

OPUNTIA 451



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

KANANASKIS VALLEY

photos by Dale Speirs

2019-07-23

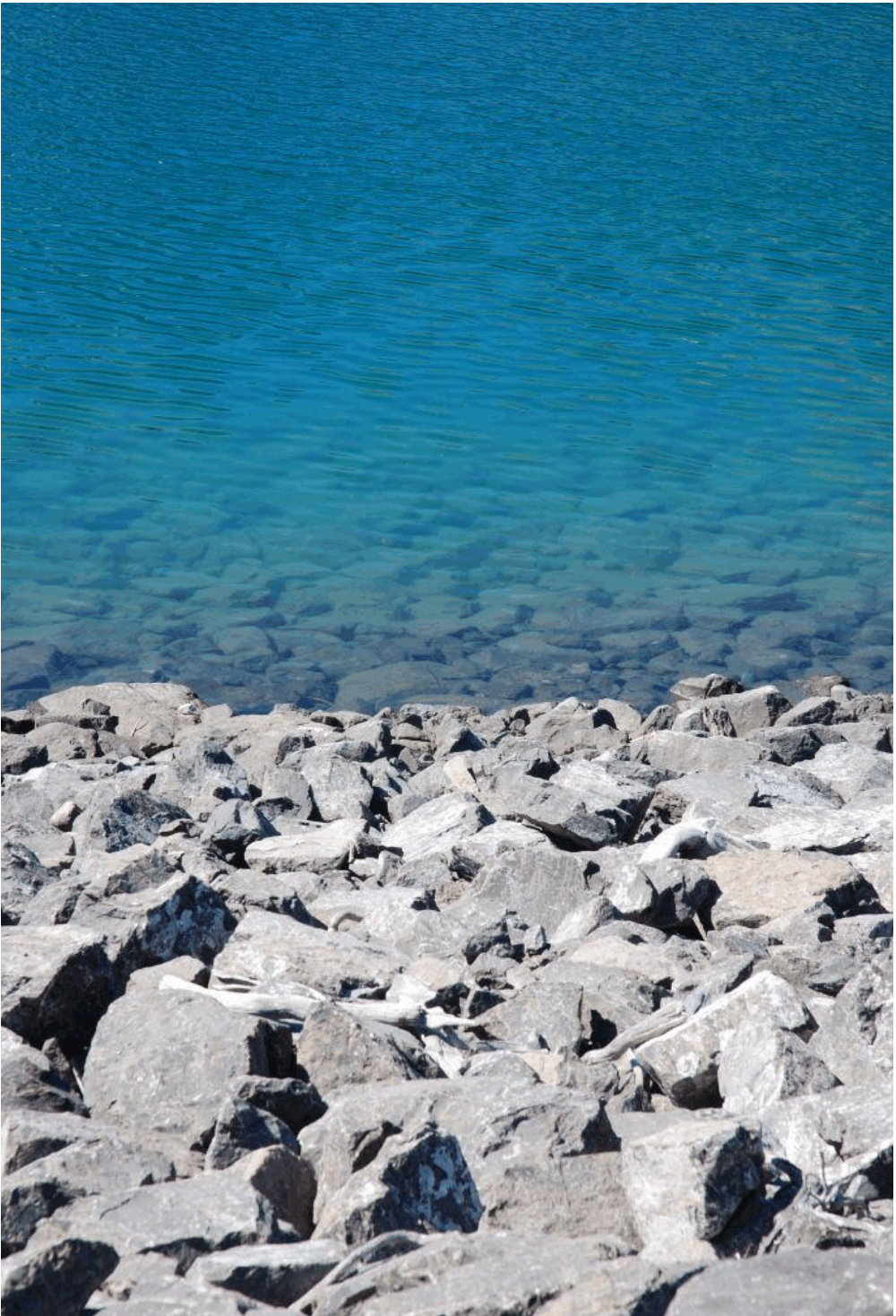
After the yahooing was done in Calgary and my cowboy shirt put away for next year's Stampede, it was time for some traveling. The Kananaskis mountains are the front range of the Rocky Mountains adjacent to Calgary. From my house to the head of the valley, at Upper Kananaskis Lake, is an hour's drive. The cover photo shows giant ripples on the lake.



Last Stampede photo for another year (clipped from a group photo), showing me in my cowboy shirt.

I wear this shirt for ten days of the Stampede, have it dry-cleaned, and then put it away until next Stampede.

The water is so clear in the Rockies that I love to photograph it. This was taken on the north shore of the lake, looking down a steep slope.



Below: This was taken later in the day on my way back to my car. The winds had calmed in the afternoon and the sun had moved around in the sky to produce better reflections.

At right: From the lake I drove halfway back down the valley to Kananaskis Village, the only settlement in the park. It was established in the early 1980s when the park was being born. Its sole purpose is to cater to the tourist trade.



The village commons is actually just a trout pond. Although it looks deserted, there are people lurking in the shade trees. Squint closely and you can see them.

It was a hot and sunny day, and ultraviolet is much worse at the higher altitudes of the mountains.



Below: *Rosa acicularis* is native to Alberta and is our floral emblem.
Bottom: Again, crystal clear water. The pond was about a metre deep.
At right: One of the paths leading away from the pond.

