

OPUNTIA 442



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CALGARY COMIC EXPO PARADE 2019

photos by Dale Speirs

[Reports of previous parades appeared in OPUNTIA's #276, 305, 340, 374, and 411.]

Calgary's science fiction fandom atomized about a decade ago after its general convention Con-Version was run into the ground by the Internet generation. The Old Guard bypassed them and began a readercon called When Words Collide, capped at 750 members. For details, visit www.whenwordscollide.org.



The costume fans now rule Cowtown SFdom with the Calgary Comic Expo, a commercial event that runs on the last weekend of April each year. With 90,000 paid admissions, they get a lot of attention. On the Victoria Day weekend, the anime fans will come to Calgary for Otafest, about 8,000 paid. There is a tiny Calgary Horror Con which does little publicity and is basically a dealer bourse with cosplayers.

The Comic Expo has a parade through the downtown core along the Stephen Avenue pedestrian mall. This year it was on April 26, and as you can see, I went along to see what there was to see. I don't attend the main event, but I like a parade as much as the next person. The sign on the mall was coincidental for the few Cowtowners who knew what the WWC was.

I always take the bus downtown, the cost of parking being what it is. En route my bus picked up this passenger. He didn't mind being photographed.



And so it began. Calgary Mayor Naheed Nenshi (bottom photo), as always was the honorary parade marshal. The day was dry but chilly, only a couple of degrees above freezing. I was glad I wore my winter parka.



Tah-rah-rah-boom-dee-eh. The Bishop Grandin High School band was probably chosen because of its name. The Holy Ghost, not the Hollywood versions, since it is a Catholic school.





This year I actually recognized a few of the celebrities. In past parades, they were media or anime stars I never heard of.



Many family cosplayers.



Below: As this float went by, I was close enough to ask the pink mermaid how cold she was in that skimpy outfit. She told me she hardly felt it.

At right: A CTV reporter doing a person in the street interview.



Below: It took real courage for the blue lady to wear that outfit on a cold day.



Bottom: I'll probably have photos in May of Otafest cosplayers. They don't have a parade but their convention centre is on the Stephen Avenue pedestrian mall, so they strut about in costume for photographers.





Ladies, it ruins the effect when you wear sneakers with a gown.



FOOD COZIES: PART 7
by Dale Speirs

[Parts 1 to 6 appeared in OPUNTIA's #432, 433, 434, 436, 438, and 441.]

On April 17, Canada Post issued a set of stamps depicting Canadian desserts. They included a Canadian invention, still very popular and found in every bakery, the Nanaimo bar.



Cozy mysteries are Miss Marple style novels. 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.

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

Cooking On Camera.

THE PROOF IS IN THE PUDDING (2010) by Melinda Wells was part of a food cozy series about Della Carmichael, who owned a cooking school in Santa Monica, California. She just got her own cable show "In The Kitchen With Della" on the Better Living Channel. Her publicity agent convinced her to be a judge for the Celebrity Cook-Off Charity Gala, where 20 giant egos from Hollywood would face each other in a hotel ballroom.

Carmichael was a last-minute replacement for a celebrity chef who operated a wildlife sanctuary on the side. One of his endangered species bit him on the nose. There were two other judges. Yvette Dupree, the Global Gourmet, did most of her food writing with the help of Google. Keith Ingram was a food columnist, playboy, and the first murder victim.

Someone managed to stab Ingram in the throat in the crowded ballroom without anyone noticing. The killer used a smoke bomb as a diversion. Carmichael's boyfriend was the obvious suspect because Ingram was poaching his daughter, so she went sleuthing on his behalf. Later, while talking to someone who might know something, a sniper opened fire with a rifle.

Carmichael uncovered some soap opera plots, but the novel made a sharp turn when she learned the true reason for Ingram's death. He had threatened to expose an action-adventure novelist as an imposter, the books having been ghost-written without acknowledgment. There were the usual alarms, the contest never was completed, and Carmichael followed cozy precedent by getting herself trapped with the killer.

Throughout the novel, she broke away from time to time to do her cooking show, the scenes of which were described in detail since this was a food cozy. The recipes at the back of the book are varied, beginning with chocolate fudge

pudding, then Italian meatballs, and followed by several pasta and chicken dishes. The recipes were accredited to various D-list celebrities.

PIE A LA MURDER (2011) is a later installment in the series. Della Carmichael had a new boyfriend, Nicholas D’Martino. The novel opened with him springing a surprise on her. He had an 18-year-old daughter Celeste Fontaine by a previous marriage, and she was coming to stay. A rather inopportune time because Carmichael was promoting Operation Pie on her cooking show, a nationwide bake sale contest to raise money for charity.

Fontaine was the spoiled brat one might expect of a rich kid (her mother’s side of the family) and had aspirations to become a film star. She tangled up with Alec Redding, a sleazy photographer who took nude photos of her, aggravating both her parents. The aggravation became even worse, but for her father, when he discovered Redding’s body after going over to his house to have a few words. He thereby became the main suspect.

Carmichael did a bit of sleuthing but was hampered by having to run her cooking school (classes were still in session) and her cable television show. The pie competition almost completely faded out of the novel. Things got bad and things got worse. Carmichael was assaulted and a reporter investigating the Redding murder was in her turn murdered.

In the end, it was all about love triangles and jealousies. Redding had canoodled with one woman too many and paid for it in full. A complicated mess of relationships had developed, and the killer decided to cut the Gordian knot the same way the Greek hero did.

From there to the recipes, starting with the Chocolate Nut Butter Pie a la Mode, which took up three pages. Not being a Southerner, I skipped the Sweet Potato Pie, especially after seeing the ingredients included two cups of sugar and a stick of butter in it. I was surprised to see Nanaimo Bars, a Canadian invention, and very popular up here as a standard dessert item. The Strawberry Cloud Pie also seemed a good treat.

DEATH OF A BACON HEIRESS (2016) by Lee Hollis (pseudonym of siblings Rick Copp and Holly Simason) is part of a cozy series set in the blood-soaked village of Bar Harbor, Maine. Hayley Powell was a food columnist for a newspaper when she wasn’t Marpleing. Her kids were grown and out on their own, so she had to keep busy somehow.

Down at the newspaper, the big breaking story was the disappearance of Dr Alvin Foley, who worked at a private genetics laboratory. The crime reporter warned off Powell from the case:

“Why would I write about that? I’m the food-and-cocktails columnist. You’re the crime reporter.”

“Good. I’m happy to hear you’re clear on that. Because my gut is telling me this is a big and complicated story, and we don’t need some amateur sleuth sticking her nose into it and muddying the waters.”, he said smugly.

