

OPUNTIA 430



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

MR T COMES TO COWTOWN

photos by Dale Speirs

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau came to Calgary on November 22. Out west, he isn't any more popular than his father was. He spoke at the Hyatt Regency Hotel on 7 Avenue SE and Centre Street. I was riding the LRT on my way to the library and saw a protest crowd blocking Centre Street in front of the hotel's main entrance. As every zine publisher knows, anything like this is copy for the publication, so I hopped off at the Centre Street station immediately adjacent to the hotel. God bless the inventor of the cellphone camera.

The protestors were objecting to Trudeau's stalling on pipelines to the west coast and to eastern Canada. The latter get most of their oil from Saudi Arabia and other countries whose men you would not let your daughter marry. Calgary is the petroleum capital of Canada. It was the best dressed crowd of protestors I've ever seen, as most were in business suits and office dresses. I've walked past many protests in Calgary over the years and most of their participants dressed like homeless people.





(I was photographing into the noonday sun in some photos, so please forgive the washouts in a few of the shots.)

The 106th playing of the Grey Cup championship took place on Sunday, November 25, in Edmonton, Alberta’s capital city. The Calgary Stampeders (Western Division) defeated the Ottawa RedBlacks (Eastern Division) by 27 to 16. It was the eighth Grey Cup for the Stampeders since they first won it in 1948.

I don’t follow sports but I like a party as much as the next person, so I went down to the Municipal Plaza on Wednesday noon for the victory celebration.

(Some of the photos have washouts due to the bright noonday sun. In winter, at Calgary’s latitude, the sun is always low on the horizon. This means taking photos on bright sunny days is difficult because of the high contrast between sunlight and shaded areas.)







The Calgary Stampede takes their name from our ranching heritage, and their logo is a galloping horse.

Their mascot, however, is Ralph the Dog. Go figure.



CHRISTMAS FICTION: PART 1

by Dale Speirs

Tis the season and all that. I reviewed a batch of Christmas-themed fiction last year in OPUNTIA #400. Herewith are some more reviews that I've been accumulating through the year.

Cozy Mysteries.

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

The modern day version of Miss Marple is Jessica Fletcher of Cabot Cove, Maine, who can be fairly said to have inherited the mantle from Marple. There is an extended series of novels and television shows about Fletcher, a mystery writer who never travels anywhere without tripping over at least one body.

The fatality rate in Cabot Cove was so high that the series authors and screenwriters had to make her an inveterate traveler who finds murder at every tourist stop she makes in foreign countries. Otherwise, Cabot Cove would be a ghost town. One is surprised that Interpol doesn't track her and alert local police that she is incoming.

A LITTLE YULETIDE MURDER (1998) by Jessica Fletcher and Donald Bain is set in Cabot Cove, and opened with a public meeting to plan the village's forthcoming Christmas festival. Rory Brent, a prosperous farmer, had played Santa Claus for the past fifteen years but didn't make it this year on account of someone shooting him dead in his barn. The Christmas festival committee is upset. As one citizen said: *It's a disgrace to be known as the town where Santa Claus was murdered.*

The local police followed standard procedure by arresting the obvious suspect and then gathering evidence to fit him. Jake Walther was a cranky old coot who feuded with the deceased and was unliked by the townsfolk. Fletcher knew better naturally, and moved into the case. This gave her an excuse to poke her nose into other people's business, whether or not they were even remotely connected to the victim or the accused.

Assorted motives came to light. Walther's daughter Jill, a high school senior, had become pregnant a while back and given the baby up for adoption. She wouldn't say who the father was. A witness for Walther's alibi kept changing his story. Brent's son Robert was a hot-blooded young fool. Among other things, he broke into Fletcher's house and left a threatening note. Was he the father?

Walther's wife Mary turned out to be good at lying. This produced a last-minute twist in the story, with Fletcher facing down a shotgun. Jake didn't kill Brent, but the rest of his family were not without sin. The sudden change in plot direction in the last few chapters was a mild cheat, but not as bad as some cozies I've read.

THE MERCHANT OF MENACE (1999) by Jill Churchill (pseudonym of Janice Young Brooks) is from a cozy series about Jane Jeffry, a suburban Chicago housewife and mother of teenagers. As if she didn't have enough to do at Christmas, she volunteered for the cookie exchange party and the neighbourhood caroling.

Her other major problem was her next-door neighbour, who had a Christmas lights display on his house that was brighter than a thousand suns. Passenger jet pilots used it to line up their approach into the airport.

Things became even livelier when a boorish television reporter appeared with his crew, determined to find scandal in suburbia in the simplest of things. It being the season, he did his muckraking in a Santa Claus suit. In that disguise, he took a dive off the neighbour's roof and was impaled on the horns of a reindeer lawn ornament. No one knew why he was up there, but everyone knew it wasn't an accident.

Jeffry did her Miss Marple routine and learned that the reporter was disliked intensely by everyone who knew him. No surprise there. Lots of residents had things they wanted to hide. When the reporter dug up the dirt on the wrong person, he signed his own death warrant. From there it was a setup for murder, and nevermind tis the season.

FLEECE NAVIDAD (2008) by Maggie Sefton (pseudonym of Margaret Conlan Aunon) is a novel in a cozy series about Kelly Flynn, an accountant in Fort Connor, Colorado. She ran with a wild bunch of knitting fanatics, any one of whom could be relied to stumble over a body.

Everyone was getting ready for Christmas. The knitting shop House of Lambspun brought in a lamb named Annie as a mascot, who got a few walk-on bits throughout the novel. A children’s knitting class was underway at the library, under the guidance of librarian Juliet Renfrow. She was involved in a love triangle, but her walk-on parts don’t last as long as Annie’s. Renfrow was killed by a hit-and-run driver, and the police called it murder.

The knitters of Fort Connor leapt into action, but it was possible that a newcomer to their group might be the guilty party. There was another subplot with a stepmother and stepdaughter seriously at odds with each other. Pay attention to that one.

For once, the usual clichés of a cozy ending were avoided. The police solved the crime and took the accused away. She didn’t blab “Yes! I did it! And I’d gladly do it again!” but instead immediately clammed up and demanded to see her lawyer. As the novel closed, the trial was yet to begin, but the knitters were satisfied that justice was done. From there to the Nativity pageant, where Annie and the participants were all dressed in wool.

MAYHEM IN MINIATURE (2008) by Margaret Grace (pseudonym of Camille Minichino) is a novel in a cozy series about Geraldine Porter, of Lincoln Point, California. She was teaching miniature crafts at the Mary Todd Retirement Home, looking after her granddaughter Maddie, and had just finished a shadow box display for the Christmas charity auction. Lincoln’s wife was born on December 13, so the village opened the holiday shopping season with a gala.

The gardener at the Nancy Hanks Home turned up dead, and a resident at the Mary Todd Home was a suspect. Porter got into sleuthing mode, in between helping students at the Mary Todd Home create 3-D scrapbooks, and trying to keep Maddie under control. Her investigation, not to mention the police, revealed a lot of soap opera plots in the retirement homes. She uncovered a drug addict who had eliminated the dead man because he saw him breaking into a pharmacy.

Along the way, the uglier side of life in nursing homes was revealed. The Christmas season reminded patients of those they had lost and those who stranded them in the homes. Porter escaped the murderer through the usual last-minute fluke, but the elderly could not escape their fate, no matter how many Christmas miniatures they made.

MRS JEFFRIES AND THE MISTLETOE MIX-UP (2011) by Emily Brightwell (pseudonym of Cheryl Arguile) is a novel in a lengthy cozy series set in Victorian England. Mrs Jeffries is a housekeeper working for Inspector Gerald Witherspoon of the London Metropolitan Police Force. Not only the dusting and cleaning but some very unofficial sleuthing on the side. Nor just her, but the rest of Witherspoon’s servants as well.

The novel opened with an argument between art collector Daniel McCourt and his wife Elena. As this was the Victorian era, he was used to giving orders, but since the house and money were hers, he was in an awkward situation. It became even more awkward when, at a Christmas tea, his throat was slashed by one of his antique swords.

The Inspector, and as usual unbeknownst to him, his servants, enquired among the McCourt servants. There were a variety of people with motives. An heir thought McCourt cheated him of an inheritance. Beside an angry wife, there were disgruntled servants, and basically anyone else who knew the defunct. Inspector Witherspoon wanted to solve the case before Christmas Eve.

There were some other possibilities. McCourt had just found out he had been sold some fake antiquities. There was adultery here and there, with infidelities in several households that seemed to connect in some way with McCourt. Mrs Jeffries and fellow servants subtly fed hints to Witherspoon to solve the case. Below-stairs gossip demonstrated that lords cannot keep secrets from their butlers.

Witherspoon arrested another collector who had been in competition with McCourt for that sword and wanted it in the worst way. And got it.

MRS JEFFRIES AND THE MERRY GENTLEMEN (2013) was another busy holiday season for Witherspoon. Just before Christmas, Orlando Edison was murdered with a blunt instrument on his doorstep. He was a stock promoter specializing in South African mining stocks, one of which had gone smash. Witherspoon was hoping for a quiet Christmas but he didn’t get it.

Edison had been scheduled to testify about the bankrupt mine. Someone might not have wanted him stepping into the witness box and revealing irregularities in the mine operations. Alternatively the deed could have been done by an investor who bought the stock from him. Finally, there was a financially embarrassed cousin who thought he would inherit Edison’s estate.

