the end of the world? Would the Old Ones prefer to rule over a barren wasteland with bad geometry, or would they be happy to have insignificant human gnats doing their bidding? Would seeing them drive everybody completely insane?*

*Ted figured the best-case scenario if the cultists succeeded was that these giant monsters would go on a Godzilla-style rampage and kill tens or even hundreds of thousands of people before the U.S. military took them down. And the worst-case scenario was that life on Earth would be transformed into an unfathomable nightmare forever. Ugh.*

The cultists succeed in ripping open the fabric of space and time in the centre court of the mall. Ted succeeds in tripping and falling into the rip just before it

closes. He finds himself in the city of R'lyeh, which turns out to be a boring place with nothing happening.

Meanwhile, Laura encounters an agent from the Supernatural Defense section of the Department of Defense. The section has had some serious budget cuts, so the agent is hampered in what assistance he can provide to her.

All roads lead to Cincinnati, where Cthulhu has appeared and the novel finishes. From there, the book fizzles out, there being nothing else to do in Cincinnati. A fair read, although weak in spots, particularly the ending.

ALL HALLOWS HORROR (2017) by John Llewellyn Probert is the first novel in a series called The Lovecraft Squad, created by Stephen Jones. From the layout of the cover design and reading the colophon, I got the impression that Jones and company are hoping to make it a movie series or video game.

Be that as it may, the basic premise is that back in the 1930s, J. Edgar Hoover created the super-secret Human Protection League after he noticed that the stories of a certain pulp writer were based on reality. Fast-forward to our modern times when the HPL still operates.

Prof. Bob Chambers of the Cthulhu Investigation Division has been summoned to England to investigate a case. A newshen named Karen Shepworth barged her way into the matter. Some old bones, not of this world, and an ancient manuscript have been found. The items cause visions and dizzy spells when handled.

Chambers, Shepworth, and assorted supporting characters visit and are trapped in All Hallows Church, which is anything but. A long series of alarums and excursions begins. The theme of the novel abruptly changes from Lovecraft to Dante, as the heroes descend into the nine circles of Hell. Apparently the Italian had also been describing reality.

They finally meet the arch-villain behind it all, a sorcerer named Thomas Moreby, 300 years old and still has his own teeth. The ending is indeterminate since this is the beginning of a series. The loose threads will be tied up in future volumes.

The book is not much of Lovecraft. One suspects that future installments will work their way through public-domain authors.

**Pastiches: Anthologies.**

THE GODS OF H.P. LOVECRAFT (2015) is an anthology edited by Aaron J. French, of which I will review a few stories. A good anthology overall, worth reading by the Lovecraft fan.

After each story is a short commentary by Donald Tyson explaining the Mythos god the story was about. It was very helpful and interesting. One minor quibble though, that it would have been better to put it ahead of each pastiche so that a reader unfamiliar with the Mythos could better appreciate the story.

The anthology opens with “Call The Name” by Adam L.G. Nevill, set a few decades from now. The oceans are changing, and not for the better. Seabed topography has altered, strange underwater archaeological sites are discovered that weren’t there before, and eldritch life forms are rising out of the waters. The story meanders, and at points is made tedious by a poor imitation of HPL’s verbose style.

However, the final section has an infodump that was more fascinating than the rest of the story, a synopsis of ideas that synthesize the Mythos into a geological narrative. Cthulhu arrived during the Ediacaran Period 535 megayears ago, long before life moved out of the ocean onto the land.

Cthulhu was annoyed by Earth life, and every so often threw a hissy fit that resulted in one of the five great mass extinctions in the geological record. Cthulhu could control climate, and used climate change to kill off as many species as possible. The sixth mass extinction, which began a few centuries ago, is another intervention of Cthulhu, soon to scrub away the dominant species, *Homo sapiens*.

“We Smoke The Northern Lights” by Laird Barron zigzags a bit before getting to the plot. A private space probe has crashed in the upper Hudson River valley in 1956. It appears to have been one that wasn’t launched yet in our timeline, traveled for centuries past Pluto, and then came back to Earth and back in time.

The data recorders from the probe are triggering madness. The probe had been based on Tesla technology which didn’t work, sending it off into the far distance into a black hole, and thence to another universe wherein resided Azathoth. That god tossed the probe back to Earth, but not without consequences to Earthlings.

“Petohtalrayn” by Bentley Little is about a Miskatonic University archaeologist who notices that there are a number of cultures around the world that had legends of a Dark Man trapped underground and thirsting to remake the human world into his image. Nyarlathotep, for it is that one, has spent centuries building up an army of small rat-like creatures who will swarm up to the surface and overrun Earth.

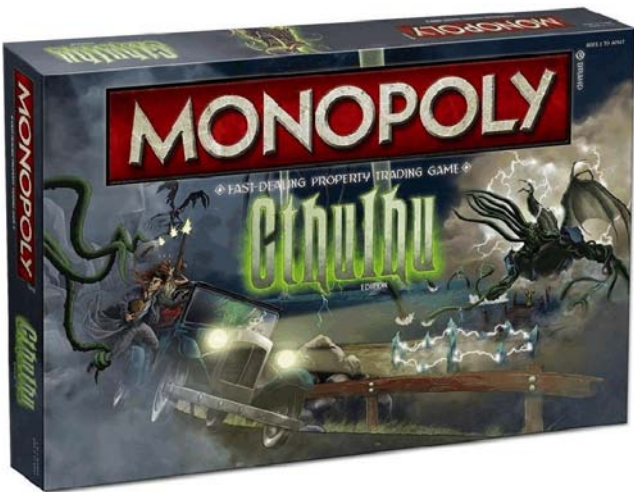
Der Tag finally comes, but Nyarlathotep is frustrated because his minions shrivel up and die upon exposure to sunshine and fresh air. We can all sleep easy in our beds now. Except, except, Nyarlathotep learned from its mistakes and is now breeding a new army that can survive on the surface.

“The Doors That Never Close And The Doors That Are Always Open” by David Liss concerns the job search of Artur Magnusson, who obtains a position with a Wall Street bank as Head of Special Projects Research. He had done graduate work on mythical continents such as Mu, but his thesis supervisor Amanda Thanton had disappeared in search of Shug-Niggurath, the she-goat with a thousand young.

The bank CEO is Howard Ostentower, and he too is in search of something Lovecraftian. Shug-Niggurath can do wonders for successful acquisitions and investment opportunities. Magnusson discovers both the details about Shug-Niggurath and what had happened to Thanton. Given the real-world behaviour of Wall Street banksters, one has to wonder how far away from the truth this story is.

“In The Mad Mountains” by Joe R. Lansdale begins with a shipwreck in Antarctic waters. A lifeboat of survivors lands on an iceberg which has an old

sailing ship frozen in it. They establish camp in it, and later find other ships and even an airplane frozen in the ice. In the distance are mountains which seem to be moving slightly. Then they meet the Elder Things, remnants of a long-ago alien invasion back in the Precambrian era.



NEW CTHULHU (2011) is an anthology edited by Paula Guran. Some of the stories have appeared in other anthologies but enough are new to justify this book. I'll only review a few stories out of the 27 in this thick volume. Overall, this is a good anthology. The stories are not necessarily chapter-and-verse Mythos, but do follow the Lovecraftian themes.