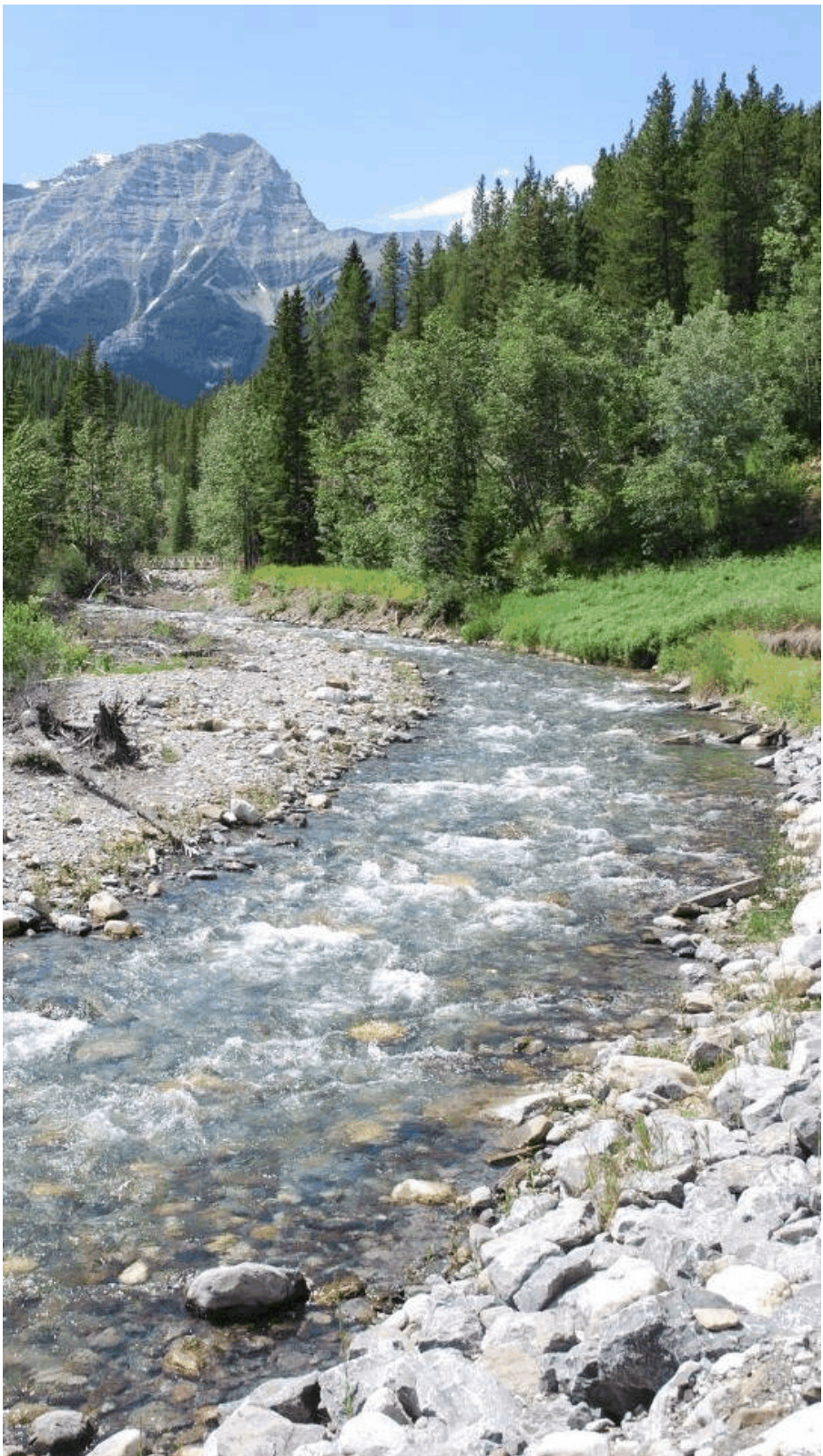


Top: The valley is constricted at the halfway mark. This view was taken from Upper Kananaskis Lake looking north down the valley. The notch in the mountains is where both the Kananaskis River and the highway squeeze through. The village is on the other side of the notch.



Bottom: I took this photo from the village promenade, looking south back up the valley at the gap.





At left: Ribbon Creek defines the northern boundary of Kananaskis Village. In the far distance is Ribbon Mountain, from whence the creek originates. I hiked a kilometre up the creek but if you've seen one photo of it, then you've seen the entire creek. It is ten kilometres long, a continuous series of small rapids.

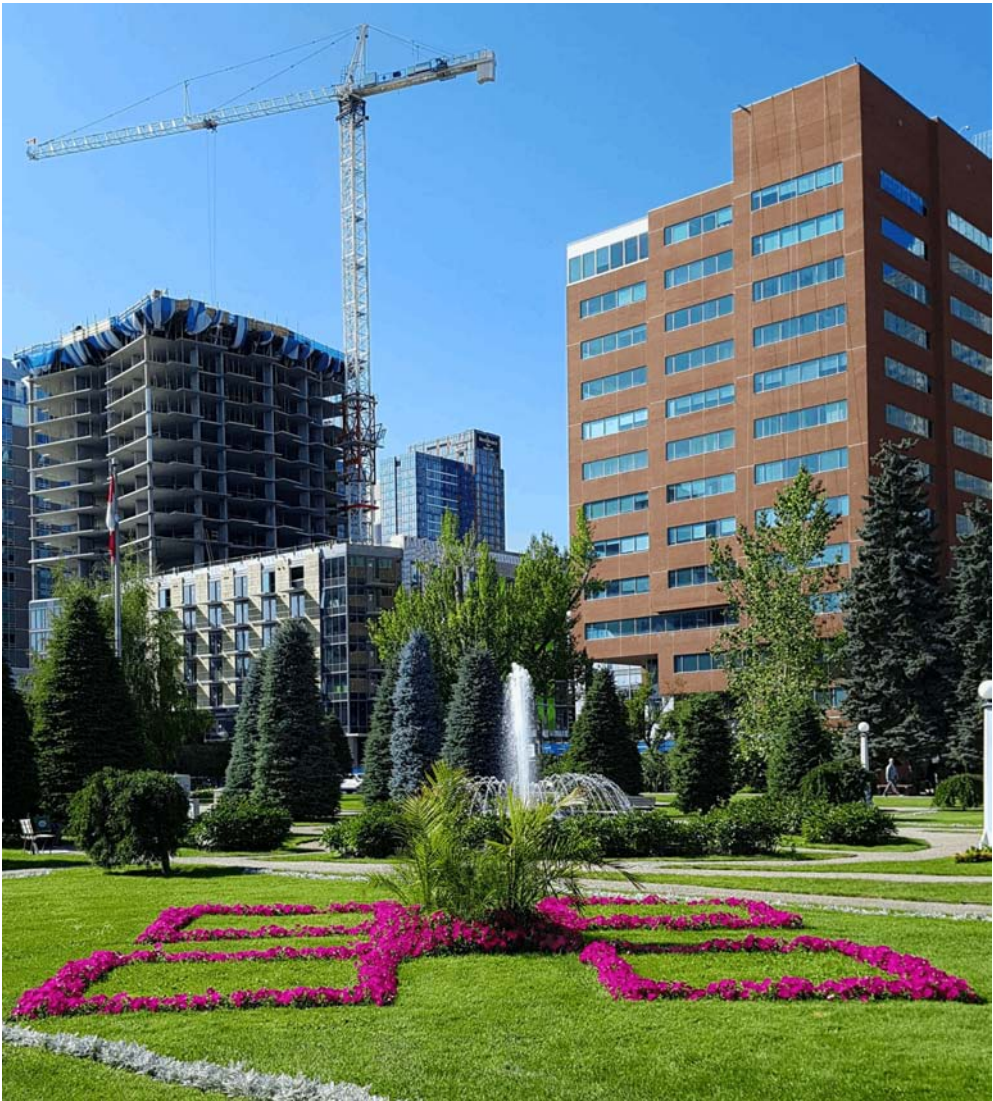
Below: On my way out of the park, I stopped and looked back at Mount Baldy. There are no prizes for guessing how it got its name.



HISTORIC CALGARY WEEK
photos by Dale Speirs

Each year the last week in July is Historic Calgary Week, with dozens and dozens of walking tours to the few remaining historic buildings in downtown Calgary that weren't destroyed and replaced by skyscrapers, and free lectures on Cowtown history. Nothing in the suburbs, 95% of which are post-war.

Below: Calgary's oldest park is in the Beltline district paralleling the downtown core. I worked 31 years for the Parks Dept and for most of that time no one could agree whether it was Memorial Park or Central Park. Finally someone in upper management decreed that henceforth it would be Central Memorial Park.



At the east end of the park is Central Memorial Library (the frontage shown on the previous page). The library board could never agree on a name either, so when Parks Dept established the official name, the board went along with them. The library was one of many across North America funded by Andrew Carnegie. Completed in 1912, it is a registered historical building and is kept in immaculate condition.

I told you all of that so I could tell you this. One of the free lectures was “The Nerds Of 1900”, presented by Cory Gross. I was surprised to read that in the schedule of events, because I knew Gross as president of the Alberta Palaeontological Society, of which I am a member. The APS is based in Calgary and has monthly meetings at Mount Royal University. I had no idea he was interested in science fiction.

The talk was in the Alexander Calhoun Salon of the Central Memorial Library. Calhoun was Calgary’s first librarian. Our city was founded in 1875, so for it to have such a magnificent library by 1912 speaks volumes about its growth.

About thirty people were in the audience, none of whom I recognized from local science fiction conventions, so Gross was apparently reaching the mundanes. He began by mentioning that the original title proposed was “The Geeks Of 1900”.

Gross pointed out to the librarians that in 1900, the term ‘geek’ had a very specific meaning. A geek was a carnival performer who bit heads off living animals such as snakes or chickens. The word ‘nerd’ came from the Dr Seuss book IF I RAN THE ZOO, published in 1950. It somehow and very quickly became a slang term for a serious student.

From there, Gross went on to consider what science fiction was available to Calgarians in 1900 as it made the transition from pioneer fort to bustling town. In that year the literature was called scientific romance. The term “science fiction” did not come into general use until the 1930s when the pulp magazines appeared.

