OPUNTIA 464

Hogmanay 2019

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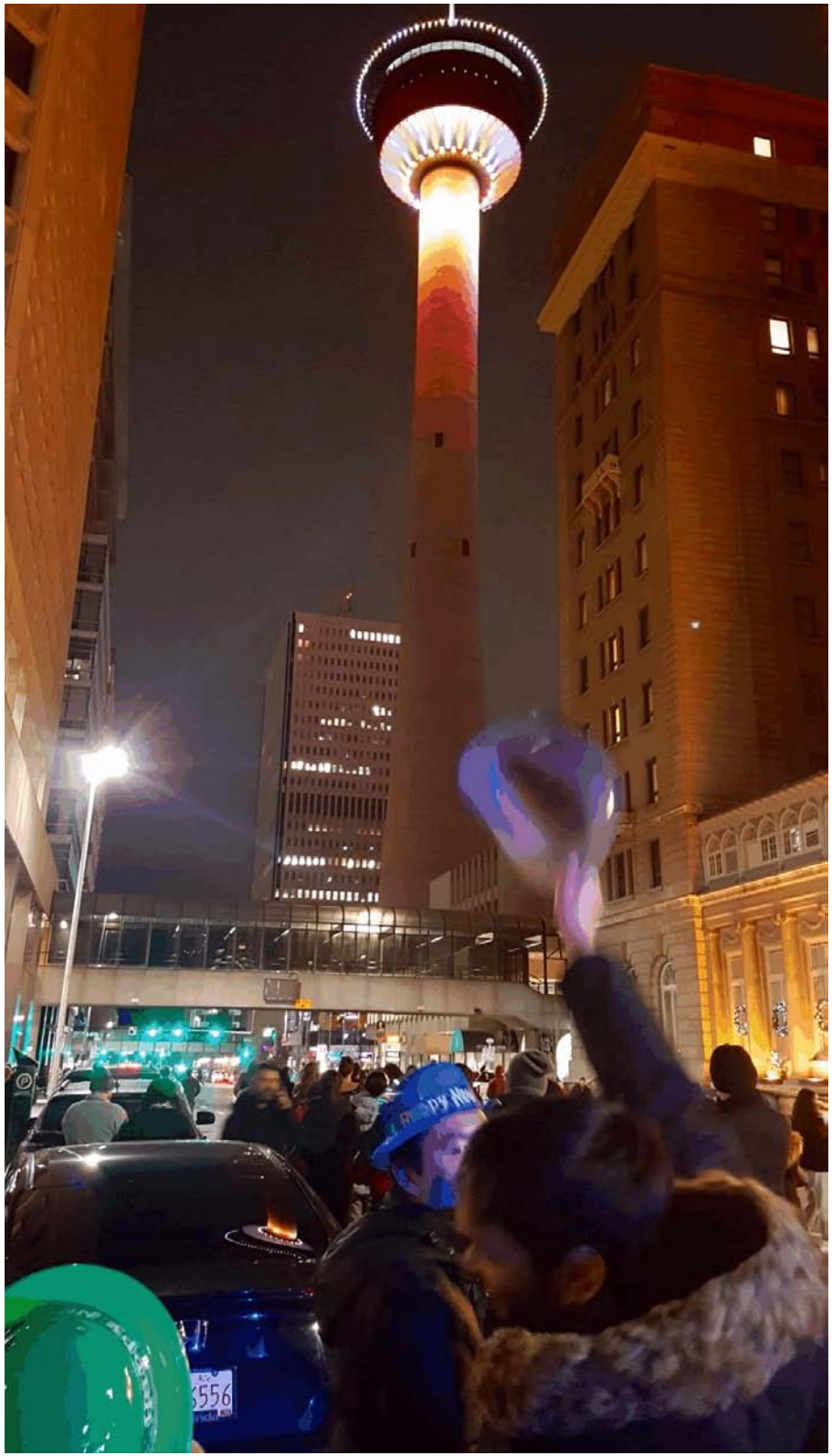
The cover photo shows the traditional ice sculpture on the Plaza, always a popular photo opportunity.
Below: The skating rink on the Plaza.

