

OPUNTIA 440



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.

About The Cover: I wanted something pretty for the cover but it's too soon to go out to the mountains, not even a dandelion has bloomed yet as I type this, and nothing much was happening around Cowtown at press time. I'm assuming no one will object to the sight of two floral cupcakes I recently enjoyed (from Safeway, which has better baked goods than the trendy bakeries around town).



AROUND COWTOWN
photos by Dale Speirs

Spring has sprung and it finally warmed up in the second half of March. Premier Rachel Notley called an election for April 16, but it seems likely the NDP (labour-socialist) will be defeated. The Dippers were elected in 2015 because the Wildrose and Conservative parties split the right-wing vote. They have since merged into the United Conservative Party, although the Freedom Conservative Party immediately hived off it. The NDP have been a disaster. In the light of falling oil prices, they brought in a carbon tax and a \$15 minimum wage, as a result of which small businesses are shuttering everywhere. The office and storefront vacancy rate in Alberta is about 40%.

At the federal level, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau staggered from one political disaster to the next. He is definitely out of his league.

He stands accused of influence peddling on behalf of the construction company SNC-Lavalin, alienating westerners by failing to move on export oil pipelines, and then starting a trade war with China that has cost us 40% of our canola export market.

I try not to let it all get to me. My daily schedule averages about one novel read, two old-time radio shows listened to, and lots of writing. I'm very active in the Calgary Philatelic Society, and attend meetings of the Alberta Palaeontological Society, plus When Words Collide. I'm staying busy in my retirement.

The TD Square mall downtown had an exhibit called Augmented Reality. Passersby stood in front of a camera that put them on a screen with various CGI animals. I got the polar bear. The dinosaurs took a long time to come around in the cycle. The snaps on this page show me (carrying briefcase) taking a smartphone photo of myself as Nanook came out of the water to sniff me.





LITERA SCRIPTA MORTEM: PART 3

by Dale Speirs

[Parts 1 to 2 appeared in OPUNTIA's #424 and 428.]

Writing Blocks.

LET GEORGE DO IT was an old-time radio series that ran from 1946 to 1954. (This and hundreds of other OTR shows are available as free mp3s at www.otrrlibrary.org) George Valentine was a private detective who ran a classified ad in the newspapers which was quoted by him in the opening of the show: *Personal notice: Danger's my stock in trade. If the job's too tough for you to handle, you've got a job for me. Write full details.*

The episode would usually open with the voice of someone writing the letter out loud, appealing for help. Sometimes Valentine would do the opening narration. The cases were not necessarily criminal investigations. The client might need him to courier a package or do some other strange, seemingly innocuous task. His secretary/girlfriend was Claire Brooks, whom everyone called Brooksie. She often accompanied him out into the field on a case.

“The First Client”, written by Pauline Hopkins and aired on May 14, 1946, was as one would guess, the pilot episode of the series. The episodes were initially salted with mildly funny jokes and played as farce before a live audience. Eventually the series found its level as a more serious detective show without a theatre audience.

George Valentine had just gotten out of uniform and settled in New York City with hopes of being a private investigator. His newspaper ad was different from the later episodes: *Do you have a crime that needs solving? Do you have a dog that needs walking? Do you have a wife that needs spanking? Let George do it.* One can see the rough edges of this series needed sanding.

A young lad named Sonny Brooks habitually loitered around the building for lack of anything better to do, and appointed himself office boy for Valentine. He said that his big sister Claire needed work as a secretary and he had already called her to come by. When she appeared, Valentine argued with her a bit, but it was obvious they were going to wind up in a relationship. Sonny was in the first few episodes, but when the series sobered up into its later form, he became an occasional character. He wasn't missed by the listeners.

Valentine's first client staggered into his office. Jonathon Winters told him that he had been shot. Valentine went out to the reception room and had Sonny make a telephone call to the police. When they returned to the inner office, Winters was gone, evidently out the fire escape. Very embarrassing when the Homicide Squad arrived and no body was present.

Valentine decided to track down Winters's wife. She wasn't much help. It transpired that Winters was a mystery writer who had run into a block in plotting his latest story. Valentine salvaged the manuscript's first draft from a wastepaper basket. It appeared to be a roman a clef about a mystery writer whose greedy wife wanted him dead so she could collect the insurance money.

From there, people and corpses disappeared and reappeared seemingly at random. Claire, not yet Brooksie, vanished. Valentine learned the address of the Winters' country house and drove out there, to find everyone else roaming the big house.

After all the explanations are done, it was revealed that Jonathon decided to get past his writer's block by staging the whole thing and letting Valentine's actions become the plot. He assuaged Valentine's hurt feelings with a cheque for \$1,000. (Say about \$10,000 in today's depreciated currency.)

The show concluded with a wonderful final line, but I'll let you hear it yourself. Do download some free mp3s; much better than listening to some droning voice on an audiobook.

“Stranger Than Fiction” was a 1949 episode written by David Victor and Herbert Little Jr. It began with socialite Victoria Beasley hiring Valentine to verify who her husband Sam's mistress was. He was a mystery writer whose recent novel was widely considered to be a roman a clef about the Beasley household. The book described a mistress that everyone assumed was Peggy Wilkinson, the Beasley secretary.

The situation was complicated by both the wife and the secretary being caught out in lies and apparently trying to substantiate each other's innocence. A peculiar divorce action if ever there was one. Sam said someone shot at him through the French doors of the Beasley mansion. The event appeared to be a re-creation of a murder described in Sam's novel.

The plot zigzagged hither and yon. Valentine broke the case when he realized there was a third woman in the house, Sally the maid. She presented a third version of what happened, no more logical than the other two women. Sam admitted he fired the shot when no one else was around. The three women all swore to be virtuous henceforth.

The police were frustrated because no one would file a complaint or had committed any serious offence worth opening a case. Brooksie, as Claire now was, put in her own oar, pressing Valentine to make her a respectable woman. A messy plot with too many dangling threads.

The idea of a mystery writer using a detective to provide story ideas was found in many books and broadcast episodes. In fact, there was an entire old-time radio series built around it, called BOX 13, which aired from 1948 to 1949. It was about Dan Holiday, a former newspaper reporter who quit his day job and went into freelance writing, only to discover that he couldn't think of any good plots. He took a continuing ad in a newspaper personal columns: *Adventure wanted. Will go anywhere, do anything. Box 13.* (A newspaper box number, not a postal box.)