In 1900, the big names were H.G. Wells and Jules Verne. Another name which has since dropped by the wayside, and deservedly so, was Garrett P. Serviss, best known for his novel EDISON’S CONQUEST OF MARS. Gross called him the Neil Degrasse Tyson of the 19th Century. Never having read Tyson, I’ll assume this was a two-way insult on both authors.

Edward Bellamy’s LOOKING BACKWARD has not survived the test of time but in 1900 it was hugely influential among the general public. The book angered many writers, who produced a flood of books denouncing it, Twitter not yet having been invented.

Next page: When I went in for Gross’s talk, I was surprised to see When Words Collide advertised on a library screen. I guess no one told them it sold out in June. I’ll have a report on this convention in the next issue.





BAWAH HA! HA!: PART 12

by Dale Speirs

[Parts 1 to 11 appeared in OPUNTIA #371, 372, 378, 388, 391, 393, 397, 409, 422, 427, and 434.]

Brains R Us.

Brain transplants are an old favourite in mad scientist fiction, although we are getting much closer to the day when they will become reality. I mentioned a batch of such stories in OPUNTIA #378.

Numerous science fiction pulp magazines have been and are being scanned as free downloads from www.gutenberg.org and www.archive.org. Well worth browsing, either by title or theme on the site search engines. Check back frequently at these Websites for updates.

Among those back issues are a favourite of pulp fiction, the brain or head transplant. The time is coming when the idea won't be as ridiculous as it was back then. I don't expect to hear of a brain or head transplant in my lifetime, but medical technology is advancing so rapidly that it seems possible before the end of this century.

"The Eternal Professors" by David H. Keller (1929 August, AMAZING) was about a rather vicious war between two universities, New York and Chicago, who each wanted to have bragging rights for the best faculty. Chicago resorted to biowarfare, infecting the New York professors with fatal cancers.

In turn, the New Yorkers recruited a Russian scientist who had been keeping decapitated dog heads alive in his laboratory. It was a last-ditch effort to save the professors and it worked.

Their heads were grafted onto machines that pumped fluids and blood through filters and back. The heads were supplied with air through the throats so the professors could speak and continue lecturing to their students.

Chicago wasn't about to take that lying down, so they hired a saboteur to taint the artificial blood and kill New York's eternal professors. It all ended in tears when the Chicago gang repented. Both universities suddenly had numerous faculty vacancies. Bizarre.

A few months later, in the 1929 November issue of AMAZING STORIES, was “The Brain Accelerator” by David Dressler. Yet another laboratory, yet another rogue scientist. His device revived a dead dog and gave it intelligence far above the normal canine. The scientist tried it on himself and became a genius.

There was a catch, however. Accelerated intelligence required accelerated metabolism for the brain, something the body couldn’t keep up with. Fatigue set in for both man and beast. Not much point in being a supergenius if you can’t stay awake for long. An interesting story that makes a valid point, that the laws of biology cannot be tampered with too far.

David H. Keller returned in the 1931 May issue of AMAZING STORIES with “The Cerebral Library”. The mad scientist was Charles Jefferson, who hired 500 college graduates and 3 librarians, not a difficult task in the depths of the Great Depression, when college graduates were a drag on the market and desperate for work.

The men were sent to a hideout in Maine where their task was to read one book a day every day for five years. At the end, Jefferson told them to report to a building for their final pay. His plan was to extract the brain of each man and hook it up to a central switchboard to produce a biological computer. The brains would answer any question put to them.

Unfortunately for him, there was a Secret Service man named Taine who was tracking the project. He controlled Dr Wing Loo, the surgeon who was to remove the 503 brains. Since Jefferson did not supervise the surgery, Taine was able to substitute wax replicas of brains and thus foil him.

Keller published another story in that series, “The Steam Shovel” (1931 September, AMAZING STORIES). A contractor building a railroad in Indochina was having difficulty with lazy natives and alcoholic white men who operated the equipment. In desperation he asked Wing Loo for help.

There was an old elephant which worked on the line. The Rajah didn’t like it and ordered it killed. Wing Loo installed the elephant’s brain into a giant steam shovel. Since the operation of such machines wasn’t much different than what the elephant was doing, the brain was successfully trained.

The Rajah came by for an inspection tour of the railroad. The elephant-operated steam shovel recognized him, and you can guess the remainder. A neat ending.

“The House Of Horror” was a 1938 episode of the old-time radio series THE SHADOW, some episodes of which are available from www.otrr.org but not this one, which I heard on a Calgary station that plays OTR. No writer credits were given, as per usual. The Shadow was in reality Lamont Cranston, a wealthy young man about town. His girlfriend, the lovely Margo Lane, was the only one who knew his secret.

The episode opened with thugs kidnapping a gorilla from a zoo, killing the night watchman in the process. The ape was wanted by a mad scientist who was going to transplant the brains of nubile young women into gorillas. His plan was to create an army of superstrength apes that would do as they were told, and thereby help him conquer the world. You can tell the uncredited writer dashed this script off while working his way through a bottle of Scotch.

Lane played her part as the traditional damsel in distress, almost having her brain transferred into the stolen gorilla. The final confrontation was in the laboratory with the expected screaming and bwah-ha-ha chortling. The Shadow appeared, or rather didn’t appear as he was invisible, and made certain that events would proceed no further than all the vocalizing.

BLACK FRIDAY is a 1940 movie written by Kurt Siodmak and Eric Taylor, based on Siodmak’s novel of the same title published in 1939. Nothing to do with a later movie of the same title about football terrorists.

It was part of a series of science fiction films starring Boris Karloff and Bela Lugosi, produced by Universal Studios and recently released as part of a four-pack DVD set. Unlike the B-movies of the 1950s, the 1930s and 1940s movies were better produced in terms of quality and scripting. Not too bad to watch.

Siodmak was fascinated by the idea of brain transplants and re-visited the subject several times. His 1942 novel DONOVAN’S BRAIN was made into a movie in 1953.

In BLACK FRIDAY, Dr Ernest Sovac wanted to help his friend George Kingsley, a mild-mannered professor of English literature. Kingsley was brain-injured during a drive-by shooting in which he was an innocent bystander.

The target of the drive-by was gangster Red Cannon, who was fleeing his enemies when he lost control of his car and swerved up onto the sidewalk, hitting Kingsley. Sovac dealt with both men in the hospital emergency ward.

To save Kingsley's life, he transplanted part of Cannon's brain into him, leaving Cannon to die as worthless trash. Before the shooting incident, Cannon had hidden \$500,000 cash in loot, millions in today's depreciated currency. Sovac wondered if the transplanted part of Cannon's brain would retain knowledge of his former life, specifically where the money was hidden.

In a word, yes. The rest of the movie followed the Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde transformation of Kingsley/Cannon. The sound of a passing siren of an ambulance, fire truck, or police car, triggered Cannon's personality to become dominant and take over Kingsley's body. However, when he fell asleep, he woke up the next morning with Kingsley's personality in charge and unaware of what Cannon was doing.

Back and forth the two personalities went, complicating the lives of Kingsley and Sovac. Cannon used his time to kill his enemies one by one, while Sovac lurked about hoping to get his hands on the missing money. It ended in tears, as Sovac was forced to shoot Kingsley qua Cannon dead, and in turn was executed for murder.

It was never specified what part of Cannon's brain was transplanted into Kingsley's body. Since memory and personality were involved, it was probably the frontal lobe of the cerebrum. The other question was immune rejection. Sovac never administered any drugs to suppress rejection of transplanted tissues. To be fair, that sort of thing was little known at the time.

