

# OPUNTIA 441





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**About The Cover:** Bunnies for Easter. I photographed this snowshoe hare in my neighbourhood on April 3 as spring reluctantly sprang. In Calgary residential neighbourhoods such as mine there are about two or three hares on every block. Their coats are just starting to turn brown.

THE MORNING AFTER THE NIGHT BEFORE

by Dale Speirs

April 16 was the Alberta provincial election. The governing NDP (labour-socialist) went down in flames like a Boeing 737 Max, to no one’s surprise. They had been elected with 40% of the popular vote in 2015 when the Wildrose and Conservative parties split the right-wing vote.

Since then the two parties merged and formed the United Conservative Party, which this time around got 55% of the popular vote and took 63 ridings compared to 24 for the NDP, who had 33% of the popular vote. The Alberta Party had three seats in the legislature at dissolution but were wiped out. The Liberals were, as usual, not on the scoreboard; they had 1% of the popular vote. 70% of those eligible to vote turned out for the polls.

Alberta has about 3,000,000 people, almost equally divided between Calgary, Edmonton, and the rural ridings. The rural populace went Tory blue as expected. The downtown ridings in Calgary went NDP orange but the suburbs outnumbered them and went blue, which gave the Tories a majority in this city. Edmonton is the capital of Alberta and mostly government workers immune to the real economy, so it went orange except for a couple of suburban ridings.

The Dippers had brought in a carbon tax and a \$15 minimum wage, which did wonders in destroying small businesses. Rachel Notley managed to retain her seat and will be back as Opposition Leader. She has the distinction of leading the first single-term government in Alberta’s history. The new Premier is Jason Kenney, who survived vicious attacks by doxxers, toxic bloggers, and tweeters.

EVERYBODY’S GONE SURFING ... CALGARY: PART 2

photos by Dale Speirs

[Part 1, depicting the only surf within 600 km, appeared in OPUNTIA #420.]

Calgary is 600 km from the nearest ocean, so our sports equipment stores don’t do much business in the way of surfboard sales. On April 7, I saw this young man at the City Hall LRT station. I’m sure he had a reason for carrying a surfboard.



## EASTER FICTION

by Dale Speirs

The Easter season has developed many customs that are the antithesis of the religious meaning, but to be fair, when the early Christians co-opted the spring fertility festivals for their celebration, they were never able to shake off entirely the pagan beginnings. That is why we have bunny rabbits hopping about dispensing dyed chicken eggs. There are also, in some places, Easter parades.

### Puttin' On The Ritz.

The Americans developed the Easter parade, when church-goers on Easter Sunday would stroll down the street en masse in their new-bought finery. I don't know if they still observe this custom. It was never followed in Alberta, because regardless of whether Easter is in March or April, that is still the tail end of winter for us. It is difficult to look suave in what Environment Canada (the federal ministry which operates the weather bureau) coyly refers to as "periods of snow".

Easter parades are out of keeping with the religious nature of the holiday. Many Roman Catholic churches, Calgary's included, have a Way of the Cross march on Good Friday, where blizzards are considered to add to the occasion as a form of penitence. Those parades are a different thing than simply showing off one's economic status by how well dressed they are.

I've listened to a number of old-time radio shows where the Easter parade featured in an episode, and wondered if this was what spread the custom. Script writers were always looking for something to hang an episode on, no matter how trivial. With a nationwide audience listening, they may have inadvertently built up customs across the country that otherwise would not have spread.

This brings me to a 1953 episode of the old-time radio comedy series THE JACK BENNY SHOW, titled "Easter Parade" and written by his stable of regular writers. (This and hundreds of other OTR series are available as free downloads at [www.otrrlibrary.org](http://www.otrrlibrary.org))

Benny played a tightwad, vain about his blue eyes, but not hiding the fact that he wore a toupee. Not quite his girlfriend was Mary Livingstone, played by his wife Sadie Marks. She had mild dyslexia and occasionally mis-read words in the script. In this episode, she refers to Benny having a "tomato soup satin" on

his suit lapel, instead of a stain. It got laughs. Her most famous garble was in another episode where, in a diner, she ordered a chiss sweet sandwich.

Benny's Negro valet Rochester van Jones wasn't the clichéd "yes massa" type that Hollywood took as a standard. He was sarcastic and poked fun at his boss's cheap ways. The two men were closer to friends than a master-servant relationship. This occasionally got Benny into trouble with his Southern audiences, who thought Rochester was a little too uppity at times.

Benny's announcer Don Wilson was a tall and rotund man who participated in the script. The bandleader at this time was Bob Crosby, Bing's brother, and the crooner was Dennis Day, an Irish tenor. There were recurring characters such as Mr Kitzel, a Brooklyn Jew who was good friends with Benny (a Waukegan Jew, which hometown he mentioned frequently in the show). Mel Blanc, best known to the younger generation for his Bugs Bunny voice, did a variety of characters on the show. In this episode, he was a local baker who couldn't pronounce 'cinnamon' correctly and always said 'cimarron'.

Finally, getting to this episode, it opened with Benny prepping in his Beverly Hills house for the Wilshire Boulevard Easter parade. Rochester had laid out a blue suit for him but Benny decided to wear a white suit instead, the one Rochester was hoping to wear to meet his girl at the parade. It had a tomato soup stain on the lapel, but Benny figured that most people who saw him from a distance would think it was a carnation. Rochester got the blue suit instead. When Mary arrived, off they went to Wilshire Boulevard.

Going past a theatre, they saw the Fred Astaire movie EASTER PARADE advertised. Mary began singing the lead song from it, and Jack joined in. Instead of singing the choruses, each time they were interrupted by one of the show's characters and did a brief routine. First Benny saw Bob Crosby and his wife June across the street. They tried to ignore Benny but he barged over. Mary asked June about her mink stole. She replied that Bob bought it for her when he was appearing on the Campbell's Soup programme. Bob added that they were the ones who supplied Benny's carnation.

The walk down Wilshire Boulevard continued, punctuated by comic interludes with other characters. The gags were not always one-shots. Many were running jokes that each character built up further from the previous one. The humour of Benny's show relied more on character development over many episodes.

Straightforward lines that were not gags could convulse an audience who knew the past history of the characters. As an example, at the opening of this episode when Benny was still getting dressed, he bragged about how much weight he had lost. Rochester didn't believe it, so Benny announced he would stand on the weigh scale and prove it. There was a pause, and then the sound of a coin falling into the machine's slot.

Loud laughter from the audience, who were used to Benny's miserly and money-grasping ways. (In reality, he was a generous man to charities.) Benny charged for everything. In a different episode, Rochester wanted to use the house telephone but had to get change from his boss.



Jack Benny is unknown to the younger generation today, although old-time radio fans still cherish his shows. That is why I was very surprised to spot this menu sign in a Calgary restaurant on 4 Street SW in the Mission district, which is populated mostly by Millennials in the surrounding condo towers.

**You Are What You Wear.**

AMOS AND ANDY was the most successful old-time radio series ever, running from 1928 to 1955 in its recognized form. It began in 1927 as SAM AND HENRY but its creators and writers, Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll, got into a dispute with the radio station that owned it. When their contract expired, they moved elsewhere and changed the names and places but kept the characters. After old-time radio died in 1955, they continued it as a 15-minute disk jockey show until 1960, but it was a shadow of its former glory and ended unlamented.

The show was a sitcom with a cast of regular characters. The male voices were all done by Gosden and Correll, both white men. The female voices were done by black actresses.

During its zenith, the two main characters were Andy Brown, a gullible mark, and George “Kingfish” Stevens, a sharp-practice man who was always trying to skim money out of Brown or someone else, in preference to actually going out and getting a job. Stevens’s wife was Sapphire, a battleaxe who justifiably always thought the worst of her husband, not surprising since they lived in poverty because of him.

“Easter Hat” was a 1945 episode about Sapphire’s desire to buy a new hat for Easter with \$10 that she had saved up. Kingfish objected and thereby hangs a tale. When he complained to Andy, the idea came up that they would make a hat and pass it off as couture to Sapphire, not so incidently getting her \$10. They cobbled something together from an old hat and scraps of this and that. Amos came by and scoffed at them, saying they would never sell the hat.

Kingfish and Andy needed a front in order to sell the hat to Sapphire, so they tried a local milliner named Madame Fifi. Attempting to pass themselves off as French designers, they approached her with the hat. She admitted she wasn’t French but was willing to make a deal. She was doubtful about the hat, but they suggest she try it out on Sapphire, who was a regular customer.

Unfortunately she bought a different hat. The men confessed their attempt to her but Sapphire told them her friend Ruby, the wife of Amos, bought it. Ruby then wore it to a fashion contest and won a \$25 prize. That ending was typical of the series, with each episode usually ending with a twist.



“Sapphire’s Easter Outfit” was a 1950 episode. It opened with her nagging Kingfish to buy her a new outfit for the Easter parade. He hadn’t the money and they began arguing about their marriage again. She regretted never having married an old flame named Slim, who was everything Kingfish wasn’t.

He went off in a huff to his fraternal lodge, The Mystic Knights of the Sea, and commiserated with Andy. They got to talking about their childhood back in Georgia, which segued to a flashback of two boys talking, the boys they once were, and a girl playing the young Sapphire.