When he went to the newspaper office to pick up his mail, the clerk he dealt with was Suzy. She left the newspaper in the third episode and went to work for Holiday as his secretary. Besides a bit of comic relief, her main job was to act as a sounding board so Holiday could explain various plot points.

The pilot episode was "The First Letter", aired on August 22, 1948, and written by Ted Hediger. Holiday got a letter from Carla Williams. He met her and she explained she needed his help to deal with a blackmailer. Reluctantly he accompanied her to the man's apartment where they found him dead from a single gunshot.

Williams framed Holiday for the murder, as a result of which he became a homeless person. He couldn't go home because the police were waiting for him, nor could he stay at a hotel because his picture was in the newspapers.

Having written numerous detective stories, he suddenly found himself living one. The kind you know so well, where the detective has to prove himself innocent while evading the police. Holiday did some break-and-enter and finally found a photograph that demonstrated Williams and her husband were the actual blackmailers. She wasn't a victim, she was the perpetrator.

As Holiday searched an apartment, he desperately tried to remember how his fictional detective operated. He itemized each room, and tried to figure out where the evidence was hidden. Thinking like a private investigator, he checked inside the fireplace and hit the jackpot. After that, he could take it to the police and win his freedom.

YOURS TRULY, JOHNNY DOLLAR was an old-time radio series that aired from 1949 to 1962, and was the last OTR survivor. Johnny Dollar was an insurance investigator with an action-packed expense account. He was famous for padding his expenses. Each line item would be read out loud and served as a bridge to the next scene. Fascinating to today's listeners, as he would fly cross-country first-class for \$100, stay in a luxury hotel for \$25 a night, or have a steak dinner for \$2.

"The Man Who Wrote Himself To Death" was a 1950 episode written by Gil Doud and David Ellis. The only surviving recording was for a rehearsal, with no musical segues and only gunshots and footsteps for sound effects. The mp3 therefore sounds rather strange. It is a good demonstration why movies and shows use background music.

Dollar was investigating Stewart Palmer, an unstable writer trying to be executed for murder as part of his research and to make his material notorious enough that someone would actually publish it. Palmer's wife Marion worshiped him as an unsung genius and was deluded about how his work would be accepted any day now. His agent told Dollar that Stewart's work was being rejected at first sight by slush pile readers.

Palmer had a \$100,000 life policy which the insurance company would have to pay out on, since technically it wasn't suicide. It named Neil Beasley as the beneficiary, not Marion. He was supposedly a mentor to Stewart, but the policy raised suspicions about him using undue influence. Ostensibly Stewart was slumming in the rough side of town as research, but his life of destitution and wife abandonment was for real.

Dollar tracked down Beasley in a tavern for questioning. Leaving the place, Dollar bumped into Stewart who had been about to enter. Stewart ran, then turned and opened fire with a handgun, but accidentally killed a newsboy standing nearby.

After some to-ing and fro-ing across the city, there was the final confrontation. Stewart wanted to go out in a blaze of publicity to immortalize his writings. Beasley got 60 days for insurance fraud, and the insurance company refused to pay off. As a sop for a happy ending, it was mentioned that Marion was told that one of her husband's plays had been optioned by a Broadway producer.

“Death by cop” happens even today, and mass shooters have the same idea. They are nobodies and want to have their names recorded in history, rather than live and die forgotten.

As an aside, I've noticed the name Beasley keeps showing up in old-time radio mysteries as a villain or victim. This can't be coincidence. I'm sure it was an in-joke among the script writers, who would have known each other and shared a few drinks in the bar. Probably some unpopular studio executive.

BETWEEN THE DARK AND THE DAYLIGHT (2009) is an anthology of 28 mystery short stories, edited by Ed Gorman and Martin H. Greenberg. One story in it is about a different way of solving writer's block. “The Quick Brown Fox” by Robert S. Levinson was about an author Gus Ebersole who wrote crime fiction but had been suffering writer's block for months.

Happenstance saw him teaching a writing course to prison inmates. Most were goof-offs who wanted to get out of their cells for a few hours, but a few turned out to be good writers. Ebersole plagiarized their stories and sold them as his own, thinking they would never find out. A couple of them did, and when paroled came looking for him. He had guns and survived.

The final catch was when he plagiarized a story that had been secretly submitted by a policeman under an assumed name. A man who was legally entitled to shoot people.

IMPOSSIBLE STORIES was a 2006 collection by Zoran Zivkovic, translated from the original Serbian by Alice Copple-Tosic. One story in it is “The Telephone”, which began with the narrator receiving a telephone call from the Devil. This is a typical pact-with-the-Devil plot, about a writer suffering from a block and unable to write his next book.

The Devil gave him a choice of either fame and fortune for his writing during his lifetime or not being recognized as a great writer until after his death but then for all posterity. Which would you choose and why?

Checked Out At The Library.

“The Strange Case Of The Megatherium Thefts” (1945) by Sydney Castle Roberts was reprinted in THE BIG BOOK OF SHERLOCK HOLMES STORIES (2015), an anthology of 82 stories, edited by Otto Penzler. Holmes was called to investigate the theft of books from the Megatherium Club library.

It was the old plot where the person hiring the detective was the culprit and did so to make himself appear innocent. To be fair, Roberts wrote this story as a chapbook for private circulation among friends. The appetite of Sherlockians for pastiches is so great that eventually every story printed will wind up somewhere in an anthology.

The old-time radio series BOSTON BLACKIE aired from 1944 to 1950. There were also movies and books. Not a detective, private or police, but always barging into crimes, Boston Blackie, real name Horatio Black, was a former jewel thief. He now lived the life of a supposedly honest citizen, although his source of income was never specified. He lived well in a nice apartment, squired a girlfriend named Mary Wesley about town, and always had time to interfere in the casebook of NYPD Inspector Faraday.

In the early part of the series, Faraday was constantly trying to run Blackie in for murder. He leaped to unsupported conclusions so often that one wonders how he made it past the rank of foot patrolman. It didn't help that Blackie kept turning up like a bad penny and razzing Faraday about his incompetence. This act grew old quickly, so in the later part of the series Faraday no longer automatically tried to arrest Blackie but grudgingly accepted his help. There was a lot of verbal sniping between them but they had moderated into friends.