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

"The Brooklyn Brain" was a 1950 episode, no writer credited, about star-crossed lovers Joe and Clarisse, who both were Noo Yawkers with Brooklyn accents thick enough to cut with a knife.

Joe proposed marriage but Clarisse declined to say yes or no immediately. She wanted that Joe should become cultured, him being a garment store owner with no class. Not that she had any, but she had aspirations to better herself.

Joe unloaded his woes on his secretary Flora. She mentioned seeing an advertisement in the noospaper, pardon me, the newspaper, for intelligence

improvement experiments. (All those Brooklyn accents got to me. It was a full day before I started talking Canajun again, eh?)

Joe was desperate and applied to the laboratory where a scientist had been testing a device on dogs that transferred knowledge from a recording. This seemed to be an early use of subliminal training. The scientist said he implanted Einstein's theories into a dog, although it was never explained how he could tell. Could a dog bark $E = mc^2$?

The device had never been tested on humans, but Joe ws willing to take the chance. He asked for implantation of knowledge about the arts and economics. The thing was done, and off he went to a dinner with Clarisse, where he put on a bravura display of artistic knowledge.

He didn't have long to bask in his glory, as the next day he found he had lost all that knowledge. A return trip to the professor confirmed that the implanted information faded away after a day. Joe decided that from there on he would just bluff his way. He rushed Clarisse into marriage. As the episode closed, she gushed to Joe that he was so smart he could probably explain Einstein.

Consider the practical economics of brains, as in the 1952 episode of INNER SANCTUM MYSTERIES titled "No Rest For The Dead", written by Robert Sloan. Each episode opened with the sound of a creaking door, the trademark of the show. The episodes were introduced by a genial host who delighted in ghoulish puns.

George Denning, a starving artist, came home to tell his daughter Grace that he had sold his brain to Dr Tarleton for enough money to get by. To be collected upon his death, of course, for scientific research. Grace objected and wanted him to return the money. She didn't like Tarleton because he had an affair with her mother, since dead.

Grace telephoned Tarleton's office but the receptionist told her the doctor had just been murdered. A man calling himself Macabre was the last to see him, and his description matched that of her father. No sooner did she hang up on that call than the telephone rang. It was Mr Macabre, asking her to meet him at the medical laboratory where she would learn something to her advantage.

Upon arrival, the night watchman told her Macabre was dead, but the corpse he showed her was that of Tarleton. The watchman was upset because he didn't

know the body had been switched. At the laboratory, another telephone call came in from Macabre, sending her to an address that he said was the home of the woman who really murdered Tarleton. She was the receptionist.

The plot complicated itself into a tangle of unexplained connections between all the characters. Paranoia reigned supreme, and nobody trusted anyone else to be telling the truth. Everyone wound up back at Tarleton's office for the denouement.

The ending was completely unbelievable, with an out-of-the-blue confession by Grace that she did it. She had learned that Tarleton felt guilty about seducing her mother, so he left her half his estate. She decided to gain her inheritance while she was still young enough to enjoy it. Not only were none of the loose threads tied up, but the entire ball of wool was tossed off stage.

The Girls In The Golden Atoms.

A long popular theme of science fiction is the superscience of shrinking people down, down, down. I mentioned stories on this theme in two previous installments of this column in OPUNTIAS #372 and 388.

When atomic physics was just being born at the turn of the 1900s, the prevailing model of the atom was a core made of protons and neutrons with electrons whizzing in orbits around them. We now know it's a bit more complicated than that but for a few decades the planetary model prevailed.

It didn't take long for science fiction writers to seize upon the idea that atoms were just miniature stellar systems. There was a flood of such stories where someone miniaturized himself down and landed on an electron planet, wherein he had assorted adventures with golden girls. These stories were easy to write. Just have the boys in the laboratory invent a superscience machine for the shrinking, then upon arrival write a standard lost-world or Tarzan adventure.

Numerous science fiction pulp magazines have been and are being scanned as free downloads from www.gutenberg.org and www.archive.org. Well worth browsing, either by title or theme on the site search engines. Check back frequently at these Websites for updates.

I told you that because I am working my way through old pulps downloaded as free pdfs. From the 1929 November issue of AMAZING STORIES comes

"Microcosmic Buccaneers" by Harl Vincent. The story followed the traditional path of scientists tinkering with a superscience machine equipped with handwavers and magic rays.

The scientists found themselves on an electron planet which had three suns in the sky. One was red and the other two shone blue, suggesting this was a tritium atom (hydrogen with one proton and two neutrons). They soon ran afoul of the natives, an advanced society who understood English and had high technology.

Insert any standard action-adventure plot in a jungle world, as indeed this author did. There was a fair maiden for the younger scientist. Meanwhile, back at the laboratory, their superscience machine automatically returned them along with the young woman. All was well, and Einstein need never know.

"Submicroscopic" by Capt. S.P. Meek (1931 August, AMAZING STORIES) shamelessly repeated the plot. Scientist shrunk himself, adventures with natives, beautiful princess, re-enlarged back to Earth. Although the story read well as an action-adventure, it was routine and forgettable.

The sequel to that story was "Awlo Of Ulm" (1931 September, AMAZING STORIES). The scientist re-shrank himself back to the electron world to help the natives, and the beautiful princess of course, fight the bad guys. This time around he introduced modern weapons and technology. The usual alarms and excursions, kidnapping of women, and all that.

I think the reason these golden atom stories held on so long was because the exploration of Earth had, by the 1930s, rendered lost world stories pointless. Since Tarzan was obsolete in Earth jungles, the electron worlds were a chance for authors to continue selling such stories.

A modern retelling from a different point of view was the humorous story "A Life In Particle Archaeology" by John J. Vester (2019 July/August, ANALOG). It poked fun at all the girl in the golden atom stories that were popular in the 1930s pulp magazines.

An insectoid species was testing a new electronic probe that could reach down and touch an electron. The probe could send back images of the surface of the electron. There was life on this particular electron, or rather, had been life. The electron was planet Earth.

The touch of the probe heated every water molecule to 98°C for fifteen minutes, thereby destroying all life. The insectoids continued to probe and marvel at all the sub-sub-sub atomic particles they were finding, completely unaware that the electron had once swarmed with life.

Shrinkage Of A Different Sort.

THE AVENGERS, not the mob of American superheroes prancing about in brightly-coloured spandex, but the 1960s British television show, had an episode of shrinking. John Steed was the main protagonist of the series, a suave, bowler-hatted debonair agent working for the Ministry of something or other. His colleague was Mrs Emma Peel, not an assistant but a counterspy in her own right, who could and frequently did use judo to overcome her assailants.

The series fluctuated between serious spy-counterspy adventures and parodies of then-current movies or shows. Some episodes drifted into weird fiction or avant garde.

One such episode was “Mission: Highly Improbable” (1967), written by Philip Levene. The plot began when a British Army General and his Rolls-Royce were miniaturized en route to a secret testing area, the Metal Fatigue Division. Dr Chivers, a 30-ish scientist did the trick, using an invention of elderly Prof. Rushton.

Chivers, and for that matter Rushton’s beautiful daughter Susan, were irritated by penny-pinching bureaucrats. The difference was that Chivers was doing something about it.

Father and daughter didn’t know what Chivers had done, nor that he disposed of the miniaturized General by wrapping him, still alive, in a small box and shoving it into a garbage can. A security officer became the second victim to be miniaturized, this time washed with a hose into a sump.

Chivers made contact with the Soviets, hoping to sell them the device. Along the way, Steed inadvertently became miniaturized, although Chivers didn’t know he was in the line of fire, as he was aiming at something else. The usual plot clichés followed, and various excursions took place, although no one seemed alarmed.