Not to worry, for Powell had bigger fish to fry, or to be more correct, bacon to fry. She was asked to fill in for a sick celebrity chef on the network television show THE CHAT. The recipe she chose was Bacon-Wrapped Jalapeno-Stuffed Chicken Thighs. For the interested reader, that recipe was attached to the end of the chapter, along with one for Mexican Martinis. (Unusually for food cozies, this series included a lot of cocktail mixes, most of which involved vodka. With all due respect to the authors, one wonders just how much drinking they do.)

Despite last-minute crises, the cooking segment was a success. Powell was a star, at least to the village folk who knew her and now wanted selfies. So much so that bacon heiress Olivia Redmond (of Redmond Meats) wanted to hire Powell as a writer. Redmond was a boor and ill-mannered, with a long list of enemies. Wealth and a hot temper are not a good mix, as she found out when someone snapped her neck.

After a pause for Madras Cocktail and Bacon Strip Pancake recipes, the story resumed with Powell visiting her brother for solace. He was a barkeep and there are no prizes for guessing what kind of drink he gave his sister to steady her nerves.

The ending was rather complicated, involving a restaurant owner who took violent exception to food critics, Foley having messed where he shouldn’t have, greedy heirs, and assorted people who hadn’t forgotten the evil that Redmond did. Lots of back story sleuthing, interspersed with cocktail and bacon recipes.

The novel concluded with one twist involving Redmond’s pet pig. The book managed to hold together quite well despite all the threads. I am a teetotaler but do enjoy a rasher of crisp bacon.

Soup Kitchens.

A SPOONFUL OF MURDER (2012) by Connie Archer was the first novel in a food cozy series about Lucky Jamieson, proprietor of By The Spoonful soup shop in Snowflake, Vermont. As the book opened, she had just inherited the shop and a house from her parents, killed in a car crash. Deciding to re-start her life, she moved to the until-now peaceful village to run the business.

It didn't last. As Jamieson struggled to balance the books in her restaurant, a more serious problem occurred. A tourist named Patricia Honeywell was murdered behind the soup shop. The chef Sage DuBois was arrested by the police. They should have taken Jamieson, who soon committed unlawful entry at Honeywell's cabin, contaminated evidence, and nearly got herself killed by the murderer.

That last event didn't stop Jamieson anymore than Miss Marple in her village. On with the snooping went Jamieson. Honeywell was a hussy, no two ways about it, and learned the hard way never to laugh in a man's face when extorting him. DuBois had a past relationship and a criminal record but wasn't the murderer. It all came down to a shaky love affair that tied together several villagers in the worst possible way.

And so to the appendix, which has three soup and two sandwich recipes. Since this was the first novel in the series, the book had many pages setting up backgrounds and characters. Someone asked Jamieson how she got her nickname Lucky. She didn't answer directly but intimated that she would in the future. One can only presume that, given the trail of bodies she left in the village, that her appellation will become ironic.

A BROTH OF BETRAYAL (2013) carried on the saga in Snowflake, Vermont. It was not a happy village. A car wash was proposed for the scenic village green, a skeleton was discovered that might be from the Revolutionary War, a local mechanic was murdered in his shop, and the Mayor went missing. Enough excitement to keep several Miss Marples busy.

By The Spoonful seemed to be a remarkably successful shop, judging by how busy Jamieson was. Them Vermonters must really like soups and salads. When not sloshing soup into bowls, Jamieson tried to keep up with all the sleuthing required. The book alternated viewpoints between her and the kidnapped Mayor held in captivity in a basement.

As the bodies piled up, the past of just about everyone was exposed to provide a plethora of motives. Lots and lots of plot threads, some of which were finally woven together for the climax. The killer was haunted by a murder from childhood days, and was seeking revenge on anyone connected to it. That innocents were swept up by his revenge was irrelevant to him.

Jamieson rescued the Mayor in the nick of time so both could enjoy the final confrontation. For once, somebody was actually carrying their cellphone with them, and called in to police. I mention this because in far too many cozies, an idiot plot is used where the heroine left her cellphone at home, or someone else never checked their phone for messages. An average read for a cozy.

A ROUX OF REVENGE (2014) opened with a murder victim discovered not by Lucky Jamieson. She was busy in her soup shop because of the Harvest Festival ongoing in Snowflake. Her waitress Janie seemed to be under surveillance by a stalker. Those two plot motivators got the story underway, not to mention all the back stories Jamieson uncovered.

Them Deppity Dawgs needed all the help they could get. The murdered man's vehicle was towed to the impound lot, and promptly stolen that night by skylarking teenagers. The reader will suspect that the village was named Snowflake not just because of the climate.

It came down to sharp practice and identity theft, with several chapters to sort out the sheep from the goats. Jamieson had her own problems with unrequited love. She should complain; at least she was still alive and healthy.

From there to the recipes, three of the most disgusting soups I hope never to slurp: Beet Mushroom Barley, Pumpkin Rice, and Beef and Blueberry. The Rosemary Biscuits seem a safer bet.

LADLE TO THE GRAVE (2015) took place in the spring. Some local women organized a pagan festival to celebrate the season, a wannabe coven. It turned to tragedy when one of the participants was poisoned by herbal wine. The herbs were supplied by Jamieson's grandfather.

The body had only just arrived at the Medical Examiner office when another corpse floated down a creek onto the property of Jamieson's friend Sophie. She was planning her wedding to Sage DuBois, the soup kitchen chef. Jamieson now had two murders to investigate, not to mention the police.

Since she was involved, everyone correctly assumed that these were murders, not accidental poisoning from a food allergy or drowning. More excitement prevailed when a stalker was spotted watching one of the waitresses at By The Spoonful.

The denouement brought out a completely different scenario from the past, of an abusive family and the damage it did down the generations. The reader can skip the middle third of the novel without losing the plot.

And so to the recipes, starting with May wine, chicken pot pie soup (why?), sausage vegetable stew, and pear and watercress soup. Stick to the May wine (white wine with strawberries and herbs).

Carrying on in the series was A CLUE IN THE STEW (2016), which began with famous mystery author Hilary Stone deigning to grace Snowflake with her majestical presence. She wants to be left alone, as Garbo once said, and intended to buy a house in Snowflake. She did, however, not want to be alone at a book signing. Since the village was too small to have suitable venues, By The Spoonful hosted the event.

A woman's body was found in the woods, not by Jamieson, in Chapter 2. The suspense as to her identity was dragged out through the novel. It wasn't Stone, unfortunately.