“Pickman’s Other Model (1929)” by Caitlin R. Kierman is a multi-layered story. It is an investigation by the narrator into the life of a deceased friend William Thurber, who in turn had been investigating an eldritch artist Richard Pickman. The model was a failed actress Vera Endecott, who had posed for Pickman.

She was still around, and the narrator learns from her that she had been born with a tail. Her family were a reclusive bunch who lived in a seaside Massachusetts village, the kind of place where everyone knows what the word ‘squamous’ means. In adulthood, she had the tail surgically removed, only to learn that the Old Ones do not like apostates.

“Fair Exchange” by Michael Marshall Smith is narrated by an English bloke speaking in housebreaker’s argot about the jobs he and his partner Baz done burglarizing homes in suburban London. One house was particularly lucrative, with some old silverplate from the American East Coast. The fence offers a substantial sum for any more like that, as he was able to sell the first batch to a collector who asked no questions and bid high.

The two thieves are interested of course, and the house is cased a second time before the next burglary. The first time there was no one home, but another hit will be more dangerous, so the bloke watches to see the occupants. There are three residents, who look weird. Nothing obvious but they have big faces and bulging eyes. The second attempt doesn’t go well, for it turns out that the occupants are looking for their own type of loot: humans.

“The Dude Who Collected Lovecraft” is by Nick Mamatas and Tim Pratt. The narrator’s great-grandfather was a correspondent of HPL, and is using those letters to earn money by selling them to a collector in the Vermont countryside. That collector is Fremgen, who has his own private museum. What Fremgen wants, however, is the narrator’s blood, as in drugging him and then draining him with an intravenous tube.

The plan is elaborate, some sort of method to time travel to 1928 and meet HPL in person. It goes weirdly wrong when Fremgen instead attracts the attention of

an Old One. The narrator barely escapes, but Fremgen doesn’t. The finale is a coruscating sky, and all that.

“The Oram County Whoosit” by Steve Duffy is a humorous story about events in Oram, West Virginia. An author named Horton Keith and the narrator, an unnamed newspaper reporter, have come to investigate claims that the local miners found a creature inside a slab of coal.

The plot goes sideways for several pages while Keith explains his interest. He had once seen the same sort of monster dug up in a gold claim in the Yukon when he was there during the Klondike gold rush. The monster suddenly came to life and ran amok, killing left, right, and centre.

Keith believes the Oram creature is the same species, and that they had come to Earth during the Carboniferous. The Klondike strata are not Carboniferous, but let that pass; the glaciers may have mixed it into Pleistocene deposits. As he finishes his explanation, the Oram creature revives, and you can guess the rest of the plot. It all ends in tears, and blood.

NEW CTHULHU 2 (2015) is the second volume of this anthology, again edited by Paula Guran, and again I’ll just pick out a few stories.

“The Wreck Of The Charles Dexter Ward” by Elizabeth Bear and Sarah Monette makes the Lovecraftian reader wince sometimes by attempts at cuteness in naming. The story is set in a Solar System where manned space flight between planets is routine. There are characters such as Professor Wandrei, who hires Dr Cynthia Feuerwerker, MD, as part of a crew salvaging a wrecked spaceship, the Charles Dexter Ward.

It is a somewhat different universe, cobbled together from HPL and Lewis Carroll. Instead of cats for vermin control, spaceships use cheshires, tentacled small creatures that prowl about looking for toves and other interdimensional pests that slip in through the interstices. Boojums are living spaceships, of which the Ward was one, that are giant space-faring whales found around Saturn.

Feuerwerker joins the away team to explore the dead ship. They find a reanimator on board. From there, events become eldritch very quickly, with bandersnatches and Mi-Gos, and other things crawling in through the interdimensional angles.

“The Doom That Came To Devil Reef” by Don Webb tells the Innsmouth people’s side of the story. Those squamous horrors from the black deeps of the ocean were simply trying to make a living and survive the pollution and harassment of humans. Cthulhu is a grievously misunderstood alien. The Mythos denizens lament the bad press perpetuated upon them by those disgusting scaleless creatures. A good read.

“Momma Durtt” by Michael Shea is about truckers who haul toxic waste and dump it down a mine shaft owned by a Mafia boss. Some of his men dispose of bodies in the same place. Events go at strange angles when a amoeboid Mythos creature decides to use them and a tanker truck to get itself out of the mine and into the city. Next time you pass a tanker on the highway, think about the possibility that it might be hauling nameless horrors to new homes.

**Pastiches: Collections.**

Brian Lumley has written extensively in the Mythos as short stories and novellas over the past several decades. They have been gathered into collections, of which a few are listed here.

THE WHISPERER AND OTHER VOICES (2001) has nine stories, not all of which are obviously connected to the Mythos, but following the theme even of only at a distance.

“The Statement Of Henry Worthy” begins in 1931 when the narrator’s nephew Matthew comes to visit the village in the Yorkshire moors. Matthew is at university and has come to do some scientific research on eldritch plants known as Unkrauter. While exploring the moors by himself, he falls into a pit.

From there, he enters an underground world with (insert various Lovecraftian adjectives) plants and creatures, and stone slabs with (runic, cabalistic, glyphic, etcetera) signs carved on them. Eventually he escapes and makes it back to his uncle’s house.

There, Matthew takes ill and begins metamorphosis into one of those Lovecraftian things, a noun, not an adjective. He eventually shuffles back out to the moors. His uncle becomes infected. Before it can take hold of him, he goes out to the pit with petrol and matches. A good story in the Mythos tradition.

“The Return Of The Deep Ones” is closer to novel length, at 142 pages, and as might be expected from the title, brings in the batrachian crowd. (There are only two groups of people in the world who know what ‘batrachian’ means, zoologists and HPL fans.)

The narrator is a marine biologist who receives a rare conch from William P. Marsh of Innsmouth, Massachusetts. The story takes a while to get going but eventually the background becomes the foreground. All sorts of (insert synonym for eldritch) people make contact with the narrator, some of whom go about muttering words such as “la R’lyeh”.

A shoggoth infests his garage, and they’re not easy pests to be rid of. The Deep Ones come and go, and one can’t take a step anywhere without slipping in primordial slime. But he must go down to the sea again. The novel fades out but there is no doubt that the majority of characters will wind up in the ocean deeps with a new life.

THE TAINT AND OTHER NOVELLAS (2007) collects more of Lumley’s stories. An example is “The Horror At Oakdeene”, set in 1935, about a wanna-be writer named Martin Spellman. He gets a job at an insane asylum, it being the Great Depression and he needing to put food on his table.

Spellman uses his spare time to look through patient files in search of literary fodder, and finds many strange correlations. There is a peculiar attendant named Barstowe, who has batrachian features, so right away the reader knows how his part will play out. Many of the inmates are incorrigible Mythos adepts.

Spellman’s investigations trigger the arrival of an Old One, who does a housecleaning of the asylum. Spellman ends up insane, Barstowe dead, and many inmates changed. Be careful what words you chant.

“The Fairground Horror” uses the premise that a good place to hide a Cthulhu hall of worship is in plain sight in a midway funhouse attraction. For visitors who have never heard of HPL, the carnival is just a carnival. For those who are adepts or working to it, it is a place where they can meet the Old Ones in person, or in creature as might be better said.

The danger is that instead of becoming an acolyte, they may become a sacrifice. The situation worsens when a showman tries to muscle his way in but is instead muscled out the ugly way.