Fortunately the machine was reversible, so Steed was brought back to original size, although Peel got shrunk in her turn. She got back to full size, rest assured. Half the cast were shrunk and enlarged at one time or another. The episode was played as mild comedy, with Steed and Peel doing just a little too much mugging or quipping wryly for the camera.

The SFX were reasonably good excepting that there were problems with size. No two people or vehicles were shrunk to the same scale. There was also the question of missing mass. People, cars, and armoured vehicles were shrunk, then someone casually picked them up and put them into their coat pocket.

It is a problem as old as the first such stories about shrinking people and objects. When they shrink, where does the mass go? When they are restored to normal size, how did they get their mass back?

Bzzzzzt!

The death ray is a time-honoured tradition of science fiction. Originally just a bunch of bwah-ha-ha-ing by pulp writers, it is not entirely implausible today in the form of lasers or ionized particle beams.

From the 1929 July issue of AMAZING STORIES (available from www.archive.org) is “The Purple Death” by Jack Barnette. Two scientists, not necessarily mad, were experimenting with a new device that emitted a purple ray which apparently did nothing. They couldn’t figure it out at first.

Subsequent testing revealed that if an ultraviolet beam was pointed at a subject sensitized by the purple ray, it would vanish into nothingness. What the scientists didn’t realize was that the purple ray sensitized everything in the laboratory. One of them stepped into sunlight streaming through a window and vanished, for sunlight has ultraviolet rays in it.

The other didn’t understand what happened and suffered the same fate. The next of kin came by after the inquest. No one else knew what had happened, but when they carried out the machinery as scrap metal, it too dissolved in the sunlight.

A variation on the theme was in the 1930 February AMAZING in the story “Into The Valley Of Death” by Alfred Pringle. The mad scientist in question invented a device that projected a beam of high-frequency sound waves that

pulverized their target into dust. He had a big one in Death Valley, California, which he used to show that it could dissolve mountains. He also had a smaller hand-carried device that served as a tactical weapon.

The ending was poorly written. He suddenly went full-scale raving mad and with a bwah-ha!-ha! turned the two devices on each other to see what would happen. What did happen was a loud bang, followed by the obliteration of both beam guns, the mad scientist, and his laboratory. On that point the story ended, the author evidently having run out of ideas or any way to reach a conclusion.

Consider, if you will, “Mystery Of The Death Ray Tube”, no writer credited, a 1937 episode of the old-time radio series PHYL COE MYSTERIES. This was an unusual contest programme sponsored by the Philco radio company. (This and other OTR shows are available as free mp3s from www.otrrlibrary.org.)

Each episode was a self-contained mystery during which amateur detective Phyllis Coe revealed the culprit but without giving any explanation how she did it.

Each week, Philco dealers had a free booklet about the forthcoming show, containing clues that were not mentioned on air but which Coe used to solve the case. The culprit was always named in the aired episode, but listeners had to send in entries with the clues listed, on the form provided in the booklet. Big cash prizes were awarded.

The idea of the booklets was to bring customer traffic into the Philco stores. There was no obligation to buy, but dealers certainly had point-of-sale signs along the aisles.

The episode at hand opened in the Colorado mountains where Phyllis Coe and her boyfriend Tom Taylor were staying in a cabin. It was sunrise, and they were sitting out front admiring the new day. Nothing was said about separate bedrooms, so old-time radio wasn't always as prudish as some might think.

Coe had been called out west by her father, who wanted her to check in with a family friend, Dr Joseph Crowfoot, the resident mad scientist. Also present was Major William Osgood from the War Department. Crowfoot was to demonstrate a death ray. A small prototype was used to despatch a guinea pig, with Coe and Taylor uttering suitable gasps of amazement.

Alas, during the night someone set fire to the laboratory in order to cover the theft of the death ray. Crowfoot suspected everybody, including his lab assistants. Using the clues only specified in the booklet, Coe identified the Major as the thief. He confessed that he was indeed a foreign spy, an imposter with fake credentials.

The spy held the group at ray-point, not gunpoint, using the death ray. Taylor saved them with a gun, not a ray, but the doctor was killed and the only working ray tube smashed. Coe remarked that it was just as well that no one would be able to duplicate the ray gun. Quite the understatement.

“Professor X” was a 1938 episode of the old-time radio series THE SHADOW, some episodes of which are available from www.otrr.org. No writer credits were given. The Shadow was in reality Lamont Cranston, a wealthy young man about town. His girlfriend, the lovely Margo Lane, was the only one who knew his secret.

Professor X was actually Professor Kramer, who had been doing private experiments funded by gangster Joe Martin. He got as far as demonstrating a large box to Martin. Anything placed into the man-sized box was disintegrated into nothing. Martin murdered the professor but strangely did not disintegrate him; he walled him up inside a plaster wall.

Cranston had received a letter from Kramer inviting up to the laboratory. With Lane at his side, they found the body. A letter in the dead man's pocket led them to Martin's residence, where the disintegrator box had been relocated. The traditional plot was followed, with Lane trapped inside the box and only one bzzzzzt away from being disintegrated.

While Martin was stuffing her into the box, The Shadow took the opportunity to disconnect the wires from the box at the control panel and attach them to the switch. When Martin touched the switch, he was electrocuted and Lane was saved. Henceforth, gangsters would have to dispose of bodies the old-fashioned way by dumping them in the East River.

LIGHTS, CAMERA, MURDER!:: PART 4

by Dale Speirs

[Parts 1 to 3 appeared in OPUNTIA's #394, 413, and 429.]

Dead On The Air.

DEATH BY KILLER MOP DOLL (2012) by Lois Winston is a novel in a cozy mystery series about Anastasia Pollack. Her hobby was arts and crafts but her life as a young widow with two children took precedence. She was plagued by a mountain of debts, assorted noisy pets, a Communist mother-in-law, and a mother who was a member of the Daughters of the American Revolution. Those two women hated each intensely and were always sparring. Pollack has a job with the magazine AMERICAN WOMAN as the crafts editor.

Which brought the story to the plot. Mama went through husbands and boyfriends like socks. Her latest paramour was Louis Beaumont, producer of the morning television show YOU HEARD IT HERE FIRST, with genial hosts Vince Alto and Monica Rivers.

The ratings were down, and they weren't so genial when they learned that Beaumont cut a deal with the network to change the show from gossip to fashion and home-making. The new hosts were the staff at the AW magazine, including Pollack.

The novel stopped for a few pages for instructions on how to make a mop doll before the action resumed. Someone trashed the YHIF set. Possibly the same person later trashed Beaumont, who was canceled with a knitting needle through his heart. The show wasn't canceled though. The media company that owned it ordered the next episode to be ready even before Beaumont was buried.

Pollack calmed herself by making some curly doll hair, using instructions inserted into the middle of Chapter 6. Following tradition, the most obvious suspect became victim #2. Alto would never again co-host anything. Pausing only for instructions on making a bunny doll (seriously, in Chapter 11) the infighting within the media company made the police homicide investigations look trivial.

Again following tradition, Pollack got herself trapped with the murderers, who were production staff creating their own job promotions by creating job

vacancies the illegal way. After the last-minute rescue, instead of the usual epilogue there was a fantasy ending whereby the media company paid out big money to compensate Pollack for her stress. But wait! There's more!

Not content with that for a proper ending, everyone turned on their television sets to watch a police chase, live on camera. The murderers escaped custody and headed to the television studio to settle their grudge against Pollack. It ended in a gunfight in front of the building. An interesting read, not like the average cozy. Certainly a zippier ending.

Dead Off Screen.

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

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

"Murder And One To Go" was a 1949 episode of LET GEORGE DO IT, written by David Victor and Herbert Little Jr. It began with a theatrical agent asking Valentine to locate Carol Gordon, a faded silent screen star, last seen a year ago on Skid Row. Her career and then her life crashed in 1929 when talkies came in and she proved unable to make the transition.