Jamieson had her own troubles. The new waitress wasn't satisfactory, and was much too uppity. Even more uppity were the entourage of Stone. They were expecting a big-city ballroom for the book signing, and were not happy to get a fast food outlet. It didn't matter, because the event was Stone's last signing when not long after she became the second murder victim.

The problems at the soup shop weren't so bad that Jamieson couldn't do any sleuthing. She quickly established that Stone and her daughter-in-law hated each other. Stone had abandoned a baby daughter at birth decades ago and sent her off for adoption. The murderer killed both victims using an M.O. from Stone's most recent mystery novel.

By Chapter 38, the first victim was finally identified as an asylum psychiatrist who treated Stone's daughter. It all tangled up with a deadly family feud, where the daughter-in-law egged on Stone's son into matricide. The insane daughter inherited. A nice family. I wonder if they ever prayed together?

Catering For Success.

THE BIG CHILI (2015) by Julia Buckley was the first novel in a cozy series set in Pine Haven, Illinois. Lilah Drake operated a covered-dish catering service for clients who didn't have time to cook but wanted to claim they did. In other words, a discreet service. Seems to me like a great opportunity to run a blackmail business as a subsidiary.

The trouble began when one of Drake's customers took her chili to a church bingo night. The bingo caller was Alice Dixon, who tasted the chili, made a face, clutched her abdomen, and fell dead to the ground. Someone had spiced the pot with poison.

Drake was a real estate agent on the side, which enabled some back stories to be introduced via house showings and clients. The police had their own investigation, it must not be forgotten, and arrested Dixon's ex-husband as the obvious suspect. The second victim, however, was a librarian who bit into his meatball sandwich during his lunch break, and was permanently checked out of the library by poison.

Dixon's life story came out, none of it too pleasant, and all of it providing motive to a variety of suspects. The epilogue narrowed them down to a jealous sister of Dixon. The best families and all that. The recipes appendix began with chili, which seemed a bit off-putting given the use it had been put to in the novel, then a variety of hot dishes.

ECLAIR AND PRESENT DANGER (2016) by Laura Bradford was the first novel in a food cozy series about Winnie Johnson of Silver Lake, Ohio. It began with the origin of her Emergency Dessert Squad business. It was a home delivery and rush-job catering service that only delivered desserts to those in desperate need. One wonders about how often villagers would be such poor planners as to find themselves without a peach pie in the house, but then again cozies are famous for their lack of commonsense economics.

The novel kicked off with Johnson delivering to a house and finding a murdered man. The Deppity Dawg wasn't much, even by village police standards, so it was justified for her to become the village Miss Marple. The incompetence of the officer in charge was demonstrated when he asked Johnson if he could have the peach pie she was delivering, seeing as how the dead man no longer had the munchies.

Lots about Johnson’s bakery and even more about old codgers and biddies who didn’t like to bother with their hearing aids. Senior citizens everywhere. Pause for digression. Instead of all those uneconomic businesses in rural villages, why not have them operate a hearing aid clinic or practical nurse clinic?

Johnson reached the peak of stupidity for Miss Marples everywhere when she realized who the murderer was. She asked herself whether she should notify the police or go to the murderer’s house without telling anyone where she was and then confront him. Unfortunately natural selection failed to work this time and she survived.

S’MORE MURDERS (2018) by Maya Corrigan was a novel in a series about Val Deniston, a part-time caterer who was hired to serve a Titanic-themed meal at a party on board a yacht in Chesapeake Bay. Otto Warbeck was a collector of Titanic memorabilia.

Deniston could not duplicate exactly the April 14, 1912, menu of the Titanic’s dining saloon for the first-class passengers. Some recipes were since lost, and others not practical for modern times. Filet Mignons Lili was replaced by Roast Beef et Chateau Potatoes. The Roast Squab and Cress were out of the question on such short notice.

Warbeck used the party for a murder mystery contest. He invited a weird group of guests and it was obvious that he had other plans for some of them. The characters and plots of the murder mystery seemed to hit home for certain guests.

All that was a diversion, for Warbeck went missing overboard. It might have been an accident, but suspicions were soon aroused that it was either murder or suicide. There were multiple motives, as Warbeck was not a likeable man, but on the other hand, some of the crew and the guests had given him just cause.

A second murder brought up fresh motives and suspects. Deniston did a lot of who-was-where-when charting of the guests’ movements about the yacht. The book helpfully included a diagram of who sat where at the dinner table.

The ending was a complicated mess and didn’t explain itself well. On the whole, it seemed to be suicide staged by Warbeck to look like a murder by his guests and ruin their reputations from beyond the grave. That triggered a subsequent murder and set off a chain of events.

From there to the recipes, beginning with Sauté Chicken Lyonnaise and ending with cheese s’mores. From the sublime to the ridiculous. I don’t think they served that last one on the Titanic.

TART OF DARKNESS (2018) by Denise Swanson was the first novel in a cozy series about Danielle Sloan of Normalton, Illinois. She inherited a 17-room mansion she couldn’t afford to keep up on her limited funds. Therefore she opened a catering business Chef-To-Go and rented some of the rooms to co-eds, who also worked part-time for her.

Her first catering contract was a disaster, for a party hosted by Regina Bourne, a spoiled rich kid. She wasn’t spoiled much longer and was soon murdered by poisoned leftover food. Sloan worried about her business being tainted by malicious rumours, so began investigating on her own.

She had to deal with a police detective who was just short of psychotic. She did manage to scrape up some new business, but spent much of her time babysitting co-eds and sorting out clues. The back stories included her, and she lived in fear that her past might come back to haunt her at precisely the wrong time.

It can be taken as stipulated that Bourne had many enemies. Sifting through the clues didn’t produce anything until the murderer confessed. Bourne was a wanna-be novelist who plagiarized as a matter of rightful due, taking advantage of the killer. The ending was based on hidden knowledge, so the reader couldn’t guess the murderer. Too many mystery novels have been written that way.

The most puzzling aspect of this novel was in Chapter 22, when out of nowhere there was a vignette about a supporting character hunting for a copy of Edgar Allan Poe’s book TAMERLANE. Sloan found it in the mansion’s attic, gave it to the searcher, who then had to turn it over to a made man in part payment for gambling debts. At that point, the incident suddenly dropped out of the narrative and was heard of no more. One wonders if this was word-count padding or if the author had too many threads and lost track.

Sit-Down Restaurants.