HAGGOPIAN AND OTHER STORIES (2008) is a further collection of Lumley’s Mythos stories, although some are duplicated from older volumes. He starts off with a foreword about the history of the Mythos. HPL established the basic tenants and creatures of what he called Yog-Sothothery, and encouraged his fellow authors to use them in a shared universe.

The Mythos was subsequently developed by others, and in particular by the publisher August Derleth, who dedicated himself to preserving HPL’s works and pastiches. Derleth was a sharp-practice man, and in his lifetime was criticized for his personal and professional behaviour. In extenuation, it is safe to say that without his strenuous efforts, HPL would be forgotten today.

“The Caller Of The Black” (1967) was one of Lumley’s earliest Mythos stories. The narrator is Titus Crow, who received a visit from a stranger named Cabot Chambers, who fears a demon is after him, sent by cultist James Gedney. The demon does get him, and Crow investigates Gedney. Not a nice man; a hooray-Henry who frequents hellfire clubs.

Gedney has learned how to summon The Black, a soul eater formed from the blood of Yibb-Tstll. There is a defense against it, which Crow discovers and Gedney overlooks. Crow successfully redirects the demon to kill Gedney. A good story that follows the weird fiction trope and moves along briskly.

“Haggopian” is about the wealthy Armenian Richard Haggopian, whom journalist Jeremy Belton goes to interview. There is something batrachian (there’s that word again) about the millionaire, and the plot immediately becomes obvious. Haggopian’s hobbies are ichthyology and oceanography.

He goes on at great length about his life and scientific discoveries, which led him around the world to stories about Deep Ones, Dagon, submerged cities, and the sleeping Cthulhu. Haggopian was bitten by a strange species of hagfish, after which the changes began in his body. Now he is going back to the sea for good, and his wife with him.

The other stories of these Lumley collections read well. If you are an HPL fan, these books are worth reading.

**BWAH HA! HA!: PART 9**  
by Dale Speirs

[Parts 1 to 8 appeared in OPUNTIA’s #371, 372, 378, 388, 391, 393, 397, and 409.]

**Real Mad Scientists.**

There really were a few genuine mad scientists in our timeline, not just fictional ones. The one who immediately comes to mind is Nikola Tesla, a pioneer in electricity and electronics, who possibly invented a death ray and was one of the principals who made alternating current the standard for power today rather than direct current.

Which brings me to the television series MURDOCH MYSTERIES, based on the novels of Maureen Jennings and available on DVD. It is one of the best mystery series produced, with top-quality production values, good scripts, and good actors. It is about William Murdoch, a detective with the Toronto police in the 1890s, whose cases involve bizarre and cutting edge technology.

The first episode of the series was “Power”, written by R.B. Carney and aired in 2008. It is set at the time of the struggle between Thomas Edison, who advocated direct current for urban electrical power, and Nikola Tesla, who supported alternating current. Toronto city council is about to make the decision, and both sides were going all out.

The DC supporters had a traveling show moving about Toronto, demonstrating the dangers of AC by electrocuting stray dogs. This had the animal rights supporters up in arms. But Miss Toronto Electric and Light, an employee of the DC people, is electrocuted instead when she throws the switch. The switch was tampered with so that when she pulled it, the electricity went through her instead of the dog. Murdoch becomes involved.

Plenty of suspects are shown. An animal rights activist. The DC company executives. The AC executives possibly trying to make it look like the DC people did it. The autopsy showed Miss TE&L was five weeks pregnant, so it might have been any of several married executives from either side or even city council. She was a hussy who got around.

Murdoch is faced with numerous twists and turns. Tesla helps him out with numerous gadgets, such as a wireless telephone that secretly records



conversations on wax cylinders. The death toll steadily increases. Executives and councillors abruptly die in bizarre electrocutions, or with old-fashioned but effective stabbings.

The confusion Murdoch faces is finally resolved when he realizes that there are several different murderers operating for different reasons. Tesla displays his inventions, particularly broadcast power, the thing that obsessed him in real life. The gadgets are well done in the style of the 1890s. Tesla's inability to concentrate on marketable items is well illustrated. He and Murdoch make a good team investigating how the foul deeds were done.

No steampunks, but the term electricpunk could be used. Recommended.

Another well-recommended television series, available on DVD, is THE LIBRARIANS, about a group who work for a secret library that collects magical artifacts and tries to stop evil doers. It is set in modern times, so Tesla doesn't appear in person, but his legacy remains.

“And The City Of Light” (2015)) is a first-season episode, written by John Rogers and Jeremy Bernstein. A UFO researcher disappears in a small town in upstate New York, under circumstances that suggest to the viewer that some sort of alien invasion is underway.

The Librarians are dispatched to investigate, and soon find all sorts of anomalies. The streets are illuminated by gaslights. The town was supposedly founded in 1953, but one of the Librarians notes that the architecture is all from the late 1800s and early 1900s. There are no bungalows, which were what the vast majority of single-family houses built in the 1950s were.

The townsfolk behave suspiciously, as if they were possessed by aliens. The story takes a right-angle turn when the Librarians discover that Tesla had been here in 1915, experimenting with broadcast power. He made a horrible mistake and popped all the townsfolk into another dimension. They can possess humans and do so in the ongoing struggle to get out of their trap and back to our side of the curtain. One of the Librarians is accidentally pulled into the other dimension.

Tesla set up a capacitor at the local hydroelectric dam, which when fully charged will release a burst of energy that will propel the trapped townsfolk back into our dimension. The Librarians try to use it but mess up. They get their own colleague back but the townsfolk are still trapped.

Pause for digression. A capacitor is an energy storage device analogous to a battery, except that it can release its energy all at once instead of in a flow. They are commonly used to block direct current while allowing alternating current to flow, to smooth power flows, and to tune radio frequencies. They come in all sizes, from microscopic in computer circuits to big iron that could vapourize you if you touched it in the wrong way. Just about every electronic device or electrical line has capacitors.

Meanwhile, back at the dam, it is said the turbine generators have been charging a single van-size capacitor for a century, accumulating the energy for the escape plan. Either the generators are incredibly weak or there is a serious design flaw in the capacitor.

It is also mentioned that the equipment is rusted and worn, and patched together to prevent failure. This means the capacitor is basically a bomb waiting to go off, assuming it has a full charge. And indeed, one reason why the Librarians botch the escape is that they realize that if all the energy is discharged, it will make Tunguska look like a damp squib.

The story is a zero-reset story where nothing changed in the end. The Librarians promise to look into the matter further to try and release the townsfolk still trapped in the other dimension, but unless a future episode deals with it, then the townsfolk are out of luck. Not a satisfying ending.

### **General Madness.**

SLAVES OF THE SWITCHBOARD OF DOOM (2017) by Bradley Schenck is a mix of mostly pulp space opera with bits of steampunk, cyberpunk, and alternative history. The novel begins with switchboard operators of Retropolis being replace by an automated system. Not a telephone switchboard, but one where operators connected callers to databases, sort of a manual Google.

The book starts off with set-ups of various subplots. An action hero engaged in derring-do on the Moon. Sinister executives up to no good. Everyday people about to be swept up in the excitement as bit players, whose last words are a scream suddenly cut off by the sound of gurgling blood.