NEW YEAR'S EVE 2019

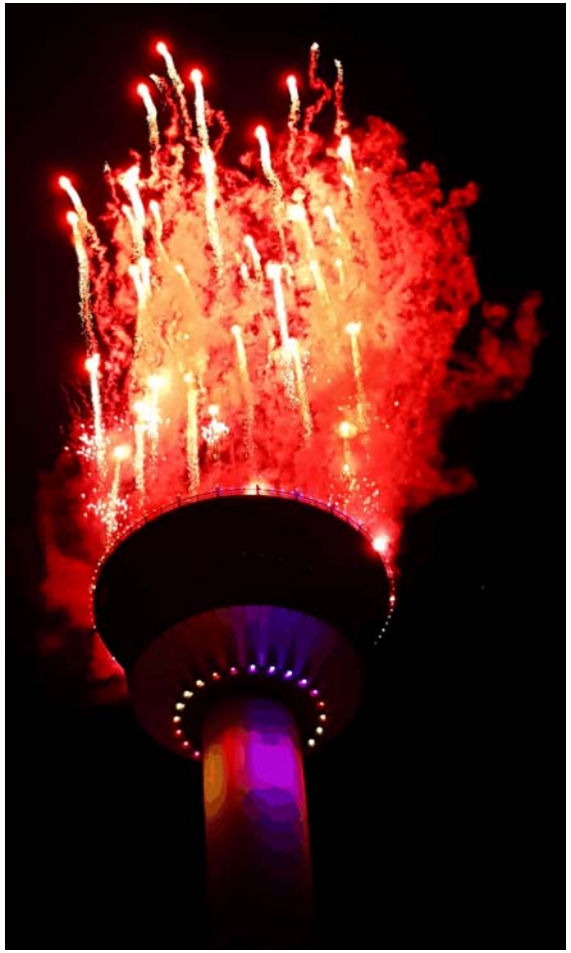
photos by Dale Speirs

Calgary's biggest New Year's Eve party is downtown at the Olympic Plaza. This year a chinook blew in on the morning of December 31, raising the temperature from -10ºC to +5ºC by sunset. The warm weather meant thick crowds on the Stephen Avenue pedestrian mall and the Plaza, which terminates the eastern end of the mall. Then fireworks at midnight from the Calgary Tower, one block away.

Below: Stephen Avenue mall, which is 8 Avenue South.
Bottom: Every night the year round, coloured lights play on the Calgary Tower in a slowly changing pattern.
At right: The Calgary Tower is on 9 Avenue South, with Centre Street terminating at its base. About fifteen minutes before the fireworks, police closed off several blocks to vehicles. I viewed the fireworks from 9 Avenue just west of the tower.



Altogether now:
Oooooooh!
Aaaaaaah!





RECYCLED SCRIPTS
by Dale Speirs

During the era of old-time radio, there were no cheap home recording devices, and even the network studios hesitated to spend big money on transcription disks or, in the late 1940s, tapes. This is why so many OTR episodes are unknown as audio recordings. A radio show was considered the same as a stage performance. After it was done, the scripts were tossed into a garbage can and that was the end of them.

Many series were later recorded on disks for syndication. Records would be mailed to subscribing radio stations out in the boondocks. From those disks came the best quality mp3s of today. Thousands of these OTR shows are available as free mp3s from www.archive.org or www.otrrlibrary.org

Many other shows were recorded off the air by amateurs who enjoyed building their own tape or disk recorders and hooking them up to radios. These shows tend to have poorer sound quality, especially over-the-air static, hisses, and pops, but often are the only recordings ever made of an episode.

New Year's Eve: Variations On A Theme By Benjamin Zubelsky.

The old-time radio comedy series THE JACK BENNY SHOW, written by his stable of regular writers, regularly recycled scripts. There was nothing wrong about that.

