OPUNTIA 424

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BEAKERHEAD 2018

photos by Dale Speirs

[2015 to 2017 reports appeared in OPUNTIAs #322, 353, and 391.]

Calgary's annual techno art festival was held this year from September 19 to 23, spreading across the central city. Lots of installations and events for free viewing, which I took in, as well as pricey art gallery showings and trendy restaurant events, which I did not. As in previous years, it was great fun.

Plenty to see in the public spaces at no charge. I managed to cram in quite a number of sites on one day of the event and picked off a few more on other days. Like a science fiction convention, you can't get to everything you wanted, with the additional problem that the installation sites were scattered over kilometres of central Calgary.

Normally September is the dry season in Alberta, but during this year's Beakerhead we had showers and flurries. That crimped everyone's style for the outdoor events, but I kept a close watch on the weather forecast and varied my schedule accordingly. Our first snowfall of the season was September 13, which was early, although it didn't stick long. Calgary is a mountain city, so we have to expect these things.

The cover and this page show a sad but common scenario in central Calgary. The balloon installation was called Dreams Never Die and is based on the animated movie UP. The house, on 12 Avenue SE in the 300 block, is more than a century old. It was originally the mansion, among many on that avenue, of a cattle baron. It changed hands several times by the Great Depression, when it became a rooming house. By the turn of the Millennium it was a crack house, deteriorated beyond salvage. It will be replaced by condo towers like the those behind it.

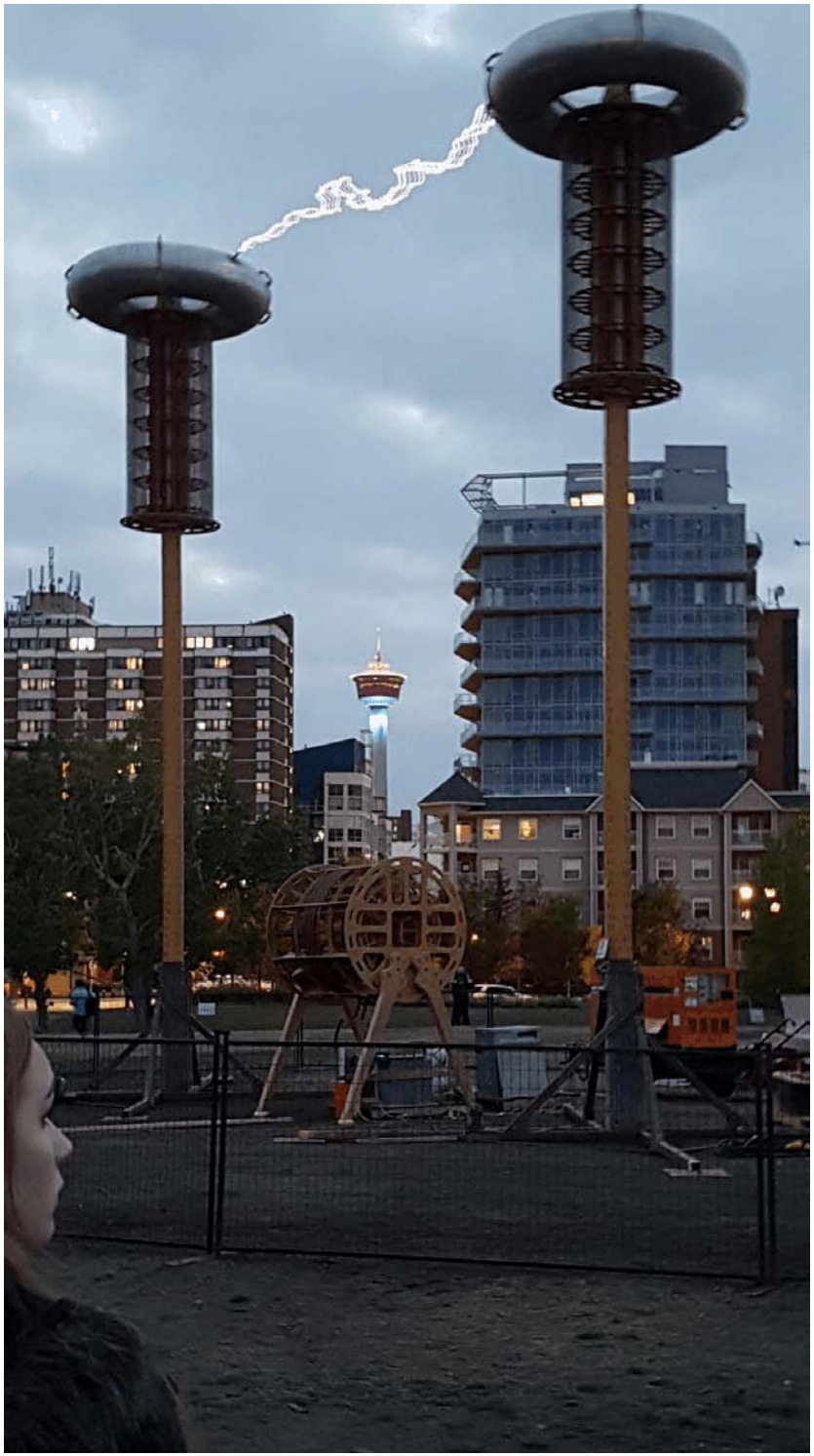
The attitude of many installation artists is that if you're going to make one, go big.

Below: A few blocks away from the UP house was Treeter Totter, a giant you-know-what with a tree planted on each end.

At right: Several kilometres away on the far side of the valley was this giant dung beetle at the Southern Alberta Institute of Technology. It was made of recycled materials. That probably meant something.

Over in the Mission district on 4 Street SW was this customized motor vehicle. The pun speaks for itself. Notice in the background a mad scientist in a lab coat singing the blues (enlargement below). Lady Frankenstein done him wrong.

Fort Calgary had these giant Tesla coils and giant flowers. The flowers had sensors that detected heart beats and then pulsed in different colours to the beats.



Most of Calgary's skyscrapers are linked by second-floor pedestrian overpasses. This one, spanning Centre Street in the 500 block, had an installation called Skybridge Syncopation.

As pedestrians walked through, sensors detected them and created light patterns that followed them. If you look closely, you can see the shadows of some of the pedestrians.

The colours were brighter and more varied than seen here, but my camera just couldn't get them. It didn't help that the headlights on the cars below kept throwing off the camera light meter.

ALIEN INVASIONS: PART 2
by Dale Speirs

[Part 1 appeared in OPUNTIA #407.]

First Contact: A Prelude.

THE ROSETTA MAN (2016) by Claire McCague was a novel I bought in the dealer bourse at the Calgary readercon When Words Collide. I picked up a copy at the table and read the blurb on the back cover. It mentioned that the hero lived in Twin Butte, in southwestern Alberta just outside the Waterton mountains.

That decided me, as I am one of few Albertans who has actually been to Twin Butte, a remote hamlet with a general store/post office and two houses. See OPUNTIA #319 for photos.

But to the novel. A type of stargate opened up near Neptune and fired a starship through, which later splashed down in the South Pacific Ocean near New Zealand. The alien on board, actually two aliens symbiotic with each other, were brought in, touching off visits into New Zealand waters by warships of nearly every nation that had a navy, all claiming right of innocent passage under international law.