ITALIAN ICED (2018) by Kylie Logan was a book in a food cozy series about Laurel Inwood of Hubbard, Ohio. She operated the Terminal At The Tracks restaurant for her Aunt Sophie. As this novel opened, the featured menu was

Italian cuisine. Prior to the restaurant, Inwood had been a personal chef for Hollywood actress Meghan Cohan. Imagine her surprise when she opened a restaurant walk-in freezer one morning and found Cohan’s body inside it. She hadn’t known that Cohan was in town. That was the primary question about the victim everyone was asking; why was she in Hubbard?

Motive wasn’t a problem. The list of suspects who wanted her dead was basically everyone who knew her. The deceased was not a popular woman. Inwood had been fired by her for unsubstantiated reasons, and blacklisted as a chef in Hollywood, thereby putting her at the top of the list.

Cohan had been searching for something, having trashed Inwood’s house before coming to the restaurant in the middle of the night. Inwood turned Miss Marple but was tripped up several times by Dolly, one of her waitresses who wanted to be a Miss Marple but was extraordinarily incompetent at the job.

In between all that, the food still had to be prepared and served. The customers had to put up with a lot, including being stampeded out of the restaurant by Dolly starting a fake fire. Her reason was that she wanted to investigate the dining room without all those people expecting her to serve them their food.

The MacGuffin of the plot was eventually revealed to be Cohan’s forged divorce papers from years ago. If revealed, they would have set off a chain reaction of events to destroy reputations and put someone in jail. The culprit, as per usual, blabbed all during the J’accuse! meeting. Had she kept her mouth shut, it would have been difficult to convict her because the two Miss Marples had contaminated most of the evidence. The recipes appendix had two pasta recipes. Nothing was said about pizzas.

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’s #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. More details from: www.whenwordscollide.org

TEMPUS FUGIT: PART 3
by Dale Speirs

[Parts 1 to 2 appeared in OPUNTIA’s #401 and 432.]

I generally don’t like time travel stories because they play around too much without goal posts. Too many paradoxes for travel into the past. But I do read a few.

“The Second Coming Of Charles Darwin” (2005) by James Morrow was reprinted from its online publication in the anthology SCIENCE FICTION: THE VERY BEST OF 2015, edited by Jonathan Strahan. It is a new twist on a tired subgenre, about time-traveling creationists. They wanted to forestall Charles Darwin by visiting the Galapagos Islands just before he did.

They used nanobots to alter related groups of animal species and merge them into one, thereby preventing him from noticing natural variation and selection. There were several fallacies, one being that if not Darwin, then Alfred Wallace, and the other that Darwin noticed variation in many places on his voyage.

Unfortunately the author copped out by having the nanobots turn the time-traveling creationist into an egret. A disappointing ending.

THE BEST TIME TRAVEL STORIES OF THE 20TH CENTURY (2005) is an anthology of 18 stories edited by Harry Turtledove and Martin H. Greenberg. It is missing a few stories which I consider better than some of those included, but then again it’s all personal opinion. I’ll mention a couple of stories, but they were all good reads.

One of the classics in this book is Ray Bradbury’s 1952 story “A Sound Of Thunder”. It was an early use of the butterfly effect, about a tourist named Eckels who wanted to hunt a *Tyrannosaurus rex* in the Cretaceous. (Not the Jurassic as that movie maker had it.)

On site, Eckels panicked and ran when confronted with the critter, leaving the guides to kill the beast. They knew it was about to die in a few moments when a wind gust toppled a large tree onto it, so that wouldn’t change the future. Except that when Eckels fled, he stepped on a butterfly and killed it. When the time machine returned to its origin, the world had changed and not for the better.

Time travel stories normally cover centuries, millennia, or eras. “The Price Of Oranges” by Nancy Kress reminds us that even a few decades can have remarkable changes. The protagonists of this story travel back and forth between 1937 and 1989, as great a difference as between the Cretaceous and 1952. Not just World War Two, Korea, and Vietnam, but automatic washing machines and penicillin.

TIME AND TIME AGAIN (2018) by Robert Silverberg is a collection of his time travel stories along with prefaces to each story discussing its aspects. A few items herewith from the 16 stories. The collection reads well, as indeed most of Silverberg’s stories do.

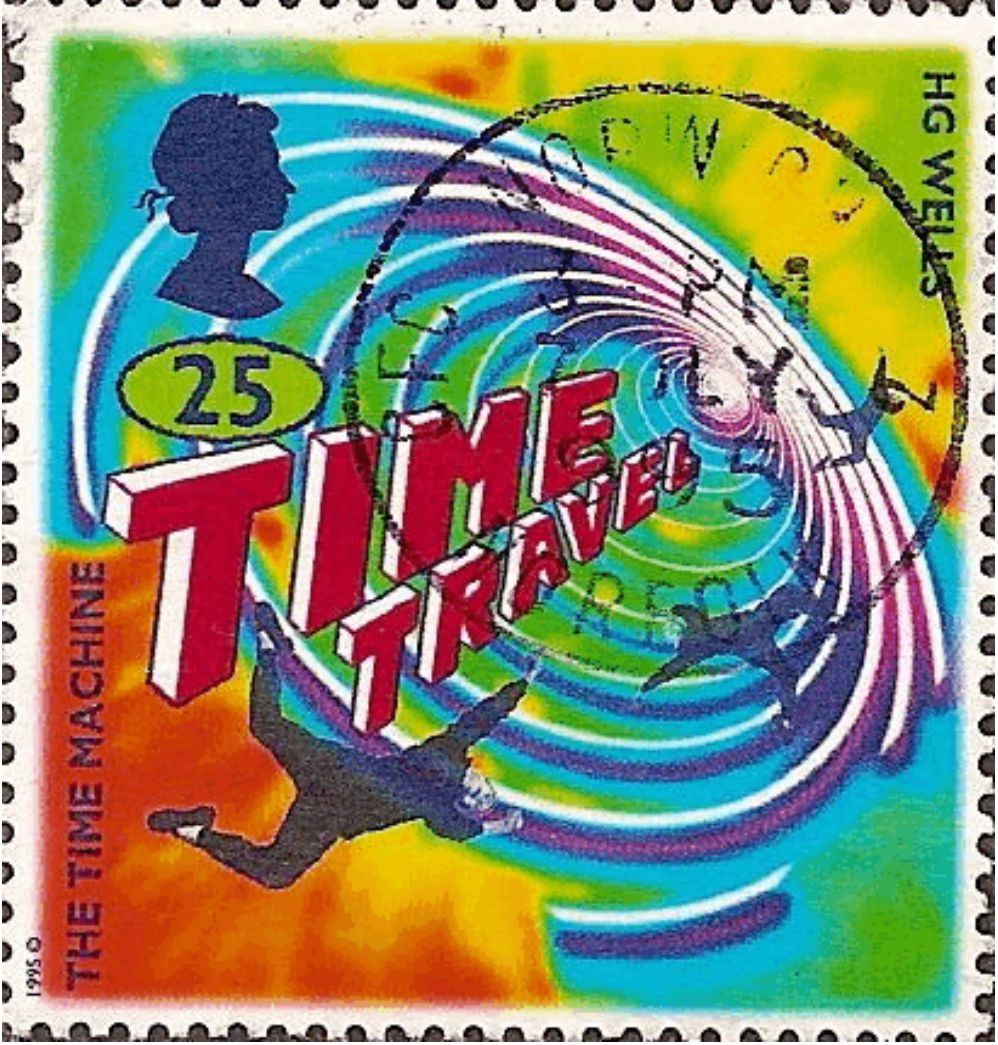
“Absolutely Inflexible” deals with one hazard of time travel into the future, that of being quarantined upon arrival because future generations would not have immunity to diseases from the past. The problem began when a time jumper showed up with a two-way rig and set off a time loop.