Often fans of a radio series wrote in asking for a repeat performance, especially for seasonal episodes such as Christmas or New Year's Eve. The home listener did not have any other method of hearing a show again. Listeners heard it once on the radio and that was that.

These repeat performances were done live-to-air, and sometimes transcribed on to disks. The scripts were mostly used as is, with a bit of updating. Jack Benny's New Year's Eve show was particularly popular, so he recycled the same basic script almost annually. It wasn't done every year. Some New Year scripts were originals.

Jack Benny played a tightwad, was vain about his blue eyes, but not hiding the fact that he wore a toupee. Not quite his girlfriend was Mary Livingstone, played by his wife Sadie Marks. She had mild dyslexia and occasionally mis-read words in the script. Her most famous garble was on another episode where, in a skit set in a diner, she ordered a chiss sweeze sandwich. That got such a laugh that for the rest of the series, characters would walk into a restaurant and ask for a chiss sweeze sandwich.

Benny's announcer Don Wilson was a tall and rotund man who participated in the script. He enthusiastically touted the sponsor's products, particularly when it was Jell-O. The show also featured a tenor named Dennis Day, who sang a sentimental song in each episode, and played the village idiot in the comedy sketches.

The band leader at this time was Phil Harris, who played himself as a heavy drinker and party man. Most of his musicians were on parole or had past records, and dressed like street bums because Harris was too cheap to buy them uniforms.

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

An early version of Benny's repeated New Year's Eve episode was "Goodbye 1938, Hello 1939", aired on January 1, 1939. The format it followed was typical of subsequent versions, and only some details were changed.

The show opened with a two-minute spiel by Wilson for Jell-O, followed by about ten minutes of gags by the cast, a song by the resident tenor, and a musical number by the orchestra. Some of the gags were random and some of them helped set up the second half of the show, which was a short play.

The play about the New Year was always set in a rental house. The name of this episode varied but in later years it was often referred to as "The New Tenant". The old tenant, that is, the old year, was preparing to move out and make way for the young kid, the new year, who was moving in.

Benny played the old year 1938, and Livingstone his wife. They had twelve children, the months of the year. In later versions, the wife became Columbia, who had 48 children. (Benny's radio series, and OTR in general, were dead by the time Hawaii and Alaska made it 50 in 1959.)

They fretted about leaving the house in poor condition because of the events of the past year, including a flood. Little did they know what the middle 1940s would bring. Old Man Mars, played by recurring actor Andy Devine, came by to apologize for the scare he gave everybody in October, an obvious reference to Orson Welles' famous 1938 rendition of WAR OF THE WORLDS.

The New Year, a boy named 1939, finally arrived and complained about the messy condition the house was in. 1938 told him that the china was all smashed up and needed repair, a reference to the Japanese occupation of China.

On a more poignant note, 1938 told his successor that if he saw some lost sheep roaming about, be sure to find room for them. Benny and most of his writers were Jewish, and were referring to the refugees fleeing Europe seeking sanctuary. On that note, Mr and Mrs 1938 departed to who knows where.

The show aired on December 29, 1940, made references to the war, although the USA would not be in it for another year. "Father Time Rides Again" began with a skit about Benny setting up a Christmas tree on a transcontinental train. It was based on reality, as the week before the cast had done a show in New York City, and had just returned to California.

The second half was the annual New Tenant play. Most of the lines were the same, but the commentary on world events was of course different. Benny, as the old man of 1940, noted that on the far side of a large swimming pool next to the house, two ruffians were messing up that side of the neighbourhood. There was a bulldog trying to keep them under control by itself and not having much luck. The references were obvious.

"New Year's Eve Skit" of December 27, 1942, was aired from New York City, where comedian Fred Allen had joined the cast. (Benny was to appear on Allen's show the following week.)

The audience were military personnel on leave. The first half was the usual assorted music, songs, and gags. The New Tenant play was the second half, but some changes were introduced into it.

Benny was still the old year, 1942, the tenant vacating to make way for 1943. Allen played Uncle Sam and Livingstone was his wife Columbia. They were the proprietors of the house. At the start of the play, Benny told her she had 48 children, to which she replied in dismay "*Holy smoke!*".