Kingfish got to thinking about Slim, whoever he was, and became obsessively jealous. Sapphire reacted with enough regret about not staying with Slim that Kingfish decided to leave her. This set off an extended farewell scene with all the lodge brothers. One of them talked him into staying until after the Easter parade.

Kingfish and Andy visited a fashion shop to buy Sapphire a dress as a surprise. From there they went to a department store to buy perfume for her. The clerk was a man transferred from the hardware department due to a staff shortage. He bullied Kingfish into buying two bottles.

The scene jumped to the Easter parade, where Kingfish and Sapphire were strolling along. He broke the news to her that he was leaving her because he couldn’t stand the competition from Slim. She gently reminded him that when they were first courting, her nickname for him was Slim. A sentimental ending with the usual twist.

BURNS AND ALLEN was an old-time radio comedy series starring the husband and wife team of George Burns and Gracie Allen. They began in vaudeville and carried over into radio by the 1930s after vaudeville died. Gracie played what vaudevillians referred to as a Dumb Dora act. The show usually had Gracie trying to pull something on George, developed to ridiculousness, and then finally collapsed into the denouement.

“Easter Program”, written by Keith Fowler and Paul Henning, was a 1948 episode beginning with Gracie trying to flatter George out of some spending money so she could buy a new Easter outfit. Then she decided to change strategy and get George a new suit. She visited a tailor, but he needed George’s measurements.

She convinced the tailor to sneak into their house and get his measurements. Events proceeded to their maximum silliness, with all sorts of misunderstandings. The tailor wanted \$100 for the suit, so Gracie had to come up with some way to get the money. George was used to her methods, and wouldn’t give her the cash.

Finally she admitted the truth and got the \$100. George told her to buy an outfit for herself instead of him. She was astonished and resolved to try that method next Easter.

Since almost every episode was a Dumb Dora plot, the series has not survived the test of time. Gracie was constantly begging George for money to buy hats or clothes and demeaning herself by concocting elaborate schemes to get money. The humour got laughs at the time but it makes the modern listener cringe.

“Death And The Easter Bonnet” was a 1949 episode of the old-time radio action-adventure series THE SHADOW, no writer credited. The Shadow was Lamont Cranston, wealthy young man about town. His girlfriend, the lovely Margo Lane, was the only one who knew his secret. Her function was to be the person to whom Cranston explained the plot, plus to scream whenever she saw a dead body. After about 500 bodies or so by the time this episode was made, she should shrug her shoulders and tell Cranston that here was another one.

The episode began with Lane dragging Cranston around to every millinery shop in the city in search of that perfect Easter hat. Finally at an exclusive shop she found what she was looking for, and for \$75. Cranston was appalled at the price (about \$750 in today’s depreciated currency) but she had to have it.

After they left the shop with her purchase, another woman came in looking for that identical hat. It transpired that the hat had something in it that a spy ring wanted, the details of some superscience formula the American government was working on and which had been stolen. The hat was to be used to smuggle the data out of the country. The spy angrily shot the shop keeper dead.

Cranston and Lane had returned to the shop and found the dead woman. They found another woman who gave them an address. She was actually one of the spies, who had been detailed to wait behind in case they came back to the shop. She led them to the address and straight into the heart of the conspiracy.

After a few alarms, the next excursion was a rush to the train station, where the spies booked passage to San Francisco, as Cranston and Lane pursued. More alarms on the train, as half the passengers seemed to be spies, but the hat and its hidden formula were recovered. A standard plot for the Cold War era.

**Fertility Rites.**

THE LIFE OF RILEY was an old-time radio comedy series that ran from 1944 to 1951. Chester A. Riley was a bull-headed schnook who provided the idiot in the idiot plots. He would never listen to advice and continually barged into situations that made a fool of him in front of his wife and two teenagers. It is a mystery why she didn't take the kids and divorce him. He was a working man (riveter at an airplane factory) trying to get ahead with get-rich-quick schemes.

“Giant Easter Bunny”, no writer credit given, was a 1948 episode about one of those schemes. Riley was working on a super-fertilizer with which to make his fortune. Lurking in his garden at night, he stood guard because he feared rabbits might steal the soon-to-be giant carrots grown with his formula of vitamins, old eggs, and stale fish.

Riley's daughter Babs was dating Simon, a boy he didn't like. The lad decided to impress Riley by wearing an Easter rabbit costume. Simon snuck into the dark backyard and scared the bejezus out of Riley, but ran away equally scared when a terrified Riley started throwing rocks at him. Riley concluded that it was the fertilizer contaminating the rabbit that made it so large.

Riley suddenly realized that his fertilizer would have the same effect on him. Despite no proof, he was convinced he was going to become a freak giant. Since he was incoherent at the best of times, his family had no idea what he was on about. From there, various false alarms kept him in an emotional uproar.

Once he got his own personal demons sorted out, he then began worrying about what would happen if the giant rabbit bred others like it. Simon, meanwhile, decided to try again with the Easter rabbit suit and started up the trouble all over again. Eventually everything was straightened out. Riley summed it up with a catch phrase he made famous: *What a revolting development this is.*

FIBBER MCGEE AND MOLLY was an old-time radio comedy that ran from 1935 to 1953 as a half-hour show before a live audience. It then straggled on as a 15-minute show in a studio without an audience. From 1957 to 1959 it was

a 4-minute act on a radio variety show before finally being put out of its misery. The episodes were mostly written by Don Quinn and Phil Leslie.

“Dyeing 12 Dozen Easter Eggs” was one of the 15-minute episodes. Fibber, incompetent at everything but always convinced he could do the job, had been requested to prepare the eggs for a community event. He decided to share the load by calling on his friends to buy the eggs and dyes, then do most of the work.

There were various disputes over how the job was to be done. One friend huffily insisted that he got to dye the red eggs. Other squabbles stretched out the script. Fibber's wife Molly came by after all the eggs were dipped and congratulated Fibber on getting such a big job done.

She remarked it must have been busy in the kitchen hard-boiling all those eggs. Oh oh. Fibber had missed that step. All the dyed eggs were fresh.

The comedy was mild, and made milder by the lack of an audience. The show was sustained by the network, that is, it had no sponsors, so the commercials were all public service announcements. The actual amount of comedy was the same as the half-hour shows, which used fifteen minutes of joshing and were padded out with two orchestra numbers, a tenor solo, and extended commercials for Johnson's Wax.





EGGSECUTIVE ORDERS (2010) by Julie Hyzy is a novel in the White House Chef cozy mystery series. One wonders about the premise, because a Miss Marple in the kitchen would have the nation in an uproar over so many murders on the White House grounds. Conspiracy theorists would overload the blogs.

Olivia Paras was the executive chef at the White House, and murder was never far from her. The Secret Service must be very sloppy to let her continue to work at the White House, even if the President and First Lady chose her for the kitchen.

Paras was getting ready for the annual Easter Egg Roll, but other duties and regular work still prevailed. They were all derailed after a National Security Agency executive Carl Minkus ate poisoned food at a White House banquet. The news media went berserk, as might be expected. Just to add more pressure, Paras's mother and grandmother arrived in town for a visit.

The widow of Minkus accused Paras of murder. The kitchen was shut down as the Secret Service investigated. They were not pleasant to Paras or the kitchen staff, who were all thoroughly interrogated. The news media made much of Paras's past history in stumbling across bodies.

Her main concern though, was the Easter dinner and Egg Roll. The good news was that the Secret Service allowed the kitchen staff to prepare a few thousand hard-boiled eggs for the Roll, but not any other food. In between, she had to squire her mother and grandmother to various tourist sites while evading the news reporters.

The big day arrived. It took a lot of work to carry 15,000 hard-boiled eggs out to the South Lawn from the kitchen. Next, all the lemonade dispensers and buffet food were hauled out. Giant Easter bunnies strolled the grounds. Pink, purple, and blue bunnies were Secret Service agents in disguise, while yellow bunnies were performers.

Two more poisonings pepped up the Egg Roll, but they cleared Paras because one of the dead was the murderer. Everything was hushed up by ascribing medical causes to the deaths, but the reader knows better.

The book wrapped up with a lengthy section of egg recipes. All kinds, prepared every which way. I got hungry just reading them, and went out for some breakfast burritos.



# FOOD COZIES: PART 6

by Dale Speirs

[Parts 1 to 5 appeared in OPUNTIA's #432, 433, 434, 436, and 438.]

Cozy mysteries are Miss Marple style novels, very popular. Most are worth reading once if you like mysteries, although it is doubtful any of them will stand the test of time. Like zines and Websites, there numerous specialized cozies.

I have learned from experience to read these novels on a full stomach. Recipes are generally included, if not at the back of the book, then in between chapters or sometimes integrated into the text. It can be very dangerous to read these books if you have an appetite.

## Chocolates.

ASKING FOR TRUFFLE (2017) by Dorothy St. James (pseudonym of Dorothy McFalls) was the first novel in a food cozy series about Charity Penn. She had received a letter, not a mass mail-out, informing her she had won a trip to Camellia Beach, South Carolina, for free cooking lessons at The Chocolate Box shop.

Not having entered any contest, she was suspicious. Her friend Craig McGee was competing in a surfing contest nearby, so he offered to check it out. Instead, he was checked out by someone who stuffed him into a vat of melted chocolate in the back room of The Chocolate Box and drowned him. Not a sweet way to go.