Estlin Hume, resident of Twin Butte, is a biologist who knew more than a bit about communication with other species, so he was roped into the exobiology team. He was the only one who could actually communicate with the aliens. They wanted to go exploring, so they allowed themselves to be captured, first by the Chinese and then by the U.S. Navy. It soon became obvious that while humans thought they had the aliens in captivity, it was the other way around.

The aliens were scouts, sent ahead to determine if Earth nations would go to war after First Contact. The answer was "damn close". The biology of the aliens was highly original and makes this novel worth reading just for that. To mention the basic points, the aliens constantly shed nanomachines everywhere they go, which contaminate humans and everything else surrounding them and can easily pass through any quarantine measures. The nanomachines were transmitters forwarding information about their surroundings. As they spread on the wind or by contact, the aliens thus knew what is going on over a huge area.

The aliens were servants, sent ahead by their masters. They had previously visited Mars during the Cretaceous, only to find its civilization had destroyed itself. Not by war, but because their first version of a stargate backfired and fried the planet.

The alien scouts communicated by colours and patterns. There is one intelligent species on Earth that does likewise, cuttlefish. The cuttlefish wanted the aliens to eradicate the bipeds that kept killing them and polluting their water. The masters never appeared on scene but their biology and ability to build stargates that don't blow up was a fascinating infodump.

All told, an excellent novel. The narrative flows freely, with mild humour throughout. Well recommended.

First Contact Goes Wrong.

THE BLACK CLOUD (1957) by Fred Hoyle is one of the classics of science fiction, based on reasonable extrapolation. The premise is straightforward. Astronomers photographed a black cloud about the size of Jupiter, inbound to the Solar System. Its arrival date was estimated to be August 1965, which at the time this novel was published made it near-future fiction.

The Cloud had enough mass that the outer planets were deviating ever so slightly from their orbits. More worrying was the density of the Cloud, sufficient to block the Sun's light and heat. Eventually the Cloud was close enough that humans around the world could see it with the naked eye, a black pit where the stars once were. Earth weather began to oscillate wildly.

Politicians and bureaucrats wanted to stifle the news. They set up astronomers in a secret observatory in the Cotswolds of England. The novel emphasized the clash between scientific culture and the usual way of doing things in politics. There are tens of thousands of amateur astronomers around the world, and something like this cannot be kept quiet.

The Cloud suddenly slowed down, in violation of physical laws, so it was not just dust and gas, but a sentient organism. This gave room for speculation about how life could evolve in interstellar space, using radiation as energy and dust and gas molecules as substance. Scientists established radio communication with the Cloud but the politicians go to war. The Cloud flicked the nuclear missiles back at them and took out the cities of the aggressors.

This is one of the few novels published in the best-selling literature which inserts mathematical equations into the text for the "As you know, Professor" lectures. It also illustrated a failing of many SF writers who were too specific about technical details. The book described how computers were programmed by punching codes on paper tapes and then feeding them through to generate the answers on fanfold printouts. It is better to avoid details where they are not needed.

The ending was wish fulfillment and not plausible. It is still a good read nonetheless. Science fiction is a literature of ideas, and this book astonishes at how relevant its ideas are even today.

"The Meteorite" is a 1977 episode of CBS MYSTERY THEATER, written by Roy Windsor. (Episodes of this series are available as free mp3s from www.cbsrmt.com) The episode began with a meteorite crashing into a farm. The story then came to a complete halt as one character explained to another what a meteorite is and how it fell from the sky. Either the writer was shamelessly padding or he had a very low estimate of the audience's intelligence. Perhaps both.

The object turned out to be an alien spacecraft. The farmer called in the resident egghead, a scientist of some sort, but in the meantime personnel from Space Control (?!) showed up and attempted to confiscate the spacecraft and the alien. They found out the hard way that the alien had the power of God to destroy. First Contact went horribly wrong. So did the script. One expects this sort of thing from a 1950 movie, but not by 1977.

They Have Come To Save Us.

A popular theme of alien invasion stories is that the aliens were observing humans, didn't like what they saw, and were going to save us from ourselves whether we liked it or not.

2000 PLUS was an early old-time radio science fiction series that ran from 1950 to 1952. The stories were set in the far future, the year 2000 plus, which is our present day. (This and other OTR shows are available as free mp3s from www.otrrlibrary.org.)

"The Flying Saucers" was a 1950 episode written by Pierre Gerson. The protagonist was Dr Bronson, in charge of an experimental rocket range at White Sands, New Mexico, in "*the year 2000 plus 12*" (as announced at the beginning). The space programme seems to have been in stasis since the Army testing in the late 1940s, because they were only just now testing rockets that could go into orbit.

Flying saucers were buzzing around the test range whenever a launch was due, although they didn't seem to be interfering. That changed when the first big rocket Zeus 1 vanished in the sky after its launch. Zeus 2 was now ready to go, and Bronson had given orders to shoot down any saucers that appear. He dictated all that to his secretary Arlene, and tells her to take the letter herself out to the next mail plane. What, no telephones or telegraphs?

Zeus 2 was launched with sound effects that made it obvious the sound man had no idea what a big rocket sounded like. To be fair, the general public at that time would have only seen movie newsreels of the V2 Bumper test rockets without the sound, just a narrator talking over the footage.

About that time, Arlene was reported missing, and Base Security began a search for her. Meanwhile, a saucer was shot down over a nearby ranch. Bronson went to examine it. The door was open and he went inside, where much to his surprise he found a sedated Arlene. The saucer suddenly closed its door and took off with the two humans inside.

Its pilot, a humanoid, introduced himself and said he was taking them to the far side of the Moon. Actually he said "dark side of the Moon", a common error since the far side also has daylight. It wasn't just Pink Floyd who got it wrong.

From there, they will step into a matter transmitter that will send them instantaneously to the home planet 500 light years away. The saucers can only go up to the speed of light, so they were just used for local traffic. Bronson and Arlene were told that the aliens are energy beings who infiltrate human bodies and take them over as observers, in the process extinguishing their own alien identities until they leave the body.

The genial host lectured them in the usual condescending manner of utopians. The saucer folk have been watching Earth for several millennia. Bronson and Arlene turn out to be aliens who had forgotten their real identities, but are now made whole again. They decide to ignore corporate policy and freelance instead, taking over the saucer and returning to Earth. Henceforth they will guide Earth to a brighter tomorrow, whether or not humans want it.

Not too bad of a story. Somewhat different than the regular run of alien invasion B-movies that would follow over the next decade, but not by much.

"The Tenth Planet", written by Charlie Smith and Ralph Rose, was a 1952 episode of the old-time radio series HOLLYWOOD STAR PLAYHOUSE, an anthology programme that used a variety of genres. This episode was narrated by Todd Walker, a mathematics teacher, who described the theme of alien saviours.

His brother Harry worked at a classified military project but disappeared somewhere on the base. Todd went to the base and met Major Collins to find out what happened. They investigated together and separately.

Todd is accosted by an alien, presumably humanoid, who told him it was from the tenth planet of the Solar System. A lengthy infodump follows. The aliens were watching Earth and feared that humans were going to destroy it with atomic weapons. For the good of us all, they will invade Earth and put a stop to the nonsense about fissionables and all that. They were kidnapping specialists to rebuild Earth after it has been pacified. They offered Todd a chance to join Harry.