Mrs Jeffries and her fellow servants made their investigations among the servants of the suspects. It is said that no man can keep secrets from his valet. Servants do gossip. The principal suspects were all lying about something or other, with no glad tidings or good will. A blackmail case between two servants muddled the water, for there is no honour among thieves.

It all got sorted out in time for Christmas, after one of the investors was found out. The epilogue was a who-did-what-to-whom explanation. Everything was wrapped up in time for the staff to cook the Christmas dinner.

THE DIVA WRAPS IT UP (2014) by Krista Davis (pseudonym of Cristina Ryplansky) is part of a cozy series about event planner Sophie Winston. Given the murders that followed her around, one wonders why anyone would hire her.

Realtor Horace Scroggins took a bad fall from a balcony during a Christmas party planned by Winston for his agency. Did the railing break accidentally or was it sabotaged? His wife Edith, a boor who didn't have the manners to be called a battleaxe, wouldn't visit him in the hospital.

A neighbour Baxter Babineaux, who worked for Scroggins, had a bad fall from a ladder while stringing Christmas lights on his house roof. Winston heard his cries for help and rushed over to assist. Fortunately for him, and her, he survived. She noticed the broken rung on the ladder had been partly sawed through. Did his wife Gwen do it, or a business competitor? Later he survived a sabotaged string of lights on his Christmas tree, designed to electrocute him.

Enough about all that, as the novel moved on to more important events, such as the Christmas cookie swap. Winston took thirteen dozen chocolate-covered ginger snaps. Several hissy fits erupted at the event, nothing to do with the cookies, but certainly good for establishing motives in the subsequent murder investigation.

The victim of honour was Gwen, found in a different neighbour's house by Winston, who was snooping about to no one's surprise. The deceased had been wrapped in Christmas wrapping paper and the body placed under a Christmas tree.

Winston's sleuthing exposed more soap opera plots. Apparently about half the teenagers in her neighbourhood were either stepchildren, illegitimate, and/or adopted. The list of suspects threatened to grow exponentially but fortunately

the culprit came forth to attempt to kill Winston and after failing, admitted his guilt in an affair. It all ended in a flurry of cookie recipes.

A HOLIDAY YARN (2010) by Sally Goldenbaum is a novel in a cozy series about the Seaside Knitters club in Sea Harbor, Massachusetts. Isabel "Izzy" Chambers Perry is the protagonist and incumbent Miss Marple. When the club wasn't knitting things for charity, they investigated local murders, which kept them just as busy.

The story began with Mary Pisano inheriting her grandfather's mansion, which she converted into a bed-and-breakfast. The Seaside Knitters helped out by knitting warm throws for each bedroom. Pisano invited her cousins to visit, trying to cool any hard feelings some of them had about being left out of the will.

Cousin Pamela, however, would not be appeased. It didn't matter because she was murdered on the back porch of the B&B. She was a hussy, with a string of boyfriends and casual lovers, and left a trail of broken hearts behind her. It did matter to Mary because a murder is not a good way to open a new business.

There were several possible motives. The neighbours weren't happy about the place, what with the traffic and lowered property values. Grandfather Pisano had a publishing empire, separate from Mary's bequest, and the cousins were maneuvering for control of it, including Pamela.

Christmas was nigh, so the Seaside Knitters had their attention partially diverted to the feasts and knitting gifts. Half of everything in the village was covered with knitwear, and there are only so many knitted woollies that people can wear.

The second murder, there is always a second murder in a cozy, was that of a painter hired to re-do the Pisano big house. It certainly kept the conversation going at the village fete as they awaited Santa Claus. The reader would not have been surprised if the jolly old man was the third victim, but he made it to the end of the novel.

The denouement was in the usual style of cozies. The murderer was a woman wronged. She blabbed all instead of remaining silent. This not only made it easier for the prosecutor but filled in the details that the knitters never would have detected. An average read for a cozy. Comes with knitting patterns in the appendix.

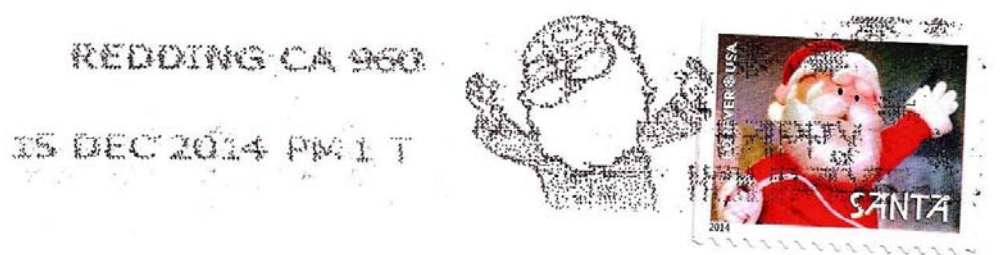
REST YE MURDERED GENTLEMEN (2015) by Vicki Delaney is the first novel in a cozy series set in Rudolph, New York State, somewhere on the shores of Lake Ontario. The village capitalized on its name as a year-round Christmas tourist attraction, including a semi-annual Santa Claus parade, one in July for the tourists and the other on December 1. Merry Wilkinson operated the store Mrs Claus's Treasures. Her father is named Noel. He had the physique to play Santa Claus and did.

The store had a float in the December Santa Claus parade, but someone sabotaged the tractor pulling it. There were worse problems to come, when Merry found the body of an out-of-town news reporter. Cause of death was a poisoned gingerbread cookie.

Another item in the mix was that a local election was impending, which had the mayor nervous about challengers. He thought the Wilkinsons, father and daughter, were scheming against him. The townsfolk were horrified because the murder would cause unfavourable publicity. Neighbouring towns quickly tried to hijack Christmas tourists by using social media to point out that no one had died from their gingerbread cookies.

The bakery that sold the gingerbread cookie was owned by Merry's friend Vicky Casey, who was arrested by the Deppity Dawgs. They preferred to pick a suspect and then gather evidence to fit her. That prompted Merry into becoming an amateur sleuth.

More excursions around town, including exploding barbecue grilles at another Christmas party. It finally all came down to the mayor, who had gone insane worrying about his job. The ending was forced but the novel is a fair read for a cozy. No food recipes.



Carrying on in the series was HARK THE HERALD ANGELS SLAY (2017), taking place during the July celebration. Santa will arrive by boat for his summer vacation. Wilkinson and the rest of the townfolk were ready and eager to part the tourists from their money. She was dressed like Mrs Claus, which posed a problem because the outfit was made for winter, and in the summer heat she was wilting.

Wilkinson was surprised when her ex-fiancé Max Folger arrived with a crew from a lifestyle magazine. Erica Johnstone, the editor of the magazine and Folger's new fiancée, came along. Since she took over as editor, circulation was in freefall, so she was under stress.

Folger had talked Wilkinson into dinner but neglected to mention that to Johnstone, who made a tremendous scene when she found them in the restaurant. Everyone else there had smartphones, and a hundred photos of the incident were posted online before Wilkinson had even finished wiping off the glass of wine that Johnstone threw in her face.

Wilkinson was yet more perturbed when Folger was murdered in her shop that night. It was good for business at Mrs Claus's Treasures, though. The publicity on Twitter (no one watches television news anymore) brought a flood of tourists who wanted to see the crime scene. If they should happen to buy a souvenir, so much the better. Murder can be good for business.

For once, the police didn't automatically suspect her. At the same time Folger's body was discovered, Wilkinson's shop assistant went missing. She had made passes at Folger and been cruelly rebuffed. She later walked into the police station and began assisting them with their enquiries. The plot thickened and loose threads were everywhere. The second murder took out Johnstone's personal assistant.

Duty must be done, and the other magazine staff, who weren't mourning the two deceased very much, roamed about town taking photos and gathering information for a special issue. Mrs Claus's Treasures was a certain bet, so they were in and out of the store.

The true culprit was a magazine staff member with little or no connection to all the clues carefully delineated. He was given his bwah-ha-ha speech and then was foiled at the last moment. And so to the Christmas in July festivities, for the show must go on.

HIGH KICKS, HOT CHOCOLATE, AND HOOFERS (2016) by Mary McHugh is a novel in a cozy series about five women who were a dance troupe called the Happy Hoofers. They landed a gig in Radio City Music Hall's Christmas show. Rehearsals and sightseeing were intermixed with murder.

The story was narrated by Mary Louise, one of the dancers. The exciting life of touring contrasted with her stick-in-the-mud husband, who wanted her at home caring for him. Their act, in company with the Rockettes, was tap dancing in skimpy Santa suits.

A Rockette was found dead underneath the stage before Chapter 1 concluded. Nothing to do with the Happy Hoofers, at least to begin with, but they were only too pleased to help out the NYPD Homicide Squad whether they wanted it or not. This book is not a food cozy, but that didn't prevent a recipe for lobster salad at the end of Chapter 1 while the body was still cooling. Chapter 2 began with a two-line squib about anchovies, and the pattern repeated through the book.

In Chapter 2, the police interrogated the dancers, and Mary Louise prepared a salmon fillet, explaining the recipe in the text. The recipe is repeated at the end of the chapter, in case you nodded off, or got hungry reading it and raided the refrigerator. So it went, alternating between recipes, crime solving, and marital sorrows. A second Rockette died after being pushed. Then things got really ugly, including kidnapping and gunplay.

The final half of the plot was incoherent. As far as I could tell, the murderers were crazy women in the Rockettes, which suggested that perhaps management should have been doing some psychological testing on the new hires. The mess was sorted out with a bit of handwaving. The Happy Hoofers carried on to do their star turn in the Christmas series.