In the preface to “Trips”, Silverberg used the phrase “alternative universe” several times. God bless him! At last, someone who understands that the more commonly used word ‘alternate’ is not synonymous with ‘alternative’.

“What We Learned From This Morning’s Newspaper” worked out one of the oldest type of time travel stories, what people would do if given next week’s newspaper. The residents of one street got the newspaper dated a week ahead. They all agreed to keep quiet about it and use the opportunity for betting on stock prices and sports events.

So far so good, because they weren’t actually changing anything. Then one of them noticed her sister’s name in the obituaries, dead from a heart attack. She decided to get her into a hospital early so the medics could save her, which they did. That triggered an event which pushed all the other residents into limbo.

IMPOSSIBLE STORIES was a 2006 collection by Zoran Zivkovic, translated from the original Serbian by Alice Copple-Tosic. One story in it was “Alarm Clock On The Night Table”. It was about an elderly spinster who for fifty years used the ticking of an alarm clock to lull herself to sleep. She never set the alarm or used it to tell time. When the clock stopped ticking, she took it to a watchmaker for repair, but he advised her it was beyond that, at least at a reasonable price. Leaving his shop, she walked out into a mist that would take her to her final sleep.



Play It Again.

Time loops are a paradox that prove travel into the past is not possible, but that never stopped science fiction writers. Consider, if you will, SUSPENSE, an old-time radio series that aired from 1942 to 1962. It was an anthology show, mostly mystery or action-adventure, but often science fiction and fantasy. The episodes were well done in general and the series was favourably received during its lifetime.

“The House In Cypress Canyon” was a 1946 episode written by Robert L. Richards. Both the basic story and the format it was told in were bizarre. It was

the strange manuscript found in mysterious circumstances by someone who wanted to tell the world about his horrors.

A further interpolation was that the manuscript was read aloud to Sam Spade by a real estate agent friend. Yes, that one, the detective. And not the version from the book or the movie, but Howard Duff, the actor who played Spade on the radio series about him. A crossover but an unusual one.

The plot was about a young couple, James and Ellen Woods, who rented a strange house. During their first night in the place, they discovered a locked closet but couldn't get it open. After retiring for the night, they heard loud groans and screams coming from it. When they investigated, they found blood seeping out from under the door.

The police were called, but upon arrival the blood had vanished and the closet door opened easily. The next night, Ellen went sleepwalking. James tried to wake her, but she attacked him, then collapsed. The milkman was found dead the next day, his throat slashed. James later stayed up the night, waiting with a shotgun for Ellen. The howling from the closet resumed.

Attached to the manuscript was a newspaper article about the murder-suicide of James and Ellen. His body had been badly slashed about the head and shoulders, wounds from which he bled to death. She had been killed by the shotgun.

The framing narrative resumed. Spade left the agent and went on his way. A moment later, James and Ellen entered the office and enquired about a rental. Their dialogue was an exact repetition of the opening dialogue of the episode. The agent was unaware of the time loop, as the story re-set.

This was said to be one of the scariest episodes on old-time radio, although I think that exaggerated. Nothing was explained, and there was no logic behind the plot. Nonetheless, the narrative was compelling and worth listening to.

The television series THE TWILIGHT ZONE was Rod Serling's masterpiece, aired from 1959 to 1964. "Execution" was a 1960 episode, with Serling writing the teleplay based on a short story by George Clayton Johnson. It began in 1880, with a murderer being hanged from a gallows tree. As he dangled from the rope, he suddenly vanished, to the understandable amazement of the spectators.

He re-appeared in the laboratory of a scientist in 1960, a man who had invented a time machine and just given it the first test. The scientist wasn't quite prepared for such a violent man, and was killed by him in a fight.

The outlaw went out into the streets but couldn't handle the noise of the traffic and the glare of electric lights. It was a good point to be made, that our ancestors led a much quieter life. I've thought about that before myself. My paternal grandparents both died in 1982. In their entire lives, they never heard a machine beep or chirp at them.

The outlaw returned to the laboratory as a refuge, only to find a burglar casing the place. They fought to the death, and the burglar succeeded in strangling the outlaw. He then prowled the laboratory looking for loot, and went inside the time machine chamber. The burglar accidentally triggered it.

He suddenly appeared in 1880, dangling from the noose and further amazing the spectators. It was astonishing enough that the outlaw had disappeared, but now a stranger dressed in strange clothes had appeared and died in the noose. The two men each died out of their times, but justice was served.

Ozymandias.

Humans have one method of reaching out to the future, the time capsule. The short story "Double Take" by Wilson Parks Griffith (1955 January, WORLDS OF IF) began with the City of Chicago creating a time capsule in 1960. Included in it was a tape recording of the proud history of the city, created at great expense with a full cast of Hollywood actors and production crew.

Centuries later, a telepathic alien race found the time capsule in the ruins of the now extinct human race. With great difficulty they figured out what it was for and recreated a machine to play it back. The aliens did not have ears and did not hear the text as produced.

What humans didn't know was that their thought patterns were imprinted on the tape. That was what the aliens heard, the free and frank thoughts of those performing in the recording, an entirely different message than intended. This created a different impression of humans than the one intended.

Project Gutenberg, by the way, has scanned many issues of science fiction magazines such as WORLDS OF IF. Available free at www.gutenberg.org

Clocked.