Todd was given a few days to think about it and released. The aliens were secure in the knowledge that no one would believe his story. Collins certainly didn't. Todd tried to run but the aliens snatched him and took him away on their spaceship. The story then abruptly cut off with no resolution. I suspect the writers wrote themselves into a corner and couldn't think how to end the plot.

Real SFX.

SHH! IT'S A SECRET! (2013) by Daniel M. Kimmel is a humourous novel about aliens who, instead of saying "Take me to your leader." say "Take me to Hollywood". The Brogardi landed in the Catskills of New York State, declaring peaceful intentions. The protagonist is movie publicist Jake Berman, who becomes entangled in the excitement.

The Brogardi are blue humanoids with vestigial gills on their necks. They send an ambassador to the United Nations, who had to suffer through 192 speeches of welcome before getting to say his piece. Ambassador Gezunt said his planet has One World Government, which means that if humans visit it, they will only have to sit through one speech.

The aliens had been studying Earth via all those television and radio broadcasts, you know, historical documents. Gezunt mentioned in passing a lag time of thirty years between Earth transmissions and Brog receiving them. That gives an idea where their home planet might be.

The ambassador's son wanted to be in pictures. The Brogardi choose Berman's movie studio, who must then try to keep the production a secret lest all the other studios try to pre-empt them. The planning is Byzantine, and details kept complicating one after another. Finally the movie was completed, although Berman is one ulcer closer to the grave.

Unfortunately it wasn't a success with the Brogardi, who considered that the movie insulted their culture, notwithstanding the Brog actor. They break off diplomatic relations and put the U.N. Security Council into a tizzy. It worked both ways though. An Earth scientist died on Brog, and his remains were eaten as was the custom. That evened up the score on cultural misunderstandings. The Brogardi were forced to learn the bit about he who is without sin casting the first stone.

The novel reads well, and the humour is realistic, based on the situations. It isn't too difficult to parody Hollywood, since it is its own parody. The aliens were the straight men but not unimpeachable.

LITERA SCRIPTA MORTEM
by Dale Speirs

Readers and wanna-be writers like to club together. Is that wise?

Clubbed To Death.

MAYHEM AT THE ORIENT EXPRESS (2013) by Kylie Logan (pseudonym of Connie Laux) is the first novel in a series about the League of Literary Ladies, who live on South Bass Island in the waters of Lake Erie off Ohio.

Three squabbling neighbours, Bea Cartwright, Chandra Morrisey, and Kate Wilder, were hauled up in court for the umpteenth time on charges of disturbing the peace. The magistrate's wife was the local librarian. She informed him that the library would lose a valuable legacy unless, per the donor's bequest, a book discussion group was formed. She couldn't get anyone interested.

The magistrate decided to solve two problems in one judgement. He ordered the defendants, in lieu of jail time, to do community service by forming said group. The hope was expressed that they would learn to get along, elsewise they'll do some hard time. That's what is called incentive.

The group's first choice to discuss was Agatha Christie's famous train ride. You know the one. All that talking got them hungry, so they went out for Chinese food at a local restaurant, The Orient Express. They found the place deserted except for the proprietor Peter Chan, lying on the floor with a knife in his chest. No orange chicken tonight.

A snowstorm blew in, trapping everyone on the island, including the killer. The ladies caught on quick to the analogies with the Christie story. For an isolated island, there certainly were a lot of strangers showing up at Cartwright's bed-and-breakfast, the only public inn on the island. So much so that there may not be enough beds to go around.

Assorted back stories and sub-plots are trotted out to fill in the middle of the novel. Chan was killed for an unlikely reason but his murderer was caught by the ladies. The train, pardon me, the island, returns to normalcy.

A TALE OF TWO BIDDIES (2014) is the second installment of the series, taking place two months later. The League of Literary Ladies had chosen as their next book the Charles Dickens novel A TALE OF TWO CITIES. This was in honour of Bastille Day, which the citizens of South Bass Island were celebrating.

You may well ask why an Ohio village with no obvious French connections would have it as a holiday. The answer is: "*Islanders are always looking for a way to cook up some fun, and tourists are always looking for any excuse to join in.*" Seems like a reasonable explanation to me.

Joining the cast of characters were elderly twins Margaret and Alice Defarge, who run a knitting shop. Just what every island village needs. If the author was going to borrow names from Dickens' novel, then the sisters should be operating a wine shop, which is what they did in that book. I am prepared to believe a wine shop is economically viable in any village, even if the #1 selling vintage would be Thunderbird. There is also the village idiot Richie Monroe, who did odd jobs and could be depended upon to make a mess.

On the day itself, a rock band named Guillotine put on a show for the tourists. The band were originally Boyz 'n Funk, but it was difficult to be a boy band in their 50s and overweight, so they changed to a new style. They brought a real guillotine for their show.

Monroe had some sort of grudge against them, but Cartwright can't find out why. It didn't matter because he became the first murder victim. Cartwright found his body. Poison, not decapitation, in case you were wondering.

The League of Literary Ladies moved into action and began dredging up history and secrets that islanders and outlanders alike preferred to remain forgotten. Monroe had unsuccessfully sued the band decades ago for the copyright of their hit song. In the modern era, he smuggled cigarettes into Canada. The Dickens look-alike contest stirs up more feuding.

Near the end of the novel, the plot made a right-angle turn and pulled in the Defarge sisters, who had an unsuspected past. One of them dragged Monroe into an affair of sororicide. He then used it for blackmail but never got the chance to enjoy the payoffs. The epilogue untangles the loose threads. Most annoyingly, no one had their head chopped off.

From the Great Lakes to the Rocky Mountains. Laura DiSilverio writes a cozy series about a book club in Heaven, Colorado. The Readaholics specialize in

murder mysteries, and every one of them is a Miss Marple at heart, with narrator Amy-Faye Johnson as the lead investigator.

THE READAHOLICS AND THE FALCON FIASCO (2015) is the first novel in this cozy series. The club are reading THE MALTESE FALCON, when one of them, Ivy Donner, died of poison, not at a meeting fortunately. The police said it was suicide but the club mates thought it was murder. That gives Johnson the impetus to become a Miss Marple.

Donner drank a lot of herbal tea. Oleander was found mixed into her last brew. Her brother Ham had been freeloading on her, and would inherit her estate, so that made him an obvious suspect. She had been involved with Clay Shumer, who in turn had dumped her and settled on another women, both of them his employees. He certainly liked to live dangerously.

In her snooping, Johnson found a coded message written by Shumer. It was in book code, that is, each code number was the page, paragraph, and word from a book. The code is unbreakable unless you know the exact book it is based on, including the edition.

The reader will naturally suspect that THE MALTESE FALCON was the book, but Johnson discovered, by breaking into Shumer's house and riffling through the furniture drawers, that he had a dog-eared copy of ENDER'S GAME. The decrypt revealed that Shumer was a big-time bookie, as in $15,000-a-pop bets from politicians and prominent businessmen. Donner had a photocopy of his coded ledger book and was threatening to expose him.

For all that, the killer's motive was for an inheritance. Johnson had the trapped with a madman experience, and escaped by dumb luck. The murderer will stand trial for that, and Shumer will go up the river for being a bookie. Nothing about Sam Spade though.