NOT A CREATURE WAS PURRING (2017) by Krista Davis (pseudonym of Cristina Ryplansky) is an installment about Holly Miller, an innkeeper in Wagtail, Virginia, who had jacked up the murder rate in this series of cozies. It wasn't mentioned, but almost certainly the local undertaker sends her a Christmas gift each year in appreciation for the business she sent his way.

The village was undaunted by the trail of bodies she left behind her. They were hosting a Christkindl Market to encourage tourists who failed to Google the place's history. The stage was soon set.

Miller had to deal with unruly guests at the Sugar Maple Inn. A neighbour had a Christmas lights display that was out of control, causing complaints to the police. A love triangle added seasoning to the season. One of the guests was businessman Dale Thackleberry, who came home for the holidays to visit family. Much to my dismay, he was the first murder victim. Dale is not a common name anymore, and the world needs more of us.

The relatives were white trash, so that added fuel to the mix. Miller was in the middle of it, being the resident Miss Marple. The second murder victim was Dale's wife. Her body was found in the Christkindl display in the village square.

Eventually everything was sorted out. The Thackleberry business was in financial trouble, and a potential son-in-law was embezzling from it. There were a couple of twists, but Miller identified the real murderer. It happens in the best of families.

Checked Out.

Libraries aren't as quiet and peaceful as you may think. LET IT SEW (2012) by Elizabeth Lynn Casey is a novel in a cozy series about librarian Tori Sinclair, way on down south in Sweet Briar, South Carolina. She and other members of the Sweet Briar Ladies Society Sewing Circle were never far from trouble.

Sinclair had been drafted for the Christmas Decorating Committee, which could teach White House staff a thing or two about vicious politics. Councilman Avery Jordan had replaced the chairwoman of the committee with his new girlfriend. The Circle referred to her as the Grinch. As an attempt at a counter-coup, the Circle volunteered Sinclair to the committee, pitchforking her into the middle of the feud.

On a sadder note, Charlotte Devereaux, a founding member of the Circle, had passed away, surprisingly of natural causes. She left behind evidence that her ex-husband had been murdered. Sinclair was compelled to investigate, thereby stirring up trouble throughout the village.

It may have been his layabout son who murdered the old man, or perhaps the fellow who operated the Devereaux business and earned a bit on the side with ghost payrolling. Charlotte may not have died of natural causes but been helped along with a pillow over her face. Illegitimate births from decades ago come to light.

Worst of all, tensions were mounting to unbearable levels in the Decorating Committee. The Grinch was a tinsplate dictator and tried to boss everyone. It all blew up in the usual way of cozies, and the murderer was brought to justice. The last chapter dealt with the committee. The counter-coup finally succeeded, and the Grinch was evicted from the chair. Now everyone else could enjoy the season.

Another librarian who sleuthed on the side appeared in the novel DECEMBER DREAD (2012) by Jess Lourey. The protagonist is Mira James, of Battle Lake, Minnesota. She had been involved in a murder a month, excessive even by cozy standards, which certainly got local tongues wagging.

Christmas was a week away, but a serial killer was here now. He targeted brunette women of a certain age and set out candy canes as his calling cards. The women had used online dating sites, a boon to psychotics everywhere. After the murderer killed a local woman, James began sleuthing.

It being the modern era, she did a lot of it online, including setting up fake profiles at dating sites as honeypots. She didn't just annoy the police, she put herself on the receiving end of candy canes.

Christmas Day was the bloody climax, when the killer reached James and almost succeeded in disposing of her. Disposing is how he thought of it. Christmas was associated by the murderer with severe psychological abuse he experienced as a boy. The son is the father of the man, as the saying goes.

The epilogue was an account by an FBI agent about why the killer only attacked in December. The loose ends were tied up, and the agent got to tell James "I told you so". Not quite a cozy, and grimmer than they usually are. This novel was a study in psychopathy and why the Christmas season is the most depressing time of the year.

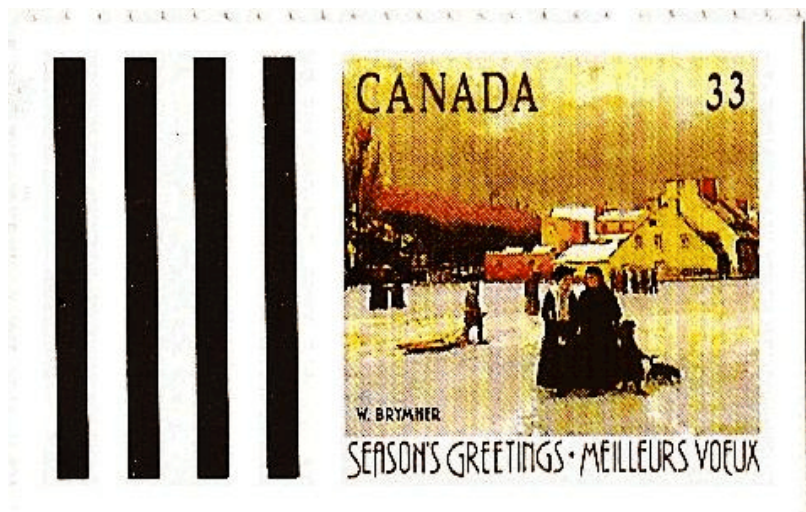
What Hath Dickens Wroth?

MISTLETOE MURDER (1991, original title MAIL ORDER MURDER) by Leslie Meier, is the first novel in a cozy series about Lucy Stone of Tinker's Cove, Maine. Stone was a working mother who had a job with the local newspaper but earned extra money with temporary jobs.

She was working December nights at the Country Cousins call centre. The business was mail order, selling kitchen stuff, junk jewelry, clothing, and whatever else could be shipped through the postal service from a warehouse. The World Wide Web was just being born and it would be a decade before it began slaughtering the old way of doing things. Stone and her co-workers took telephone orders from catalogue customers doing last-minute Christmas shopping.

The company founder Sam Miller was discovered, by Stone of course, dead in the parking lot when she came off work at 01h00. Her first murder, but to be followed by a trail of carnage over the next two decades.

A few days later, her cat was killed. Then her mentally-ill mother came to visit for the holidays. Plus, she had three small children bouncing off the walls. Happy holidays indeed. Somehow she survived to the new year. January sales were slow at the store, but Stone pepped up the plot by finding another body. Said the police lieutenant: "*This is getting to be a bad habit, Mrs Stone.*" Little did he know.



She did some sleuthing and scraped up evidence of an adulterous affair. Miller was murdered by the man who was cuckolding him. After that, one thing led to another and the killer had to weave a tangled web indeed.

CHRISTMAS COOKIE MURDER (1999) is a later installment in the saga of Lucy Stone. It revolved around the annual Cookie Exchange, a deadly event that should be outlawed by peace-loving nations everywhere. Stone was roped into hosting it at her house. Some of the guests squabbled over who stole whose recipe, the worst accusations coming from Tucker Whitney, a jealous woman. No bodies, but the upstairs toilet pipe broke and flooded the dining room table with all the cookies.

Fortunately for Stone, the first murder took place elsewhere and a neighbour found the body, that of Whitney. It was only natural for Stone to poke her nose into other people's business. There were some adulterous affairs that might have triggered events. Things got rough though, such as arson, grand theft, and drug trafficking. There were lots of sirens and flashing lights at the end of the novel, punctuated by automatic weapons fire. Stone survived with nothing worse than a dislocated shoulder. From there to the cookie recipes.

CHRISTMAS CAROL MURDER (2013) carried on the bloodshed. As if she didn't have enough to do, Stone was rehearsing the part of Mrs Cratchit in the play "A Christmas Carol" at the Christmas festival.

The villains in this novel were Jake Marlowe and Ben Scribner, who held half the mortgages in town, and weren't above going bwah ha! ha! and twirling their mustaches as they foreclosed. Marlowe was murdered by a mail bomb to no one's sorrow. The list of suspects was basically everyone in the telephone directory.

Bad news is good news for reporters, but Stone also had to write up all the village Christmas events, look after her kids, and rehearse for the play. Scribner had his own problems as he thought he saw Marlowe's ghost. Not the one from the play but his murdered partner.

Most of the novel was a chronicle of the heartache and pain caused by Marlowe and Scribner as the local economy slid into recession and homeowners fell behind on their payments. Stone's daughter was mixed up with a protest group, and the play rehearsals were running rough.

A mortgage defaulter was driven to become a suicide bomber and went after Scribner. He failed because Stone stopped him in the nick of time. The ending was unbelievable. Scribner suddenly repented, stopped all the foreclosures, and bought frozen turkeys for the poor. Dickens wrote it better, but the instant change doesn't work in this novel. Where's Scrooge when you really need him?

WHITE COLANDER CRIME (2015) by Victoria Hamilton (pseudonym of Donna Lea Simpson) is a novel in a cozy series set in the village of Queensville, Michigan. Jaymie Leighton was the local amateur sleuth when she wasn't writing a food review column for a newspaper or collecting vintage cookware. If there was a murder, she was the one who found the deceased.

Queensville had a Dickens Days festival just before Christmas, centred around an historic manor. The theme was Christmas in the Victorian era. But all was not well. Leighton walked into a family argument between the newspaper editor and her son Cody Wainwright from a previous marriage. His mother Nan did not approve of his girlfriend Shelby Fretter, who in Nan's view was a hussy from the wrong type of family.

Fretter made a brief appearance but turned up dead from a vicious beating. You know who found her. Cody was the first suspect for the police, so Leighton did some sleuthing and found other people with motives.