Alaska, not yet a state, was personified by Don Wilson, who complained he was having trouble with Japanese lice, a reference to the occupation of some Aleutian Islands by the Imperial Japanese Navy. Reference was also made to the Battle of Midway, and tenor Dennis Day did a humourous imitation of Hitler speaking on the radio.

Allen got the loudest and longest laugh when someone asked Uncle Sam why he was wearing two pairs of suspenders. He replied that he had been doing that since Pearl Harbor: "*I'll never get caught with them down again.*"

The next version of "The New Tenant" was aired a day late on January 2, 1944, for which Benny apologized. It aired from Hollywood, so band leader Phil Harris played Uncle Sam. Most of the opening dialogue and the rest of the cast were unchanged.

The group listened to a baseball game on the radio between the United Nations and the Axis Polecats. The Axis team did well in the early innings, but in the middle of the game the tide started to turn. The United Nations team loaded the bases with no outs and their next batter walking up to home plate. At that point, Uncle Sam told 1943 that it was time for him to go. 1943 protested that he wanted to hear how the game turned out, but Uncle Sam was firm and shut off the radio. Tune in again this time next year.

In peacetime, not every year repeated the New Tenant script. "Goodbye 1947, Hello 1948" aired on December 28, 1947, again from Hollywood. Livingstone was off sick with a cold, so she was replaced by Alice Faye, the wife of Phil Harris and a singer/actress in her own right. (The two later had their own comedy OTR series.)

Faye was dubious about being Columbia because the Jack Benny series was aired on NBC. One of the competing networks was CBS, the Columbia Broadcasting System. Benny assured her it was okay and the NBC management had been good sports about it. She wasn't pleased to learn that she was a mother of 48 children.

But on with the sketch. Benny was once more the old year, 1947, and was sorting out what to take with him. He had a stack of records of hit songs of that year. Faye suggested he take those pesky flying saucers with him. The modern era of flying saucers had begun in 1947 when a pilot spotted one and set off a craze that persisted for decades.

Dennis Day did some deliberately bad imitations of foreign accents when he portrayed the countries of Mexico and Britain personified. Harris was again Uncle Sam, and reassured Britain that he would get the loan. When 1948 arrived as a young boy, 1947 lectured him with a sentimental spiel about the USA being a land of freedom and opportunity, which was true as long as you weren't black or a woman. That part hasn't withstood the test of time.

The New Tenant sketch was revived for the December 31, 1950, episode, titled "A New Year's Fantasy". It was specifically mentioned that it was a revival after several years of unrelated New Year episodes. Livingstone was back playing Columbia to Harris's Uncle Sam. Benny, as Old Man 1950, mentioned the death of Al Jolson that year, who was a good friend of his. He also mentioned in passing the nascent civil rights movement.

Wilson played The World, complaining about a bellyache around his 38th Parallel. This was an obvious reference to the Korean War, which had began that June. Part of the sketch involved listening to a debate at the United Nations about the war. Uncle Sam was very busy gearing up for the war, saying he did it before and he'd do it again. He also complained about the cold freeze in Florida at the start of 1950 and the rail and coal strikes.

The sketch faded away as old-time radio did. Benny began doing occasional television specials but while he was still popular with older audiences, by the time of his death in 1974 he had been passed by.

A Tale Thrice Told.

THE WHISTLER was an old-time radio anthology series that aired from 1942 to 1955 only on a western radio network. It was not a mystery series, since both the narrator and the lead characters explained the action along the way. The listener followed step by step the planning and commission of the crime.

The scripts were "perfect crime" stories, whereby the murderer set up and committed a perfect crime. After gloating about having gotten away with it, the episode then cut to the final commercial. Upon returning to the epilogue, a twist ending was revealed that trapped the murderer, based on a trivial detail mentioned earlier.