THE READAHOLICS AND THE POIROT PUZZLE (2015) carries on the blood-soaked tradition. Their current book was, surprise!, the one Agatha Christie wrote about a train trip. It did seem an ominous choice because in that story, Poirot decided that everyone was guilty of the murder.

Johnson's brother Derek was opening a pub in partnership with Gordon Marsh, a hot-headed man who doesn't make it past Chapter 5. He left behind a string of angry women he romanced and dumped, and was known as a sharp practice man in his business dealings. There was no shortage of suspects, Derek among them, and lots of motives.

The book club swung into action. One member comments: "*Poirot had it easy; no one could come and go.*" After assorted melodramas are played out and a pile of clues accumulated, the guilty party is identified as a member of Marsh's family. She blabs all, instead of keeping quiet and allowing the case to be thrown out of court because of contaminated evidence.

Johnson dominated most of the book, although the Readaholics got supporting parts, especially near the end. An average cozy but a fair read.

THE READAHOLICS AND THE GOTHIC GALA (2016) were still going strong a year later, which demonstrated appalling malfeasance by the Colorado State Police in not shutting them down. Amy-Faye Johnson organized the Celebration of Gothic Novels weekend festival in Heaven. Not the original mad scientist in a castle type of gothic, but the modern version that sells millions of paperbacks each year, the romantic version of misunderstood love and reconciliation in the final pages.

Not so much Heaven at the festival. There were egotistical writers and just plain boors annoying others. The themed costume party produced a corpse, not gothic but modern. The Readaholics were excited at seeing big-name gothic authors in their town. Catty remarks by panelists were par for the course, but uglier events intrude. One author was being sued for plagiarism, and another had her manuscript stolen but recovered it at the festival auction. A psychotic fan was flinging fake blood.

The real downer was an unknown man being stabbed through the heart at the costume party. Not a member, and he had no known connection with the literary world. The police tagged him as having just been released from a New Jersey state penitentiary after serving time for armed robbery and grand theft auto.

From there, zigzagging through the subplots, Johnson narrows down the suspects to a short list. In the denouement, an infodump tied almost everyone together by blood, marriage, or one-night stand. All of it had to do with one of the star authors not having written her novels. They were done by her father, currently doing hard time in New Jersey for sexual abuse crimes.

If that information got out, her career and book sales would be over. Various characters, including the killer and his victim, were trying to capitalize on that with a bit of blackmail. They had a falling out, the usual honour among thieves.

The book tied up a massive number of loose threads at the end. It was marred, however, by information constantly being withheld from the reader until the next infodump.

A KILLER READ (2012) by Erika Chase is the first novel in a cozy series set in Ashton Corners, Alabama. The main protagonist is a literary tutor named Lizzie Turner, who has just organized the Ashton Corners Mystery Readers and Cheese Straws Society. You may guess what they eat at the meetings and you will not be wrong.

The first meeting was a real barn burner. It was held at the mansion of the widow Molly Mathews. During the meeting, a stranger stopped to use the telephone because of car trouble. He went back outside and a moment later was shot dead with a gun owned by Mathews' late husband. Police later identified him as Frank Telford of nearby Stoney Mills. The book club members were under police suspicion, and they began investigating in turn.

Turner's nerves were further frazzled when chapters of a manuscript began appearing in her mailbox. It appeared to be an autobiography set in Stoney Mills, about a man cheated out of his life savings by a real estate speculator. The names were changed but it eventually transpired that a grandson of the cheated man was looking for revenge, starting with Telford and moving on to others.

The grandson's mother, in and out of rehab, didn't have the courage to come forward and identify her son as the culprit. As the next best thing, she sent portions of a manuscript she had written to Turner, whom she correctly identified as the village's Miss Marple.

READ AND BURIED (2012) was the follow-on novel. The ACMR&CSS was having a Christmas party with their first guest author, novelist Derek Alton. An egotistical lecher, he wasn't mourned when he was shot dead in Chapter 2. The problem was that it happened in Turner's living room.

That ruined Christmas for Turner and other members of the book club. Alton had a private life worth apologizing for, and a book in progress worth killing for. His previous novel was plagiarized from a neophyte's manuscript.

Once the news of his death became known, Turner began receiving telephone calls from women asking if she knew anything about the manuscript for his next novel. It was to have been a scandalous roman a clef. Alton wasn't only living on his royalties. He had been blackmailing some of the women with videos and photos, choosing the ones who had since married and didn't want their past haunting them.

Blackmailers sometimes push too hard and may regret it. Or, in the case of one Ashton Corners victim, she made certain that he would not live to enjoy his ill-gotten gains.

What could be more vicious than a book club? The answer is two book clubs, which brings us to DEATH BY TEA (2015) by Alex Erickson (pseudonym of Eric S. Moore). This novel continues a cozy series about Krissy Hancock, proprietor of the Death By Coffee bookstore and café in Pine Hills, Ohio.

The store was hosting a competition between two book clubs. The literary infighting is fierce. Which book is to be discussed for the contest was a third-rail topic, a choice between an obscure and deservedly forgotten potboiler written by the father of one of the villagers, or an Agatha Christie book. The arguing made a few club members red-faced and shouting with murderous intent.

The first-place prize was a silver teapot. Before it could be awarded as such, it became a blunt instrument, used to bash in the head of a contestant in the shop. Hancock is a suspect, so she has to do some sleuthing to clear her name. The evidence was stacked up against her, but I think too implausibly and a little too over the top.

After piling on for about 150 pages, a break suddenly came when the murderer trapped Hancock and told her that he did it because he was being blackmailed by the victim. Everything flushes clear in the end. Having gone through emotional hell, Hancock decided to take in a play. Agatha Christie, to be precise. And then there were none.

The Moving Finger.

If there are thousands of book clubs in North America, then there must be as many writers' support groups. A KILLER PLOT (2010) by Ellery Adams is the first novel in a cozy series set in the coastal village of Oyster Bay, North

Carolina. Olivia Limoges had returned to the village of her birth after a long absence and joined the Bayside Book Writers Club in order to make new friends.

She had problems. Her childhood had been horrific, with an abusive father, and bad memories kept resurfacing. On her return, she found the village wasn't as she remembered it and had changed. As Thomas Wolfe wrote, she couldn't go home again.

More problems surface when she finds a body, next to which the murderer had written a haiku. She and the club went into Miss Marple mode. There were some soap operas going on, beside her own. A nasty real estate developer was trying to turn Oyster Bay into a condominium tourist resort. Other bodies and haiku appeared. In between, Limoges was having trouble with writer's block, her first novel in progress going nowhere.

The murderer was caught, the motive being a tangled mix of family history and corrupt real estate dealings. The good news was the trauma of all those murders finally inspired her to finish her novel. All ended well. What the villagers didn't know was that a long and bloody sequence of murders is about to begin as the cozy series progresses. They would be safer living in the south side of Chicago.

THE LAST WORD (2011) began with the village abuzz over the visit of best-selling novelist Nick Plumley. He honoured the Bayside Book Writers with his gracious presence at one of their meetings. Foolishly, he did not research the history of the club, and thus didn't make it past Chapter 6. Limoges found his body, you will not be surprised to learn.