Fretter was wearing her mother's coat when she was attacked, so it might have been mistaken identity in a dark night, her mother being one of those people. There was also a missing young woman that Fetter was searching for when she was assaulted.

The show must go on. Leighton was busy with an open house at the manor and making arrangements for the Christmas festivities, not to mention chasing about for kitchen antiques. She did some cooking as stress relief, and a recipe was given at the back of the book for her no-bake fruitcake. Pay attention to that, because the fruitcake will re-appear later.

The plot complicates. The missing woman was a blackmailer who tried it on the wrong man. Fretter was a failed Miss Marple who forgot that when you go after a murderer, he may decide that he can't be hanged twice. Leighton almost ended up the same way, but she's a continuing character and Fretter wasn't, so she lived to see another day and another novel.

Once caught, the murderer blabbed all to the police instead of listening to his lawyer and shutting up. It's one way to tie off the loose threads in the epilogue. From there to a traditional Christmas dinner for the survivors. After the potato salad and baked ham, the no-bake fruitcake is served, followed by gathering around the piano and singing Christmas songs. *Omnibus terris pacem bonam.*

HOW THE FINCH STOLE CHRISTMAS (2017) by Donna Andrews comes from a cozy series about Meg Langslow in the village of Caerphilly, Virginia. She and her husband Michael have twin boys, are active in community affairs, and ardent amateur sleuths.

This novel had Meg working as stage manager for the local amateur dramatics production of "A Christmas Carol". Michael was the director and their sons were cast as Tiny Tim and Young Scrooge. The leading actor who played Scrooge was an import, one of those over-the-hill actors who did dinner theatre in tribal casinos. Malcom Haver was a alcoholic primo uomo with an inflated opinion of himself. He was supported by local amateur actors who may not be drunks but had egos to match.

The theatre lobby was decorated with live animals for the Twelve Days of Christmas theme. The calling birds were represented by Gouldian finches. Meg's grandfather, an animal rights activist, kept smuggling in additional finches. There were 33 finches as the novel began, with more appearing regularly. The old man was rescuing them from somewhere. He didn't want to specify because the birds are restricted species and had no documentation.

It was but a single logical step that Meg became involved in a Fish & Wildlife raid at a nearby farm suspected as a base for wildlife smugglers. During the raid, Meg found the body, the reader will not be surprised to learn, of the farmer, who had two bullet holes through his head.

A drunken Haver, meanwhile, was terrorizing the village, or perhaps stumbling would be the better verb, making himself unwelcome wherever he went. He and Meg stumble, pardon me, walk in to a confrontation with one of the animal smugglers but escaped through rather improbable luck.

All ended well though. Haver sobered up for the play and the villagers were happy. A humorous novel.

Food Cozies.

You are what you eat. Unfortunately in all too many villages, what you eat may be poisoned.

THE CHRISTMAS COOKIE KILLER (2009) by Livia J. Washburn is part of a food cozy series set in Weatherford, Texas, where Phyllis Newsom lives. She was a retired teacher, widow, boarding house landlady, and Miss Marple. If someone in the village died from foul play, she'd find the body.

The novel at hand was about the annual Christmas cookie exchange. Newsom has high hopes of winning with her snowflake lime sugar cookies, although her neighbour Agnes Simmons baked a mean gingerdoodle. Simmons quickly became an also-ran in Chapter 1 when someone strangled her. It went without saying that Newsom found the body.

The murderer was still in the house. He snuck up behind her and slugged her unconscious. She ended up in hospital for a few days, but even from her sickbed managed to do some sleuthing. Once home, she really got going, busily breaking and entering to find clues and contaminating the evidence.

It might have been a family feud that got Simmons killed. Newsom continued to investigate, always making certain that everyone she met got a batch of her lime cookies. For a change of pace, once in a while it was stuffed zucchini.

Other suspects were introduced later in the novel, as were some last-minute motives, such as an adulterous love affair. Newsom staged the traditional J'accuse! meeting, with police in attendance and a tray of cookies in case anyone was hungry. She had no proof, but that was easily taken care of when the suspect broke down and blabbed all. Had he kept his mouth shut, then he would have been acquitted, if indeed the prosecutor would have allowed the case to go to trial.

And so to the recipe appendix, where you can find out what a gingerdoodle is. The cola ham recipe is something that only a Southerner could eat. It is exactly what it seems, ham basted in Coca-Cola. It's probably more popular in Atlanta.

THE GINGERBREAD BUMP-OFF (2011) has Newsom getting ready for the Jingle Bells Tour of Christmas lights. She was a glutton for punishment, baking cookies for a bridal shower on Christmas Eve and a wedding on New Year's

Eve. The happy bride was one of her boarders, Eve Turner, hence the decision to use those two dates.

Georgia Hallerbee asked Newsom to put her house on the Tour itinerary. A feature decoration was a large ceramic gingerbread man. Shortly after, it featured in an assault on Hallerbee when someone broke it over her head, putting her in hospital in critical condition.

This being the sixth novel in the series, the police were not at all surprised to get a 9-1-1 call for the Newsom residence. The Tour would have to skip the house. Nonetheless it became a tourist magnet for other sightseers who were interested in more than the Christmas lights. Newsom did some investigating in self-defence, and stirred up a variety of soap opera plots and financial miscreants. As her boyfriend commented: *“If this keeps up, you’re not gonna have any shortage of suspects.”* Hallerbee died in hospital without regaining consciousness.

The culprit was eventually run to ground after he tried to take Newsom hostage. She whacked him with a pickup truck door and knocked him down, just as the police roared up the street. The novel ended on a high note, specifically a recipe for German chocolate cookies.

THE CANDY CANE CUPCAKE KILLER (2015) carried on the series, with Newsom involved in yet another deadly Christmas. At the tree lighting ceremony and Christmas parade, she was serving candy cane cupcakes. A local rancher Barney McCrory sampled one of her cupcakes and promptly departed for the Great Roundup in the Sky. Fortunately for Newsom, although not for McCrory, he was shot by a sniper, not poisoned by her cupcake.

McCrory’s daughter and son-in-law were under suspicion, there being some soap opera plots involved. It happens in the best of families. Additionally, a landman (petroleum company agent who handles oil and gas leases) was trying to convince McCrory to lease his mineral rights for natural gas wells. He refused to do so, although his son-in-law favoured the deal.

Newsom began her sleuthing with the aid of a television crew who were looking for a good story. Just to muddy the waters, the possibility was raised that the sniper was aiming at someone else in the Christmas festival crowd and missed. Some local politicians had been involved in public works contracting, around which charges of influence peddling had been levied.

The plot turned to corruption and shady business deals. McCrory had to die because he was in the way. The grand finale had the killer holding Newsom and bragging to her what he did and what he was going to do. There was a last-second save, which was filmed by a hidden television camera. It will be an easy prosecution.

The Christmas festival ended on a happy note, except for McCrory’s next of kin. From there, the novel concluded with the recipe for candy cane cupcakes. Everybody had more than one, they were that good.



CHRISTMAS CARAMEL MURDER (2016) is a food cozy by Joanne Fluke, part of a series set in Lake Eden, Minnesota. The protagonist and village Miss Marple is Hannah Swenson, who, with her assistant Lisa Beeseman, operated a bakery. Recipes are scattered throughout the novel. If a character enjoyed a chocolate flan, then the chapter concluded with instructions on how to make it.

The novel began with melodrama. The village mayor was in charge of the annual production of “A Christmas Carol”. The list of who’s-doing-whom would take a full page to explain. The short explanation is that Lisa’s husband was playing the part of Santa Claus. The village hussy Phyllis Bates was Mrs Claus, appointed by the mayor, who had previously enjoyed her favours. She also played half the men in the village, and Lisa was not pleased. Someone mentioned red velvet cookies, so the action stopped momentarily for another recipe.

The other melodrama was the rehearsal for the play. Amateur dramatics are no less susceptible to giant egos than Hollywood. Once again Bates stirred up trouble, wearing a costume that a lap dancer would consider too revealing, and certainly not suitable for a family play. She didn’t make it past Chapter 3, however, and became the first murder victim.

Hannah was the one who found the body. She later told someone: *It makes me feel a little strange to say it, but Lake Eden murders are good for our business.* Fortunately there were no state troopers within hearing distance.

Lisa became the new Mrs Claus. Suspicion settled on her, Hannah, and most of the other characters. Illicit romance and adultery were everywhere. There were lots of suspects and recipes to sort out. Just for fun, Hannah began seeing her father’s ghost at night.

Hannah found the murderer, who was the victim’s mother, and whose main appearance wasn’t until later in the novel. She had her reasons and admitted the crime. Before anything else could happen, even a recipe, she was shot dead by another avenging angel. The book lurched to a close with a recipe for cherry shortbread cookies. A rough ending.

DEATH BY EGGNOG (2017) by Alex Erickson (pseudonym of Eric S. Moore) continues a cozy series about Krissy Hancock, proprietor of the Death By Coffee bookstore and café in Pine Hills, Ohio. She became involved with vicious gossip, arrogant egos, politicking of the worst kind, and dirty tricks by unprincipled people. In other words, the village Christmas play.

One of the elves came down sick, so Hancock was drafted as a last-minute replacement. This brought her in contact with a tyrannical director and local actors who could teach Hollywood a thing or two about egos and hissy fits. She didn’t seem to be able to pick her friends carefully, for one of her fellow thespians was an ex-boyfriend with a lot of emotional baggage.

Too late, Hancock learned that the play was a musical, so she was expected not only to memorize dialogue but dance and sing. Nevermind any murders, for her that was the true terror. Santa Claus was the murder victim, or at least the man who was playing him. He had displaced the regular Santa, who had performed the part for years but had developed a drinking problem and was now playing the part of the town drunk year-round.