“Stolen Rare Book” was a 1946 episode, no writer credited. (This and hundreds of other OTR shows are available as free mp3s at www.otrrlibrary.org) Mary Wesley was visiting the rare book room of a library and wanted to look at a rare tome. Before she had a chance, Vivian Peterson came running up and said a man had collapsed in the book vault.

After the flurry, when the ambulance had taken the library attendant away, it was discovered that a rare book had been stolen. Faraday showed up, which was puzzling because he was with Homicide, but perhaps not because Wesley and Blackie were there and thus a body was bound to turn up.

Everyone was questioned and released. Peterson fled from the city, with Wesley in pursuit. The latter accused the former of being a shill for Harold Benson, a book dealer with no scruples and probably the one who would fence the stolen book. The rebuttal was that Benson had just been murdered, so ta!

The book had been smuggled out by placing it under the stretcher when the library attendant had been rushed to hospital. The story jumped to the thief, who talked with a collector prepared to buy it, no questions asked. A few more complications developed to fill the time. There had been a gang of thieves at work, who had a falling out after the theft, resulting in a few more murders. Eventually the survivors were rounded up and the book recovered.

The library setting and rare book were part of a MacGuffin plot. The story could just as easily been told about any other valuable object, such as jewelry or antiques. A standard plot, but enough to pass a half hour.

BOOKS CAN BE DECEIVING (2011) by Jenn McKinlay was the first novel of a cozy series about Lindsey Norris, the new librarian for the seashore village of Briar Creek, Connecticut. She had just taken up her new job, and little did the citizens of the village know what awaited them in the future.

Norris's assistant was Beth Stanley, the children's librarian, who had dreams of professional authorship. Stanley was trying to sell a children's book to New York editor Sydney Carlisle.

Local author Rick Eckman was Stanley's boyfriend, a vain and egotistical boor. If, at high school graduation, you voted him Most Likely To Be First Murder Victim In A Cozy, you'd be correct. The couple had a very nasty and public breakup in a restaurant, so the Deppity Dawg decided to look no further than her as the suspect.

Plenty of back stories, including plagiarism and multiple impersonations. Carlisle had a past history with Eckman, and both had aroused the ire of her editorial assistant Astrid Blunt. Carlisle became victim #2. The man who fingered Blunt as the culprit was shot by a sniper. Lots of name-changing and new identities amongst both the living and the dead, for all had something really serious to hide.

Norris blithely Marpled her way into the middle of the bloodbath. As per usual in cozies, she was taken hostage by the murderer. The escape wasn't the

standard with-a-single-bound-she-was-free, but rather slugging the killer with Volume 9 of the OXFORD ENGLISH DICTIONARY. If you're going to employ a blunt instrument, nothing could be better.

The appendix was rather strange. The reader's guide for a classical novel mentioned in the book was to be expected, but there were also a knitting pattern and a recipe for clam chowder.

BOOK, LINE, AND SINKER (2012) had Lindsey Norris settled into her job as a librarian, her avocation as a Miss Marple, her hobby of crafts, a romance with a salvage boat captain, and her ability to attract murders like flies to manure.

In this installment, an island just offshore of the village was the site of a salvage operation aimed at recovering treasure, formerly the property of Capt. William Kidd. And yes, someone had a treasure map purporting to show where Kidd stashed his loot. The village folk were divided between preservationists who wanted to protect the island from the depredations of outlanders, and the tourist industry glad of a new attraction.

It became ugly though. The local tourist bureau director was murdered at the salvage site. The main suspect was Norris's downstairs neighbour, which gave her an excuse to leap into the fray. After the assorted complications and back stories were worked out in the middle of the novel, and elaborate sting operation was set up to catch the real murderer.

Norris and the treasure map were used as bait. The plan went wrong, followed by many excursions and alarums. The murderer was a character mentioned in a back story, who had returned to the island decades after torching a house and killing its occupants. Norris was held at gunpoint on the shore, but with a single bound into the ocean, she was free.

The rest was just cleanup of the details, plus some unusual factoids about the original version of Robert Louis Stevenson's novel TREASURE ISLAND. (It was first titled THE SEA COOK. Not a food cozy.)

READ IT AND WEEP (2013) had Lindsey Norris living dangerously by participating in the village's community theatre. If you don't think amateur dramatics are dangerous, ask anyone who is involved in them.

The Briar Creek Community Theater was staging A MIDSUMMER NIGHT’S DREAM, directed by former Broadway actress (very former) Violet La Rue. She managed to dragoon most of the library staff into the play, but Norris wanted no part of it. A professional actor, Robbie Vine, was brought in to play the part of Puck.

A nasty New York theatre critic, Harvey Wargus, appeared as the play was still being cast. Another antagonistic character was Brian Loeb, a local villager who accused Vine of canoodling with his wife. Someone stabbed Vine in the arm, and the consensus was that the perpetrator had aimed for the heart and missed. Vine had several girlfriends who didn’t like the way he ended his affairs, and a wife who didn’t like the way he started them.

Vine later collapsed during rehearsals, the verdict being poison. Loeb, meanwhile, was arrested for beating his wife. La Rue had a busy time constantly recasting the parts as one by one her actors were taken out by assorted events. Norris went into Miss Marple mode and sussed out that Vine had a son he abandoned.

The play’s the thing, with which to catch the conscience of the murderer, and as Shakespeare never wrote, it was a real barnburner. Much to everyone’s astonishment, Vine came back to life. He had shammed his death and been in hiding. He made his re-appearance in the first public performance of the play. That brought the mother down the aisle screaming for vengeance. Banquo’s ghost never stirred up so much trouble. A night to remember.

ON BORROWED TIME (2014) was more personal for Lindsey Norris. She was now being courted by Robby Vine. Her brother Jack was in town, traveling on behalf of a coffee company, but went missing. That was just after a body was found in the library.

Jack had admitted to his sister that his employers, a South American based corporation, were not of the highest ethical standards. He didn’t want to discuss recent events with her, and therefore scarpered.

Lindsey got really serious this time about her Marpleing, for this time it was personal. She even phoned her parents. The cause turned out to be a war between Brazilian cartels. Coffee cartels, not what you were thinking of. One competitor was releasing fungal spores upwind of her enemies’ plantations to wipe out their crops.