What Plumley had been researching were the World War Two internment camps along the North Carolina coast, including one at Oyster Bay, for his next novel. Evidently someone preferred that the dead past stay dead, and the best method to ensure it was to make Plumley likewise. Limoges ignored the hazards of historical research, as well she might since she was booked for the series. She took up where Plumley had left off.

The tangled web of the past snared the sins of the fathers and passed them onto their sons, one of which was Plumley. Other descendants saw an opportunity for blackmail, while another wanted revenge.

One of them got the ultimate revenge on Plumley by stealing his laptop and backup files and dumping them into the ocean, thereby eradicating all traces of the second novel. The Bayside Book Writers were rather cynical about that once it became known: "*Maybe that's the best place for it. Creates some empty shelf space for some new writers to fill.*"

KILLER CHARACTERS (2017) is about a nasty split dividing the Bayside Book Writers after yet another murder. One of their members, Laurel Hobbs, caught her husband Steve having an affair with Stacy Balena, the hospice nurse for his terminally-ill mother. Hobbs' angry threats and comments came back to haunt her. Balena was murdered in Chapter 3, just after a screaming match with Hobbs, witnessed by outsiders.

Limoges thought Hobbs was innocent, and in that she was supported by some in the Bayside Book Writers. Other club members weren't surprised that Hobbs did it. Tensions rise. "*All because Steve had a midlife crisis, which resulted in his not being able to keep it in his pants, the Bayside Book Writers are now divided. It's going to be a civil war. Painful and bloody and nobody really wins.*" In other words, all fandom was plunged into war.

Balena died because she was part of a jewelry theft ring comprised of caregivers who preyed on elderly and sick patients in their care. The members of the ring had a falling out, the usual honour among thieves type.

That much was solved by the Bayside Book Writers, but there was no evidence to prove the murder in court. Fortunately, as happens in cozies but not in real life, the killer arrived and gave herself away by blabbing all the details. We knew it was coming.

Checked Out.

THE CHOCOLATE BOOK BANDIT (2013) by JoAnna Carl (pseudonym of Eve Sandstrom) is part of a food cozy series about chocolate shop manager Lee Woodyard, set in the blood-soaked resort village of Warner Pier, on the shores of Lake Michigan. Cabot Cove, but with fresh water, not the sea.

It opened with Woodyard attending a library board meeting. The new director was making waves with his ideas for change. Those plans were nothing compared to the outwash a few moments later, when the body of librarian Abigail Montgomery was discovered in the basement of the library.

As with previous novels in this series, the narrative paused occasionally for a sidebar about chocolate. The first one made me pause. It was about how researchers at the University of Calgary tested memory responses of snails in normal water compared to chocolate-flavoured water. The chocolate water improved snail memories. I don't know how I missed that news.

Getting back to the novel, the Deppity Dawgs were messing up the investigation, so Woodyard sprang into action. There had been some financial sleight-of-hand going on with the library accounts. The second murder stirred up some more silt in the case. Then someone ran Woodyard off the road. There's never a dull moment in Warner Pier, at least not since Woodyard moved into the village.

The culprit came from out of left field. She had been diddling accounts in several different organizations and was about to be exposed. In too deep with no way out, she resorted to murder in order to balance the books.

Speaking of chocolate, I found these in Safeway's bakery in September. The "hot dog" is Nutella, and the ketchup and mustard are coloured icing sugar. The bun was marzipan. A bit too sweet for me.

Confer With Me Of Murder.

Shakespeare was a great one for stories of murder and intrigue. The academic litcrit crowd go on about his literary mystique, but others have viewed him from a different angle.

"The Macbeth Murder Mystery" by James Thurber (1937-10-02, THE NEW YORKER, and anthologized many times since) is narrated by him about a woman he once met who read Shakespeare by mistake.

She normally only read mystery novels, but accidently bought a copy of MACBETH while vacationing in the English lake country. She was quite put out when she got back to her hotel room and discovered that Penguin published Shakespearean plays in the same type of covers as mysteries. But she made the best of a bad thing and read it through.

Her analysis of the Scottish play, as told to Thurber, was brilliant. Applying the standard conventions of whodunit mysteries, she first decided that neither Macbeth nor his wife could have murdered the King. She concluded that Macduff was the culprit. Her first suspicions were on Banquo, but as per standard practice in countless mystery stories, then and now, the most suspicious character becomes the second victim.

The King's sons, Malcolm and Donalbain, fled the scene but of course that was because they had something else on their consciences. This is another standard procedure in cozy mysteries, where the heir quarreled with the deceased and won't say why, but is not the murderer.

Thurber becomes drawn into the mystery, and later goes through the play in detail. His conclusion was that Lady Macbeth's father was the murderer. Not only that, he was one of the Weird Sisters in disguise. I think Thurber was reaching here, and I'm inclined to agree with the woman that Macduff had to be the killer.

"Mysterious Affair At Elsinore" by Michael Innes (1959 October, THE SAINT MYSTERY MAGAZINE) carries on this idea and analyzes HAMLET as a murder mystery. Innes notes that the investigation was incredibly sloppy when considered as a police procedural. The body was moved and the scene of the crime was badly compromised by people coming and going.

Innes's conclusion was that Prince Fortinbras of Norway was the culprit. He was intriguing to get the Danish throne, and it was all part of the plot. There was something rotten in Norway as well.

At the risk of bringing down the wrath of zealots supporting the inerrancy of the Christian Bible, there is the short story "Cain Was Innocent" (2006) by Simon

Brett (from the anthology THOU SHALT NOT KILL, edited by Anne Perry). The Book of Genesis as a murder mystery certainly makes for a different interpretation.

Inspector Gabriel and Sgt. Uriel have passed through the Pearly Gates and are at leisure. Since there is no crime in Heaven, they are very bored. To keep active, they decide to look at cold cases, and why not the oldest one of all, that of Cain and Abel. *Abel was a keeper of sheep, but Cain was a tiller of the ground* (Genesis 4:2)

What is puzzling is that Cain is in Heaven, vehemently denying the murder. In their interview with the policemen, Cain says he was never in the same field as Abel. Cain was a dirt farmer who grew vegetables, "*fruit of the ground*" as the Bible specifically states. Abel was a pastoralist, who obviously kept his flock in different fields.

Eve confirms to the policemen that Cain was allergic to sheep but couldn't say if he was in Abel's field. Taking their cue from the Gospel of Saint John, the policemen visit the headquarters of Logos, the Word of God. They are wondering if the Genesis text had been distorted, much like what Shakespeare did to Richard the Third.

They find Abel, who admits it was a setup job, with the Word falsifying the evidence. On that point the story ends. There is no punishment in Heaven. I got the impression that the author wrote himself into a corner and then just abandoned the story.

ZINE LISTINGS

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

BANANA WINGS #71 (The Usual or editorial whim from Claire Brialey and Mark Plummer, 59 Shirley Road, Croydon, Surrey CR0 7ES, England) SF fanzine, with lots of commentary, convention reports, and letters of comment on the state of traditional SF fandom.