THE GREEN HORNET was an old-time radio series that aired from 1936 to 1952. Britt Reid was the masked man known as the Green Hornet, assisted by his faithful Filipino servant Kato, who drove his high-speed car called the Black Beauty. The series was a spin-off from THE LONE RANGER but set two generations and four decades later. Reid was the grand-nephew of John Reid, the Lone Ranger.

“A Question Of Time” was a 1946 episode written by Dan Beattie. The war wasn’t over for many Nazis hiding in South America. The Green Hornet stopped a plan to sell a secret formula to them. The episode opened with noisy waterfront sound effects that almost drowned out the dialogue, but someone eventually quieted the sound man.

The murder, and there was one of course, resulted in the theft of the formula. The papers were hidden somewhere, possibly in a small boat. The owner of the boat told police he hadn’t used the boat in three months. What Reid noticed but no one else, was that a wind-up clock in the cabin was ticking away and had the correct time. That couldn’t possibly be unless the boat had been used for smuggling operations.

MOLLE MYSTERY THEATER was an OTR series which aired from 1943 to 1948, then underwent a series of bizarre name changes and network transfers, including becoming, of all things, a soap opera. However, the episode that I’ll summarize here was from 1946 during its glory days.

“Mathematics Of Murder”, as stated by the announcer but commonly mislabeled as “Mathematics For Murder” in mp3 form, is available from www.archive.org No writer was credited.

The protagonist was Colin Hughes, who owed big money to some unfriendly guys. He murdered his ex-wife by running her down with a rental car, knowing that she hadn’t yet removed him as a beneficiary on her life insurance policy.

He set up an alibi by visiting his girlfriend’s apartment prior and setting her clock back an hour. This, he thought, would give him an alibi since he could show up for a party at her place after the murder and have other people testify that he was in the apartment at the time.

As Burns wrote, gang aft agley. The story became a police procedural, following Detective Sam Evans back and forth across the city as he double-checked the alibi. There were some clever twists by Hughes in planning the murder, and more clever twists as Evans maneuvered Hughes into a trap.

What Hughes had forgotten was that it was not enough to set his girlfriend’s clock back. Those who crossed paths with Hughes on the fateful evening gave different times to Evans. As did the girlfriend, for Hughes forgot to set her clock back to the correct time after he had established his alibi.

The old-time radio mystery 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.

“The Murdering Cuckoo Clock” was a 1946 episode, no writer credit given. Mary Wesley took her clock in for repairs. It was never mentioned again and she had only a few lines more in the episode, so presumably the writer included her because she was being paid as a regular actor under contract.

After she left the shop, the clock repairman’s son came out from the back room and wondered aloud to his father if it was possible to make a clock with a poisoned pin on the windup key.

His musings didn’t go any further, for that night he attended a party where he was shot dead by a gun hidden in a cuckoo clock. Since it was random chance that he was standing in front of the clock when the shot was fired, the question was why.

The couple who owned the clock and who were hosting the party were later bickering after the police had come and gone. The clock was still there, and they noticed it had run down. The husband went over to wind it up, and promptly fell dead after being stuck by a poisoned pin. Just as promptly, Boston Blackie appeared at the front door, in time for the murder.

The wife’s boyfriend was a suspect. As Blackie investigated, he hypothesized increasingly elaborate murder plans and double-crosses. A flow chart would

have been handy. Then the wife was found dead in a closet of the boyfriend's apartment.

There were so many twists and turns in the plot that it crashed. One got the impression that the denouement was written after the scriptwriter lost track and rushed to a finish, hoping no one would notice the spaghetti logic. In those days, before home recording devices, a writer could get away with it because the listening audience never heard an episode again.

“The Broken Clock Murder” was a 1949 episode of BOSTON BLACKIE, again writer uncredited. A man named Baker offered Blackie \$5,000 to hide out overnight in his apartment. The next morning, all the clocks and wristwatches in the apartment were broken. Baker fled in panic but was shot dead just outside Blackie's apartment. The police found the body had \$40,000 in cash.

Baker had been rushing to buy a redevelopment property from a club owner named Simpson before a 09h00 deadline, after which his right of first refusal expired. Since he was expired, his competitor Joey Wall was able to buy the property, albeit at twice the price. Wall denied killing Baker to get the place.

Blackie proved Simpson was the culprit, to get the extra money. That left one gaping plot hole which was never explained. Someone had sneaked into the apartment during the night past Blackie and Baker, then broke their wristwatches and all the clocks without being noticed. How?

It's Time To End This.

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.

“Riley Installs A Time Clock” was a 1951 episode, no writer credited. Riley was working the swing shift (16h00 to midnight) with his neighbour. The two were commiserating about trying to adjust to their families' schedule. His teenaged kids were staying out late, and he didn't like it. He wanted his wife Peg to keep track of their comings and goings.

She refused, so he brought home a time clock for all of them to punch in and out. At this point, the listener wonders why they put up with him. The kids quickly worked out a bypass, punching in or out for each other when they were late. Peg said nothing while Riley gloated about how well it was working.

A few nights later, the swing shift was canceled. Instead of going home, Riley went out with the boys for a night on the town. Arriving home at 02h00, he found Peg waiting up for him and not in a good mood. He was found out. The kids no longer had to punch the clock, but from then on he had to.

Remember all that fuss back in December 2012? As the Mayans themselves pointed out (they are not extinct as many people think), their calendar is cyclical, not terminal, and would simply click over to the next cycle.

MAYAN ATLANTIS RETURNS (2016) by Neil Enock is a novel that followed up on that idea. The premise was that the original Mayans really believed that 2012 would be the end of the world. In company with the Minoans, they built a 6-km-diameter spaceship with the idea of moving away to safety, then returning in 2025 after the cataclysm to rebuild civilization. Oops! Someone must have misplaced a decimal point in the equations.

The return did not go well. The spaceship's return triggered a massive electromagnetic pulse from their engines, which was not a problem thousands of years ago, but this time blacked out a good part of southern Mexico. The U.S. Navy sent in the Fourth Fleet, and got into a terrible misunderstanding.

Both sides fumbled about trying to make sense of the situation. The Atlanteans, as the Mayan/Minoan crew called themselves, were not expecting an advanced technological society. The U.S. Navy didn't like surprises. Eventually the situation calmed down. The Atlanteans gave the standard Tour of Utopia, with a guide babbling about all the wonders of their spaceship.