The battle spread to Briar Creek with some of the players, jacking up the death toll. One wonders why the villagers hadn’t yet gotten their pitchforks and torches to clear out the Norris family. Transylvanians know how to deal with individuals who spread death wherever they go. Either that or burn the library down.

IMPOSSIBLE STORIES was a 2006 collection by Zoran Zivkovic, translated from the original Serbian by Alice Copple-Tosic. It included a set of stories about libraries.

The first one, “Virtual Library”, has dated past its shelf life. An author found his books online without permission at a Website. Also listed on the site were the books he hadn’t yet written and a biography of his life, including his future. The author contacted the Webmaster and had everything expunged. Later he got to thinking about it but by then it was too late. His works had ceased to exist.

“Home Library” dealt with real books. Someone kept sending the narrator thick books into his mailbox. Endlessly, a collection of world literature totaling 8,305 books. To fit them in without spending a fortune on shelving, he stacked them vertically. The practical details made up most of the story. Been there (three-room library in Chez Opuntia) and done that.

“Night Library” was about a man who was accidentally locked into a library after hours. It transpired though, that there was a night shift of librarians that the general public didn’t know about.

Nor was the stock of books the same. Each book in the night library was about an individual’s life, in great detail, most of which the individual had forgotten. Billions of books, for the billions of humans that have ever lived. Naturally the narrator asked to see his own biography. While reading it, he learned there is a reason why it is not given to us to see ourselves as others see us.

“Infernal Library” began with a sinner arriving in Hell and discovering that it was now a library. The sinners had to spend eternity reading books. All of them, every one that was ever published. Not your idea of severe punishment? Realize that if you liked science fiction, then you would have to spend eternity reading every romance paperback written, or vice versa.

“Smallest Library” was about a man who bought a book whose title and text changed after every reading, with no return to any previous text. Not as magical as it used to be before tablets and Kindle arrived.

“Noble Library” concerned a book collector who only had fine bound volumes on his shelves. He was annoyed one day to discover a paperback in the midst of them, and threw it in the garbage can. When he walked back into his library, it had reappeared on the shelves. He tried several methods of disposing it, but it always came back. Finally he cut the book into pieces and ate it.

“The Library” (1991) was a Season 3 episode of the television series SEINFELD, written by Larry Charles. It began with Jerry Seinfeld getting a telephone call from the New York Public Library about an overdue book from 1971. The book was TROPIC OF CANCER, hot stuff for a sheltered teenaged Jewish boy, as Seinfeld then was. He insisted he had returned the book, but that cut no ice with the library bureaucracy.

Seinfeld went down to the NYPL to argue his case, and tangled with the library cop, Lt. Bookman. The episode became a parody of the famous police procedural DRAGNET, because Bookman dressed and talked exactly like Sgt. Joe Friday. A subplot was Seinfeld’s neighbour Cosmo Kramer accompanying him and asking the librarian for a date. Naturally her name was Marion. His come-on line to her was “*So what’s a guy gotta do around here to get a library card?*”

Bookman visited Seinfeld’s apartment. As they argued over the book, he checked every book in the apartment for NYPL markings. In his best Joe Friday voice he complained about life in 1971: “*Hippies burning library cards. Abbie Hoffman telling everyone to steal books.*”

In an effort to prove his innocence, Seinfeld looked up an old classmate who might vouch that he returned it. Her memory was different though, and she said it was TROPIC OF CAPRICORN. That jogged his memory. He realized that he had both books checked out and hadn’t returned one of them but gave it to a friend.

Several subplots came together. Bookman caught Kramer and Marion canoodling after hours in the library, but let them off with a warning. Seinfeld admitted the offense and paid the fine. The ending was a neat twist explaining what happened to the book.

Book Collecting Made Bloody.

THE SAYERS SWINDLE (2013) by Victoria Abbott was part of a cozy series about Jordan Bingham of Harrison Falls, upstate New York. She was a book hunter who worked for Vera Van Alst, a wealthy collector who specialized in mysteries. Van Alst’s set of Dorothy Sayers first editions had been stolen, then sold through a secondhand bookstore to an unknown buyer.

Bingham eventually tracked down the buyer, Randolph Adams, and tried to persuade him to return the books in exchange for a Hemingway first edition. That didn’t seem right to me. A basic principle of law is that title to stolen goods can never pass, so all Van Alst had to do was get a court order. Instead, the retrieval was prolonged, the excuse being that Adams was apparently drugged by his family for secret reasons.

After a body of an unknown man was found in the Adams neighbourhood, the excrement hit the rotating impeller blades. The family disappeared. No one was who they seemed to be. Hitmen roamed hither and yon. Adams was someone else in disguise. It was all very complicated.

The stolen Sayers editions had been invisibly marked with code numbers that led to a bank account with sizeable sums. Assorted characters came and went, and the novel eventually fizzled to an ending. Recipes then followed, which was strange because this was not a food cozy.

THE HAMMETT HEX (2016) saw Jordan Bingham taking a trip to San Francisco with her boyfriend, police officer Tyler Dekker. It wasn’t completely a pleasure trip, as Vera Van Alst wanted Bingham to locate a rare edition of the Dashiell Hammett novel RED HARVEST.

It could never be that simple of course. Someone pushed Bingham off a cable car. A sedan later tried to run over the couple. Their hotel room was burglarized. There was evil afoot in San Francisco.

Farley Tso was the man who had the Hammett book. He had also been involved decades earlier in the theft of jewelry from a moll. The Mafia didn’t like that, and not yet having settled the score, were trying to do so. That a book collector had wandered into the middle of the fracas didn’t slow down the made men. From their point of view, everyone was guilty.

The death toll was never fully accounted, as many shadowy figures just vanished. Probably wearing concrete overshoes at the bottom of the bay. Bingham got the book from Tso just before he was eliminated. There were no other survivors left to claim it, so Van Alst got her accession with a clear title.

MURDER IN THE LOCKED LIBRARY (2018) by Ellery Adams (pseudonym of Jennifer Stanley) carried on the bloodshed at Storyton Hall, Virginia. Jane Steward was a single mother with young twin sons. The big house was now her hotel, and she lived in a cottage that once was a hunting lodge. She was doing well enough that she decided to expand the manor with a spa. The groundbreaking for the addition brought up some old bones and the remnants of an old book.