"Search For Maxine", written by Harold Swanton, first aired on March 13, 1949. It began with Theodore Pomeroy wanting to borrow $5,000 from his cousin Walter for an investment opportunity. He visited Walter at his apartment and found him drunk. The loan was refused, Theodore became angry, they argued, and Theodore swung at his cousin. Walter went down and hit his head on the side of a table.

Panicked at having killed him, Theodore was about to flee when he noticed that the telephone was off the hook. Picking it up, he spoke and found there was a woman at the other end. She had heard the argument but didn't know Walter was dead. Theodore tried to get her name but she wouldn't give it, not trusting him any more than she did Walter. She did say she had heard Theodore's name mentioned.

The telephone call ended. Theodore realized that within a few hours Walter's body would be discovered and the news would be out on the radio and newspapers. He grabbed Walter's address book and ran off, knowing he had to locate the woman before she heard the news and told police.

Trying each name in the book, he phoned each woman and eventually got the right one. Her name was listed as Maxine but without a surname or street address. He then became a detective and a good one too, for despite the tremendous stress he was under, he tracked her down, step by logical step.

Theodore met with her and took her at gunpoint to a park where he intended to kill her. He lost his nerve and didn't go through with it. Confessing to her, he told the whole story. Just then the police arrived. They had been searching for him because Walter had been admitted to hospital. Walter, having been drunk, had told them he had taken a bad fall and that Theodore was his next of kin. He wanted to talk to his cousin about loaning him money.

The guilty fled when no one pursued.

Exactly two months later, the episode was re-aired. This time it appeared on the CBS eastern network as "Four Hours To Kill", broadcast as an episode of THE PHILIP MORRIS PLAYHOUSE on May13, 1949. Few people would have heard the earlier version due to separation of radio networks in those days.

Swanton changed a few details. Theodore and Walter were now brothers. Walter was not drunk, just a successful lawyer. The rest of the plot proceeded as it did in the earlier version. The sound effects were better and the episode seemed slightly better produced.

The ending was modified with Theodore getting to the newspaper first and reading that Walter was recovering in hospital. He then confessed to Maxine and the music cued up for the final commercial.

Swanton had a very good agent, because on January 12, 1950, "Four Hours To Kill" was staged on the mystery series SUSPENSE. The cast was different but little else. The episode must have had excellent ratings.

WHEN WORDS COLLIDE 2020

The tenth annual When Words Collide will return to the Delta South Marriott Hotel on the weekend of August 14 to 16, 2020. It will incorporate the Aurora Awards and Canvention 40. WWC always sells out by June, as do the banquet and hotel. Details from www.whenwordscollide.org

Each year a Canadian convention hosts the floating convention known as Canvention. This year Canvention is being organized by the Canadian Science Fiction and Fantasy Association (CSFFA) a national non-profit society along with a host convention, When Words Collide 2020. CSFFA's mandate is to give out the Aurora awards and induct people into CSFFA's Hall of the Fame.

There are 11 different Aurora awards, given out for professional and volunteer (unpaid) work in the genres of science fiction, fantasy and horror. The CSFFA Hall of Fame trophy will also be on display at When Words Collide. The Hall of Fame inductees are determined by a jury of four experts and one coordinator from CSFFA.

On Friday evening after the Keynote speeches by WWC's guests, CSFFA will be presenting this year's first-time nominees with their Aurora nominee pins. On Saturday night after the banquet, at about 19h00, we invite everyone to join us for the Aurora awards ceremony. This is free and open to the public. The CSFFA annual general meeting will take place on Sunday morning.

Here are a number of helpful links about the Auroras and CSFFA:
Canvention: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Canvention
CSFFA: prixaurorawards.ca/about-us/CSFFA
Aurora FAQs: prixaurorawards.ca/home/faq/
Award categories: prixaurorawards.ca/home/faq/#cat/

TEMPUS FUGIT: PART 4
by Dale Speirs

[Parts 1 to 3 appeared in OPUNTIAs #401 432, and 442.]

The flow of time is never more conspicuous than when the calendar turns over. Rich or poor, great or small, time will make equal us all. Lots of New Year's Eve episodes were heard on old-time radio series. Thousands of these OTR shows are available as free mp3s from www.archive.org or www.otrrlibrary.org

New Year's Eve: Serious Stuff.