The police know who to suspect, but since this is a cozy, Hancock began her own investigation. There were no lack of soap opera plots among the cast and crew of the musical. No one seemed to have a stable relationship with anyone else. The backstage drama was true to life. Anyone who has ever been in amateur dramatics will be nodding their heads in recognition as they read this novel.

Eventually Hancock narrowed down the possibilities by the standard practice in cozies, that is, getting trapped in isolation with the killer. She survived to live another day and another novel in the series.

Oh Tannenbaum.

MERRY MARKET MURDER (2013) by Paige Shelton is a novel in a cozy series about Becca Robins, a market gardener at Ridgeway, South Carolina. Bailey’s Farmers Market had become a bloodbath since she first began selling jams and preserves there.

The holiday season was not peace and goodwill to all men. The problem was two rival Christmas tree vendors. One of them, Reggie Stuckey, claimed he had exclusive rights to sell Christmas trees at the market. Whether it was the other tree vendor or someone else, his claim went no further after a murderer pounded a tree stake through his heart. Robins, of course, found the body.

She began searching out the back stories. Someone was leaving strange Christmas ornaments on her market stall table, such as a decorated onion and a corn husk doll. Robins didn’t know if they were supposed to be clues or if somebody was acting out on an unrelated matter. She eventually found out the hard way.

The final confrontation took place on a Christmas tree farm, with Robins chased about by the murderer swinging an axe. Justice was done in time for Christmas. The book wrapped up with a selection of cookie recipes, which was strange because Robins sold jams and preserves.



HO-HO-HOMICIDE (2014) by Kaitlyn Dunnett (pseudonym of Kathy Lynn Emerson) is from a cozy series about Liss MacCrimmon Ruskin, who runs a Scottish knickknacks store in the village of Moosetookalook, Maine. Just what every remote village needs, a gift shop for any Highlanders who happen to stray in from the main highway.

Ruskin and her husband Dan were invited by her friend Gina Snowe for a week at a Christmas tree farm near the village of New Boston that she just inherited from her granduncle Simeon Snowe. Gina couldn't make it herself, so she gave them the key and sent them out by themselves. Not surprisingly, the townsfolk were suspicious of strangers who showed up without credentials to the place, although they did have the key to the house.

The caretaker was Andy Dutton, a woman, as in Andrea. She briefed the Ruskins about the farm. It had run down because Simeon hadn't been well before his mysterious disappearance. Matters were not helped when the final shipment of Christmas trees to the big city included an unknown dead man mixed in with them (not Simeon).

Lisa naturally had to investigate. Part of the tree farm was an overgrown maze, apparently an attempt by Simeon to diversify but which he never lived to see. Lisa snooped around a la Marple, with some suspicious accidents on the farm that appeared to be sabotage. Someone set fire to the maze, a good way of clearing the land, and which revealed the grave of Simeon. The farmhouse was later torched.

More suspects were revealed. It transpired that two of them, unbeknownst to each other, were working at cross-purposes, as a result of which they inadvertently exposed themselves as the murderer and accomplice. The plot complicated near the end, and I'm not entirely sure all the loose threads were tied off.

The good news though, was that Liss's body count was applied against the village of New Boston, not her hometown of Moosetookalook.

TRIMMED WITH MURDER (2015) by Sally Goldenbaum continued the seasonal mayhem with the Seaside Knitters club in Sea Harbor, Massachusetts. Isabel "Izzy" Chambers Perry did her job as Miss Marple. Izzy's brother Charlie Chambers had arrived unexpectedly in town, bringing with him a hitchhiker Amber Harper, who was claiming an inheritance.

The knitting club was competing in the village tree-trimming contest by knitting hundreds of tiny ornaments for the trees. Charlie had his problems and was still acting out as an angry young man. Harper's were even worse, and she ended up dead under the Christmas trees, as yet undecorated. Charlie was the main suspect. Izzy and the knitters went to work trying to vindicate him.

Lots of melodrama and soap opera surfaced during the sleuthing. Harper died intestate, so questions arose as to who would benefit. Her inheritance included a tree nursery, the operators of which may not have been happy to have her auditing the company ledgers. They were embezzling in a big way with fake invoicing. The knitters followed the money and after that, the deluge.

The epilogue was the Christmas tree decorating contest. There were 32 entries, in a small village where people have killed for less, so the judges declared all of them winners. It was like those politically-correct schools where every child at the track meet gets a ribbon. In this case though, it was justified. Given the murder rate of the village, the judges couldn't be blamed for playing it safe. The novel concluded with a knitting pattern.

WAGGING THROUGH THE SNOW (2017) by Laurien Berenson is a novel in a lengthy canine cozy series about Melanie Travis, who teaches at a Connecticut private school and keeps five poodles. She was on her second marriage, with two children, one by each husband.

In this installment, her brother and her ex-husband bought a pine tree farm, with delusions of making a fortune selling Christmas trees. Four weeks to go, and they were still casing their purchase when they found the body of a squatter amidst the Christmas trees. The question was whether a large tree branch had fallen on him accidentally, or if it had been used as a blunt instrument.

Travis and her Aunt Peg went investigating. The men, meanwhile, were too busy worrying how to unload all those trees so late in the season. The poodles went everywhere with Travis, just to remind readers this was a dog cozy. They, the women that is, dredged up past histories of alcoholism and embezzlement.

The killer was caught but did not blab "*Yes, I did it! And I'd gladly do it again!*". Instead, she shut up, got a good defence attorney and stonewalled. That's how the real world operates, Miss Marple.

PURRING AROUND THE CHRISTMAS TREE (2017) by Liz Mugavero is a novel from a cozy series set in Frog Ledge, Connecticut. Kristan Connor operated a pet food store and did the Marpleing around the village.

The Holiday Light Festival was a success, other than Santa arriving dead in his sleigh, but you can't have everything. Connor's boyfriend's uncle Seamus McGee was supposed to be in the suit, but instead it was Harold Dewey, who worked at the local Christmas tree farm.

McGee dropped out of sight. Both the police and Miss Marple would like to ask him questions. Notwithstanding that, Connor trawled up some back stories, including Irish gangsters begorrah. Even she admitted the cast of characters got out of control. Her pet food store kept her busy, especially with another corpse dumped at the rear. They never have this sort of trouble in Manhattan.

It all ended well when her boyfriend proposed marriage. The recipes are for doggie treats, so I'll pass comment.

Anthology Fiction.

CHILLERS FOR CHRISTMAS (1989) is an anthology edited by Richard Dalby. It has 27 stories, so I'll only mention a couple of them. The stories were written between the late 1800s and the 1980s. These are horror or weird fiction; no cozies here.

"The Waits" (1861) by L.P. Hartley is about Marriner, a well-to-do man with something on his conscience. Just what it was became clear at the denouement. The story took place Christmas Eve when carolers began singing in front of the Marriner house. The traditional offer of coins was refused, so Marriner went outside to see what they were on about. The song they sang wasn't quite right:

*God blast the master of this house
Likewise the mistress too
And all the little children
That round the table go.*

Marriner confronted the leader of the carolers and found the man had a bullet hole through his forehead. There was more, and Marriner would not live to see Christmas morn.

"A Present For Christmas" (1989) by A.J. Merak (pseudonym of John Glasby) took place in a cemetery on Christmas Eve. A young woman whose twin sister died at birth had been possessed by her twin's angry spirit. The narrator couldn't get anyone to believe it, so he solved the problem with a Christmas morning bullet through the head of the possessed woman. The story built up tension, but the crucial fact came just a little bit too late to make it seem natural.

As you may guess, these weren't holly-jolly stories. Then again, neither is Christmas to many people, then and now. Take, for example, another such anthology, A TREASURY OF OLD-FASHIONED CHRISTMAS STORIES (2006), an anthology edited by Michele Slung.

These 21 short stories are from the Victorian and Edwardian eras. The style of writing and pacing shows how anglophone literature has changed over the past century. Nonetheless, the stories are still readable. I mention a few herewith.

"Christmas Every Day" by William Dean Howells is about a little girl who wanted Christmas every day. She got it, and soon came to resent it. The flow of gifts became repetitive and monotonous, since there were only so many kinds of gifts to give. Turkeys became expensive because they are bred for the holidays, not for year-round demands at the level of Christmas. They also made for a monotonous diet, and after six months of Christmas dinners became off-putting. The girl regretted her wish, for she learned that holidays are special precisely because they are rare. A cautionary tale to point a moral.

"The Christmas Heretic" by J. Edgar Park is about Mr Jones, a new neighbour on a residential street. He was genial to all, kind to children and pets, and an eligible bachelor in a neighbourhood with several marriageable daughters. Twice a year, on Thanksgiving and Christmas Day, he turned into a demonic figure, cursing everyone he met, chasing away children, and kicking dogs. The explanation, as the neighbours eventually learned, is that he saved up all his irritations and annoyances for those two days and then vented a year's worth of anger at once.

"Merry Christmas" by Stephen Leacock was written during the war years at the nadir of the western world's fortunes. He received a visit from Father Christmas, who didn't have much to give anymore. The sentiment drowns the modern reader, we who do not go to sleep listening to the thunder of distant artillery. The story went on to emphasize that children must be sheltered from such troubles. Let them have holiday fun even if the presents aren't much.