A Rare Book Conference had booked the hotel, and its delegates were delighted to get into Miss Marple mode en masse. One of them was poisoned, dying in the Henry James Library. Someone dusted his gloves (used for handling rare books) with Prussian blue, a cyanide compound.

The rare book industry had its nastier moments, so Steward had her own Marpleing to do. The tome dug up was the only remaining copy of a cookbook prepared by manufacturers who adulterated their food but were eventually exposed.

Incredibly, someone still wanted revenge more than a century later, which stretched this reader's credibility. The motives and actions were not believable to me.

“The Unique Hamlet” (1920) by Vincent Starrett (one of the earliest and greatest Sherlockian bibliophiles) was reprinted in THE BIG BOOK OF SHERLOCK HOLMES STORIES (2015), an anthology edited by Otto Penzler.

The story was about a Shakespearean scholar who borrowed a unique quarto of HAMLET for his bibliographic research. On his way home with the book, he was mugged and the volume stolen.

Holmes investigated and concluded that the book's owner was the mugger. He had discovered his book was a fake after having insured it for £100,000. He therefore used the borrowing request to stage the crime and burn the book. Had he succeeded, he would have avoided embarrassment and come out ahead with a huge sum.

Bookselling.

“The Bookshop” by Zoran Zivkovic (from his 2006 collection IMPOSSIBLE STORIES, translated from the original Serbian by Alice Copple-Tosic) was set in a science fiction bookshop. A customer came in looking for a particular title that didn't exist yet, and whose author he didn't know. The proprietor wrote science fiction on the side and had just finished a story as the customer came in.

The customer said he was from a star 11.5 light years away and traveled via the fifth force to Earth, assuming the form of a human upon arrival. He had detected another beam of fifth force emanating from the bookshop. The rest of the plot became obvious from that point.

MURDER IS BINDING (2008) by Lorna Barrett was the first novel in a cozy series about Tricia Miles, who owned a mystery bookshop in the village of Stoneham, New Hampshire. She had a cat named Miss Marple who lived in the bookstore. In an attempt to stave off economic decline, the council turned Stoneham into a book town. They invited numerous booksellers to locate in the village in the hopes of making it a tourist attraction like Hay-on-Wye, Wales.

The story began when a neighbouring bookseller Doris Gleason got the sharp end of a carving knife. She specialized in cookbooks but was having trouble making a go of it. She was also feuding with Bob Kelly, the landlord of all the bookstores, who drove a hard bargain in the leases.

The murderer had disabled the smoke alarms and set a fire, although if it was to cover the killer's tracks then the knife should have been removed from the corpse. The fire and body were discovered by Miles, so the firefighters arrived in time before much damage had been done. A rare book had been stolen, AMERICAN COOKERY (1796) by Amelia Simmons, the first cookbook published in the USA.

The Deppity Dawg was determined to pin the murder on Miles, so in self defense she went sleuthing. Another problem for her was the arrival of her annoying sister Angelica. Speaking of sisters, Doris Gleason was still alive, having substituted the body of her twin sister Deirdre for an inheritance scam.

This was a sudden right-angle turn in the plot, sprung as a surprise near the end of the novel without any prior knowledge to the reader that there was an evil twin. Said one of the supporting characters: “*This is all so convoluted it's*

making me dizzy.” Me too, as I had to go back several pages and re-read them to make sense of where Doris/Deirdre came from.

The denouement was a car wreck with the killer, Doris’s boyfriend. An unbelievable ending. The stolen book was mentioned a few times but seemed to have dropped out of the plot along the way. The novel concluded with “Angelica’s Recipes”, even stranger because this was not a food cozy.

BOOKMARKED FOR DEATH (2009) took place on the bookstore’s anniversary. Tricia Miles celebrated by hosting a book signing by bestselling author Zoe Carter. The writer was accompanied by her obnoxious assistant, her niece Kimberly Peters. Carter was a nice woman but that didn’t stop her from being strangled in the bookshop’s washroom.

The other serious problem, and it was more serious to the villagers who didn’t know or care about Carter, was wild geese pooping all over the sidewalks. This took up more than a few pages, as the debate raged between those who thought they were cute and an added tourist attraction, and those who had to hose down their sidewalks every day.

The Deppity Dawg closed down the bookstore as a crime scene. With nothing better to do, Miles went sleuthing. She learned that Peters was a nasty bit of work, and Carter had a criminal past that someone was trying to blackmail her about. Or perhaps it may have been that she didn’t actually write her books but got them from someone else’s manuscripts.

The story and the soap operas became complicated. The daughter of the woman whose manuscripts were plagiarized didn’t kill Carter. The murderer was an obsessive man who considered her to be his woman, whether or not she wanted him.

The J’accuse! meeting set up by Miles didn’t go as she planned, but the Deppity Dawg saved her life at the last moment. More recipes at the end for no apparent reason. No roast goose recipes, which would have made sense.

BOOKPLATE SPECIAL (2009) began with Tricia Miles dealing with an uninvited house guest Pammy Fredericks. She overstayed her welcome, so Miles showed a rare bit of gumption and forcibly evicted her.

Fredericks was a freeloader who stole things. It wasn’t just Miles she annoyed, for she had her hooks into a village family with lots of secrets to hide. That cost Fredericks her life. She left behind a diary that detailed assorted who-did-whats. It was good reading for the police.

Miles again had the idea of confrontation at a J’accuse! meeting. So many attendees were packing heat that it turned into a gunfight wilder than the O.K. Corral. White trash, all of them.

Travel Is Broadening And Deadly.

Livia J. Washburn has a cozy series about travel agency owner Delilah Dickinson. The agency had a special line in thematic tours of places associated with a particular author. That way, as a Miss Marple strewing dead bodies about, she could spread the murders across the country instead of decimating a single village.

The series began with FRANKLY MY DEAR, I’M DEAD (2008). Dickinson had just survived a divorce and opened her literary travel agency in Atlanta, Georgia. Her first tour group was in celebration of GONE WITH THE WIND. They visited the apartment where Margaret Mitchell wrote the novel, then a museum devoted to the movie, after which a hearty meal at a restaurant serving Southern food. So far so good.