The hero is Dash Kent. He is hired by the laid-off switchboard operators to find out why their jobs are suddenly gone. That search brings him to Howard Pitt, a mad engineer (no doctorate) with a nefarious plan.



The public transit system consists of pods that carry individuals through tubes to their customized destinations, and an elevated monorail for those traveling in groups. Someone is buying up all the inertrium, an anti-gravity substance used for airships and extraordinarily tall skyscrapers.

Pitt’s plan, pardon me, The Plan, involves a humongous rocket ship powered by all the sequestered inertrium. It will take countless involuntary passengers to the Moon, where they will colonize it whether they want to or not. It all ends in tears. Pitt gets his just desserts in an unusual way, and The Plan is successfully defeated.

The book reads easily as pulp fiction or space opera, but with better writing than the authors of the 1930s could do. The text flows smoothly, without constant interruptions from “As you know, Professor” infodumps that plague so much SF then and now. An enjoyable read.

**CRIME AND PUBLISMENT: PART 3**  
by Dale Speirs

[Parts 1 to 2 appeared in OPUNTIA #61.1 and 391.]

**Roman A Clef.**

“The Case Of The Final Page”, written by Don Arthur, is a 1951 episode of the old-time radio series THE NEW ADVENTURES OF NERO WOLFE. (This and hundreds of other OTR shows are available as free mp3s at [www.otrrlibrary.org](http://www.otrrlibrary.org)) The radio show pastiches were based on Rex Stout’s famous detective but he did not involve himself in the series beyond cashing his royalty cheques.

Nero Wolfe was a gargantuan detective who solved most of his cases sitting at his desk in his brownstone house. Archie Goodwin was his legman, who did the actual work out in the field. The novels and short stories had a good run from 1934 to Stout’s death in 1975. I reviewed them in OPUNTIA #252, 253, 275, 278, 279, 289, 304, 307, 319, 332, 335, 337, 344, 355, 364, 365, and 382.

This radio episode begins with Wolfe making one of his rare excursions from his Manhattan brownstone to visit novelist Arthur Merle, a fellow gourmet. On arrival at his apartment, they find him slumped over his typewriter, a knife in his back. In the typewriter, they find page 189 of his current novel, STARBREAKER. The rest of the manuscript is missing, as are the carbons. Nothing else was taken, so the conclusion was that the killer knew there was something in it that was dangerous.

The table had been set for four, but who was the fourth guest? It seems that the guest arrived earlier and murdered Merle. While the police are investigating, Merle’s fiancée Cynthia Roberts arrives. She wasn’t part of the dinner group but was just coming by for a visit. Inspector Cramer wants to arrest her on general suspicion, but Wolfe dissuades him.

Goodwin visits the publisher Morton, and meets him and the publicity agent Childs. Wolfe brings Roberts into his office for interrogation but it is fruitless. He contacts Morton and arranges a bluff. A press release is sent out saying that an extra set of the manuscript carbons would be used and finished off by a ghostwriter. The carbons are stored in Wolfe’s office. The stratagem succeeds, and the killer shows up. The men are hiding in the office with Cramer, when Morton shows up with a gun in his back, held by Childs.

The manuscript described a method of blackmail that Childs had been using. He wasn’t too happy about the details being exposed. There is gunplay, and Cramer saves the District Attorney the cost of a trial. A routine whodunit, but the pace is brisk and the plot moves along nicely.

As further proof that authors should not resort to blackmail, consider DEATH ON DEMAND (1987) by Carolyn G. Hart. This novel is part of a cozy series about Annie Laurance, owner of the Death On Demand bookstore on Broward’s Rock, an island in South Carolina. The bookstore has a weekly gathering of mystery authors called the Sunday Night Regulars.

One such author is Elliot Morgan, a nasty sort whom Laurance and many others despise, and for good reason. He is, of course, the victim. He was done in at the latest meeting after he announced he was writing a roman a clef novel that would expose the other authors present. He stated that he had collected damaging evidence against several authors for serious crimes, and would use it in the novel. At that point, the lights were turned off, and someone killed Morgan with a poisoned dart.



Everyone really did have something to hide, and Morgan’s knowledge cost him his life. Laurance is the main suspect in the opinion of the police, and not just because it happened in her bookstore. She has to scramble into Miss Marple mode and find the killer.

The book has floor plans, a map of the island, and even several charts sorting out who was where when. They are needed, considering the convoluted mess of details dredged up by Laurance and her boyfriend Max Darling. (Some authors should be prosecuted in federal court for their choice of character names.)

The Sunday Night Regulars have a final meeting, not to discuss mystery fiction but mystery fact. It is a J’accuse! meeting, with Laurance taking the role of Nero Wolfe. She tells the group that she has a photo of the murderer connecting him to Morgan’s death and will turn it over to the police tomorrow.

After that, it is just a matter of lying in wait for the murderer to come back later that night to steal the evidence. The culprit is captured and turns out to be a blackmailer who resented Morgan occupying his territory. Morgan was going to expose the other authors for all the world to see. That is the last thing a blackmailer wants, since his success depends on keeping the secret so the victim will continue paying.

For a cozy, and in the early style, the novel wasn’t a bad read but was a bit over detailed.

**The Manuscript’s The Thing.**

*“You’ll never get anywhere with all those damned short little sentences.”*  
Gregory Clark to Ernest Hemingway, when both were reporters on the TORONTO STAR newspaper in the 1920s.

THE HEMINGWAY THIEF (2016) by Shaun Harris is a mystery novel based on the true story of how Ernest Hemingway’s wife Hadley lost all his manuscripts in December 1922. At that time, he was a newspaper reporter with the TORONTO STAR on assignment in Switzerland,. He had yet to publish a short story or novel. He met an editor who wanted to see samples of his work, so he telegraphed Hadley in Paris to bring all his unpublished manuscripts to Lausanne.

She packed them all into one suitcase, including carbon copies, which was stolen from the train en route. They were never found. The thief probably chucked the papers and sold the suitcase for a few francs.

Ernest Hemingway later said that the manuscripts were no great loss, although if they were to resurface today they would be worth a fortune as collectible artifacts. There is an entire cottage industry of short stories and novels about the loss of the suitcase (see OPUNTIA #71.1C, page 16). This novel by Harris is one of the more recent productions in that sub-genre.

In the novel at hand, writer Henry Cooper and a hotel owner Grady Doyle are the main protagonists. Cooper’s first novel bombed. The kindest review was that it was a solid case to bring back book burning. Another reviewer suggested it be used to line bird cages. Cooper switched to romance paperbacks under the nom de plume of Toulouse Velour, and was now earning a good living.

Cooper and Doyle cross paths in Mexico with a small-time thief Ebbie Milch, who just stole the first draft of a Hemingway novel from a book dealer. From there, the three of them become entangled in a chase for a bigger prize, the suitcase with the missing 1922 manuscripts.

The conspiracy theory is that Hemingway staged the theft as a publicity stunt. The suitcase has now resurfaced in Mexico. Lots of action-adventure, with nasty Mexicans and gringos alike, while Cooper, Doyle, and Milch try to thread their way between them and survive. The suitcase and its manuscripts are the MacGuffin of the story.

The chase goes hither and yon through Mexican canyons until the MacGuffin is destroyed by fire. At that point, those still left alive more or less shrug their shoulders and head home. Cooper decides it is safer to stick to writing romance paperbacks. The novel peters out to the finish. Worth reading once.