The agent was murdered, but Valentine carried on the search. His friends remarked that finding Gordon was like finding a needle in a haystack, to which he replied that was easy, just use a large magnet. His magnet for Gordon was to arrange a revival showing of her movies at a cheap theatre near Skid Row and advertise it widely. It worked, and drew her out.

It wasn't as simple as that of course, and various complications in the plot developed. Gordon had separated from her husband years ago. He wanted to

remarry and needed her to sign divorce papers. The agent was up to sharp practice (which seemed normal) and there were several suspects who wanted revenge against him.

The murderer sent Gordon a bottle of spiked champagne, and cut the brake line on Valentine's car. Both survived to see the killer taken in for the agent's murder. Loose threads were tied up in the epilogue when Valentine explained everything to the police lieutenant. Like the other later episodes (the earliest ones were rough cuts) this one is a fair listen. Not great art but a comfortable listen.

BIRD, BATH, AND BEYOND (2018) by E.J. Copperman was a novel in a cozy series about Kay Powell, who operated Agent To The Paws, which supplied animals for television and movie studios. Her current job was babysitting a parrot named Barney, who was working on the television show DEAD CITY.

The star of the show, the human one that is, was shot in his trailer between scenes, and Barney was the only witness. The series was about zombie detectives, and Dray Mattone was the leading man. Barney's catchphrase line was "*Can't kill a zombie*". Since Mattone wasn't a zombie, someone could kill him.

The police interrogated Barney but he wasn't that helpful, other than him shouting "*Put down that gun!*" every so often. Mattone had been shot in the back of the head, so the reader will wonder how he could have said that. Powell had to explain to the police that parrots could not have a genuine conversation, so giving Barney the third degree wouldn't work.

The studio was distressed and hysterical, not so much about Mattone's death but how to keep filming the series. It cost big money to keep the crew on standby. The current episode could be finished with a bit of film editing, but replacing the lead character was a major job for the writers. They were, of course, deeply regretful about Mattone's death, but first things first.

The story switched about every so often. The murderer managed to plant the handgun inside Powell's purse. The killer had an accomplice, an actress who was going nowhere. She helped the murderer falsify evidence and trap Powell in a burning trailer on the set.

The plot line made more right-angle bends than the Elbow River as it flows through Calgary. Justice prevailed bloodily and all ended well for Powell, since she was booked for the series.

Dead On Screen.

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

"Movie Murder Case" was a 1949 episode of the OTR series, no writer credited. The venue was an outdoor cowboy movie set. The leading man was Art Ingram, who died of a broken neck after being thrown from his horse during a scene. A curious incident was that he was riding with bare hands, whereas cowboys normally wear gloves.

Philo Vance was called in by the District Attorney to investigate on location. Suspects included just about everyone who knew Ingram. As his leading lady told Vance when he asked her to name Ingram's enemies, it would be faster to just list his friends.

The main suspects were the scriptwriter Bill Moore and a stuntman Wally Douglas. Ingram had stolen Moore's sister away from her fiancé and then dumped her a few months later after he got bored with her. She committed suicide. Douglas had formerly been a boxer who retired from one concussion too many. He was okay as a stuntman but wasn't able to remember lines because of his head injury.

Vance believed that Ingram had been killed before he was put on his horse by the murderer. He had been out of sight of the crew in order to bring his horse up to full gallop before reaching the camera. The killer could have been helping Ingram up onto the saddle and snapped his neck without being seen. When the body toppled off just as the horse reached the camera, it would look like an accidental death.

The show must go on, and there were still many scenes to be filmed, not that anyone was mourning Ingram. The director had Douglas act as a body double for Ingram, telling him: "*You'll have the most famous back in Hollywood.*" As the scenes were shot, Vance worked his way through the suspects.

The case was solved with knowledge held back from the listener. Vance made a phone call and found out that the fiancé of Moore's sister had been Douglas. That and other withheld information was revealed in the epilogue as Vance filled in all the details.

It was a case of revenge, always best served cold. Ingram had never met Douglas qua the fiancé, and hadn't known he was riding with a man who held a grudge.

And The Murder Goes To ...

DIAL EMMY FOR MURDER (2009) was written by Eileen Davidson, a real-life soap opera actress who wrote what she knew best (soaps, not murders). The protagonist of the novel was Alexis Peterson, who was preparing to be a presenter at the Daytime Emmy Awards.

The ceremony was a doozy. Her co-presenter Jackson Masters missed his cue and she had to go on stage without him. He made a spectacular entrance a few moments later when his body fell off a catwalk and narrowly missed Peterson. Masters had been a 20-something hunk who didn't hesitate to enjoy the ladies.

This time around, the soap opera plots were real, not just a figure of speech. What really upset Peterson was facing the fact that she was now a woman of a certain age. During her Marpleing, another character referred to her as an older woman. *"I wanted to weep. Was I truly that old? Never mind. I still needed information."*

The culprit was a really really angry stage mother. The final confrontation involved Peterson defending herself with a hockey stick, disarming the murderer with a bit of high sticking. This was in Los Angeles mind you, not Canada. An interesting read.

Movie Go Wrong.

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. Those were its glory days. 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.

Fibber McGee and his wife Molly lived in Wistful Vista, state never specified, and did not seem to have gainful employment yet always had money to be doing things.

"Horror Movie At The Bijou" was a 15-minute episode aired in 1955, written by Phil Leslie and Ralph Goodman. Fibber and Molly decided to go out for an old Boris Karloff and Bela Lugosi movie. Remember this was in the days before home video. There were art house theatres which specialized in airing old movies for people who wanted to see them again or hadn't been around for the first release.

The next showing was 13h30, but Fibber and Molly missed it because their living room clock was slow. It wasn't until another character dropped by that they discovered the problem. Not a big deal, as there was a 16h30 showing. That turned into a big deal when they found the car battery had died. Fibber had a battery recharger, so he hooked it up and they waited for the 19h30 showing.

Despite Molly's trepidations, they made it on time and sat down to enjoy it. They chatted with another audience member who told him he had seen it before. He inadvertently revealed who the murderer was, almost starting a fistfight with Fibber. The management gave Fibber and Molly a credit note for next week's movie. A musical.

THE TWILIGHT ZONE television series needs no introduction. Rod Serling's masterpiece aired from 1959 to 1964. I'd never actually seen it until I found the boxed set on sale in 2019. When it first aired, I was four years old. Since it was black-and-white, it was never syndicated in Alberta after colour television came in during the middle 1960s, when I would have been old enough to be interested.

"The Sixteen-Millimeter Shrine" was a 1959 episode written by Rod Serling. An aging actress had spent the last 25 years in seclusion at her mansion, constantly re-screening her movies from her glory days as a young leading lady. She would not accept that her time had come and gone.

Her agent tried to get her to come back into the real world and accept a small part as the mother of teenagers, to no avail. He brought one of her leading men to visit, now a grey-haired man with thick glasses and who owned a small chain of supermarkets. That only increased her trauma.

All attempts to stop her from living in the past failed. She finally managed to be absorbed into one of her films, replacing her younger image, and left this world. The agent saw her inside the last movie she had been playing on her projector, stepping cheerfully out into the mansion's garden, never to return. With her was her leading man, young again and always would be.

“A World Of Difference” was a 1960 episode written by Richard Matheson. It began with a businessman named Arthur Curtis coming into his office to start the morning's work. He made his first telephone call but the phone didn't work. Someone behind him yelled “CUT!”. He turned to look and the back wall of his office had vanished. A movie production crew stared back at him.