The excitement began during an overnight stay at a plantation recreating Tara. The staff included actors portraying the actors who played the characters. Steve Kelley played Clark Gable playing Rhett Butler, but not for long after the tour group arrived. Someone stuck a shiv into him.

Several of Dickinson’s family were along for the tour as assistants. The police suspected everybody, so Dickinson became a Miss Marple to clear the family name. Her son-in-law had a past history with Kelley, so that bumped him up to the top of the list. Almost everyone, tour group or plantation staff, had a past they preferred to keep quiet about.

A second murder, this time by gun, enhanced the tribulations of the tour group, as the dead man was one of them. The plantation staff had some problems with illicit romances. A few of the actors had been playing their parts for so long they had trouble breaking character and coming back into their own personas.

For variety, instead of the cozy heroine being trapped with the murderer, she was trapped with two murderers. It was all the aftermath of Kelley chasing one hoop skirt too many. The police arrived in the nick of time and Dickinson lived to tell the story.

HUCKLEBERRY FINISHED (2009) was the sequel, about her Mark Twain tour on board a sternwheeler going down the Mississippi River. There was a Mark Twain impersonator ambling about the deck entertaining the tourists. One of her group, Ben Webster, accused the ship's casino of running a ragged roulette wheel. Someone later snapped his neck and stuffed his body into a locker.

The police at Hannibal, Missouri, took the case. The ship's security chief Logan Rafferty didn't get along with them, Dickinson, or anyone else, and certainly resented a murder on his watch. The captain wasn't happy either, as the riverboat was detained at Hannibal for further investigation.

Dickinson had her own affairs to look after, such as romancing the Mark Twain imposter, a young actor named Mark Lansing. She learned, a bit late, that he had a history and so did several other people, including the deceased. Ben Webster was a fake identity. There had been another murder on board a year ago, and the parents of the young woman killed were part of Dickinson's group.

The denouement was complicated, as it developed there were four different criminals on board, some killers, some not. One was out for revenge, others to protect their rigged games in the casino, and others to suppress scandal. A bomb was rigged on the riverboat. Dickinson and Lansing found it in time. None of this business about cutting the red wire. They just tossed it overboard and let it explode in the river. A night to remember.

FOR WHOM THE FUNERAL BELL TOLLS (2012) took Delilah Dickinson and her tour group to Key West, Florida, this time in search of the Ernest Hemingway legacy. His house was the first stop, with its famous six-toed cats roaming freely.

One of the tour group was Walter Harvick, an obnoxious man who liked to bait Hemingway impersonators. He managed to make it as far as Chapter 10 before someone stuck a shotgun in his mouth and pulled both triggers. Everyone was surprised, because it was in Idaho that Hemingway had committed suicide.

Dickinson's history as a murder magnet soon came out. As one character commented, "*That's incredible. And people still sign up for your tours?*" Regrettably not everyone uses Google to research before the event.

The chief suspect, Harvick's fellow traveler Veronica Scanlon, was later found unconscious, either poisoned or a drug overdose. Other tourists in the group were suspected of something, treasure hunting and drug smuggling among them.

It turned out they were all relevant, although not necessarily contemporaneous or contiguous. Hemingway had been peripherally involved in some of the events in his lifetime.

There being no basements for Dickinson to be trapped in with the murderer, she was instead trapped with him on a speedboat out in the ocean. The motive was a mixed blend of family pride and guilt over past offences. It all worked out okay, since the sun also rises.

The Craft Of Writing.

"Mayhem by Experts" was a 1949 episode of LET GEORGE DO IT, written by David Victor and Herbert Little Jr. A surprise birthday party was set up for George Valentine, with five mystery authors in attendance to stage a mystery play. Only it wasn't just staged, for one of the authors was murdered for real.

There was little love lost between the writers. Valentine and Brooksie investigated the back stories but what broke the case was an unusual method, reading the novels of all the writers and applying textual analysis. They went to the library and ploughed through the books.

It has long been known that authors are creatures of habit and tend to use certain word phrases repeatedly or write in a certain pattern. By parsing the text, Valentine and Brooksie noticed that two of the authors used strange phrases such as "translucent twilight" several times in several of their books.

Those two authors were mother and son. She was ghostwriting his novels for him because she wanted her son to be as successful as she was. The dead man had been her lover but broke it off, then threatened to expose her. She confessed that she did it, but Valentine wouldn't accept it for a good reason explained in the epilogue.

Valentine kept pushing until her son broke down and blabbed. It was the traditional “Yes! I did it! And I’d gladly do it again!”. He wanted to protect and avenge his mother. She had made the false confession because he still had his life ahead of him.

On that note, the birthday celebrations ended. Brooksie rushed out to buy a gift because she had forgotten it was Valentine’s birthday. The episode is average but worth listening to once. Like other OTR mp3s, it passes time if your workday commute is a half-hour or more.

Leslie Charteris made his reputation with his series about The Saint, real name Simon Templar, a Robin Hood character who first appeared in print in 1928 and lasted into the 1990s. Besides about 100 novels and short stories, The Saint appeared in movies, on stage, radio, and television.

The best portrayal was done by that gentlemanly actor Vincent Price on the radio series. His cultured voice and snappy lines were the epitome of the character. (This and other OTR shows are available as free mp3s from www.otrrlibrary.org.)

“The Frightened Author” was a 1950 episode of THE SAINT, written by Jerome Epstein. Templar was called in by a mystery author who had done a foolish thing. Wanting to get revenge on his agent, who was gypping him of money, he wrote a roman a clef about the agent, the agent’s wife, and a handsome young boxer.

Supposedly it was a menage a trois but the boxer hired a lawyer, the agent hired a bodyguard, and the wife was just plain furious. The author admitted to Templar that he couldn’t prove it in court. He tried to hide behind the old disclaimer “Any similarity between ... etcetera etcetera” but that didn’t work. As an example, the boxer was a heavyweight, so the author disguised him by making him a lightweight.

Templar visited everyone in succession to find out if there really would be a murder. There was, for the author was shot dead while talking on the telephone with Templar. Some more contretemps followed, but justice reigned and the killer was brought to justice. The dialogue was well done. Writers would do well to remember that words can come back to haunt you.

Speaking of which, consider the mystery book A MOST NOVEL REVENGE (2016) by Ashley Weaver. It was set in the English countryside of 1933. Amory and Milo Ames were invited to the mansion of Reginald Lyons for the weekend.