SEEN IN THE LITERATURE

Wolter, A., et al (2018-06-07) **The X-ray luminosity function of ultra luminous X-ray sources in collisional ring galaxies.** arXiv:1806.02746v1 [astro-ph.HE] Preprint at www.arXiv.org

Authors' abstract: *Ring galaxies are fascinating laboratories: a catastrophic impact between two galaxies (one not much smaller than the other) has produced fireworks especially in the larger one, when hit roughly perpendicularly to the plane. We analyze the point sources, produced by the starburst episode following the impact, in the rings of seven galaxies and determine their X-ray luminosity function (XLF).*

In total we detect 63 sources, of which 50 have luminosity LX 1039 erg sec[1], classifying them as ultra luminous X-ray sources (ULXs). We find that the total XLF is not significantly different from XLFs derived for other kinds of galaxies, with a tendency of having a larger fraction of high X-ray luminosity objects. Both the total number of ULXs and the number of ULXs per unit star formation rate are found in the upper envelope of the more normal galaxies distribution.

Ring galaxies are unique laboratories in which to study peculiar phases of galaxy evolution. At least a fraction of ring galaxies are thought to form via (almost) head-on collisions with massive intruder galaxies. Due to the gravitational perturbation induced by the bullet galaxy, a density wave propagates through the disc of the target galaxy, generating an expanding ring of gas and stars.

They are often characterized by high star formation rates, suggesting that the density wave associated with the propagating ring triggers the formation of stars. Even if they constitute a small subclass of galaxies (they are estimated to be about 0.02-0.2 percent of all spiral galaxies.

[Image from this paper]

Lingam, M., and A. Loeb (2018) **Implications of tides for life on exoplanets.** ASTROBIOLOGY 18:967-982

Authors' abstract: *As evident from the nearby examples of Proxima Centauri and TRAPPIST-1, Earth-sized planets in the habitable zone of low-mass stars are common. Here, we focus on such planetary systems and argue that their oceanic tides could be more prominent due to stronger tidal forces.*

We identify the conditions under which tides may exert a significant positive influence on biotic processes including abiogenesis, biological rhythms, nutrient upwelling, and stimulating photosynthesis. We conclude our analysis with the identification of large-scale algal blooms as potential temporal biosignatures in reflectance light curves that can arise indirectly as a consequence of strong tidal forces.

Speirs: Sentient or sapient life may be extremely rare in our galaxy (and certainly not visiting Earth in UFOs) but microscopic life seems a certainty. If photosynthetic organisms exist in quantity, their masses will change the colour of their oceans and thereby the colour of their planet, which can then be detected by spectrometers.

Our technology isn't there yet, but the day is coming. The reason for the detection of hundreds of exoplanets in the last decade or so isn't because astronomers weren't looking before. It is because telescope technology has made giant leaps and bounds in recent years.

Morris, Simon Conway (2018) **Three explanations for extraterrestrials: sensible, unlikely, mad.** INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ASTROBIOLOGY 17:287-293

Author's abstract: *The Fermi Paradox (or Question) has moved back into central focus. This is for a number of reasons, not least the evidence for both the abundance and antiquity of many extrasolar systems, the extrapolation of current technological trends to suggest that even inter-galactic colonization (by self-replicating machines) is plausible (if not desirable), and the recurrence of evolutionary solutions (convergence) in the terrestrial biosphere suggesting that features such as intelligence and tool-making are not fortuitous outcomes, but frequent if not universal.*

Here I review the three possible solutions to the Fermi Paradox. First, extraterrestrials certainly exist (and may be abundant), but for one reason or another (probably mundane) we have not yet met them, or at least found evidence for their existence. Second, against all expectations, we are alone. Third, we have entirely misunderstood the sort of universe we live in and have become unwitting hostages to a strict materialist explanandum that in refusing to acknowledge the other realities of our Universe has derailed any prospect of explaining the apparent absence of extraterrestrials.

Meyers, S.R., and A. Malinverno (2018) **Proterozoic Milankovitch cycles and the history of the solar system.** PROCEEDINGS OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES USA 115:6363-6368

Authors' abstract: *Periodic variations in Earth's orbit and rotation axis occur over tens of thousands of years, producing rhythmic climate changes known as Milankovitch cycles. The geologic record of these climate cycles is a powerful tool for reconstructing geologic time, for understanding ancient climate change, and for evaluating the history of our solar system, but their reliability dramatically decreases beyond 50 Ma.*

Here, we extend the analysis of Milankovitch cycles into the deepest stretches of Earth history, billions of years ago, while simultaneously reconstructing the history of solar system characteristics, including the distance between the Earth and Moon.

Application of the approach to 1.4-billion-year-old rhythmites indicates a precession constant of 85.79 ± 2.72 arcsec/year (2s), an Earth-Moon distance of 340,900 ± 2,600 km (2s), and length of day of 18.68 ± 0.25 hours (2s), with dominant climatic precession cycles of ~14 ky and eccentricity cycles of ~131 ky.

The results confirm reduced tidal dissipation in the Proterozoic. A complementary analysis of Eocene rhythmites (~55 Ma) illustrates how the approach offers a means to map out ancient solar system behavior and Earth–Moon history using the geologic archive.

Speirs: 1.4 gigayears ago the Moon was about 341,000 km from Earth, and today it is about 384,000. Back then the Earth day was 18.68 hours, so now we have more time to get our work done.

Schulze-Makuch, D., and I.A. Crawford (2018) **Was there an early habitability window for Earth's Moon?** ASTROBIOLOGY 18:doi.org/10.1089/ast.2018.1844

Authors' abstract: *Our moon is uninhabitable and lifeless today. It has no significant atmosphere, no liquid water on its surface, no magnetosphere to protect its surface from solar wind and cosmic radiation, no polymeric chemistry, and it is subject to large diurnal temperature variations. Thus, associating our Moon with habitability seems outrageous, and certainly it would have been just a decade ago.*

However, results from recent space missions, as well as sensitive analyses of lunar rock and soil samples, have indicated that the Moon is not as dry as previously thought. In addition to the probable occurrence of water ice in permanently shadowed polar craters, spectroscopic studies also indicate the presence of hydrated surface materials at high, but not permanently shadowed, latitudes, with evidence for temporal variations over the course of a lunar day.

In addition, recent studies of the products of lunar volcanism indicate that the lunar interior also contains more water than was once appreciated and that the lunar mantle may even be as comparably water-rich as Earth's upper mantle.

The existence of indigenous sources of water implies that the Moon may not always have been as dead and dry as it is today. Insofar as water is required for habitability, we can speculatively identify two possible windows for lunar habitability. These may have occurred immediately following the accretion of the Moon and some hundreds of millions of years later following outgassing associated with lunar volcanic activity.

Current understanding is that the Moon originated from a gigantic impact 4.5 billion years ago. ... Following accretion, the Moon is expected to have been largely molten, with its silicate components existing in the form of a lunar magma ocean (LMO). Such magma oceans are expected to outgas volatiles, leading to the formation of significant transient atmospheres. ... It appears that significant quantities of water were present in the final stages of LMO evolution.

Here, we merely note that outgassing 500 ppm water during the LMO phase (which would be required to bring the higher original values predicted could in principle result in a surface water layer of an order of 1 km thickness.

Of course, this would be a very optimistic estimate for the depth of any early lunar oceans-water would only be stable at the surface if protected by a sufficiently dense atmosphere, and significant losses would be expected owing to impact erosion, but it illustrates how much water might potentially have been available.