Curtis went berserk after the director stepped forward and talked to him. He refused to believe he was an actor playing the role of Curtis, yet there he was inside a movie studio. He fled outside and met the actor's ex-wife, who was after him for alimony. In desperation he tried to find the home of Curtis but since it was on a fictional street, he was lost in the city.

Eventually he made his way back to the studio, where the props staff were dismantling the set. Enough of it was left that he could sit down at his desk and try the telephone again. It brought him back into the world he came from, an ordinary businessman, and he, both as character and actor, vanished into the Twilight Zone. It was never explained if he was an actor having a nervous breakdown or a character who had slipped into a different universe.

“Showdown With Rance McGrew” was a 1962 episode of THE TWILIGHT ZONE, written by Rod Serling. It was a rare comedy episode, quite hilarious in some scenes, about an inept cowboy star in a B-grade Western television series. Rance McGrew was filming a saloon scene where he was to triumph over Jesse James in one of those clichéd gunfights. Between McGrew's ego and his inability get a scene done in one take, the actor playing James was quite annoyed at him.

The director wasn't too happy either, as McGrew kept accidentally breaking the long mirror behind the bar. During one scene, McGrew suddenly found himself in a real Old West saloon with the real Jesse James. He quickly became a blubbering coward fleeing from James. Then he reverted back to the Hollywood studio, but this time a sadder and wiser man. There was one catch. McGrew's agent came by to talk some sense into him. The agent was the spitting image of the real Jesse James.

SEEN IN THE LITERATURE

Kim, C.S. (2019) **Can stabilization and symmetry breakings give rise to life in the process of the universe evolution?** INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ASTROBIOLOGY 18:311-315

Author's abstract: *Biogenesis can be understood as the final process of the Universe's evolution, from Planck scale down to nuclear scale to atomic scale to molecular scale, then finally to bioscale, with the breaking of relevant symmetries at every step.*

By assuming the simplest definition of life, that life is just a molecular system which can reproduce itself (auto-reproducing molecular system, ARMS) and has such kinetic ability (kinetomolecular system), at least for its microscopic level, as to respond actively to its surrounding environments, we tried to explain the origin of life, taking the final step of the Universe evolution.

We found a few clues for the origin of life, such as:

- (1) As the Universe expands and gets extremely cold, biogenesis can take place by ARMS, new level of stabilization may be achievable only at 'locally cold places' (LCPs), such as comets.*
- (2) There must be the parity breaking in the bioscale stabilization process, which can be violated spontaneously, or dynamically by the van der Waals forces possible only at LCPs.*
- (3) The rule of bioparity breaking is universal within the biohorizon. So we will find, e.g. only left-handed amino acids in all living beings dwelling within our Galaxy.*
- (4) The idea of biogenesis through the bioscale stabilization in the evolution of the Universe looks very consistent with Panspermia hypothesis and supports it by providing a viable answer for life's origin at such LCPs.*

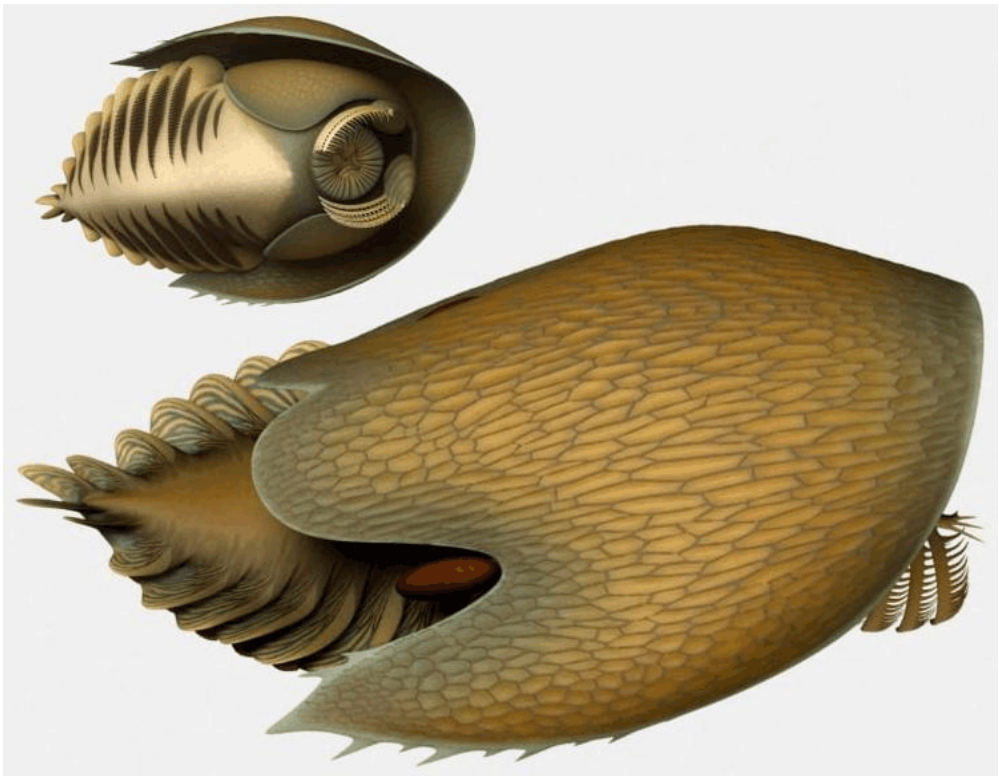
Moysiuk, J., and J-B. Caron (2019) **A new hurdiid radiodont from the Burgess Shale evinces the exploitation of Cambrian infaunal food sources.** PROCEEDINGS OF THE ROYAL SOCIETY OF LONDON 286B:doi.org/10.1098/rspb.2019.1079

Authors' abstract: *Radiodonts, a clade of Cambro-Devonian stem group euarthropods, have classically been regarded as nektonic apex predators. However, many aspects of radiodont morphology and ecology have remained*

unclear because of the typically fragmentary nature of fossil material. Here, we describe a new hurdiid radiodont based on abundant and exceptionally well-preserved fossils from the Burgess Shale (Marble Canyon area, British Columbia, Canada).

Cambroraster falcatus gen. et sp. nov. is characterized by an extra-large horseshoe-shaped head carapace, bearing conspicuous posterolateral spinous processes, and partially covering a short trunk with eight pairs of lateral flaps. Each of the pair of frontal appendages possess five mesially curving rake-like endites equipped with a series of anteriorly directed hooked spines, altogether surrounding the oral cone.

This feeding apparatus suggests a micro to macrophagous sediment-sifting feeding ecology. *Cambroraster* illuminates the evolution of Hurdiidae and evinces the exploitation of the diversifying infauna by these large and specialized nektobenthic carnivores in the aftermath of the Cambrian explosion.



Ledger, P.M., et al (2019) **New horizons at L’Anse aux Meadows.** PROCEEDINGS OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES USA 116:doi.org/cgi/doi/10.1073/pnas.1907986116

Authors’ abstract: *The UNESCO World Heritage site of L’Anse aux Meadows (LAM) in northern Newfoundland is the only undisputed site of pre-1492 presence of Europeans in the Americas. In August 2018, we undertook fieldwork at LAM to sample the peat bog 30m east of the Norse ruins for a multiproxy paleoenvironmental assessment of Norse settlement. Instead, we encountered a new cultural horizon.*

Here we report our fieldwork at this iconic site and a Bayesian analysis of legacy radiocarbon data, which nuance previous conclusions and suggest Norse activity at LAM may have endured for a century. In light of these findings, we reflect on how the cultural horizon, containing nonnative ecofacts, may relate to indigenous or Norse activities.

Despite being the earliest known European outpost in North America, LAM remains enigmatic. None of the structures are identifiable as animal shelters, nor is there faunal evidence for animal husbandry, the foundation of Norse subsistence in Greenland and Iceland. LAM is therefore an outlier within the Norse settlements of the North Atlantic.