Penn headed down south to investigate. The local Deppity Dawgs were useless. The co-owners of the store were Bertie Bays and Mabel Maybank. Penn got in on their good side. The shop apparently had access to a line of rare chocolate beans but weren't doing much to exploit them.

Maybank then died of natural causes, and in her will left the shop to Penn. The latter was much confused because she didn't know why a stranger would do that. Maybank's four children were very unhappy about it. Needless to say, several people were gunning for Penn and not just figuratively.

After many alarums and not a few excursions, the case came down to a man obsessed with getting the rights to the rare chocolate beans and selling them to

a multinational confectionery company. McGee was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. His body had been dumped into the vat by the murderer in an effort to destroy The Chocolate Box.

He was stymied of course. Penn decided to settle down and run the shop. Good news for her, although bad news for the village, since their murder rate was about to soar.

PLAYING WITH BONBON FIRE (2018) was the sequel. Charity Penn was learning that running a chocolate shop wasn't a bowl full of cherries, if you'll pardon the expression. In particular, she was having trouble recreating the late Mabel Maybank's recipe for spicy bonbons.

Camellia Beach was hosting a seaside music festival. Since Penn helped out with the show, it was no surprise that murder was done. The lead singer of the headliner band was found dead by a bonfire. All manner of excitement emerged in the follow-through.

Penn was a busy woman, not only sleuthing the murder but stubbornly trying to get her bonbon recipe to work. There were a lot of back stories, not only among the villagers but the musicians, all prima donas, the lot of them. Some of the bonbons were found at the crime scene but since Penn's shop sold them all over town, the Deppity Dawg couldn't pin her to the murder.

Meanwhile, the other Maybank heirs were still contesting the will. A different heir was contesting something else, the death of another Maybank years ago. The murdered musician had written a song that would expose the killer. That all ended in gunfire. The good news was that Penn finally perfected her recipe for spicy bonbons.

And so to the recipes appendix, which began with Shrimp Stew, although it did have chocolate listed in the ingredients. The next recipe was for Cheddar Cheese Bonbons. Indeed.

IN COLD CHOCOLATE (2018) opened on the beach as the villagers and tourists watched a hatch of sea turtles make their way to water. Charity Penn was among the spectators, so it was not a surprise that gunshots rang out. The victim was the village lothario Cassidy Jones. His current lover Jody Dalton was holding a gun. She then grazed Penn with a bullet, who seemed to take it calmly.





Penn was still under threat by the Maybank relatives trying to dispossess her from The Chocolate Box. Dalton was an outright nutcase who had previously threatened Penn. Dalton's son Gavin pleaded with Penn to investigate and she agreed, thereby demonstrating that Dalton wasn't the only nutcase in the village. Other problems included a shoplifter stealing the salted chocolate sea turtles, plus the usual background noise from Deppity Dawgs.

The culprit had something to do with stealing sea turtle eggs, and Jones had got in the way. The murderer was perturbed because another villager had gone into

the Miss Marple business, unbeknownst to Penn. With two of them trailing him, he understandably became paranoid.

There was a happy ending, not for him but for Penn, when DNA tests proved she was a Maybank granddaughter. That gave her clear probate and ta! to her jealous relatives. A few other threads were left dangling for the next novel in this series.

The reader can then relax with the recipes in the appendix such as Benne Wafer Cookies and Chocolate Chip Pancakes. Skip the Spicy Cocoa Pork Tenderloin though.

**Fudged.**

FIRST-DEGREE FUDGE (2013) by Christine DeSmet was the first novel in a food cozy series about Ava Oosterling, who opened a fudge shop in Door County, Michigan. She was sharing the building with Oosterling's Live Bait, Bobbers, and Beer, her grandfather's bait shop, conveniently located next to the fishermen's landing. She wanted a high traffic location. For once, the business economics of a cozy made sense.

Her specialty was pink fudge with sugar glitter. In the hope of publicity, Oosterling asked a faded and almost forgotten movie star Rainetta Johnson to try it. She did and choked to death on a stolen diamond hidden inside the fudge.

In self-defence, Oosterling began sleuthing, although the incident would seem a wonderful advertising opportunity. Buy a piece of fudge and you might find a diamond! There was a lot of nastiness in Johnson's life and that of a local politician who had it in for Oosterling.

What was amazing was that diamonds began turning up all over the village, and people were stealing them back and forth. Even worse, Oosterling was short of staff in her fudge store and desperately needed help preparing the fudge.

The final confrontation was a gunfight in a root cellar. The culprit had been involved in a diamond fencing operation that Johnson had unknowingly blundered into. A nasty finish, but on to the recipes appendix. After a brief note on the history of fudge, the recipes included Vassar College Fudge (they were the first to popularize fudge, in 1888), Cinderella Pink Fudge With Diamonds, and fudge with gummy worms.

FIVE-ALARM FUDGE (2015) began with the villagers, and Ava Oosterling, preparing for the visit of Belgian royals Prince Arnaud Van Damme and his mother Princess Amandine. The locals were nervous about Oosterling being a murder magnet, as well they might be. The great fear around the village was that it would become the centre of an international incident if a royal was the next murder statistic.

The other big excitement was the search for an 1860s recipe for divinity fudge, which is an egg white meringue style of fudge, difficult to make. The legend was that a local nun had served some to an apparition of Virgin Mary in 1859. It was never explained why the mother of Jesus would travel to an obscure fishing village for a sweet, but logic has nothing to do with tourist attractions.

This time it was Oosterling’s mother who found the body. The deceased was in a church where he may have been searching for the original fudge recipe, which seemed highly improbable. More likely was that he was an obnoxious busybody who frequently interfered with his neighbours.

The real busybody was Oosterling, who snooped about when not cooking fudge. There was much discussion about divinity fudge, and other types such as Rapunzel Raspberry Rapture Fairy Tale Fudge (recipe not included, strangely).

The murder had been triggered by a jealous man over a romantic affair and an illicit pregnancy. Shots were fired and all that, but the case was solved. The royal visit was an anti-climax but a good time was had by all. Lots of tourists, who bought lots of fudge.

The recipes appendix included Red Riding Hood Fairy Tale Fudge, Saint Mary Of The Snow’s Divinity Fudge, and Jack-O-Lantern Pumpkin Fudge. Diet? What about it?

**The Victim Screamed, But Not For Ice Cream.**

I SCREAM, YOU SCREAM (2009) by Wendy Lyn Watson was the first novel in a cozy series introducing Tallulah (Tally) Jones of Dalliance, Texas. She owned an ice cream parlor called the Remember The A-la-mode. Only in Texas.

The shop was economically marginal, so Tally had to grin and bear it when working every angle of the business. That included catering a private function for her ex-husband Wayne Jones and his sexy young girlfriend Brittanie

Brinkman. Worse yet, her high school boyfriend Finn Harper was back in town, looking gorgeous and making Tally regret having dumped him. The ice cream shop staff were a motley collection of shirttail relatives, each with multiple husbands and as many bank overdrafts.

Brittanie died in her sleep the night after the company function. The police suspected foul play because she was young and in the prime of health. They raided the funeral reception, which seemed rough. The autopsy showed poison in her system, possibly an allergen, but in something she ate or drank at the function. Tally was a suspect and Wayne not far behind.

Assorted other suspects clutter the background. Numerous romantic entanglements were exposed, some from the distant past. Brittanie was the illegitimate offspring of one of those distant entanglements. Her grannie didn’t approve of Wayne and didn’t want her to suffer because of him, so targeted him with a poisoned drink. Horrible luck for her that Brittanie picked up the fatal chalice and drank from it instead of Wayne.

The good news was the business recovered at the ice cream shop, along with Tally’s reputation. Thence to the recipes for Tropical Sundaes and Tropical Coconut Sauce.

A PARFAIT MURDER (2011) moved the action to the Lantana County Fair, where Tally was judging homemade ice cream. There was a scandal over stolen recipes, but that paled compared to her cousin Bree’s scandal.

Bree worked in the ice cream shop and was at the fair when she spotted one of her ex-husbands with his current girlfriend. He owed child support so she went after him. A bit later, his attorney was found dead, and she was found holding a gun. Bree proclaimed her innocence but no one else saw the shooting.

Finn Harper was a distraction for Tally, although the ice cream shop didn’t merit much attention. She was, however, busy judging the ice cream contest at the fair. It was almost, but not quite, as vicious as what was going on elsewhere.

And in the elsewhere was adultery, meth cooking, a financial fraud, and illegitimate children learning their daddy wasn’t the one they thought he was. The term “white trash” was invented for these people. The murderer was running the scam but diversified as she became tangled in her web of lies. After



taking Tally hostage and explaining everything to her, there was the traditional last-minute save by the police.

To settle the reader’s nerves thereafter, the appendix has a recipe for Ice Cream Terrine with Deep Dark Fudge Sauce. This is a slab cake of several different layers of fruit-flavoured ice creams, separated by layers of nuts and crushed candies, and topped off with heavy fudge. Take an extra Lipitor after eating it.

MURDER WITH A CHERRY ON TOP (2018) by Cynthia Baxter began a new cozy series about Kate McKay of Wolfert’s Point, upstate New York. She gave up the bright lights of Manhattan to return to the village where she grew up, and care for her grandmother. On the side, she opened the Lickety Split Ice Cream Shoppe.

It wasn’t as easy as all that, otherwise the story would end after a few pages. Her childhood acquaintance, Ashley Winthrop, had a bakery across the street. When the ice cream shop (or shoppe) opened, she began selling ice cream as well, obviously from spite.