GHOSTAL LIVING (2017) by Kathleen Bridge is a novel from a cozy series about Meg Barrett, an interior decorator in the Hamptons district of Long Island, New York. She has the contract for the Bibliophile Bed and Breakfast, owned by book collector Franklin Hollingsworth. The MacGuffin of this story is an unpublished manuscript of F. Scott Fitzgerald.

The B&B starts at \$800 per night off-season, meals extra. The Fitzgerald, Melville, and Poe suites are occupied, the first one by Randall McFee. He had

authenticated the manuscript, for which Hollingsworth paid \$5 million. McFee doesn't stay in the suite long, as his body was found on a nearby estate.

The attribution of the manuscript had been called into question. Before further studies can be made on its authenticity, it and several rare books disappear from the B&B library. Sharp practice in the rare book industry is not unknown, but in this case it may have been insurance fraud.

Barrett does her snooping, often ineptly, and stirs up trouble all across that end of the island. Someone is poisoning people by putting digitalis in their food. The body count rises, especially after certain heirs realize that Hollingsworth's debts exceeded his assets by a substantial margin. They won't get any inheritance if bankruptcy is declared, so they have to move before the fact becomes known.

The epilogue is a tangled mess because so many people are guilty of so many things. A daughter was being blackmailed by her alcoholic father and forced to steal rare books. Elsewhere, a four-way romance sets off the murders. One would think that the Hollingsworth family were in a tontine. People live materially better in the Hamptons, but their personal lives are messier than the plot.

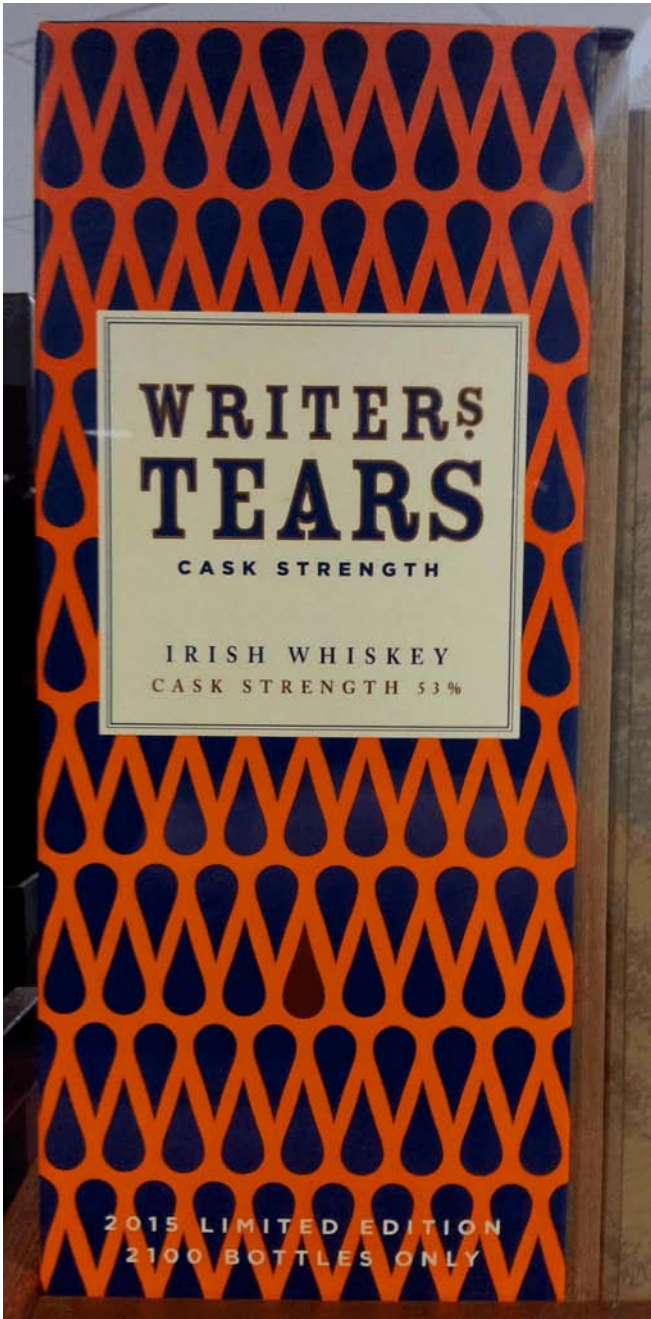
**He That Filches From Me My Good Name.**

"Borrowed Byline", written by Joel Malone and Harold Swanton, is a 1947 episode of the old-time radio series THE WHISTLER. This mystery show specialized in endings with twists that came back to trash the protagonist in the last few minutes of the episode.

Craig MacElvey was a foreign correspondence for an English newspaper, just arrived in Hong Kong from Singapore. He made the jump without permission from his editor and on arrival gets a cablegram firing him for insubordination. This makes his life difficult because he made the trip to meet up with a shady friend Alfonse Selendrum, who wants him to file a false story to London, unaware that MacElvey has just been dismissed.

Selendrum will pay \$50,000 for the fake news that he has found a huge batch of deer musk, used as a base for the finest perfumes. That in turn will convince his backers in England to forward \$250,000 as an advance payment for the musk. Multiply those amounts by 20 to get the inflated dollar value of our times.

MacElvey wants in on the deal but can't let Selendrum know what happened. His replacement, en route to Hong Kong, is Frank Parksley. MacElvey meets him at the dock, takes him by car to his hotel but in the guise of showing him a scenic view, detours to a remote site and murders him. The deed is done and the body tossed into the bay. MacElvey then continues to the hotel and checks in under Parksley's name, using his luggage.



The false story is filed by MacElvey in Parksley's name. Selendrum arrives at the hotel room to finish the deal.

Moments later, so do the police. They had been tracking Parksley as a smuggler who had just stolen a quantity of musk, which was in the luggage. His body had been found at low tide in the bay. MacElvey's use of Parksley's name will hang him.

*I'm a teetotaler, but when I saw this displayed in the window of a liquor store, I couldn't resist taking a smartphone photo.*



# **A WORK YOU SHALL NOT BELIEVE, THOUGH A MAN DECLARE IT UNTO YOU**

by Dale Speirs

## **World Building.**

Larry Niven is one of the best science fiction authors, with a lot of cutting-edge stories. His Ringworld books are among my favourites. They involve a giant artificial ring rotating around a star. I was therefore interested to stumble across a forgotten version of a ringworld dating from 1921.

THE EMANCIPATRIX was a novel by Homer Eon Flint in a series about mad scientist Dr William Kinney. Most of this novel is about telepathy experiments which allow Kinney and his friends to lurk in the minds of aliens elsewhere in the galaxy.

This time around they are visiting a hive-mind society but then find primitive humanoids elsewhere. It isn't until two-thirds of the way through the novel that they realize they are on a ringworld known to the aliens as Sanus.

One of Kinney's people is lurking in the mind of an alien named Rolla, who lived in the oppressive hive-mind world. She escaped and after a strange journey arrived in another place where she met a humanoid named Somat, who also has a lurker in his mind. The aliens are not aware of the presence of the humans, nor can the humans affect them.

Somat explains the ringworld to Rolla.