The paucity of material culture and shallow deposits indicate a transitory place functioning as a base for exploration of North America. Although the Norse colonization of the North Atlantic is often viewed as a search for farmland, it was also an endeavor to secure luxury resources for European markets. From this perspective, perhaps a Norse outpost makes perfect sense. LAM is located on the shores of a rich cod fishery, which, 6 centuries later, was home to hundreds of seasonal French fishers, and in a dense nesting region for eiders. Both stockfish (dried cod) and eiderdown were highly prized commodities in the Viking Age.

McDermott, Amy (2019) **Light-seeking mobile houseplants raise big questions about the future of technology.** PROCEEDINGS OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES USA 116:15313-15315

Extracts: *Houseplants on wheels roamed the hallways of Rutgers University in New Jersey, beginning in 2012, sunning themselves in bright windows and*

asking students for water when their soil was dry. No remote control directed them. No unseen hand guided their movement. Themobile plants, called FloraBorgs, drove themselves.



Bioroboticist Harpreet Sareen of Parson’s School of Design in New York, NY, and Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge sought a different approach, one that uses the plant itself as the photosensor, creating a true hybrid between organic and machine, and pointing out the nonnecessity of reliance on artificial products.

Called Elowan, the project connects a houseplant and a mobile base using fine wire electrodes poking into stems on either side of the plant. The electrodes detect calcium gradients, a kind of chemical signal produced when a plant senses light, Sareen says. The calcium reacts with silver chloride at the electrode tip, producing electricity. Only then does the electrode communicate with a robotic base that moves in the direction of the signal.

Sareen attributes the recent explosion of plant-robot combinations to existential dread about humanity’s exploitative relationship with the environment. In the marriage of nature and technology, he sees an urge to fix things. “We are desperate to look for ideas that can propagate that change,” he says. No single

project claims to answer all of the grand questions it poses. Questions are the point in most cases.

As it happens, all these creations are also quite likable. Audiences often view them as pets, McMullen says. The emotional attachments are faster and more intense than she expected, one more example of the blurring edge between life and technology. Likable as they are, none of these projects are widely commercially available, although Hexa’s robotic base is sold online.

Speirs: I have a BSc in Horticulture from the University of Alberta in Edmonton, Class of 1978. Not once did we or our professors imagine mobile houseplants.

Francis, E.A., et al (2019) **Anthropogenic nest sites provide warmer incubation environments than natural nest sites in a population of oviparous reptiles near their northern range limit.** OECOLOGIA 190:511-522

Authors’ abstract: *Oviposition site choice affects a host of offspring phenotypes and directly impacts maternal fitness. Recent evidence suggests that oviparous reptiles often select nest sites where the landscape has been altered by anthropogenic activity, whereas natural nest sites are less often used.*

We leverage a long-term study of snapping turtle (Chelydra serpentina) to identify natural nest sites and anthropogenic nest sites and to compare habitat variables among nest site types. Natural and anthropogenic nest sites did not differ in average canopy closure, distance to nearest water, substrate composition, or aspect. However, anthropogenic nest sites had less ground-level vegetation and greater soil brightness, and were 3.3 °C warmer than natural nests during incubation.

We used the Schoolfield model of poikilotherm development to assess differences in development rate between natural and anthropogenic nests. Because of the difference in temperature, embryos in anthropogenic nests were predicted to have undergone nearly twice as much development as embryos in natural nests during incubation.

We outline why the evolution of fast embryonic development rate cannot compensate indefinitely for the low temperature incubation regimes that

become increasingly prevalent at northern range margins, thereby underlining why maternal nest site choice of relatively warm anthropogenic sites may help oviparous reptiles persist in thermally constrained environments.

Future research should aim to quantify both the thermal benefits of anthropogenic nest sites, as well as associated fitness costs (e.g., increased adult mortality) to elucidate whether anthropogenic disturbance of the landscape can be an ecological trap or serve a net benefit to some reptiles in northern environments.

Cai, C., et al (2019) **Modulation of humor ratings of bad jokes by other people’s laughter.** CURRENT BIOLOGY 29:R663-R682

Authors’ abstract: We are overwhelmingly more likely to laugh when we are with other people, and laughter can play a very important communicative role. We do of course also laugh at humor, but can laughter influence how funny we actually perceive the humorous material to be?

In this study, we show that the presence of laughter enhances how funny people find jokes and that this effect is increased for spontaneous laughter. This effect was present for both neurotypical and autistic participants, indicating similarities in their implicit processing of laughter.

These data indicate that implicit processing of laughter can influence the perceived funniness of a fairly dire joke, and that more spontaneous laughter has the strongest effects.

Laughter tracks were initially introduced because listeners did not always realize that radio comedies were meant to be funny. Our data suggest that laughter may also influence how funny the comedy itself is perceived to be, and that people with autism are equally sensitive to this effect.

Vaclavik, K. (2019) **World Book Day and its discontents: The cultural politics of book-based fancy dress.** JOURNAL OF POPULAR CULTURE 52:doi.org/10.1111/jpcu.12798

Extracts: On the first Thursday of every March, children the length and breadth of Britain go to school dressed as their favorite book characters. This donning of more or less elaborate costumes in exchange for a charitable donation is

undertaken to mark World Book Day (hereafter WBD), an international celebration of reading created by UNESCO in 1995.

Relying on celebrity pizzazz ever since its Blair-sponsored inception, British WBD has become something of a modern tradition, despite or even because of the various controversies it has elicited. By far the most regular critique is the costume element, which has become virtually synonymous with WBD in Britain. Enjoining children in a pithy slogan to “Dress up to Change Lives”, WBD couples the transformative potential of charitable giving on one hand and of fancy dress (to adopt British parlance) on the other. ...

Because of their perceived amateurism, both fancy dress and cosplay, with which WBD fancy dress is closely related, have been kept at arms breadth by dress and costume scholars. Cosplay itself has generated a growing multi-disciplinary body of critical work, within which researchers and cosplayers are often at pains to differentiate their object of study or activities from ‘mere’ fancy dress.

Breda, T., and C. Napp (2019) **Girls’ comparative advantage in reading can largely explain the gender gap in math-related fields.** PROCEEDINGS OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES USA 116:15435-15440

Authors’ abstract: Gender differences in math performance are now small in developed countries and they cannot explain on their own the strong under-representation of women in math-related fields. This latter result is however no longer true once gender differences in reading performance are also taken into account.

Using individual-level data on 300,000 15-y-old students in 64 countries, we show that the difference between a student performance in reading and math is 80% of a standard deviation larger for girls than boys, a magnitude considered as very large. When this difference is controlled for, the gender gap in students’ intentions to pursue math-intensive studies and careers is reduced by around 75%, while gender gaps in self-concept in math, declared interest for math or attitudes toward math entirely disappear.

These latter variables are also much less able to explain the gender gap in intentions to study math than is students’ difference in performance between math and reading. These results are in line with choice models in which

educational decisions involve intra-individual comparisons of achievement and self-beliefs in different subjects as well as cultural norms regarding gender.

To directly show that intra-individual comparisons of achievement impact students' intended careers, we use differences across schools in teaching resources dedicated to math and reading as exogenous variations of students' comparative advantage for math.

Results confirm that the comparative advantage in math with respect to reading at the time of making educational choices plays a key role in the process leading to women's under-representation in math-intensive fields.

SEEN AROUND COWTOWN
photos by Dale Speirs

Below: I grew up on a cattle ranch and don't recall that any popcorn we ate was cowboy style, whatever that might be. Cowboys buy microwave popcorn from the supermarket like everyone else. Seen on the Stephen Avenue pedestrian mall downtown.