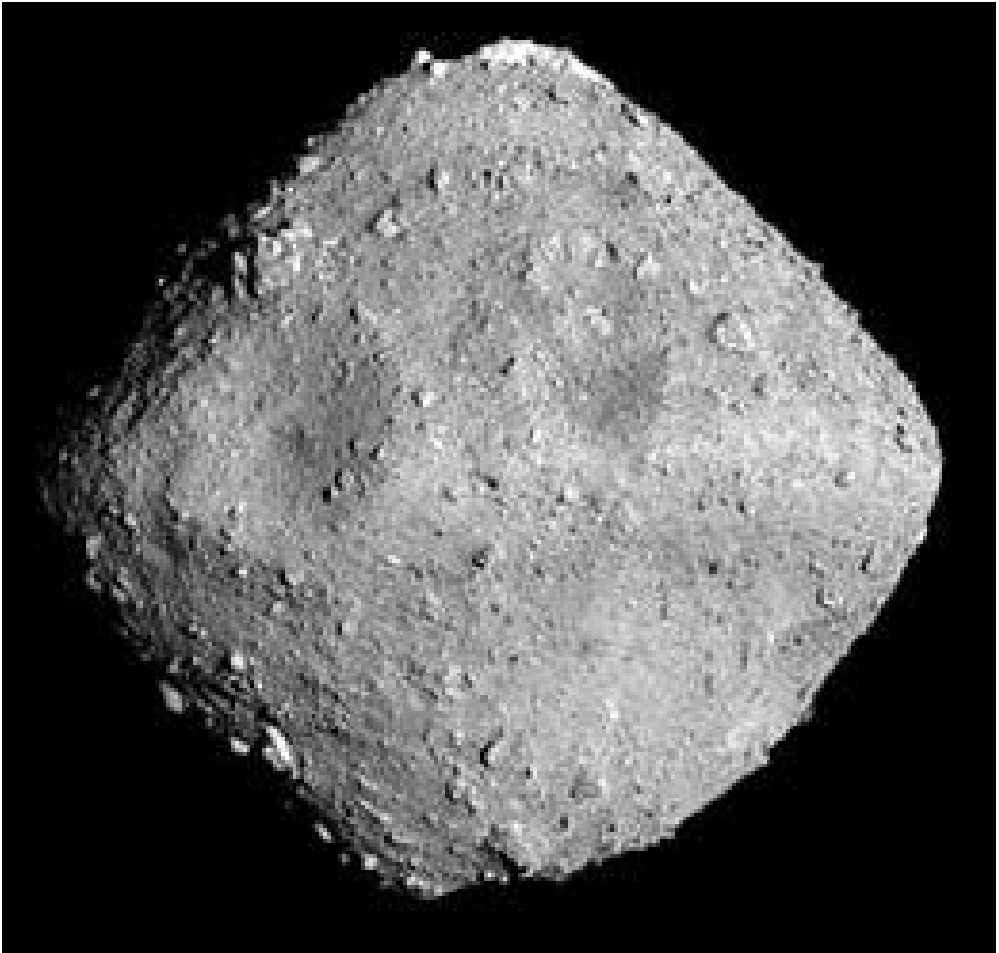
Ultimately it ended in failure. Two civilizations on different levels cannot meet as equals. The ship departed under cloudy circumstances, perhaps to return in a future cycle of the Mayan calendar. An interesting take on a much abused idea.

SEEN IN THE LITERATURE

Watanabe, S., et al (2019) **Hayabusa2 arrives at the carbonaceous asteroid 162173 Ryugu, a spinning top-shaped rubble pile.** SCIENCE 364:268-272

Authors’ abstract: *The Hayabusa2 spacecraft arrived at the near-Earth carbonaceous asteroid 162173 Ryugu in 2018. We present Hayabusa2 observations of Ryugu’s shape, mass, and geomorphology. Ryugu has an oblate “spinning top” shape, with a prominent circular equatorial ridge.*

Its bulk density, 1.19 ± 0.02 grams per cubic centimeter, indicates a high-porosity (>50%) interior. Large surface boulders suggest a rubble-pile structure. Surface slope analysis shows Ryugu’s shape may have been produced from having once spun at twice the current rate. Coupled with the observed global material homogeneity, this suggests that Ryugu was reshaped by centrifugally induced deformation during a period of rapid rotation.

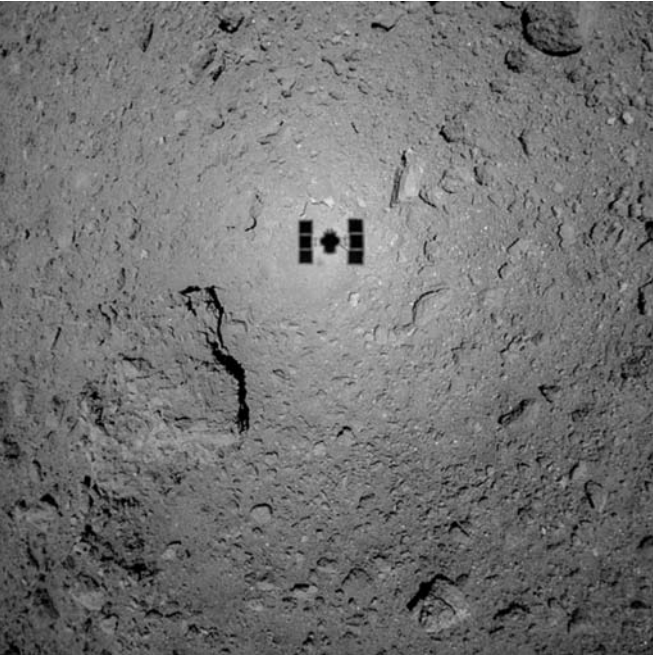


Sugita, S., et al (2019) **The geomorphology, color, and thermal properties of Ryugu: Implications for parent body processes.** SCIENCE 364:252

Authors’ abstract: *Theoretical calculations indicate that Ryugu-size asteroids are likely produced through catastrophic disruption of a parent body, formed in the early Solar System, whose fragments then re-accumulated. Ryugu later migrated from the main asteroid belt to its current near-Earth orbit.*

Geologic features on Ryugu include a circum-equatorial ridge, an underlying east-west dichotomy, high boulder abundance, impact craters, and large-scale color uniformity. We estimate that the impact craters penetrating the top 10 meters of Ryugu’s surface have existed for 10^7 to 10^8 years, indicating that the last major resurfacing likely occurred while Ryugu was still located in the main asteroid belt. In contrast, the low number density of small craters (~10 m in diameter) suggests a very young resurfacing age (about 10^6 years) for the top 1-meter layer.

Multiple scenarios remain viable, but the Hayabusa2 remote sensing data are most consistent with parent-body partial dehydration due to internal heating. This scenario suggests that asteroids formed from materials that condensed at about 150°K (the H₂O condensation temperature under typical solar nebula conditions) must have either formed sufficiently early to contain high concentrations of radiogenic species, such as ²⁶Al, or formed near the Sun, where they experienced other heating mechanisms.