A second phase of outgassing, and associated peak in lunar atmospheric pressure, as a result of mare basalt eruptions ~3.5 billion years ago. Gases derived from lava outpourings may have built up an atmosphere of about 10 mbar, which is above the triple-point pressure of water and about 1.5 times the present atmospheric pressure on Mars (and about 3 times as massive as the current martian atmosphere, given the difference in surface gravities).

Estimated a lifetime of ~70 million years for the transient atmosphere generated by lunar volcanic activity, and the duration of a hypothetical denser and earlier atmosphere immediately following LMO crystallization could have been even longer. In principle, liquid water could have existed on the lunar surface during these times, and perhaps even more likely in protected subsurface environments such as interstitial pore spaces within the impact-generated mega-regolith.

It is instructive to put this time frame into perspective from a natural history point of view: the time it took from the formation of suitable building blocks of life to the first cyanobacteria was no more than 10 million years. The transition from a nonliving to a living system might have taken place in considerably less of a time span, perhaps as little as a few thousand years.

During this time, and indeed subsequently, it is expected that meteorites blasted off the surface of Earth will have landed on the Moon, and some of them are expected to have survived the impact. As life appears to have been present on Earth by 3.8 to 3.5 billion years ago, and possibly by 4.1 or even 4.28 billion years ago, it is possible that Earth life could have inoculated transiently habitable lunar environments.

We note that the chances of survival of microorganisms within terrestrial meteorites impacting the Moon would be increased by the presence of even a tenuous lunar atmosphere because this would reduce the impact velocity.

If these early habitable environments ever existed, would there be any evidence remaining? Clearly, we do not see the familiar water-modified topography on the Moon that we see on Mars (e.g., fluvial channels or crater rims that are

altered by liquid water), and it is questionable whether any topographical evidence of early surface water would be preserved on the Moon after approximately 4 billion years of pounding by solar wind, cosmic radiation, and micrometeorites.

Groopman, E.E., et al (2018) **Discovery of fissionogenic Cs and Ba capture five years after Oklo reactor shutdown.** PROCEEDINGS OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES USA 115:8676-8681

Speirs: Several billion years ago, the concentration of radioactive uranium was high enough that rich veins of the element began operating as natural fission reactors. See OPUNTIAs #30 and 336 for more details.

Authors' abstract: *The Oklo natural nuclear reactors provide a wealth of information regarding the migration and retention of fission products in nuclear wastes. Radioactive volatile and gaseous elements easily escape from reactor fuel into the environment without proper containment. Cesium, in particular, represents a significant environmental and health hazard.*

Here, we used an isotope imaging system to identify the location of sequestered fissionogenic Cs and Ba in Oklo. Cesium and Ba were captured in Ru metal/sulfide aggregates shortly after reactor criticality ceased. These elements were otherwise nearly completely lost from the reactor. We have further discovered the most depleted natural U on Earth, indicating that these fission products were retained in the most active region of the reactor.

Understanding the release and sequestration of specific radioactive signatures into the environment is of extreme importance for long-term nuclear waste storage and reactor accident mitigation. Recent accidents at the Fukushima and Chernobyl nuclear reactors released radioactive ^{137}Cs and ^{134}Cs into the environment, the former of which is still live today.

We have studied the migration of fission products in the Oklo natural nuclear reactor using an isotope imaging capability, the NAval Ultra-Trace Isotope Laboratory's Universal Spectrometer (NAUTILUS) at the US Naval Research Laboratory. In Oklo reactor zone (RZ) 13, we have identified the most depleted natural U of any known material with a $^{235}U/^{238}U$ ratio of 0.3655 ± 0.0007% (2s).

This sample contains the most extreme natural burn-up in ^{149}Sm, ^{151}Eu, ^{155}Gd, and ^{157}Gd, which demonstrates that it was sourced from the most active Oklo reactor region. We have discovered that fissionogenic Cs and Ba were captured by Ru metal/sulfide aggregates shortly following reactor shutdown. Isochrons from the Ru aggregates place their closure time at 4.98 ± 0.56 y after the end of criticality. Most fissionogenic ^{135}Ba and ^{137}Ba in the Ru migrated and was incorporated as Cs over this period. Excesses in ^{134}Ba in the Ru point to the burnup of ^{133}Cs. Cesium and Ba were retained in the Ru despite local volcanic activity since the reactor shutdown and the high level of activity during reactor operation.

Tilley, M.A., et al (2018) **Modeling repeated M dwarf flaring at an Earth-like planet in the habitable zone: Atmospheric effects for an unmagnetized planet.** ASTROBIOLOGY 18:doi.org/10.1089/ast.2017.1794

Authors' abstract: *Understanding the impact of active M dwarf stars on the atmospheric equilibrium and surface conditions of a habitable zone Earth-like planet is key to assessing M dwarf planet habitability. Previous modeling of the impact of electromagnetic (EM) radiation and protons from a single large flare on an Earth-like atmosphere indicated that significant and long-term reductions in ozone were possible, but the atmosphere recovered.*

However, these stars more realistically exhibit frequent flaring with a distribution of different total energies and cadences. Here, we use a coupled 1D photochemical and radiative-convective model to investigate the effects of repeated flaring on the photochemistry and surface UV of an Earth-like planet unprotected by an intrinsic magnetic field.

Our model results show that repeated EM-only flares have little effect on the ozone column depth but that multiple proton events can rapidly destroy the ozone column. Combining the realistic flare and proton event frequencies with nominal CME/SEP geometries, we find the ozone column for an Earth-like planet can be depleted by 94% in 10 years, with a downward trend that makes recovery unlikely and suggests further destruction.

For more extreme stellar inputs, ozone depletion allows a constant ~0.1–1 W m of UVC at the planet's surface, which is likely detrimental to organic complexity. Our results suggest that active M dwarf hosts may comprehensively destroy ozone shields and subject the surface of magnetically unprotected

Earth-like planets to long-term radiation that can damage complex organic structures. However, this does not preclude habitability, as a safe haven for life could still exist below an ocean surface.

Bellefroid, E.J., et al (2018) **Constraints on Paleoproterozoic atmospheric oxygen levels.** PROCEEDINGS OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES USA 115:8104-8109

Authors' abstract: *Earth's protracted oxygenation significantly transformed global biological and geochemical cycles. In particular, the rise of atmospheric oxygen above trace levels was an essential prerequisite for the development of animals. However, quantifying atmospheric oxygen levels in Earth's middle age remains a daunting challenge.*

Here we use a combination of sedimentology, geochemical constraints, and oceanographic modeling to provide a quantitative estimate of Precambrian atmospheric oxygen. We provide evidence that atmospheric oxygen levels decreased significantly after the "Great Oxygenation Event" in Earth's early history, to levels that would have negatively impacted the ecology of the earliest complex organisms.

However, atmospheric oxygen partial pressures (pO) estimates for large swaths of the Precambrian remain intensely debated. Here we evaluate and explore the use of carbonate cerium (Ce) anomalies (Ce/Ce) as a quantitative atmospheric pO proxy and provide estimates of Proterozoic pO using marine carbonates from a unique Precambrian carbonate succession, the Paleoproterozoic Pethei Group.* [1.87 gigayears ago]

Our results suggest Paleoproterozoic atmospheric oxygen concentrations were low, near 0.1% of the present atmospheric level. This work provides another crucial line of empirical evidence that atmospheric oxygen levels returned to low concentrations following the Lomagundi Event, and remained low enough for large portions of the Proterozoic to have impacted the ecology of the earliest complex organisms.