GINGERBREAD COOKIE MURDER (2010) is an anthology, no editor specified, of three novellas by cozy mystery authors, each part of their own series. Leading off is “Gingerbread Cookie Murder” by Joanne Fluke. The heroine is bakery owner Hannah Swensen, who lived in a condominium complex where she was busily baking you-know-what.

The first chapter set up the back story about her neighbour Ernie Kusak, who had just gone through a messy divorce but then won \$8 million in the lottery. After a pause for a gingerbread recipe, the story resumed. Swensen went next door and found Kusak dead on the floor, with a box of her gingerbread cookies next to him. The good news was that he wasn’t poisoned by the cookies; someone bashed his head with a blunt instrument.

Swensen’s first thought was to whip up some chocolate cookies for the crime scene crew and next of kin. This is, after all, a food cozy. Recipe at the end of Chapter 2. Her bakery did well out of it: *She had a packed house, standing room only, and every single customer at the counter and tables had purchased at least two cookies and a cup of coffee or tea. The Cookie Jar would make an incredible profit today thanks to Hannah’s propensity for finding dead bodies.* No wonder the police always suspected her.

The usual investigation, blah, blah, blah. It was discovered that Kusak had stolen that winning lottery ticket. The man who felt it should have been his then decided that Kusak wouldn’t live to enjoy his winnings.

“The Dangers Of Gingerbread Cookies” by Laura Levine is part of her cozy series about Jaine Austen (with an ‘i’), an advertising copywriter. She headed to Florida to spend Christmas with her parents in their retirement home. Since she was the only professional writer in the villa, Austen found herself helping with their play “The Gingerbread Cookie That Saved Christmas”. The Cookie was played by resident lothario Dr Preston McCay, who never got to take a bow after he died during the final act.

Lots of emotional acting-out for Austen to investigate, both the social dynamics of a retirement village where everyone had too much time on their hands, and the ego trips of amateur dramatics. The culprit was brought from off stage in the penultimate chapter. He was getting women by posing as a doctor (in a retirement community they are worth their weight in gold). McCay, a real doctor, was about to expose him as a faker.

The epilogue was a checklist of loose threads being tied up. No recipes, since the Austen series is not a food cozy.

“Gingerbread Cookies And Gunshots” by Leslie Meier had Lucy Stone mixed up in something more serious than usually found in cozies. She found the body of Rick Juergens, whose 5-year-old son Nemo had gone missing. The only clue was some gingerbread cookie crumbs.

The kidnapping brought out the full force of the police. Stone couldn’t do much sleuthing in the face of such a serious crime. She wondered though, if the kidnapping was real or if the estranged mother was trying to raise money with a hoax. The boy was rescued by her and the mother in a last-minute plot twist.

The ending was far-fetched, bringing in a deus ex machina team of private security guards hired by Nemo’s rich grandfather. Those who deserved it got to celebrate Christmas, and those who didn’t were dead.

CHRISTMAS AT THE MYSTERIOUS BOOKSHOP (2010) is an anthology edited by Otto Penzler. He owned a bookstore in New York City called The Mysterious Bookshop. Each year for many years he solicited an author to write a short story set at Christmas, which he then distributed as a booklet to favoured customers. Seventeen of those stories are collected into this anthology, although I won’t review them all.

Leading off is “Give Til It Hurts” by Donald E. Westlake (1993). A thief on the run blundered into a poker game at the bookshop. It was Christmas, but having just stolen some rare coins from nearby, he needed a place to sit out the hue-and-cry. The other players are mystery fans who figured out who he was. Since he displayed a thick wad of banknotes to get into the game, they weren’t going to let him leave after just a few hands. There was an unspoken agreement with the thief; his money or Christmas in the hoosegow.

“Schemes And Variations” by George Baxt (1994) is about a hit man who intercepted and killed a rare-book dealer at Christmas. He had been hired to steal an unpublished Dashiell Hammett manuscript but was dismayed to find the dealer didn’t have it. Penzler was mixed into the story as a character, and helped the police with their investigation. The manuscript existed, but unknown to everyone it was under a different title. There are a couple of twists as to who the hitman is, and how Penzler wound up in the middle of events. Somewhat clever.

“The Theft Of The Rusty Bookmark” by Edward D. Hoch (1995) is from his series about Nick Velvet, a for-hire burglar who specialized in stealing apparently worthless objects. His client wanted a rusted copper bookmark that had been sold by mistake buried inside a consignment of books purchased by Penzler.

It was the Christmas rush, and Velvet had to recover it before Penzler sold whatever book it was in. Velvet figured out how to find it with a handheld metal detector, but the story didn’t end there. As Velvet realized, copper doesn’t rust, it corrodes and turns green. The spots weren’t rust, they were dried blood from a murder. The ending was unbelievable, as Velvet suddenly developed a conscience and threatened to expose the murderer. Honour among thieves and all that.

“Murder For Dummies” by humour writer Ron Goulart (1996) is about Rufe Petticord, a slowly-failing author who just before Christmas received the news that his next novel will be his last published because of falling sales. He was reduced to teaching a writing class, where he stole a manuscript from one of his students and sold it under his own name. She found out and he killed her. Her nephew got the goods on him, but instead of notifying police, demanded 60% of the royalties. There was a twist that neither of them realized. Auntie was a plagiarist, and her novel came back to haunt them both.

“Yule Be Sorry” by Lisa Michelle Atkinson (2004) is about a bookshop proprietor having a bad year for Christmas sales. He was hoping to break even by selling a rare book to a wealthy customer. Unfortunately, before the sale is made, she was run over by a reindeer in Central Park, while watching a publicity stunt with Santa Claus driving a sleigh pulled by the critters.

The good news was that she willed her library to the dealer, which will put the store well ahead into black ink. I didn’t mind all the twists and turns so much, but after reading the story I had the Irish Rovers tune running through my head the rest of the day, and probably after typing this.

SEASON OF WONDER (2012), edited by Paula Guran, anthologized 18 fantasy or science fiction stories with a Christmas theme. I found most of the stories to be so-so average, well written but not a cut above. The reason seemed to be that adding an extra layer of fantasy on top of another fantasy merely stultified the stories. Here follow three examples that seemed worth the effort of writing a review.

“The Nutcracker Coup” by Janet Kagan is about a human diplomat on a distant planet. She decided to celebrate Christmas as close to the traditional ways as possible, choosing the planet’s winter solstice as the date. Some of the aliens joined in for the fun, while others objected and caused a minor kerfluffle. It all worked out well in the end.

“Wise Men” by Orson Scott Card considered the Three Wise Men as aliens, come to inspect the newborn Jesus. Humans were mostly under the control of fallen angels, whose spirits occupied their bodies. Eloï had chosen the baby to host the spirit of his favourite, and Lucifer tried to stop him. The magi stymied him, for Eloï had a master plan of which Jesus was only a part.

“Newsletter” by Connie Willis is a humourous look at one Christmas tradition that even secular families indulge in. The Christmas newsletter is a chance to brag about Junior and Missy’s accomplishments at school, Dad’s promotion at work, and Mom’s activity in the knitting club. The narrator of this story led a boring life and fretted that she had nothing to write about. That was soon resolved when she discovered an alien invasion was underway at Christmas and they were secretly taking over their city. It was one way to fill space in her annual letter.



THE USUAL SANTAS (2017) is an anthology of 18 Christmas mystery stories. No credit is given to an editor. Is this a new trend? The anthology included a variety of European authors not commonly read on this side of the Atlantic. I'll only pick out two stories for review, but on the whole the stories were good.

"There's Only One Father Christmas, Right?" by Colin Cotterill is about a thief who robbed a jewelry store at gunpoint on December 25. In Thailand, where the day is an ordinary business day. Dressed as Santa Claus, as good of a disguise as any. Passersby assumed it was a publicity stunt.

Police arrested the only possible suspect, an alcoholic who was hired by a department store to play Santa Claus. He didn't do it, and was framed by the real thief, who had borrowed his suit while he was sleeping off a drunk. The point-of-view then switched to the actual thief, who was congratulating himself for a successful getaway. He was on a bus heading to a different city. Except that Muslim terrorist bombers had targeted the bus.

"The Usual Santas" by Mick Herron is set in Whiteoaks, an English shopping mall on the fringe of London. *The shopper who is tired of Whiteoaks, it might easily be asserted, is a shopper who is tired of credit.* When the Christmas shopping season began, eight Santas were in place in eight tentacles of the mall. By custom, no one ever saw their real faces, not even between themselves.

On Christmas Eve night after the mall closes for the holiday, the eight Santas gathered for their traditional feast, supplied by the fast-food outlets of the mall in appreciation. The elves, all young women, went out clubbing. Security shut down for the holiday and left the cameras and alarms running on automatic.

This year though, there is a problem, when nine Santas appeared for the feast. The obvious conclusion was that someone wanted to hang about for some after-hours burglary. Like Isaac Asimov's Black Widowers diners, the nine Santas try to identify the odd one out. There was no point in unveiling since none of them knew the real identities of each other. They attempted to deduce who the interloper was but fail.

After futile attempts at spotting the faker, they agreed all for one and one for all. The nine of them loot the stores after turning off the alarms and security cameras. There is a neat twist at the end that revealed the true burglar Santa.

IT'S A WEIRD WINTER WONDERLAND (2017) is an anthology edited by Robert Bose and Axel Howerton. The stories purport to be about the weird side of the season and dark crime. Some were poorly written pornography, and most were just poorly written, period. Not recommended.

The only story I found worth reading was "Up The Chimney" by Steve Brewer. It was about an elderly widow on Christmas Eve, who was expecting her children and grandchildren to arrive for probably be her last Christmas. She lived in a remote farmhouse, with solid window bars and door locks.