Among other such guests were Isobel Van Allen, a novelist who had written a roman-a-clef about a real murder that had been committed at Lyonsgate House in 1925. She accused Bradford Glenn of the murder, with no proof. Nonetheless, high society drove him out of their ranks. So you see, Twitter toxicity is no new thing.

Van Allen announced to the guests, all of whom were there in 1925, that she was writing a second expose about that unhappy day. She intended to name names and show up people for their sins. The reader will not be surprised that Van Allen was soon murdered and her manuscript thrown into the fireplace.

Amory Ames was the Miss Marple of the hour. She tangled with Inspector Laszlo, who seemed to think he was in charge of the investigation. The middle of this novel was devoted to the two of them dredging up back stories and assorted alarums and excursions. Ames read Van Allen’s roman-a-clef, hoping to find clues but without any luck.

Van Allen had a past that consisted of throwing away her society lovers after she had drained them of their ready cash. More than one subsequently committed suicide. Van Allen had to keep moving as she was ostracized by one family after another. An acquaintance told Ames: “*In some ways, I suppose it’s lucky she died before she had no continents left where she was welcome.*”

The J’accuse! meeting was a complicated lecture about who was romantically involved with whom, a few pages of which require re-reading to keep the cast of characters straight. It was all done for revenge, but Van Allen herself may have been suicidal and decided to provoke someone into killing her.

CRIME AND PUNCTUATION (2018) by Kaitlyn Dunnett (pseudonym of Kathy Lynn Emerson) is the first novel in a new cozy series about the widowed Mikki Lincoln. She had bought a big house in the Catskills village of Lenape Hollow, New York State. As every homeowner knows, houses are money pits always needing something, so Lincoln set herself up as a freelance editor to supplement her retirement income.

She had expected to operate her business over the Internet, so she was surprised when her first client was a local citizen who appeared in person at her front door clutching a thick manuscript. Tiffany Scott had written a murder mystery based on Lenape Hollow's past as a favoured dumping ground for bodies by the Mafia. The book was almost a roman-a-clef, which proved fatal for Scott. She didn't make it past Chapter 2.

Lots of back stories and front-page stories fill in the middle section of the novel. The main narrative was about an unpopular developer who wanted to build a theme park in the village. He was opposed by most of the villagers, including Scott's family. Tiffany had been mixed into several of those stories with her husband and grandmother.

As the reader will soon guess, the murderer was a descendant of a Mafia man, determined to save the honour of his generation's family. Scott was making a good living from blackmail, and it cost her life. The novel ended with threads deliberately left hanging loose, an obvious setup for a sequel. A good read overall, and I will watch for the next installment.

Critical Matters.

As composer Jean Sibelius said, there are no statues erected to honour critics.

THE WHISTLER is considered one of the best old-time radio series, airing from 1942 to 1955. It was not a mystery show, for the murderer narrated his plotting and execution of what he thought would be a perfect crime. After doing the deed and gloating in his success, the final commercial would play. Then came the epilogue, where one tiny detail overlooked by the murderer or information unknown to him caught him out in a twist ending.

"Seven Steps To Murder" was a 1947 episode written by Meyer Dolinsky. A drama critic savaged a play unnecessarily and cost the playwright his money when the show folded after a few performances. The two men had grown up together and had been childhood friends. The critic had dated the playwright's sister in their teenaged days.

The playwright arranged for a book of poems to be sent to the critic, who loved them and praised them in his column. It was then announced that the poems were cobbled together from random phrases and gibberish. As a result, the critic lost his job because of public ridicule, and vowed revenge.

He got it through an elaborate plot to poison the playwright. He sneaked into the playwright's apartment after he was dead and typed a fake suicide note admitting the poems were genuine poetry and the critic had been wronged.

In the epilogue, the police didn't believe the note was real and arrested the critic. The critic had long forgotten the source of the poems: himself. He had written them in letters to the sister. Her brother had found them and dummied up a book to trap the critic. She was upset and told her brother to publicly apologize and help the critic get his job back. He was going to do it first thing the next morning. Sparky the electric chair would have the final criticism.

Philo Vance was a private investigator in a series of novels by S.S. Van Dine. The character was very popular back then although he is mostly forgotten today. There were movies and, from 1945 to 1950, a radio series.

"The Poetic Murder Case" was a 1948 OTR episode, no writer credited. Two drama critics had been stabbed to death, and soon a third one joined them in the next world. On each corpse, the murderer had left a bit of doggerel about the critic's sins. The three of them usually sat together at theatres, and agreed on a consensus. The foremost and nastiest of the trio was Robert Carnes. The police were stumped, so they brought in Philo Vance to help.

Carnes's wife had formerly dated a mobster but he denied the killings. It made sense because he never went to the theatre and was an uncouth man. Carnes was an abusive husband, so she herself became a suspect briefly, but only briefly because there was no connection between her and the other two critics.

Vance zeroed in on a Broadway producer whose previous show had been savaged by the critics. As a last-minute piece of info, Vance discovered that the producer and Carnes were brothers under different surnames. There was bad blood between them. The producer had tried to set up the evidence to frame the mobster but it didn't work. Mafioso don't leave poetry pinned to their victims' bodies.

The episode moved briskly. The Philo Vance scripts relied too much on withholding evidence from the listener and using last-minute twists, but that having been said, they were easy listening.

SEEN IN THE LITERATURE

Eshel, T., et al (2019) **Lead isotopes in silver reveal earliest Phoenician quest for metals in the west Mediterranean.** PROCEEDINGS OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES USA 116:6007-6012

Authors’ abstract: *We offer here an answer to one of the most intriguing questions in ancient Mediterranean history: the timing/contexts and incentives of early Phoenician expansion to Mediterranean and Atlantic regions in Africa and Europe ~3,000 years ago. This was enabled by a rare opportunity to analyze a very large sample set of ancient silver items from Phoenicia. An interdisciplinary collaboration combining scientific methods with precise archaeological data revealed the Phoenicians’ silver sources.*

We propose that Phoenicians brought silver to the Levant from southwest Sardinia ~200 years before they de facto settled there, and later, gradually, also from Iberia. We show that the quest for silver was a major trigger for a long “precolonization” phase, during the 10th to 9th centuries BCE.