In Chapter 1, the two women had a screaming match on the sidewalk, witnessed by about half the villagers. In Chapter 3, Winthrop was murdered. There are no prizes for guessing who the prime suspect was. To add a further touch of misery, or at least conflicted feelings, McKay’s ex-boyfriend Jake Pratt was in town. He had been a criminal lawyer in Manhattan but came back to run the family dairy business.

The sleuthing eventually began, but was delayed because McKay was busy starting up her business, when not mooning about Pratt. She made her own ice cream, such as Cappuccino Crunch, Carrot Cake, and Avocado. I’ll stick to vanilla, thank you.

The clues weren’t vanilla, however. Eventually it was discovered that Winthrop was using her shop to launder money from her escort agency. She wouldn’t let one of her women leave the trade, and paid the price for it. The ending was a bit of a sudden twist but other than that the novel was readable.

The recipes appendix had Brown Sugar Bourbon Ice Cream. I’m a teetotaler, so I prefer the Black Raspberry Frozen Custard.

**SCIENCE FICTION IN THE GREAT WHITE NORTH**  
by Dale Speirs

**Those Who Came Before Us.**

John Robert Colombo was a titan in the field of Canadian literature, and received the Order of Canada for his work. His particular forte was surveying the old literature of yore, usually to refute commentators who wrote that there was no old Canadian fiction in whatever type of genre they were discussing.

Colombo’s best example is his 1979 anthology OTHER CANADAS, which compiled Canadian fantasy and science fiction from the 1600s to the early 1900s. This is still the best survey on the subject. The stories are not necessarily by Canadian authors if set in Canada, or set in Canada if written by Canadians.

The contents began with an extract from Cyrano de Bergerac’s “Voyage To New France” (1657) in which he took an airship across the ocean from France. It was inadvertent, as he was intending to rise up to the Moon in a vertical ascent. He forgot that the Earth was rotating underneath him, so that when he descended he landed in New France.

“The Wendigo” (1910) by Algernon Blackwood is considered the best retelling of the ancient Cree legend of the boreal forest, when mania gripped those who spent too much time alone in the vast spaces and turned them into berserkers.

There is an extract from CONSIDER HER WAYS (1947) by Frederick Philip Grove. This novel has to be one of the most bizarre pieces of anthropomorphic fiction ever written. It is narrated by an ant, who with her friends went off on an epic journey across the Americas. Everything is interpreted from an ant’s eye view where gigantic objects and creatures can only be dimly perceived.

A.E. van Vogt was born and raised on the Canadian prairies. He wrote most of his early science fiction in Canada, such as “Black Destroyer”, a well thought out idea about an alien creature whose civilization destroyed itself and descended into primitive savagery.

This anthology will be an eye-opener for those who thought Canadian science fiction began with Phyllis Gotlieb or Robert Sawyer. As far as I can tell, it is out of print but since it was a bestseller, used copies shouldn’t be too expensive.

**The Modern Era.**

NORTHERN STARS was a 1994 anthology edited by David Hartwell and Glenn Grant. Its official release was at the Winnipeg Worldcon that year, which I attended and was where I bought my copy of the book. The stories were not necessarily Canadian in setting or written by pure-laine Canadians. Some were by American expatriates such as Judith Merril, Spider Robinson, and William Gibson. There were a number of translations from francophone authors, which are hard to judge because the translator gets in the way.

I see two autographs in my copy, one from co-editor Glenn Grant and the other from a writer named John Park. John Park? Who remembers him? Not Google, as I couldn't find any references other than those arising from this anthology. I'm not an autograph collector, so I must have met them at a dinner or some such event while I was carrying the book. See OPUNTIA #21 for my full report on the Winnipeg Worldcon.

The stories have not survived the test of time. They were well written to be sure, in the trendy styles of the 1980s and 1990s. In the same way that the SJW stories of today's science fiction will fade away with their politically-correct audience, so it is that many of these stories have become dated.

The problem with writing in trendy styles is that too often they depend on an unwritten context which the reader of the day would have known, but not subsequent generations. I am a Boomer, so I understood the concerns behind the stories, but I doubt a Millennial would catch them.

A climate change story was about how the world was growing colder. A couple of cyberpunk stories were pathetically obsolete and completely missed the real technology that was just being born about then. The stories may have been cutting edge at the time but are now just so much wood shavings. Even in 1994, the New Wave style was moribund but there were a few stories from authors still plugging away in that style, not having read the memo.

ENIGMA FRONT: ONWARD (2018), edited by Chris Patrick Carolan, is an anthology of 21 science fiction and fantasy stories by members of the Imaginative Fiction Writers of Alberta, a Calgary writers group, plus a Toronto fella named Robert J. Sawyer. You may have heard of Sawyer. I've seen him visiting Calgary many times for conventions and writing conferences, so he is at least an honorary Cowtownner.

A couple of stories from this anthology I'll mention, which I'm sure is available from the usual online places.

“When The Suit No Longer Fits” by Celeste A. Peters looked at a question that Marvel and DC Comics gloss over. What do you do with an aging superhero who refuses to admit he's past it? Microbe Man was having increasing difficulty in rendering supervillains out of action. His wife was worried sick and wanted him to retire. The problem was that A-type personalities do not take kindly to being put out to pasture.

“Star Light, Star Bright” by Robert J. Sawyer was an interesting look at life on a Dyson sphere. There were two cultures, those inside the sphere and those on the outside. What if the twain don't meet?

**WORLD WIDE PARTY ON JUNE 21**

Founded by Benoit Girard (Québec) and Franz Miklis (Austria) in 1994, the World Wide Party is held on June 21st every year. 2019 will be the 26th year of the WWP. Mark your calendars now!

At 21h00 local time, everyone is invited to raise a glass and toast fellow members of zinedom around the world. It is important to have it exactly at 21h00 your time. The idea is to get a wave of fellowship circling the planet. Rescheduling it to a club meeting or more convenient time negates the idea of a wave of celebration by SF fans and zinesters circling the globe.

At 21h00, face to the east and salute those who have already celebrated. Then face north, then south, and toast those in your time zone who are celebrating as you do. Finally, face west and raise a glass to those who will celebrate WWP in the next hour.

Raise a glass, publish a one-shot zine, have a party, or do a mail art project for the WWP. Let me know how you celebrated the day.



## WOKE UP ONE MORNIN' ON THE RED DEER TRAIL: PART 2

by Dale Speirs

[Part 1 appeared in OPUNTIA #60.5.]

My mother Betty was an ardent amateur photographer. When she died in 2002, my brother inherited hundreds of her photo albums, which have been stored in the basement of his house. In recent years, he and I have been going through them looking for interesting photos to copy.

Alas, the vast majority of them were blurry wildflower close-ups or family gatherings of people sitting around a table at Thanksgiving or Christmas. We were joking with each other that we could write the history of milk cartons in Alberta from 1950 to 2002 since there was always at least one sitting in the centre of the table. Mom never thought to photograph any of the houses we lived in, nor the farm buildings. After we moved to the ranch just north of Red Deer in 1963, Dad had his veterinary clinic there, but no photo could be found.

The main quarter-section of the ranch, where the farmstead was, could not support a herd of 200 or so cattle all year round. In spring, we drove the herd out to summer pastures, then planted the home field into feed barley, which would be used to overwinter the cattle. After the crop was harvested, the herd was brought back for the winter.

Of all those cattle drives, only once did Mom photograph a complete sequence of the drive, which I printed in OPUNTIA #60.5. The photo below is one that I missed at the time, showing our hired hands stopping for a coffee break. A few cattle from the herd can be seen at upper right, grazing in the ditch while the humans grazed on coffee and sandwiches.

The green Volkswagen Beetle was my mother's car. They were very practical for country work because of their high clearance, body pan under the car (which protected the engine and drive train), and excellent traction (the engine sat over the rear wheels).





This is the only known photo of our farmstead my brother and I have so far located. The house was directly behind the camera. This photo was taken in June 1970 and shows one of the corrals; others were out of photo to the right.

The white or cream coloured cattle are Charolais. The official name of our ranch was CJS Charolais, the letters being my father's initials for Cecil James Speirs. The beige cattle with white faces are Simmental. There are a couple of Herefords to the right; my father must have picked them up at the auction mart as bargains. Fortunately Mom was with him the day they auctioned some llamas and stopped him in time.

I'm not sure why these cattle were on the home quarter-section. Since the calves are very young, they may have been late calvers. The other cows were probably farrow (not bred the previous autumn) or recent acquisitions.

Dad loved auctions, and not just livestock. He brought home all sorts of knickknacks and doodads. Our house was cluttered with all sorts of kitsch that cost a few dollars and were worth as many cents.





More 1970 photos.

The photo below was taken by Mom somewhere out in one of our pastures. One Hereford and her calf, and the rest are Charolais. The size of the calves indicates they were spring calves, born out on the range.

At right is the grain harvest on the home quarter-section. I don't know why Mom was using black-and-white film. In the top photo, a few of our farmstead buildings can be seen on the horizon at left.