*"It is true that I have crossed the edge of the world. And yet, I understand it not at all. Can ye explain the nature of this strange world we live upon, Somat?" There was infinite respect in the way Rolla used his name; had she known a word to indicate human infallibility, such as "Your Majesty", she would have used it. "There is a saying among our people that the world be round. How can this be so?"*

*"Yet it is true", answered Somat, "although ye must know that it be not round like a fruit or a pebble. No more is it flat, like this", indicating the lid of the stove, near which they sat. "Instead, 'tis shaped thus", and he took from his finger a plain gold band, like an ordinary wedding ring, "the world is shaped like that!"*

*Rolla examined the ring with vast curiosity. She had never seen the like before, and was quite as much interested in the metal as in the thing it illustrated. Fortunately the band was so worn that both edges were nearly sharp, thus corresponding with the knifelike ridge over which she had crawled.*

*"Now", Somat went on, "ye and your people live on the inner face of the world", indicating the surface next his skin, "while I and my kind live on the outer face. Were it not for the difficulties of making the trip, we should have found you out ere this."*

*Rolla sat for a long time with the ring in her hand, pondering the great fact she had just learned. And meanwhile, back on the earth, four excited citizens were discussing this latest discovery.*

*"An annular world!" exclaimed the doctor, his eyes sparkling delightedly. "It confirms the nebular hypothesis!" "How so?" Smith wanted to know.*

*"Because it proves that the process of condensation and concentration, which produces planets out of the original gases can take place at uneven speeds! Instead of concentrating to the globular form, Sanus cooled too quickly; she concentrated while she was still a ring!"*

*Smith was struck with another phase of the matter. "Must have a queer sort of gravitation", he pointed out. "Seems to be the same, inside the ring or outside. Surely, Doc, it can't be as powerful as it is here on the Earth?"*

*"No; not likely."*

*"Then, why hasn't it made a difference in the inhabitants? Seems to me the humans would have different structure."*

*"Not necessarily. Look at it the other way around; consider what an enormous variety of animal forms we have here, all developed under the same conditions. The humming-bird and the python, for instance. Gravitation needn't have anything to do with it."*

*Billie was thinking mainly of the question of day and night. "The ring must be inclined at an angle with the sun's rays", she observed. "That being the case, Sanus has two periods each year when there is continuous darkness on the*

*inner face; might last a week or two. Do you suppose the people all hibernate during those seasons?” But no one had an answer to that.*

*Van Emmon said he would give all he was worth to explore the Sanusian mountains long enough to learn their geology. He said that the rocks ought to produce some new mineral forms, due to the peculiar condition of strain they would be subjected to.*

*“I’m not sure”, said he thoughtfully, “but I shouldn’t be surprised if there’s an enormous amount of carbon there. Maybe diamonds are as plentiful as coal is here.”*

An interesting idea for the times. I wonder if there are any earlier science fiction stories about ringworlds.

### **Antichthon.**

The idea of a counter-Earth that revolved around the Sun always 180° opposite our Earth is an old one that goes back to the ancient Greeks. It was supposed to be undetectable because it was always hidden by the Sun. If it actually existed in reality, it would have been detected millennia ago because the planets move in ellipses, not circles, and the perturbation of other planets, particularly Venus, would have wobbled it off its course.

As science fiction though, it is fun to run with. The standard plot is to assume it has humans with identical or nearly-so histories, and every Earthling has a doppelganger on Counter-Earth. They speak English on the far side of the Sun, which saves the script writer time and trouble.

“Worlds Apart” is a 1950 episode of the old-time radio series 2000 PLUS, no writer credit given. (This and hundreds of other OTR shows are available as free mp3s at [www.otrrlibrary.org](http://www.otrrlibrary.org)) The Phoenix is a spaceship making the first flight from Earth to Neptune. En route, it goes off course when it tangles with the tail of a comet. The impact, and it would be an impact at such high speeds, even if just gas and dust, damaged the ship and killed the astrogator.

For the purpose of the plot, no one else on board knows how to navigate, not even the captain. Unbelievable, since every large ship has redundancy. They do know how to work the radio, as fortunately the communications technician survived. Their distress call is finally answered, and they are towed into port.

It seems like Earth, but in the conversation that follows, although everyone is fluent in English, no one has heard of the Phoenix, America, Chicago, or any other place mentioned by the crew, not even Earth. The crew are held prisoners by parahumans who have extended lifespans, the hearing of a cat, and the night vision of an owl.

Finally the reason is discovered. The Phoenix landed on Counter-Earth, where the place names are different but the language is the same. Not plausible, but what the hey. Once that is resolved, tensions ease and the parahumans show the Earthlings about, lecturing them on their utopia as such people always do.

They can’t stay there forever, so the ship is reprovisioned. Everybody shakes hands all around and promise we really must do this again someday. The Phoenix returns to Earth, and on that happy note the episode ends.

JOURNEY TO THE FAR SIDE OF THE SUN was a 1969 movie made in Britain and released as DOPPELGANGER. The American distributors dumbed down the title and under that one it is available on DVD.

The movie was written by Gerry and Sylvia Anderson and Donald James. The Andersons are most famous for their puppet shows, but this was live action. The SFX are reasonably good, but anyone who has seen the puppet shows will instantly recognize the type of models used for spacecraft and ground vehicles.

The movie is Eurocentric, which adds to its charm. It opens with the discovery of Counter-Earth by a space probe, which triggers a manned mission to explore it. Because of the length of time needed to reach it, the astronauts are put into hibernation once underway. This allows for dreamy lava-lamp psychedelic sequences to pass the time.

When they wake up, they find they have arrived back at Earth, or what they think is Earth. Mission Control is angry at them for aborting their flight and interrogates them roughly. The astronauts are confused. People speak normal English but their writing is a mirror image. Everything is.

After much stress and anguish on both sides, it is determined that the astronauts did indeed land on Counter-Earth. Incredibly, there was a space expedition in the opposite direction by Counter-Earth with doppelganger astronauts, mirror-reversed of course, and spacecraft.



The mother ship had been left in orbit and the astronauts descended in a shuttle, which they crashed, killing one of them. Once the difficulties are straightened out, Counter-Earth builds the survivor a new shuttle so the can go back to the mother ship and return to Earth. It is supposed by all that the same thing is happening on the other side of the Sun, although that part of the story is never shown or explained.

The new shuttle was built with faulty hardware that caused it to crash, killing the astronaut and ruining the careers of the Counter-Earth space agency managers. One of them is shown decades later in his dotage, confined to a wheelchair in a nursing home and still grieving about what happened. His nurse leaves him alone for a moment. He sees his image in a full-length mirror at the opposite end of the hallway. He wheels his chair to it, going faster, faster, faster at the mirror. Cut before the impact to the ruins of the spaceport.

A good movie. The SFX are well done for the late 1960s. Worth viewing.

**Do You See What I See?**

“The Telescopic Eye” is an 1876 story by William Henry Rhodes, reprinted in the 2017 anthology FRANKENSTEIN DREAMS, edited by Michael Sims. It is about a boy named Johnny Palmer. By the time he was two years old, he was presumed to be congenitally blind. Ophthalmologists later discover that he had abnormally shaped eyes with a minimum focal distance of 240,000 miles, that is, the distance to the Moon.

He could see the Moon’s surface as if it were a front yard he was standing in, and describes the inhabitants who live on its surface. With a telescope adjusted for his vision, he can see the civilization on the surface of Mars, while Venus is just as fuzzy to him as to regular astronomers.