At 03h00, she was awakened by the sound of a man trapped in her chimney. He had tried to get into the house but having been stymied at ground level, found a ladder she had left on the ground and thought he could get in through the chimney. She talked to him. He was trapped with his arms above his head and legs jammed in a narrow passage. He admitted he was a thief but begged for mercy.

The widow considered what would happen if she called the police. First-responders of all kinds tramping through her house on Christmas morning instead of her watching the grandchildren open their gifts. Giving statements to constables instead of the family sitting down to dinner. Her sons using the incident as an excuse to put her into a nursing home.

She lit the fireplace, putting lots of smoke-generating material in it. If the smoke didn't asphyxiate the thief, then the heat would kill him. She kept the fire roaring all night to ensure that she would have a peaceful Christmas. Her time was coming soon, and the thief's time was even sooner. A story of pathos, the only one well-written in the anthology.

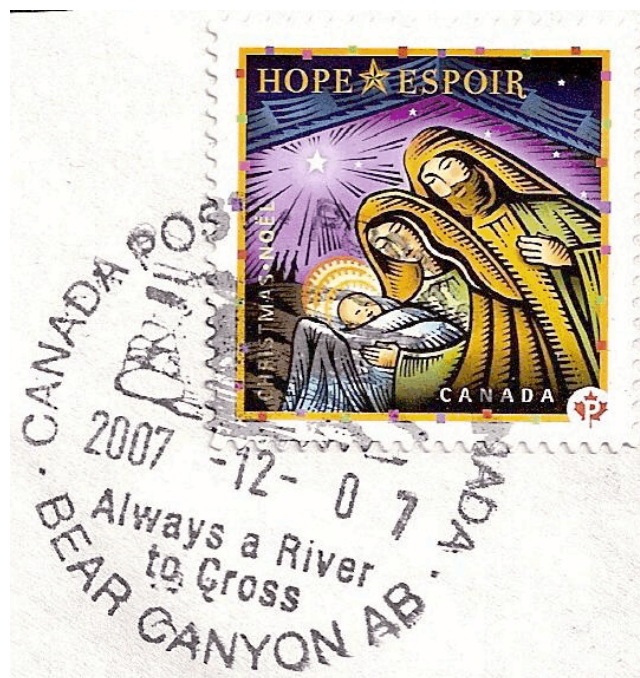
As for the rest of the book, it was a waste of money. Normally I put my unwanted books in a Little Free Library (Calgary has hundreds of them) but crude porno such as this went into my fireplace as starter paper. My chimney is a metal pipe much too small for any burglar to attempt.

MRS CLAUS: NOT THE FAIRY TALE THEY SAY (2017) is an anthology edited by Rhonda Parrish, who compiled it to fill what she thought was a gap in Christmas fiction. Stories about Mrs Claus are few and far between, and mostly depicted her as a grandmotherly woman baking cookies. Parrish therefore decided to compile this anthology, which has 14 original stories about variants of Mrs Claus.

“Wight Christmas” by Laura VanArendonk Baugh leads off, with a council of personified holidays. The council had in the past been comprised of Christmas, Halloween, Easter, and so forth. Each holiday had its own representative but they agreed to go by their holiday name because some of them had changed over the years. Halloween, for example, was now represented by the Skeleton King, and Santa Claus had sent his wife in his stead.

In a burst of liberalism, the council had expanded, and now included the ghost of Administrative Professionals Day and Kwanzaa. The chairman of the meeting was National Tartan Day, which wasn’t a holiday but a day of recognition, allowed in to get the numbers up. National Raisin Day was a particularly annoying member. Christmas was having some problems because toy sales are down. The blame was on Black Friday, and Mrs Claus went after him with a vengeance.

The remaining stories covered a variety of Mrs Clauses, good and evil, trendy or rigidly traditional. Not a few of them borrowed from Nordic mythology, and in one story she was an airship commander. The stories were not necessarily suited for the kiddies, but for anyone disgruntled by ho-ho-ho, they make a refreshing change.



Humour: Print.

THE TWELVE WAYS OF CHRISTMAS (2012) by Sandra M. Odell is a collection of twelve stories, one for each line of the well known Christmas song. I won’t review all of them but just take two as examples. An interesting read.

“To Speak Of Metal Men And Birds Of War” (4 calling birds) is set in a steampunk World War One. A lieutenant was dying of his wounds while his faithful mechanical man Tokker tended to him. He sent off messages with metal calling birds that upon arrival at their destination would repeat the verbal message he gave them. He died with one bird remaining. Tokker gave it instructions to sing a eulogy. A story of pathos.

“Good For The Gander” is a story of revenge against her ex-boyfriend by a woman who laid a curse on him. During the 12 days of Christmas, each day all the different types of birds mentioned in the song were flying into his apartment. Remember that the song counts up exponentially, so he got 12 partridges, 22 turtle doves, 30 French hens, 36 calling birds, 42 geese, and 42 swans. A bit messy for a small apartment.

REAL SANTA (2017) by William Hazelgrove is a humorous novel about an engineer George Kronenfeldt, who wanted to keep the faith for his young daughter Megan’s belief in Santa Claus. So much so, that he planned an elaborate production with a ‘real’ Santa Claus landing on the roof. He wanted to make it convincing enough that Megan could record him on video and post it to YouTube.

Having just lost his job, and the simulated Santa bankrupting him with its costs, George was a man who had tipped over the edge and was falling into the abyss. He was not the only one over the edge, as Megan’s schoolteacher Mrs Worthington was working out her own personal issues about Christmas due to a warped childhood.

George hired a movie producer to help bring Santa onto the roof with real reindeer and a sleigh. After all, it’s just a matter of SFX and stunts. Like many a movie production, the budget spiraled out of control. George hit the bottom of the abyss, although Worthington managed to resolve her problems. Megan got to see Santa, albeit not in the way George intended. The novel was dark humour, not something you would read to your kids or give a copy to Aunt Ethel as a Christmas present.

THE PURITAN CHRISTMAS

THE PICTORIAL PRESS: ITS ORIGIN AND PROGRESS (1885) by Mason Jackson, available as a free download at www.gutenberg.org The cartoon below is dated 1653, titled “Vindication of Christmas” (page 66 of the book)

When the Civil War was over the newspapers it had called into existence disappeared. The printing press was, of course, not idle during the rule of Cromwell, but its productions were narrowly watched, and there is reason to suppose the newspapers were to a great extent under the influence of the party in power. ...

The grim and unsocial character of the times is set forth in ‘The Vindication of Christmas,’ a pamphlet illustrated with a woodcut representing Old Christmas welcomed on one hand and forbidden on the other. After a pitiful lament for the misery of the times, Christmas sets out on a pilgrimage to London, where he enters a fair house that had once been an Alderman’s, but is now inhabited by a sour-tempered miser. Here he meets with such a cold reception that he is fain to take himself off, ‘and wandering into the country up and down from house to house, found small comfort in any.’



ZINE LISTINGS

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

[The Usual means \$5 cash (\$6 overseas) or trade for your zine. Americans: please don’t send cheques for small amounts to Canada or overseas (the bank fee to cash them is usually more than the amount) or mint USA stamps (which are not valid for postage outside USA). US\$ banknotes are still acceptable around the world.]

CHRISTIAN NEW AGE QUARTERLY V23#4 (US\$5 for a sample copy from Catherine Groves, Box 276, Clifton, New Jersey 07015-0276) The main article in this issue is “A Political Jesus?” by Robert M. Price. There are conflicting views as to whether Jesus had political views in the sense that we understand them today. If he did, they would have been inapplicable to today’s world, because Jews at that time expected the End Times momentarily. Two millennia later, we are still waiting for the Last Trumpet, so the thoughts of Jesus are now usually bent to whatever belief that modern commentators hold. A good article, although the pages should have been contiguous, not jumped through the zine by the editor.

BANANA WINGS #72 (The Usual from Claire Brialey and Mark Plummer, 59 Shirley Road, Croydon, Surrey CR0 7ES, England) SF fanzine with emphasis on fannish things, as in literary and conventions, not the latest Marvel comics or cosplaying. Lots of letters of comment.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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

FROM: Lloyd Penney
Etobicoke, Ontario

2018-11-27

Congrats to the Calgary Stampeders on their Grey Cup win this year. The Ottawa Redblacks are an amazing team for an expansion franchise, and they’ve won the Cup in two of their first five years, but Calgary was overdue, I think. Next year, who knows? Arrrrrrrgooooooooosssss...

[For the benefit of my non-Canadian readers, the Toronto football team (Etobicoke is a suburb thereof) are called the Argonauts.]

OPUNTIA #428: That new library is quite the building, and it must have been a tough build with the LRT lines so close to it. Our main reference library is also an atrium building, which makes it naturally lit nearly everywhere. Card catalogues? The original version of Google. I don’t miss them, either, but it is good to know how they are still used.

I’d seen the passing of Dave Duncan online. I met Dave once, very personable fellow, at an Ad Astra many years ago when he was the Pro Guest of Honour. That may have been as far back as the late 1980s or early 1990s.

OPUNTIA #429: Re: Remembrance Day. The idea of the knitted poppies is a very British one. When we were there in 2016, we did see knitted poppies, or at least thousands of poppies linked together, around Lincoln Castle. Remembrance Day was quite the day around here, but Yvonne and I were vending at a craft show in Pickering. We asked the organizer if we would have a moment of silence at 11 am, and though she had not planned for it, a short ceremony was cobbled together.