**SEEN IN THE LITERATURE**

Manser, C.J., et al (2019) **A planetesimal orbiting within the debris disc around a white dwarf star.** SCIENCE 364:66-69

Authors’ abstract: *Many white dwarf stars show signs of having accreted smaller bodies, implying that they may host planetary systems. A small number of these systems contain gaseous debris discs, visible through emission lines.*

*We report a stable 123.4-minute periodic variation in the strength and shape of the Ca II emission line profiles originating from the debris disc around the white dwarf SDSS J122859.93+104032.9. We interpret this short-period signal as the signature of a solid-body planetesimal held together by its internal strength.*

*Numerous exoplanets have been detected around Sun-like stars. These stars end their lives as white dwarfs, which should inherit any surviving planetary systems. We found periodic shifts in emission lines from a disc of gas orbiting around a white dwarf.*

*We used numerical simulations to show that the most likely explanation for the spectral shifts is a low mass planet orbiting within the disc. The planet must be unusually small and dense to avoid being ripped apart by tidal forces. We speculate that it may be the leftover core of a planet whose outer layers have been removed.*

Lauretta, D.S., et al (2019) **The unexpected surface of asteroid (101955) Bennu.** NATURE 568:55-60

Authors’ abstract: *NASA’s Origins, Spectral Interpretation, Resource Identification and Security-Regolith Explorer (OSIRIS-REx) spacecraft recently arrived at the near-Earth asteroid (101955) Bennu, a primitive body that represents the objects that may have brought prebiotic molecules and volatiles such as water to Earth.*

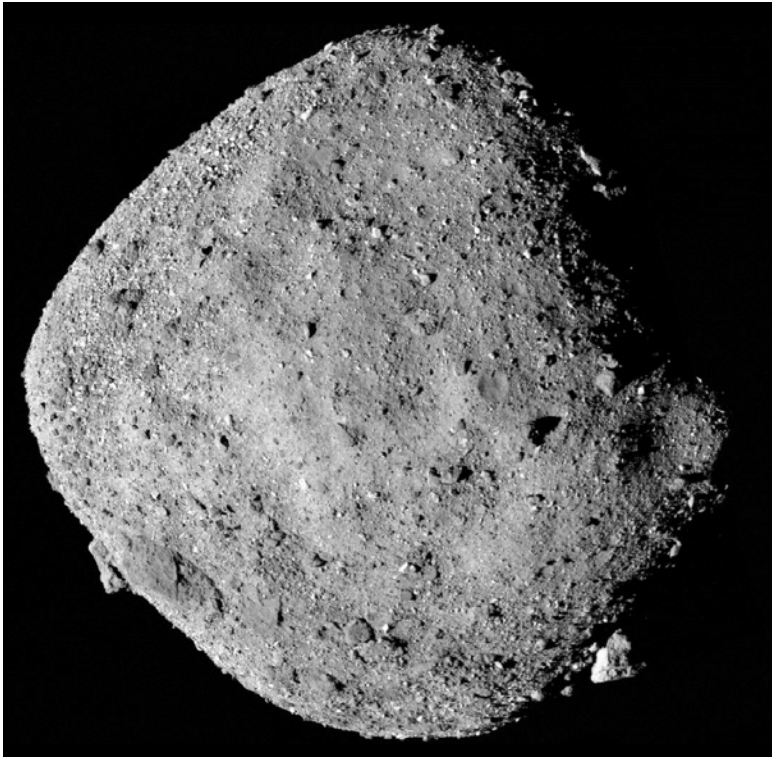
*Bennu is a low-albedo B-type asteroid that has been linked to organic-rich hydrated carbonaceous chondrites. Such meteorites are altered by ejection from their parent body and contaminated by atmospheric entry and terrestrial microbes. Therefore, the primary mission objective is to return a sample of*

*Bennu to Earth that is pristine, that is, not affected by these processes.*

*The OSIRIS-REx spacecraft carries a sophisticated suite of instruments to characterize Bennu’s global properties, support the selection of a sampling site and document that site at a sub-centimetre scale. Here we consider early OSIRIS-REx observations of Bennu to understand how the asteroid’s properties compare to pre-encounter expectations and to assess the prospects for sample return.*

*The bulk composition of Bennu appears to be hydrated and volatile-rich, as expected. However, in contrast to pre-encounter modelling of Bennu’s thermal inertia and radar polarization ratios, which indicated a generally smooth surface covered by centimetre-scale particles, resolved imaging reveals an unexpected surficial diversity.*

*The albedo, texture, particle size and roughness are beyond the spacecraft design specifications. On the basis of our pre-encounter knowledge, we developed a sampling strategy to target 50-metre-diameter patches of loose regolith with grain sizes smaller than two centimetres. We observe only a small number of apparently hazard-free regions, of the order of 5 to 20 metres in extent, the sampling of which poses a substantial challenge to mission success.*



NASA photo of Bennu



Bak, E.N., et al (2019) **Wind-driven saltation: An overlooked challenge for life on Mars.** ASTROBIOLOGY 19:497-505

[Saltation is the movement of small granular material, such as sand blowing in the wind.]

Authors' abstract: *Numerous studies have demonstrated that the Martian surface environment is hostile to life because of its rough radiation climate and the reactive chemistry of the regolith. Physical processes such as erosion and transport of mineral particles by wind-driven saltation have hitherto not been considered as a life hazard.*

*We report a series of experiments where bacterial endospores (spores of Bacillus subtilis) were exposed to a simulated saltating Martian environment. We observed that 50% of the spores that are known to be highly resistant to radiation and oxidizing chemicals were destroyed by saltation-mediated abrasion within one minute.*

*Scanning electron micrographs show that the spores were not only damaged by abrasion but were eradicated during the saltation process. We suggest that abrasion mediated by wind-driven saltation should be included as a factor that defines the habitability of the Martian surface environment.*

*The process may efficiently protect the Martian surface from forward contamination with terrestrial microbial life-forms. Abrasion mediated by wind-driven saltation should also be considered as a major challenge to indigenous Martian surface life if it exists/existed.*

Rasmussen, C.M.O., et al (2019) **Cascading trend of Early Paleozoic marine radiations paused by Late Ordovician extinctions.** PROCEEDINGS OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES USA 116:cgi/doi/10.1073/pnas.1821123116

[The Ordovician period was from 488.3 to 443.7 megayears ago.]

Authors' abstract: *The first 120 million years of Phanerozoic life witnessed significant changes in biodiversity levels. Attempts to correlate these changes to potential short-term environmental drivers have been hampered by the crude temporal resolution of current biodiversity estimates.*

*We present a biodiversity curve for the Early Paleozoic with high temporal precision. It shows that once equatorial sea-surface temperatures fell to present-day levels during the early Mid Ordovician, marine biodiversity accumulation accelerated dramatically.*

*However, this acceleration ceased as increased volcanism commenced during the mid-Late Ordovician. Since biodiversity levels were not restored for at least ~35 million years, this finding redefines the nature of the end Ordovician mass extinctions and further reframes the Silurian as a prolonged recovery interval.*

*The greatest relative changes in marine biodiversity accumulation occurred during the Early Paleozoic. ... Our method reveals a stepwise biodiversity increase with distinct Cambrian and Ordovician radiation events that are clearly separated by a 50-million-year-long period of slow biodiversity accumulation. The Ordovician Radiation is confined to a 15-million-year phase after which the Late Ordovician extinctions lowered generic richness and further delayed a biodiversity rebound by at least 35 million years.*

*Based on a first-differences approach on potential abiotic drivers controlling richness, we find an overall correlation with oxygen levels, with temperature also exhibiting a coordinated trend once equatorial sea surface temperatures fell to present-day levels during the Middle Ordovician Darriwilian Age.*

*Contrary to the traditional view of the Late Ordovician extinctions, our study suggests a protracted crisis interval linked to intense volcanism during the middle Late Ordovician Katian Age. As richness levels did not return to prior levels during the Silurian, a time of continental amalgamation, we further argue that plate tectonics exerted an overarching control on biodiversity accumulation.*

Speirs: Earth's climate has fluctuated dramatically many times since life first evolved and even since humans began evolving 100,000 years ago. When plate tectonics amalgamated continents into supercontinents, biological diversity fell. When the supercontinents broke apart, biodiversity increased. Oxygen levels were more critical than carbon dioxide levels in determining extinctions.