The story cuts off abruptly with no resolution. It is an interesting concept story of extreme presbyopia. Science fiction is, after all, a literature of ideas.

**Gimme That Old Time Radio.**

QUIET PLEASE was an old-time radio series which ran 1947 to 1949. All the episodes were written by the director Wyllis Cooper. (This and hundreds of other OTR shows are available as free mp3s at [www.otrrlibrary.org](http://www.otrrlibrary.org)) “Where Do You Get Your Ideas” is a 1949 episode that initially wanders about like a horse

grazing in a pasture. One gets the impression that Cooper didn’t have a proper plot and was just filling in air time. As a result, the listener is liable to tune it out as background chatter and not hear the twist ending in the last few seconds.

The story is about a drunk in a bar who listens in on a conversation between two radio scriptwriters. He asks them the familiar question that writers often get, “Where do you get your ideas?” The conversation meanders back and forth, taking in topics such as life on the Moon, and a confession by the drunk that he has just murdered his wife Helen. That gets everyone’s attention for a moment, until Helen walks in and orders a beer.

Most of the episode is a setup for the supposed murder mystery. At the ending, it suddenly changes to science fiction when the drunk gives away the fact that he is either an alien or a physical freak. I have to confess that the dullness of the episode caused me to miss the last sentence. It wasn’t until the end credits began that I realized there had been something strange about the drunk’s last remark, and backed up the mp3 to re-listen to it.

**SEEN IN THE LITERATURE**

Sage, R.F., et al (2018) **Some like it hot: the physiological ecology of C<sub>4</sub> plant evolution.** OECOLOGIA 187:941-966

Speirs: To explain why I'm citing this paper, the current fuss over elevated CO<sub>2</sub> levels ignores the fact that many times before in Earth's history carbon levels were elevated and yet life survived. This paper discusses the evolution of C<sub>4</sub> plants, which began when atmospheric carbon levels fell down to current levels, causing extinctions and stress to biological life. Climate change is natural and has occurred many times in the past, sometimes violently (the end-Permian, when 97% of all life became extinct, the worst mass extinction on record) but mostly just the usual swings of the pendulum.

There are three basic types of photosynthesis found in plants: carbon three (C<sub>3</sub>), carbon four (C<sub>4</sub>), and Crassulacean Acid Metabolism (CAM). The majority of plants use C<sub>3</sub>, so called because the intermediate products of photosynthesis have three carbon atoms. Many plants, such as grassland species, have C<sub>4</sub> metabolism, which is not as efficient as C<sub>3</sub> but allows better survival in dry conditions. In extreme environments, such as deserts and nutrient-poor fresh waters, cacti and some aquatic species use CAM, which reduces metabolic losses.

Authors' abstract: *'Why' C<sub>4</sub> photosynthesis evolved is largely explained by ancestral C<sub>3</sub> species exploiting photorespiratory CO<sub>2</sub> to improve carbon gain and thus enhance fitness. While photorespiration depresses C<sub>3</sub> performance, it produces a resource (photorespired CO<sub>2</sub>) that can be exploited to build an evolutionary bridge to C<sub>4</sub> photosynthesis.*

*'Where' C<sub>4</sub> evolved is indicated by the habitat of species branching near C<sub>3</sub>-to-C<sub>4</sub> transitions on phylogenetic trees. Consistent with the photorespiratory bridge hypothesis, transitional species show that the large majority of > 60 C<sub>4</sub> lineages arose in hot, dry, and/or saline regions where photorespiratory potential is high.*

*'When' C<sub>4</sub> evolved has been clarified by molecular clock analyses using phylogenetic data, coupled with isotopic signatures from fossils. Nearly all C<sub>4</sub> lineages arose after 25 megayears ago when atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> levels had fallen to near current values. This reduction in CO<sub>2</sub>, coupled with persistent high temperature at low-to-mid-latitudes, met a precondition where photorespiration was elevated, thus facilitating the evolutionary selection pressure that led to C<sub>4</sub> photosynthesis.*

Proctor, J., et al (2018) **Estimating global agricultural effects of geoengineering using volcanic eruptions.** NATURE 560:480-483

Authors' abstract: *Solar radiation management is increasingly considered to be an option for managing global temperatures, yet the economic effects of ameliorating climatic changes by scattering sunlight back to space remain largely unknown. Although solar radiation management may increase crop yields by reducing heat stress, the effects of concomitant changes in available sunlight have never been empirically estimated.*

*Here we use the volcanic eruptions that inspired modern solar radiation management proposals as natural experiments to provide the first estimates, to our knowledge, of how the stratospheric sulfate aerosols created by the eruptions of El Chichón and Mount Pinatubo altered the quantity and quality of global sunlight, and how these changes in sunlight affected global crop yields.*

*We find that the sunlight-mediated effect of stratospheric sulfate aerosols on yields is negative for both C<sub>4</sub> (maize) and C<sub>3</sub> (soy, rice and wheat) crops. Applying our yield model to a solar radiation management scenario based on stratospheric sulfate aerosols, we find that projected mid-twenty-first century damages due to scattering sunlight caused by solar radiation management are roughly equal in magnitude to benefits from cooling.*

*This suggests that solar radiation management, if deployed using stratospheric sulfate aerosols similar to those emitted by the volcanic eruptions it seeks to mimic, would, on net, attenuate little of the global agricultural damage from climate change.*

Quinton, P.C., et al (2018) **Extreme heat in the early Ordovician.** PALAIOS 33:353-360

[The Ordovician era went from 488 megayears ago to 443 megayears.]

Authors' abstract: *Global cooling and the establishment of a moderate climate in the Middle Ordovician has been invoked as the primary driver of the tenfold increase in marine biodiversity that characterized the Great Ordovician Biodiversification Event.*

*Arguments suggesting that climate change played a significant role in biodiversification purport that the Early Ordovician was dominated by warm (possibly even extremely warm) temperatures. In this scenario, biodiversification occurred only after sea surface temperatures approached the range observed in modern tropical settings. Temperature constraints for the Early Ordovician, however, are limited in number and documentation of short-term climatic trends is lacking.*

*This study aims to begin to address these shortcomings by presenting a new high resolution phosphate oxygen isotope record of species-specific and mixed*



*conodont assemblages from the Lange Ranch section of central Texas. We document consistently low  $\delta O$  values indicating that the Early Ordovician was characterized by extreme warmth. In addition, variations observed in  $\delta O$  values through the section are consistent with a short-lived (< 4 m.y.) warming event and/or oceanographic shift leading to a decrease in the  $\delta O$  value of local seawater.*

*All new data generated for this study are consistent with very warm temperatures during the Early Ordovician, an important starting condition in arguments that climate played an important role in Middle Ordovician biodiversification, but variation found also demonstrates the need for high resolution studies to constrain conditions on time scales relevant to evolutionary diversification.*

**Meyer, W.K., et al (2018) Ancient convergent losses of Paraoxonase 1 yield potential risks for modern marine mammals. SCIENCE 361:591-594**

*Authors' abstract: Mammals evolved in terrestrial environments. Those that now live in the marine environment have had to adapt to the particular selective pressures that this environment imposes. Multiple losses of the Paraoxonase 1 gene are evident in marine mammals, likely resulting from remodeling of lipid metabolism or antioxidant networks. The multiple occurrences of this loss of function across taxa indicate an evolutionary benefit.*