Speirs: The image shows the shadow of the Hayabusa2 space probe on the surface of 162173 Ryuga. Am I the only one who noticed how much it resembles the Canadian flag?

DePalma, R.A., et al (2019) **A seismically induced onshore surge deposit at the KPg boundary, North Dakota.** PROCEEDINGS OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES USA 116:doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1817407116

[This is an open-source article. You can download the entire paper as a free pdf. Highly recommended if you are interested in dinosaurs or mass extinctions.]

Authors’ abstract: *The Chicxulub impact played a crucial role in the Cretaceous-Paleogene extinction. However the earliest post impact effects, critical to fully decode the profound influence on Earth’s biota, are poorly understood due to a lack of high-temporal-resolution contemporaneous deposits.*

The Tanis site, which preserves a rapidly deposited, ejecta-bearing bed in the Hell Creek Formation, helps to resolve that long-standing deficit. Emplaced immediately (minutes to hours) after impact, Tanis provides a post impact snapshot, including ejecta accretion and faunal mass death, advancing our understanding of the immediate effects of the Chicxulub impact. Moreover, we demonstrate that the depositional event, calculated to have coincided with the arrival of seismic waves from Chicxulub, likely resulted from a seismically coupled local seiche.

[A seiche is water sloshing back and forth in a confined space such as a lake or, in this case, the tsunami waters after they flooded the low-lying areas of what are now the Great Plains states.]

The most immediate effects of the terminal-Cretaceous Chicxulub impact, essential to understanding the global-scale environmental and biotic collapses that mark the Cretaceous-Paleogene extinction, are poorly resolved despite extensive previous work.

Here, we help to resolve this by describing a rapidly emplaced, high energy onshore surge deposit from the terrestrial Hell Creek Formation in Montana. Associated ejecta and a cap of iridium-rich impactite reveal that its emplacement coincided with the Chicxulub event.

Acipenseriform fish, densely packed in the deposit, contain ejecta spherules in their gills and were buried by an inland-directed surge that inundated a deeply incised river channel before accretion of the fine-grained impactite.

Although this deposit displays all of the physical characteristics of a tsunami runup, the timing (<1 hour post impact) is instead consistent with the arrival of strong seismic waves from the magnitude Mw ~10 to 11 earthquake generated by the Chicxulub impact, identifying a seismically coupled seiche inundation as the likely cause.

Our findings present high-resolution chronology of the immediate aftereffects of the Chicxulub impact event in the Western Interior, and report an impact-triggered onshore mix of marine and terrestrial sedimentation, potentially a significant advancement for eventually resolving both the complex dynamics of debris ejection and the full nature and extent of biotic disruptions that took place in the first moments post impact.



[This image from the paper shows how far the tsunami from the Chicxulub impact penetrated into the USA.]

Speirs: The tsunami didn’t just wipe out life as it penetrated inland, it also did as much damage sloshing back and forth, and then while draining back into the Gulf of Mexico.

ten Brink, H., et al (2019) **The evolutionary ecology of metamorphosis.** AMERICAN NATURALIST 193:E116-E131.

Authors' abstract: *Almost all animal species undergo metamorphosis, even though empirical data show that this life-history strategy evolved only a few times. Why is metamorphosis so widespread, and why has it evolved?*

Here we study the evolution of metamorphosis by using a fully size-structured population model in conjunction with the adaptive dynamics approach. We assume that individuals compete for two food sources; one of these, the primary food source, is available to individuals of all sizes. The secondary food source is available only to large individuals.

Without metamorphosis, unresolvable tensions arise for species faced with the opportunity of specializing on such a secondary food source. We show that metamorphosis can evolve as a way to resolve these tensions, such that small individuals specialize on the primary food source while large individuals specialize on the secondary food source. We find, however, that metamorphosis evolves only when the supply rate of the secondary food source exceeds a high threshold.

Individuals postpone metamorphosis when the ecological conditions under which metamorphosis originally evolved deteriorate but will often not abandon this life-history strategy, even if it causes population extinction through evolutionary trapping. In summary, our results show that metamorphosis is not easy to evolve but that, once evolved, it is hard to lose. These findings can explain the widespread occurrence of metamorphosis in the animal kingdom despite its few evolutionary origins.

Bar-Oz, Guy, et al (2019) **Ancient trash mounds unravel urban collapse a century before the end of Byzantine hegemony in the southern Levant.** PROCEEDINGS OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES USA 116:doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1900233116

Authors' abstract: *Historians have long debated the role of climate in the rise and fall of empires of the 1st millennium CE. Drastic territorial contraction of the Byzantine Empire, societal decline, and beginning of the European Middle Ages have generally been linked to the Islamic conquests of the seventh century.*

This multidisciplinary archaeological investigation of trash mounds in the Negev Desert establishes the end date of organized trash management in the Byzantine-period city of Elusa and demonstrates urban collapse a century before the Islamic transition. Our findings, taken together with other evidence for Byzantine urban dysfunction, the Justinianic Plague, and recent research on the Late Antique Little Ice Age, flesh out the impact of the sixth century on broad historical trajectories.

The historic event of the Late Antique Little Ice Age (LALIA) was recently identified in dozens of natural and geological climate proxies of the northern hemisphere. Although this climatic downturn was proposed as a major cause for pandemic and extensive societal upheavals in the sixth to seventh centuries CE, archaeological evidence for the magnitude of societal response to this event is sparse.

This study uses ancient trash mounds as a type of proxy for identifying societal crisis in the urban domain, and employs multidisciplinary investigations to establish the terminal date of organized trash collection and high-level municipal functioning on a city-wide scale. Survey, excavation, sediment analysis, and geographic information system assessment of mound volume were conducted on a series of mounds surrounding the Byzantine urban settlement of Elusa in the Negev Desert.

These reveal the massive collection and dumping of domestic and construction waste over time on the city edges. Carbon dating of charred seeds and charcoal fragments combined with ceramic analysis establish the end date of orchestrated trash removal near the mid-sixth century, coinciding closely with the beginning of the LALIA event and outbreak of the Justinian Plague in the year 541.

This evidence for societal decline during the sixth century ties with other arguments for urban dysfunction across the Byzantine Levant at this time. We demonstrate the utility of trash mounds as sensitive proxies of social response and unravel the time-space dynamics of urban collapse, suggesting diminished resilience to rapid climate change in the frontier Negev region of the empire.