Macdonald, F.A., et al (2019) **Arc-continent collisions in the tropics set Earth's climate state.** SCIENCE 364:181-184

Authors' abstract: *On million-year time scales, Earth's climate state is determined by sources and sinks of carbon to the ocean-atmosphere system. But which specific mechanisms are important in controlling the timing of glacial intervals?*

*We identify arc-continent collisions in the tropics as a primary control. We compiled a database of Phanerozoic arc-continent collisions and the latitudinal distribution of ice sheets, showing that ice coverage was greatest when those collisions were most widespread, maximizing global weatherability.*

*On multimillion-year time scales, Earth has experienced warm ice free and cold glacial climates, but it is unknown whether transitions between these background climate states were the result of changes in carbon dioxide sources or sinks. Low-latitude arc continent collisions are hypothesized to drive cooling by exhuming and eroding mafic and ultramafic rocks in the warm, wet tropics, thereby increasing Earth's potential to sequester carbon through chemical weathering.*

*To better constrain global weatherability through time, the paleogeographic position of all major Phanerozoic arc-continent collisions was reconstructed and compared to the latitudinal distribution of ice sheets. This analysis reveals a strong correlation between the extent of glaciation and arc-continent collisions in the tropics. Earth's climate state is set primarily by global weatherability, which changes with the latitudinal distribution of arc-continent collisions.*

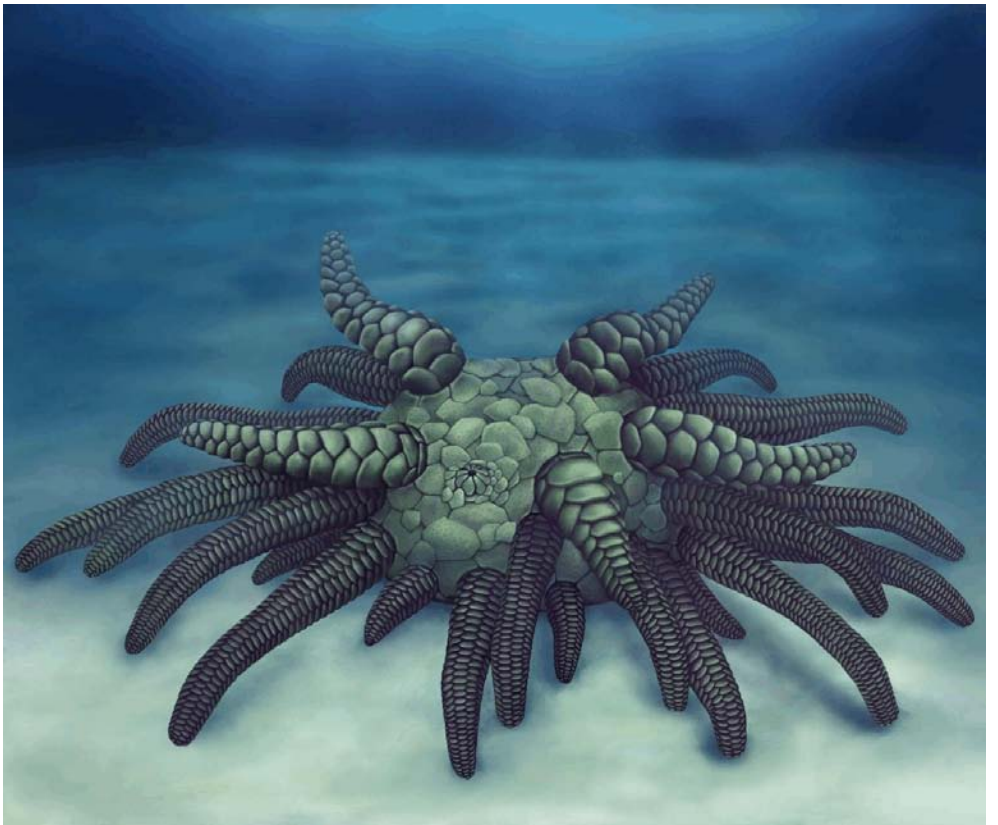
Rahman, I.A., et al (2019) **A new ophiocistoid with soft-tissue preservation from the Silurian Herefordshire Lagerstatte, and the evolution of the holothurian body plan.** PROCEEDINGS OF THE ROYAL SOCIETY OF LONDON 286B:doi.org/10.1098/rspb.2018.2792

[The Silurian period lasted from 443.7 to 416.0 megayears ago. Lagerstattes are fossil accumulations in very finely grained sedimentary rocks that allow for exceptional preservation of soft tissues.]

Authors' abstract: *Reconstructing the evolutionary assembly of animal body plans is challenging when there are large morphological gaps between extant sister taxa, as in the case of echinozoans (echinoids and holothurians). However, the inclusion of extinct taxa can help bridge these gaps.*

*Here we describe a new species of echinozoan, Sollasina cthulhu, from the Silurian Herefordshire Lagerstatte, UK. Sollasina cthulhu belongs to the ophiocistoids, an extinct group that shares characters with both echinoids and holothurians. Using physical-optical tomography and computer reconstruction, we visualize the internal anatomy of S. cthulhu in three dimensions, revealing inner soft tissues that we interpret as the ring canal, a key part of the water vascular system that was previously unknown in fossil echinozoans.*

*Phylogenetic analyses strongly suggest that Sollasina and other ophiocistoids represent a paraphyletic group of stem holothurians, as previously hypothesized. This allows us to reconstruct the stepwise reduction of the skeleton during the assembly of the holothurian body plan, which may have been controlled by changes in the expression of biomineralization genes.*





Fontanarrosa, G., et al (2019) **The manus of Tetracynodon (Therapsida: Therocephalia) provides evidence for survival strategies following the Permian extinction.** JOURNAL OF VERTEBRATE PALEONTOLOGY 38:doi.org/10.1080/02724634.2018.1491404

[A manus is a hand or paw, which is where the word ‘manual’ comes from.]

Authors’ abstract: *We present a comprehensive qualitative and quantitative study of the manus of a new therocephalian specimen referable to Tetracynodon from the Early Triassic of South Africa. We examined 18 specimens, representing at least 12 genera, including basal therocephalians (Lycosuchidae and Scylacosauridae) and eutheriocephalians (Akidnognathidae, Waitisioidea and Baurioidea). A temporal range of 23 million years through the Permo-Triassic (Wordian to Anisian) was surveyed.*

*Strong and proportionally long unguals in relation to length of digits III and IV, wide and stocky basal phalanges, and short non-ungual phalanges strongly suggest that Tetracynodon was a scratch-digger. This supports the proposition that burrowing was an important behavioral strategy of terrestrial taxa during and after the Permo-Triassic mass extinction.*

Speirs: The end-Permian mass extinction 251 megayears ago was the worst mass extinction that Earth has suffered, when 97% of all species died out. The cause was massive flood lavas that heated Earth’s atmosphere up to 50°C at the equator. Vertebrates only survived at the poles and as burrowing animals elsewhere.

Paleos, C.M. (2019) **Organization and compartmentalization by lipid membranes promote reactions related to the origin of cellular life.** ASTROBIOLOGY 19:547-552

Author’s abstract: *Liquid crystals have certain physical properties that promote chemical reactions which cannot occur in bulk phase media. These properties are displayed, among other molecules, by amphiphilic compounds which assemble into membrane structures, then concentrate and organize biologically relevant monomers within their confined spaces.*

*When mixtures of lipids and nucleotides are cycled multiple times between hydrated and anhydrous conditions, the monomers polymerize in the dry phase*

*into oligonucleotides. Upon rehydration, mixtures of the polymers are encapsulated in lipid-bounded compartments called protocells. Reactions in liquid crystalline organizing matrices represent a promising approach for future research on how primitive cells could emerge on the early Earth and other habitable planets.*

Whitmire, D.P. (2019) **Implication of our technological species being first and early.** INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ASTROBIOLOGY 18:183-188

Author’s abstract: *According to the Principle of Mediocrity, a cornerstone of modern cosmology, in the absence of any evidence to the contrary, we should believe that we are a typical member of an appropriately chosen reference class.*

*If we assume that this principle applies to the reference class of all extant technological species, then it follows that other technological species will, like us, typically find that they are both the first such species to evolve on their planet and also that they are early in their potential technological evolution.*

*Here we argue that this suggests that the typical technological species becomes extinct soon after attaining a modern technology and that this event results in the extinction of the planet’s global biosphere.*

Saito, A., et al (2019) **Domestic cats (Felis catus) discriminate their names from other words.** SCIENTIFIC REPORTS 9:doi.org/10.1038/s41598-019-40616-4

Authors’ abstract: *Two of the most common nonhuman animals that interact with humans are domestic dogs (Canis familiaris) and cats (Felis catus). In contrast to dogs, the ability of domestic cats to communicate with humans has not been explored thoroughly.*

*We used a habituation-dishabituation method to investigate whether domestic cats could discriminate human utterances, which consisted of cats’ own names, general nouns, and other cohabiting cats’ names. Cats from ordinary households and from a ‘cat café’ participated in the experiments.*

*Among cats from ordinary households, cats habituated to the serial presentation of four different general nouns or four names of cohabiting cats showed a significant rebound in response to the subsequent presentation of their own names; these cats discriminated their own names from general nouns even when unfamiliar persons uttered them. These results indicate that cats are able to discriminate their own names from other words.*

*There was no difference in discrimination of their own names from general nouns between cats from the cat café and household cats, but café cats did not discriminate their own names from other cohabiting cats' names. We conclude that cats can discriminate the content of human utterances based on phonemic differences.*

*Domestic cats (Felis catus) and dogs (Canis familiaris) are the most popular companion animals; worldwide, over 600 million cats live with humans, and in some countries their number equals or exceeds the number of dogs (e.g., Japan: dogs: 8,920,000, cats: 9,526,000).*

*Cats started to cohabit with humans about 9,500 years ago; their history of cohabitation with humans is shorter than that of dogs, and they have been domesticated by natural selection, not by artificial selection.*

*Despite these differences in their process of domestication compared to that of dogs, cats too have developed behaviours related to communication with humans; for example, for human listeners, the vocalisations of domestic cats are more comfortable than those of African wild cats (Felis silvestris lybica).*

*In addition, purring has different acoustical components during solicitation of foods than at other times, and humans perceive such solicitation purrs as more urgent and unpleasant than non-solicitation purrs. These facts clearly indicate that domestic cats have developed the ability to communicate with humans and frequently do so; Bradshaw suggested that this inter-species communicative ability is descended from intra-species communicative ability.*