*However, Paraoxonase 1 is the primary mammalian defense against organophosphorus toxicity. Marine mammals may be at a great disadvantage in the Anthropocene if run-off of this agricultural product into the marine environment continues.*

*Mammals diversified by colonizing drastically different environments, with each transition yielding numerous molecular changes, including losses of protein function. Though not initially deleterious, these losses could subsequently carry deleterious pleiotropic consequences. We have used phylogenetic methods to identify convergent functional losses across independent marine mammal lineages.*

*In one extreme case, Paraoxonase 1 (PON1) accrued lesions in all marine lineages, while remaining intact in all terrestrial mammals. These lesions coincide with PON1 enzymatic activity loss in marine species' blood plasma.*

*This convergent loss is likely explained by parallel shifts in marine ancestors' lipid metabolism and/or bloodstream oxidative environment affecting PON1's role in fatty acid oxidation. PON1 loss also eliminates marine mammals' main defense against neurotoxicity from specific man-made organophosphorus compounds, implying potential risks in modern environments.*

**Speirs: Organophosphate insecticides have been widely used since World War Two. This article reads as if the threat were something new, but marine mammals have been exposed to organophosphates for many decades. The greater threat is whaling and sealing.**

**Roos, C.I., et al (2018) Indigenous impacts on North American Great Plains fire regimes of the past millennium. PROCEEDINGS OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES USA 115:8143-8148**

*Authors' abstract: For centuries before the introduction of the horse, Native American and First Nations hunters built and used landscape features on these grasslands to harvest bison en masse. Charcoal layers associated with drivelines indicate that fire was an important part of these hunting practices.*

*Furthermore, correlation of dated fire deposits and climate records indicate that ancient bison hunters burned in response to favorable climate conditions. This study indicates that climate and human activities are not mutually exclusive factors in fire histories; even relatively small groups of hunter-gatherers can enhance climate impacts.*

*We used an offsite geoarchaeological approach to link terrestrial records of prairie fire activity with spatially related archaeological features (driveline complexes) used for intensive, communal bison hunting in north-central Montana. Radiocarbon-dated charcoal layers from alluvial and colluvial deposits associated with driveline complexes indicate that peak fire activity over the past millennium occurred coincident with the use of these features (ca. 1100-1650 CE).*

*However, comparison of dated fire deposits with Palmer Drought Severity Index reconstructions reveal strong climate-fire linkages. More than half of all charcoal layers coincide with modest pluvial episodes, suggesting that fire use by indigenous hunters enhanced the effects of climate variability on prairie fire regimes. These results indicate that relatively small, mobile human populations*

can impact natural fire regimes, even in pyrogeographic settings in which climate exerts strong, top-down controls on fuels.

Doctor, J.N., et al (2018) **Opioid prescribing decreases after learning of a patient’s fatal overdose.** SCIENCE 361:588-590

Authors’ abstract: *Most people addicted to opioids began taking them because they were legally prescribed. Little attention has been paid to changing physicians' prescribing behavior. Using a randomized controlled trial format, Doctor et al. monitored the effect of notifying physicians who had a patient die of opioid overdose within 12 months of a prescription.*

*The physicians received an injunction to prescribe safely from their county's medical examiner. This intervention led to reductions in high-intensity prescribing, reductions in the likelihood that an opioid-naïve patient received a prescription, and a reduction in overall cumulative opioid intake.*

*Most opioid prescription deaths occur among people with common conditions for which prescribing risks outweigh benefits. General psychological insights offer an explanation: People may judge risk to be low without available personal experiences, may be less careful than expected when not observed, and may falter without an injunction from authority.*

*To test these hypotheses, we conducted a randomized trial of 861 clinicians prescribing to 170 persons who subsequently suffered fatal overdoses. Clinicians in the intervention group received notification of their patients’ deaths and a safe prescribing injunction from their county’s medical examiner, whereas physicians in the control group did not.*

*Milligram morphine equivalents in prescriptions filled by patients of letter recipients versus controls decreased by 9.7% (95% confidence interval: 6.2 to 13.2%;  $P < 0.001$ ) over 3 months after intervention. We also observed both fewer opioid initiates and fewer high-dose opioid prescriptions by letter recipients.*

Speirs: And yes, the lead investigator’s surname really is Doctor. I looked him up on Google. Dr. Jason Doctor is at the University of California, San Diego. I originally noticed this article because opioids are a problem in Canada as well as the USA, and have been making the news here.

Carson, R.G. (2018) **Get a grip: Individual variations in grip strength are a marker of brain health.** NEUROBIOLOGY OF AGING doi.org/10.1016/j.neurobiolaging.2018.07.023

Author’s abstract: *Demonstrations that grip strength has predictive power in relation to a range of health conditions, even when these are assessed decades later, has motivated claims that hand-grip dynamometry has the potential to serve as a vital sign for middle-aged and older adults. Central to this belief has been the assumption that grip strength is a simple measure of physical performance that provides a marker of muscle status in general, and sarcopaenia in particular.*

*It is now evident that while differences in grip strength between individuals are influenced by musculo-skeletal factors, lifespan changes in grip strength within individuals are exquisitely sensitive to integrity of neural systems that mediate the control of coordinated movement. The close and pervasive relationships between age-related declines in maximum grip strength and expressions of cognitive dysfunction can therefore be understood in terms of the convergent functional and structural mediation of cognitive and motor processes by the human brain. In the context of ageing, maximum grip strength is a discriminating measure of neurological function and brain health.*

Blake, K.R., et al (2018) **Income inequality not gender inequality positively covaries with female sexualization on social media.** PROCEEDINGS OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES USA 115:8722-8727

Authors’ abstract: *Publicly displayed, sexualized depictions of women have proliferated, enabled by new communication technologies, including the Internet and mobile devices. These depictions are often claimed to be outcomes of a culture of gender inequality and female oppression, but, paradoxically, recent rises in sexualization are most notable in societies that have made strong progress toward gender parity.*

*Few empirical tests of the relation between gender inequality and sexualization exist, and there are even fewer tests of alternative hypotheses. We examined aggregate patterns in 68,562 sexualized self-portrait photographs (“sexy selfies”) shared publicly on Twitter and Instagram and their association with city-, county-, and cross-national indicators of gender inequality. We then investigated the association between sexy-selfie prevalence and income*



*inequality, positing that sexualization, a marker of high female competition, is greater in environments in which incomes are unequal and people are preoccupied with relative social standing.*

*Among 5,567 US cities and 1,622 US counties, areas with relatively more sexy selfies were more economically unequal but not more gender oppressive. A complementary pattern emerged cross-nationally (113 nations): Income inequality positively covaried with sexy-selfie prevalence, particularly within more developed nations.*

*To externally validate our findings, we investigated and confirmed that economically unequal (but not gender oppressive) areas in the United States also had greater aggregate sales in goods and services related to female physical appearance enhancement (beauty salons and women’s clothing). Here, we provide an empirical understanding of what female sexualization reflects in societies and why it proliferates.*

**Worldwide Range Of The Common Rat**

The map below caused a stir on Twitter and various blogs when outlanders noticed the outline of Alberta as the only non-Arctic area in the world which has no rats. Alberta has an actual Rat Patrol which checks the borders regularly and investigates reports in the cities.

Worldwide Range of the Common Rat