Speirs: When the first photosynthetic organisms began pumping out oxygen, it was not a smooth steady rise. Oxygen levels fluctuated (and still do) because of natural feedback loops, in particular the oxidation of mineral elements such as iron.

SEEN AROUND COWTOWN
photos by Dale Speirs

These photos were taken during the summer on the Stephen Avenue pedestrian mall in Calgary's downtown core.

This juggler is throwing two machetes and a running chainsaw.

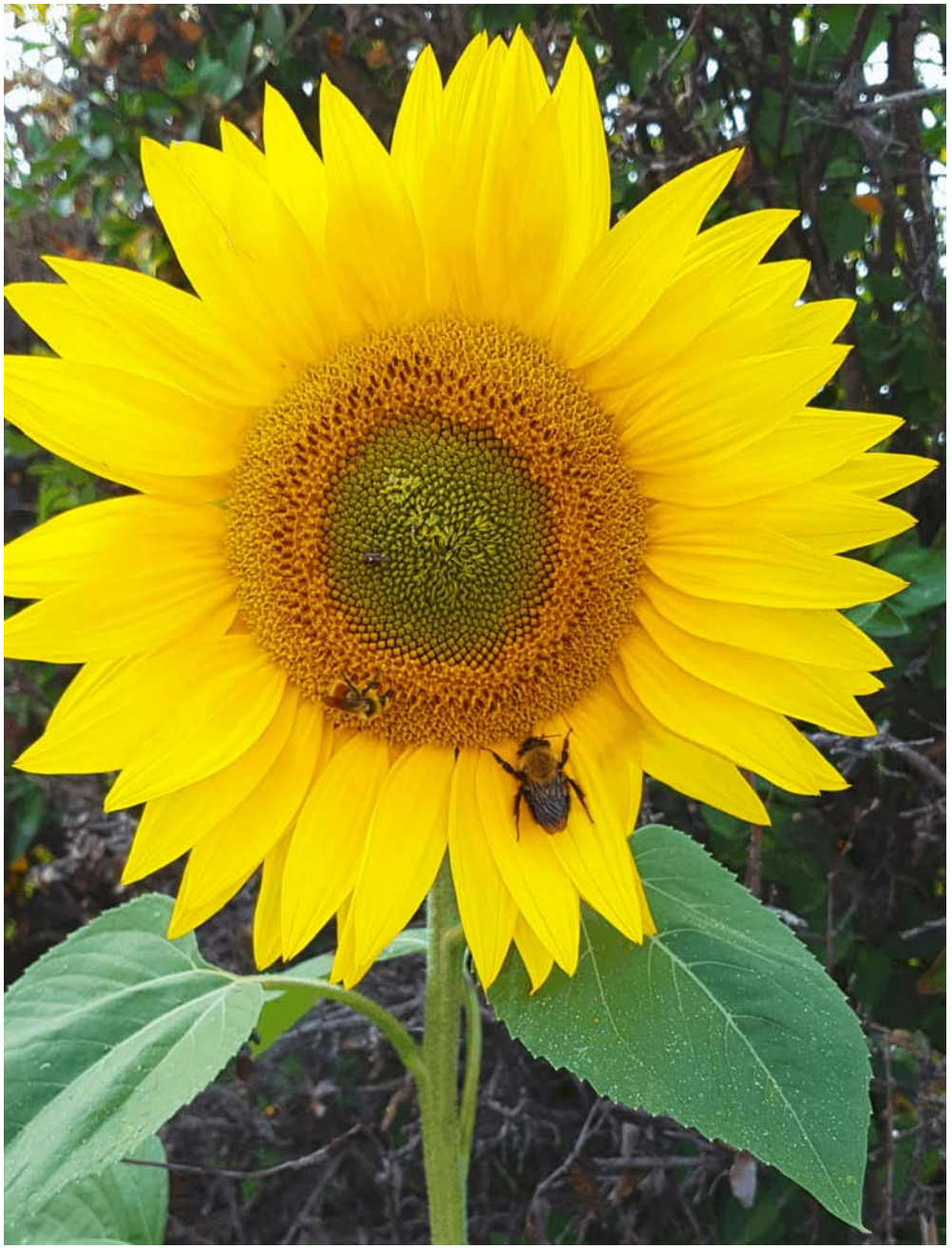
Having pruned 31,000 trees during my career with Calgary Parks Dept., I immediately knew that there was no danger from the chainsaw.

For the blade to turn, you have to squeeze the safety switch on the inside of the handle. He is just grabbing it by the loop of the handle. The engine is running, but the blade is not turning.

On the next page, elsewhere in Calgary.

At left: Flowers at the 10 Street SW bridge at the west end of the downtown core.

Below: I was walking past a neighbour's yard when I saw these three different species of bees hard at work on one sunflower.



Another Safeway bakery treat, a sunflower cupcake.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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

FROM: Lloyd Penney 2018-09-21
Etobicoke, Ontario

OPUNTIA #422: Re: cover photo of Kananaskis mountains. I don't see the Rockies often enough. I wish there was the opportunity or excuse to get out there, and just sightsee. There's lots of sights to do just that. Yvonne may have plans for us to head out that way in a couple of years.

[You could always time a visit before or after the When Words Collide convention in Calgary.]

No squamous or eldritch for me. To be honest, I have never had the interest in anything to do with Cthulhu, although I think a Miskatonic University shirt might be fun. I know people who make Cthulhu knit stuffed toys.

I wouldn't call Nikola Tesla a mad scientist, but otherwise agree with your assessment of Murdoch Mysteries. The premiere of the first episode of Season 12 is this coming Monday. I think Tesla was a visionary with amazing ideas, but he didn't have any of the business sense or savagery that kept Thomas Edison a rich man.

OPUNTIA #423: The 9/11 disaster still brings about conspiracy theories, about it being an inside job, and wondering how it was that a third building (7 World Trade Center) also fell that day, that it was a staged demolition, etc., etc. It does get tiring reading about all these conspiracies.

[Conspiracy theory is a branch of abnormal psychology. Nothing will ever change their minds.]

Re: Calgary wall murals. There is a series of wall murals in Etobioke, along Dundas St. W., not far from home. It starts at Dundas and Islington Ave., and continues west until nearly Kipling Ave. Unfortunately, the final mural in the series was destroyed in a building fire.

Re: GASLIGHT GOTHIC. It's good to know there is yet another book in Campbell and Prepolec's Gaslight Series. I should pop over to Bakka-Phoenix Books to pick it up.

We do have some upcoming shows when it comes to steampunk vending. Our future shows will take us to High Park, Mississauga, Brampton, an art school in Etobicoke, and Pickering. We are learning about new shows starting up elsewhere in Toronto, so our vending opportunities are increasing. I hope our good sales continue.

Street or ethnic festivals in Etobicoke? Not that I know of. There is a big Ukrainian population here, but any festivals like that are held in Toronto proper. The closest is that coming up in the end of the month, where the local mall will have a food truck festival.