**Ramos, S.E., and F.P. Schiestl (2019) Rapid plant evolution driven by the interaction of pollination and herbivory. SCIENCE 364:193-196**

*Authors' abstract: Many plants rely on animal pollinators to spread pollen and increase the genetic diversity of their offspring. However, there are trade-offs,*

*because attracting pollinators may also attract herbivores and deterring predation may diminish floral displays.*

*Pollination and herbivory are both key drivers of plant diversity but are traditionally studied in isolation from each other. We investigated real-time evolutionary changes in plant traits over six generations by using fast-cycling Brassica rapa plants and manipulating the presence and absence of bumble bee pollinators and leaf herbivores.*

*We found that plants under selection by bee pollinators evolved increased floral attractiveness, but this process was compromised by the presence of herbivores. Plants under selection from both bee pollinators and herbivores evolved higher degrees of self-compatibility and autonomous selfing, as well as reduced spatial separation of sexual organs (herkogamy).*

*Overall, the evolution of most traits was affected by the interaction of bee pollination and herbivory, emphasizing the importance of the crosstalk between both types of interactions for plant evolution.*

**Pagel, M., et al (2019) Dominant words rise to the top by positive frequency-dependent selection. PROCEEDINGS OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES USA 116:7397-7402**

*Authors' abstract: A puzzle of language is how speakers come to use the same words for particular meanings, given that there are often many competing alternatives (e.g., "sofa," "couch," "settee"), and there is seldom a necessary connection between a word and its meaning.*

*The well-known process of random drift, roughly corresponding in this context to "say what you hear", can cause the frequencies of alternative words to fluctuate over time, and it is even possible for one of the words to replace all others, without any form of selection being involved. However, is drift alone an adequate explanation of a shared vocabulary? Darwin thought not.*

*Here, we apply models of neutral drift, directional selection, and positive frequency-dependent selection to explain over 417,000 word-use choices for 418 meanings in two natural populations of speakers. We find that neutral drift does not in general explain word use. Instead, some form of selection governs word choice in over 91% of the meanings we studied.*



*In cases where one word dominates all others for a particular meaning, such as is typical of the words in the core lexicon of a language, word choice is guided by positive frequency-dependent selection, a bias that makes speakers disproportionately likely to use the words that most others use.*

*This bias grants an increasing advantage to the common form as it becomes more popular and provides a mechanism to explain how a shared vocabulary can spontaneously self-organize and then be maintained for centuries or even millennia, despite new words continually entering the lexicon.*

Whitehouse, H., et al (2019) **Complex societies precede moralizing gods throughout world history.** NATURE 568:226-229

Authors’ abstract: *The origins of religion and of complex societies represent evolutionary puzzles. The ‘moralizing gods’ hypothesis offers a solution to both puzzles by proposing that belief in morally concerned supernatural agents culturally evolved to facilitate cooperation among strangers in large-scale societies.*

*Although previous research has suggested an association between the presence of moralizing gods and social complexity, the relationship between the two is disputed, and attempts to establish causality have been hampered by limitations in the availability of detailed global longitudinal data.*

*To overcome these limitations, here we systematically coded records from 414 societies that span the past 10,000 years from 30 regions around the world, using 51 measures of social complexity and 4 measures of supernatural enforcement of morality. Our analyses not only confirm the association between moralizing gods and social complexity, but also reveal that moralizing gods follow, rather than precede, large increases in social complexity.*

*Contrary to previous predictions, powerful moralizing ‘big gods’ and prosocial supernatural punishment tend to appear only after the emergence of ‘megasocieties’ with populations of more than around one million people.*

*Moralizing gods are not a prerequisite for the evolution of social complexity, but they may help to sustain and expand complex multi-ethnic empires after they have become established. By contrast, rituals that facilitate the standardization of religious traditions across large populations generally precede the*

*appearance of moralizing gods. This suggests that ritual practices were more important than the particular content of religious belief to the initial rise of social complexity.*

Kelly, M., and C. Ó Gráda (2019) **Speed under sail during the early industrial revolution (c.1750-1830).** ECONOMIC HISTORY REVIEW 72:doi.org/10.1111/ehr.12696

Authors’ abstract: *This article measures technological progress in oceanic shipping directly by using a large database of daily log entries from British, Dutch, and Spanish ships to estimate daily sailing speed in different wind conditions from 1750 to 1850.*

*Against the consensus among economic (but not maritime) historians that the technology of sailing ships was fairly static during this time, we find that average sailing speeds of British East India Company and Navy ships in moderate to strong winds rose considerably after the 1770s.*

*Driving this progress was the introduction of coppering in the 1780s, but subsequent rises are probably due to a continuous evolution of sails and rigging, and improved hulls that allowed a greater area of sail to be set safely in a given wind.*

*By contrast, the speeds of Dutch and Spanish vessels were stagnant. Using separate data on the crossing times of Atlantic mail packets, we find gradual progress from the 1750s, followed by marked improvements when American packets appeared in the 1820s.*

Bottomley, S. (2019) **The returns to invention during the British industrial revolution.** ECONOMIC HISTORY REVIEW 72:doi.org/10.1111/ehr.12701

Author’s abstract: *It was a commonplace among contemporaries, and remains received wisdom today, that inventors were poorly remunerated during the industrial revolution. Adapting a dataset of 759 British inventors, this article presents the first large-scale attempt to examine the issue systematically.*

*Using probate information, the article shows that inventors were extremely wealthy relative to the adult male population. Inventors were also significantly*

*wealthier than another group who would have received a similar inheritance (in terms of both financial and social capital) and entered similar occupations: their brothers. Their additional wealth was derived from inventive activities: invention paid.*

Ong, Q., et al (2019) **Reducing debt improves psychological functioning and changes decision making in the poor.** PROCEEDINGS OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES USA 116:7244-7249

*Authors' abstract: The impact of chronic debt on the poor is psychological, not just financial. We hypothesize that chronic debt impairs psychological functioning and decision-making, contributing to the poverty trap. This is because debt is not considered fungible and is viewed as costly mental accounts that consume cognitive bandwidth.*

*We test this using quasiexperimental evidence from a one-off, unanticipated debt-relief program worth several months' household income. Comparing the poor before and after debt relief, those with more debt accounts paid off experienced greater improvements in cognitive functioning, reported less anxiety, and became less present-biased. These findings provide actionable evidence for poverty-alleviation policy.*

*A charity granted low-income households debt relief worth up to Singapore dollars 5,000 (~3 month's household income). We exploited quasiexperimental variation in the structure of debt relief: For the same dollar amount of relief, some beneficiaries had more debt accounts eliminated, while others had fewer paid off.*

*Comparing 196 beneficiaries before and after debt relief, and controlling for debt-relief amount, having an additional debt account paid off improves cognitive functioning by about one-quarter of a SD and reduces the likelihood of exhibiting anxiety by 11% and of present bias by 10%.*

*To achieve the same effect on cognitive functioning of eliminating one debt account, a beneficiary must receive debt relief worth ~1 month's household income. There is no effect of debt-relief magnitude on anxiety and decision-making. We exclude training and calendar effects, debt causing behaviors, and liquidity constraints as explanations.*

*Instead, these results support the hypothesis that chronic debt impairs behavior because the mental-accounting costs of owing distinct debt accounts consume mental bandwidth. Poverty-alleviation policies aimed at the indebted poor should consider addressing mental accounting and bandwidth taxes.*

Atkins, J.L., et al (2019) **Cascading impacts of large-carnivore extirpation in an African ecosystem.** SCIENCE 364:173-177

*Authors' abstract: War ravages human lives and landscapes, but nonhuman victims are no less affected. The Mozambican Civil War resulted in the rapid decline of predators in Gorongosa National Park and led to a trophic cascade that shifted prey behaviors and plant communities.*

*The absence of wild dogs and leopards resulted in a change in habitat use and plant consumption by bushbuck, which are forest-dwelling antelopes. Experiments further showed that changes in prey behavior were reversible when signs of predator activity were introduced, supporting the impact of the predator loss.*

*Theory predicts that when apex predators disappear, large herbivores become less fearful, occupy new habitats, and modify those habitats by eating new food plants. Yet experimental support for this prediction has been difficult to obtain in large-mammal systems.*

*After the extirpation of leopards and African wild dogs from Mozambique's Gorongosa National Park, forest-dwelling antelopes [bushbuck (*Tragelaphus sylvaticus*)] expanded into treeless floodplains, where they consumed novel diets and suppressed a common food plant [waterwort (*Bergia mossambicensis*)].*

*By experimentally simulating predation risk, we demonstrate that this behavior was reversible. Thus, whereas anthropogenic predator extinction disrupted a trophic cascade by enabling rapid differentiation of prey behavior, carnivore restoration may just as rapidly reestablish that cascade.*



Scarpino, S.V., and B.M. Althouse (2019) **Uncovering the hidden cost of bed bugs.** PROCEEDINGS OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES USA 116:7160-7162

Authors' abstract: *In the United States, emergency department visits resulting from bed bugs increased by over 700% between 2007 and 2010, at least 80% of hotels in 2015 had to treat for bed bug infestations, and some hospitals lost access to beds nearly every other day due to bed bugs. These costs may be just the tip of the iceberg.*