There are websites and publications galore when it comes to legal cannabis. I don’t care for it myself smoke-wise, but I am sure there is much of value in its derivatives. All we need now is a huge acreage in the cultivation of hemp, for use in paper and so many other products. Such cultivation will help us save trees, and in the long run, the oxygen content in our atmosphere.

[The same land that would grow hemp needs be used to grow food crops, whereas tree logging is done on non-arable land. Canada legalized marijuana by federal law on October 17, 2018. The following day, while riding the LRT, I saw my first stoner, who pranced down the aisle and then collapsed at the end of the compartment. It was obvious he was high, not drunk, since drunks shuffle and are bleary-eyed, while stoners are overactive. While constantly babbling gibberish to himself, he then proceeded to eat a jumbo cup of soft ice cream, several chocolate bars, and was working on a sub sandwich as I got off at my station. I always thought it was a joke about stoners getting the munchies. Brave new world.]

As I read this, the news announces the end of the post office rotating strikes per legislation. It’s the same as always, but it’s being crowded off the front page by the closing of the GM plant in Oshawa.

[One of Canada’s hoariest traditions is a postal strike every few years. They stage rotating strikes for a month and then the House of Commons passes back-to-work legislation.]



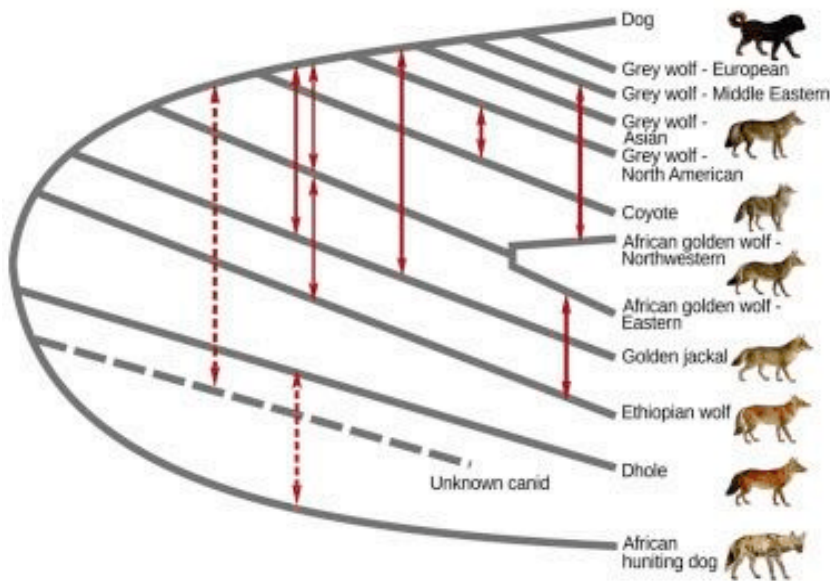
I get my mail at the Central Post Office downtown. I took this photo there when Calgary had a rotating strike on October 25. I know all the posties who work at the station, and none of these were them.

SEEN IN THE LITERATURE

Gopalakrishnan, S., et al (2018) **Interspecific gene flow shaped the evolution of the genus *Canis***. CURRENT BIOLOGY 28:3441-3449

Authors’ abstract: *The evolutionary history of the wolf-like canids of the genus Canis has been heavily debated, especially regarding the number of distinct species and their relationships at the population and species level. We assembled a dataset of 48 resequenced genomes spanning all members of the genus Canis except the black-backed and side-striped jackals, encompassing the global diversity of seven extant canid lineages.*

Specifically, we find gene flow between the ancestors of the dhole and African hunting dog and admixture between the gray wolf, coyote (Canis latrans), golden jackal, and African golden wolf. Additionally, we report gene flow from gray and Ethiopian wolves to the African golden wolf, suggesting that the African golden wolf originated through hybridization between these species. Finally, we hypothesize that coyotes and gray wolves carry genetic material derived from a “ghost” basal canid lineage.



Summary of the relationships between all the species included in this study. The red arrows indicate inferred gene flow between the two connected species. A solid arrow is corroboration of a previously reported finding, whereas a dashed arrow is a novel finding in this study.

Moreno-Mayar, J.V., et al (2018) **Early human dispersals within the Americas**. SCIENCE 362:doi.org/10.1126/science.aav2621

Authors’ abstract: *Studies of the peopling of the Americas have focused on the timing and number of initial migrations. Less attention has been paid to the subsequent spread of people within the Americas. We sequenced 15 ancient human genomes spanning Alaska to Patagonia; six are ~10,000 years old (up to ~18× coverage). All are most closely related to Native Americans, including an Ancient Beringian individual, and two morphologically distinct Paleoamericans.*

We find evidence of rapid dispersal and early diversification, including previously unknown groups, as people moved south. This resulted in multiple independent, geographically uneven migrations, including one that provides clues of a Late Pleistocene Australasian genetic signal, and a later Mesoamerican-related expansion. These led to complex and dynamic population histories from North to South America.

Otto, S.P. (2018) **Adaptation, speciation and extinction in the Anthropocene**. PROCEEDINGS OF THE ROYAL SOCIETY OF LONDON 285B:doi.org/10.1098/rspb.2018.2047

Author’s abstract: *Humans have dramatically altered the planet over the course of a century, from the acidity of our oceans to the fragmentation of our landscapes and the temperature of our climate. Species find themselves in novel environments, within communities assembled from never before encountered mixtures of invasives and natives. The speed with which the biotic and abiotic environment of species has changed has already altered the evolutionary trajectory of species, a trend that promises to escalate.*

Human activities have reshaped selection pressures, favouring individuals that better survive in our built landscapes, that avoid our hunting and fishing, and that best tolerate the species that we have introduced. Human-altered selection pressures have also modified how organisms live and move through the landscape, and even the nature of reproduction and genome structure. Humans are also shaping selection pressures at the species level, and I discuss how species traits are affecting both extinction and speciation rates in the Anthropocene.

Humans have altered the course of evolution. The pervasiveness of evolutionary impacts, from genome structure to dispersal rates, on species throughout the globe should make us take pause. Particularly troubling is the elevated extinction rate associated with human activities, which is disproportionately leading to the loss of large-bodied, specialist, narrow-ranged species, as well as species that are otherwise vulnerable to humans.

Tushingham, S., et al (2018) **Biomolecular archaeology reveals ancient origins of indigenous tobacco smoking in North American Plateau.** PROCEEDINGS OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES USA 115:doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1813796115

Authors’ abstract: *Chemical analysis of residues contained in the matrix of stone smoking pipes reveal a substantial direct biomolecular record of ancient tobacco (Nicotiana) smoking practices in the North American interior northwest (Plateau), in an area where tobacco was often portrayed as a Euro-American-introduced post-contact trade commodity.*

Nicotine, a stimulant alkaloid and biomarker for tobacco, was identified via ultra-performance liquid chromatography-mass spectrometry in 8 of 12 analyzed pipes and pipe fragments from five sites in the Columbia River Basin, southeastern Washington State. The specimens date from 1200 cal BP to historic times, confirming the deep time continuity of intoxicant use and indigenous smoking practices in northwestern North America.

The results indicate that hunting and gathering communities in the region, including ancestral Nez Perce peoples, established a tobacco smoking complex of wild (indigenous) tobacco well before the main domesticated tobacco (Nicotiana tabacum) was introduced by contact-era fur traders and settlers after the 1790s.

This is the longest continuous biomolecular record of ancient tobacco smoking from a single region anywhere in the world, initially during an era of pithouse development, through the late precontact equestrian era, and into the historic period.

This contradicts some ethnohistorical data indicating that kinnikinnick, or bearberry (Arctostaphylos uva-ursi) was the primary precontact smoke plant in the study area. Early use likely involved the management and cultivation of

indigenous tobaccos (Nicotiana quadrivalvis or Nicotiana attenuata), species that are today exceedingly rare in the region and seem to have been abandoned as smoke plants after the entry of trade tobacco.

Abbasi, I., et al (2018) **Plant-feeding phlebotomine sand flies, vectors of leishmaniasis, prefer Cannabis sativa.** PROCEEDINGS OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES USA 115:11790-11795

[Leishmaniasis is a disease caused by protozoans which is spread by biting insects. It causes skin ulcers, low red blood cells, and enlarged livers.]

Authors’ abstract: *Sand fly females suck blood from vertebrate animals, including humans, and thereby transmit Leishmania parasites and arboviruses. In addition, both sand fly sexes consume plant-derived sugar meals. Therefore, the structure of plant communities can influence the transmission dynamics of sand fly-borne diseases.*

Our findings demonstrate that, in proportion to their abundance, Cannabis sativa plants were consumed by sand flies much more frequently than expected (i.e., C. sativa is probably highly attractive to sand flies). We discuss the conceivable influence of C. sativa on the transmission of Leishmania and its potential utility for sand fly control.

Blood-sucking phlebotomine sand flies (Diptera: Psychodidae) transmit leishmaniasis as well as arboviral diseases and bartonellosis. Sand fly females become infected with Leishmania parasites and transmit them while imbibing vertebrates’ blood, required as a source of protein for maturation of eggs. In addition, both females and males consume plant-derived sugar meals as a source of energy.

Plant meals may comprise sugary solutions such as nectar or honeydew (secreted by plant-sucking homopteran insects), as well as phloem sap that sand flies obtain by piercing leaves and stems with their needle-like mouthparts. Hence, the structure of plant communities can influence the distribution and epidemiology of leishmaniasis.

Speirs: This might be of greater interest to Canadians since marijuana was legalized by federal law on October 17, 2018.