Intertwining lead isotope analysis of silver items with precise archaeological context and chronology, we provide analytical evidence for the onset of Phoenician westward expansion. We suggest that the quest for silver instigated a long, exploratory phase, first in Anatolia (Asia Minor) and Sardinia, and subsequently in the Iberian Peninsula.

This phase preceded the establishment of sustainable, flourishing Phoenician colonies in the West by over a century. In so doing, our results buttress the “precolonization” theory, accord it a firm chronological framework, and demonstrate that the quest for silver (and probably other metals) was an incentive for Phoenician westward expansion. Furthermore, our results show that the Phoenicians introduced innovative silver production methods to historic Europe.

Fitzpatrick, Claire (2019) **The first step to a nation? The Irish postal service and the Home Rule crisis.** HISTORY 104:doi.org/10.1111/1468-229X.12736

Author’s abstract: *This article examines the fate of the proposition in the original third Home Rule bill of 1912 to grant control of the Post Office to the*

Irish government and the implications this had on debates about the future government of Ireland. It places this within the broader context of calls made by Irish Nationalists for control of the Post Office, disagreements between the Gaelic League and the Post Office, and the choice of the GPO as a rebel target in 1916.

A reading of the debates at a parliamentary and popular level reveals wider concerns about the nature of the Home Rule settlement, threats to imperial authority, status, security and financial interests and Ulster. It discusses how national identity and aspirations for sovereignty were expressed through control over this symbolic, vital organ of the state.

A study of the Post Office reveals much about communications, questions of patronage and employment and how the state in the nineteenth century became more engaged in people's lives. The fate of the Post Office in Ireland reflected the country’s fate. That the Home Rule act of 1914 was suspended during the course of the war and never came into operation opened up possibilities for alternative action.

Irish Nationalists understood the importance of institutions for the building of national character. As a space of power, the GPO in Dublin was a physical expression of the British state in Ireland. Its choice as a rebel target in 1916 was a key assertion of identity, power and nation.

Speirs: The takeover of the General Post Office by rebels during the 1916 Easter Rising made the building an icon. See OPUNTIA #62.1B for more info.

Xie, S., et al (2019) **Dynamics of bed bug infestations and control under disclosure policies.** PROCEEDINGS OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES USA 116:doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1814647116

Authors’ abstract: *Bed bugs have reemerged in the United States and worldwide over recent decades, presenting a major challenge to both public health practitioners and housing authorities. A number of municipalities have proposed or initiated policies to stem the bed bug epidemic, but little guidance is available to evaluate them.*

One contentious policy is disclosure, whereby landlords are obligated to notify potential tenants of current or prior bed bug infestations. Aimed to protect

tenants from leasing an infested rental unit, disclosure also creates a kind of quarantine, partially and temporarily removing infested units from the market.

Here, we develop a mathematical model for the spread of bed bugs in a generalized rental market, calibrate it to parameters of bed bug dispersion and housing turnover, and use it to evaluate the costs and benefits of disclosure policies to landlords.

We find disclosure to be an effective control policy to curb infestation prevalence. Over the short term (within 5 years), disclosure policies result in modest increases in cost to landlords, while over the long term, reductions of infestation prevalence lead, on average, to savings.

These results are insensitive to different assumptions regarding the prevalence of infestation, rate of introduction of bed bugs from other municipalities, and the strength of the quarantine effect created by disclosure. Beyond its application to bed bugs, our model offers a framework to evaluate policies to curtail the spread of household pests and is appropriate for systems in which spillover effects result in highly nonlinear cost-benefit relationships.

Hochella, M.F. Jr, et al (2019) **Natural, incidental, and engineered nanomaterials and their impacts on the Earth system.** SCIENCE 363:doi: 10.1126/science.aau8299

Authors' abstract: Natural nanomaterials have always been abundant during Earth's formation and throughout its evolution over the past 4.54 billion years. Incidental nanomaterials, which arise as a by-product from human activity, have become unintentionally abundant since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution.

Nanomaterials can also be engineered to have unusual, tunable properties that can be used to improve products in applications from human health to electronics, and in energy, water, and food production.

Engineered nanomaterials are very much a recent phenomenon, not yet a century old, and are just a small mass fraction of the natural and incidental varieties. As with natural and incidental nanomaterials, engineered nanomaterials can have both positive and negative consequences in our environment.

Despite the ubiquity of nanomaterials on Earth, only in the past 20 years or so have their impacts on the Earth system been studied intensively. This is mostly due to a much better understanding of the distinct behavior of materials at the nanoscale and to multiple advances in analytic techniques. This progress continues to expand rapidly as it becomes clear that nanomaterials are relevant from molecular to planetary dimensions and that they operate from the shortest to the longest time scales over the entire Earth system.

Nanomaterials can be defined as any organic, inorganic, or organometallic material that present chemical, physical, and/or electrical properties that change as a function of the size and shape of the material. This behavior is most often observed in the size range between 1 nm up to a few to several tens of nanometers in at least one dimension.

These materials have very high proportions of surface atoms relative to interior ones. Also, they are often subject to property variation as a function of size owing to quantum confinement effects. Nanomaterial growth, dissolution or evaporation, surface reactivity, and aggregation states play key roles in their lifetime, behaviors, and local interactions in both natural and engineered environments, often with global consequences.

It is now possible to recognize and identify critical roles played by nanomaterials in vital Earth system components, including direct human impact. For example, nanomaterial surfaces may have been responsible for promoting the self-assembly of protocells in the origin of life and in the early evolution of bacterial cell walls.

Also, weathering reactions on the continents produce various bioavailable iron (oxy)hydroxide natural and incidental nanomaterials, which are transported to the oceans via riverine and atmospheric pathways and which influence ocean surface primary productivity and thus the global carbon cycle.

A third example involves nanomaterials in the atmosphere that travel locally, regionally, and globally. When inhaled, the smallest nanoparticles can pass through the alveolar membranes of the lungs and directly enter the bloodstream. From there, they enter vital organs, including the brain, with possible deleterious consequences.

SIGNS, SIGNS, EVERYWHERE A SIGN
photo by Dale Speirs

This is a construction zone for a new pedestrian overpass at 54 Avenue SW and Crowchild Trail. The fence is obviously a rental that was used for a fireworks festival last year. However you can't be too careful these days, lest someone sues.