*For thousands of years, at least as far back as ancient Egypt, bed bugs have afflicted human populations, and before the Second World War and the advent of dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane (DDT) perhaps a third of all major European cities were infested with bed bugs. After the invention and widespread adoption of DDT, bed bug prevalence plummeted, but almost immediately resistance to DDT emerged in bed bugs and their numbers began to surge.*

*Recent studies in the United States suggest that the incidence of bed bugs may have returned to levels not seen since pre-World War II Europe. Despite bed bugs' well documented negative effects on quality of life and mental health, the risk of serious infection and inflammation stemming from their bites, the substantial economic costs incurred for treatment/removal, and their potential ability to vector Chagas disease, antibiotic-resistant bacteria, and numerous other human pathogens, the scientific community (and funding agencies) have turned a comparatively blind eye to bed bugs.*

Garrett-Bakelman, F.E., et al (2019) **The NASA Twins Study: A multidimensional analysis of a year-long human spaceflight.** SCIENCE 364:doi/10.1126/science.aau8650

Authors' abstract: *Space is the final frontier for understanding how extreme environments affect human physiology. Following twin astronauts, one of which spent a year-long mission on the International Space Station, we examined molecular and physiological traits that may be affected by time in space.*

*Sequencing the components of whole blood revealed that the length of telomeres, which is important to maintain in dividing cells and may be related to human aging, changed substantially during space flight and again upon*

*return to Earth. Coupled with changes in DNA methylation in immune cells and cardiovascular and cognitive effects, this study provides a basis to assess the hazards of long-term space habitation.*

*To date, 559 humans have been flown into space, but long-duration (>300 days) missions are rare (n = 8 total). Long-duration missions that will take humans to Mars and beyond are planned by public and private entities for the 2020s and 2030s; therefore, comprehensive studies are needed now to assess the impact of long-duration spaceflight on the human body, brain, and overall physiology. The space environment is made harsh and challenging by multiple factors, including confinement, isolation, and exposure to environmental stressors such as microgravity, radiation, and noise.*

*The selection of one of a pair of monozygotic (identical) twin astronauts for NASA's first 1-year mission enabled us to compare the impact of the spaceflight environment on one twin to the simultaneous impact of the Earth environment on a genetically matched subject.*

*Physiological, telomeric, transcriptomic, epigenetic, proteomic, metabolomic, immune, microbiomic, cardiovascular, vision-related, and cognitive data were collected over 25 months. Some biological functions were not significantly affected by spaceflight, including the immune response (T cell receptor repertoire) to the first test of a vaccination in flight.*

*However, significant changes in multiple data types were observed in association with the spaceflight period; the majority of these eventually returned to a preflight state within the time period of the study. These included changes in telomere length, gene regulation measured in both epigenetic and transcriptional data, gut microbiome composition, body weight, carotid artery dimensions, subfoveal choroidal thickness and peripapillary total retinal thickness, and serum metabolites.*

*In addition, some factors were significantly affected by the stress of returning to Earth, including inflammation cytokines and immune response gene networks, as well as cognitive performance. For a few measures, persistent changes were observed even after 6 months on Earth, including some genes' expression levels, increased DNA damage from chromosomal inversions, increased numbers of short telomeres, and attenuated cognitive function.*

*Given that the majority of the biological and human health variables remained stable, or returned to baseline, after a 340-day space mission, these data suggest that human health can be mostly sustained over this duration of spaceflight. The persistence of the molecular changes (e.g., gene expression) and the extrapolation of the identified risk factors for longer missions (>1 year) remain estimates and should be demonstrated with these measures in future astronauts.*

*Finally, changes described in this study highlight pathways and mechanisms that may be vulnerable to spaceflight and may require safeguards for longer space missions; thus, they serve as a guide for targeted countermeasures or monitoring during future missions.*

Buerkle, C.W. (2019) **“I didn't see it, but I know what it's about”: The motion picture trailer and problematic synecdoche.** JOURNAL OF POPULAR CULTURE 52:239-258

*Author's introduction: Motion picture trailers seem like obvious examples of synecdoche, presenting the part for the whole, by deploying images, words, and actions from the central text to convey to audiences the essence of the movie they should want to pay to see. Trailers, as advertisements shown in both movie theaters and on television, have long been accused of either overhyping their product or engaging in cinematic bait-and-switch.*

*Accusations of the first stripe opine, “The movie looked good, but they used all the best parts for the ads.” Trailers of the second order refer to instances when audiences are sold on a movie of a different genre than expected, as when MAN OF THE YEAR's (2006) promos advertised scenes of Robin Williams as a wise-cracking presidential candidate despite those moments' actual use as mere punctuation in a conspiracy theory thriller.*

*Either of these offenses raises the charge of false advertising, that the trailers are expected to be true to the film promoted. Furthermore, these accusations are inherent to the audience having seen the film to reflect on the trailer's accuracy. In actuality, given the saturation of advertisements on television and online, let alone pre-main-attraction trailers, a movie trailer often enjoys a much larger audience than the movie itself.*

*Given the prevalence of trailers over the movies they promote, trailers often become the movie for audiences, a synecdochic offering from which audiences draw conclusions about the film's narrative, a film which they may never see but nevertheless feel they know.*

Speirs: I haven't set foot in a movie theatre in more than a decade, not after I figured it was cheaper to buy the DVD when it came out. I well recall when I was a teenager during the Roger Moore era of James Bond films realizing that all their action shots were in the trailer and there was consequently no need to see the rest of the movie.

ZINE LISTINGS

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

BANANA WINGS #73 (Editorial whim from Claire Brialey and Mark Plummer, 59 Shirley Road, Croydon, Surrey CR0 7ES, England) A somewhat depressing issue this time around, lamenting death and its approach in the fannish zinedom, but also some convention commentary and lots of letters of comment.

THE FOSSIL #379 (US\$10 per year from The Fossils Inc, c/o Tom Parson, 157 South Logan Street, Denver, Colorado 80209) This issue will be of great interest to Lovecraft fans, as it discusses recently-uncovered information and letters between Wilson Shepherd Sr, an early science fiction fan, and H.P. Lovecraft. Illustrated is a scan of one of HPL's handwritten letters. All letters written by him are now in the public domain, and scans of many of them are available from Brown University Library (no address given unfortunately).

Ken Faig Jr has an article on the history of apa bundles. Instead of zinesters having to mail copies individually, they developed the method by 1930 of sending a batch to a Central Mailer, who collated them and sent each member of the apa a bundle. Mailing comments were not unknown in the old-time apas, some of which HPL belonged to, but science fiction zinesters were the ones who expanded the idea.

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

2019-04-11

OPUNTIA #438: I think we’ve both had to deal with -30°C this past winter, but I am happy to say that the winter is indeed past. We’ve had a few snowflakes go past our window this morning, but it looks like we will enjoy something approaching warm this weekend.

As far as I can tell, the only place near me that might have a bargain bin of DVDs is our local variety store. We check on occasion, but that bin is full of kids’ movies, video games and some movies dubbed in Ukrainian/Russian. There’s a lot of both nationalities in our area. And, lots of mystery books. There is still one mystery bookstore in Toronto, Sleuth of Baker Street. We picked up Maureen Jennings’ latest novel there.

[Re: World Wide Party] June 21, forgot all about that. Yvonne and I will be in England for three weeks between May 29 and June 19, and the WWP comes two days after our return. I hope we can do something.

OPUNTIA #439: Looks like both the Paleo conference and the Canstruction were great fun, but for different reasons. In March, Yvonne headed down to London, Ontario, for the History Symposium, and we quite enjoyed ourselves. We did find out shortly beforehand that this was the 25th annual event, and we’d never heard of it before. At least now, we’re on the mailing list.

[Re: Canadian prophecies] The Eric Kierans article sure made him look like a visionary, at least from my viewpoint. If I recall, Kierans was a Postmaster-General under Pierre Trudeau.

[Indeed he was, serving in the House of Commons from 1968 to 1972, representing a Montreal riding, and before that as a provincial legislator. From 1968 to 1971 he was both the PMG and the Minister of Communications. He got into a fight with Pierre Trudeau and did not run for re-election in 1972.]

OPUNTIA #440: Cupcakes! Getting hungry again. Don’t need the sugar, to be honest.

[Food. Can’t live with it, can’t live without it.]

Your provincial election is coming in five days as I write, and you may have seen a graphic from online, voting Conservative if you got mad at the Liberals or NDP for something, is a really, really bad idea. In Ontario, we are finding that out. Doug Ford is the worst thing to happen to us in some time. Justin may be out of his league, but if we vote to the right again, we will find out that Andrew Scheer is out of his league, too. Anyone for declining their vote?

[Unfortunately “None of the above” was not an option on the ballot. We had no choice but to go Tory blue. The NDP almost bankrupted Alberta. Justin Trudeau can print currency to cover his debts, but provinces can’t.]

WHEN WORDS COLLIDE 2019

Calgary’s annual readercon When Words Collide will be held on the weekend of August 9 to 11, 2019. The venue is the Delta South Marriott hotel on Southland Drive SE on Bonaventure Drive. A writing-centred convention, with an excellent dealer bourse where only books can be sold. My reports on previous WWCs can be found in OPUNTIA #71, 253, 266, 282, 318, 350, 387, and 421.

The membership is capped at 750 plus volunteers and guests, and always sells out by June, as do room reservations and banquet tickets. As of this issue they report 75% of memberships sold. More details from: [www.whenwordscollide.org](http://www.whenwordscollide.org)