DARK FANTASY was a short-lived but good quality old-time radio series which originated out of Oklahoma City. It specialized in weird fiction, was written by Scott Bishop, and aired from November 1941 to June 1942.

"Resolution 1841" was aired on January 2, 1942. Two couples drove out to a remote farmhouse that was more than a century old. They were going to celebrate New Year's Eve 1941. The house was owned by Laura Cabot, whose family had built and owned the house since the early 1800s. She brought along her friends Helen and Ed, a married couple, and they in turn had fixed her up with a blind date named Duke Taboc.

When they entered the house, Duke had flashes of deja vu, and Laura also began to feel strange. She mentioned in passing that she was in danger of losing the house because she had heavily mortgaged it for renovations and repairs. After assorted ominous forebodings were set up, Duke stepped outside to the woodpile to freshen up the fireplace. He had an accident and was temporarily stunned.

The other three dragged him back inside and revived him. He then began speaking in the voice of Jeremiah Cabot, Laura's distant ancestor and the man who built the house. He told them that on New Year's Eve 1841 he and his family had been making resolutions for the new year. His was to come back and visit in spirit a century hence.

After they talked for a while, Duke qua Jeremiah took a loose brick out of the fireplace and revealed hidden currency and the title deed to the house, his gift to Laura. The implication was that Laura could use the currency to pay off the mortgage.

This raised questions in my mind. In 1934, President Roosevelt revalued the American dollar and demonetized all previous banknotes, so Jeremiah's hoard was worthless. If the family didn't have the original title deed for the past century, a new one had to be issued so the house could pass down to Laura.

It would have been better had the money been silver or gold coins, which never lose their value, as opposed to paper currency which seldom lasts more than a generation. (Canada, for example, converted to high-tech plastic banknotes a decade ago. Anyone holding a stash of the previous currency has paper fit for the recycle bin.)

In any event, Jeremiah bid adieu to Laura, and Duke woke up unaware of what happened. The two of them were no doubt bound for the marriage altar. On that note, to the closing credits.

Leaping ahead past the Millennium turnover brings us to NEW YEAR'S EVE MURDER (2005) by Leslie Meier. This was a novel in a cozy series about Lucy Stone, the resident Miss Marple, or Jessica Fletcher if you will, of Tinker's Cove, Maine. The village homicide statistics being what they were, the plot in this book moved to Manhattan. One murder more or less would make no difference to the big city.

Stone and her daughter Elizabeth won a contest for fashion makeovers by JOLIE magazine, plus a New Year's Eve party. The fashionistas at the magazine feuded constantly. When the editor Nadine Nelson suddenly fell ill and died, many were prepared to believe it was murder.

It was indeed, as her powderpuff compact was laced with anthrax. Since the FBI still hadn't solved the 2001 anthrax attacks, no one had any faith in them.** Elizabeth proudly announced to all and sundry that her mother was a Miss Marple back home.

The chase was on, and led to a laboratory of feminist ecoterrorists. They wanted to deal cosmetic testing laboratories a crushing blow. Nelson's murder was intended as the opening overture of a campaign of terror against the cosmetics industry.

** A true fact. The FBI first falsely accused an innocent man and ended up paying libel damages to him. They eventually blamed it on a dead laboratory researcher.

The final confrontation in their laboratory would do any mad scientist movie proud. Only the Jacob's ladders and spark-gap transmitters were missing. Lucy and Elizabeth made it to Times Square before midnight and saw the ball drop. Happy New Year! and don't forget your eye shadow.

New Year's Eve: Comedy Tonight.

Sitcoms were not invented by television but were a long-standing part of old-time radio. FIBBER MCGEE AND MOLLY was an OTR comedy that ran from 1935 to 1953 as a half-hour show before a live audience. The episodes were mostly written by Don Quinn and Phil Leslie.

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. Later in the series there were references to them being vaudeville performers, and later yet to them making movies (all of which were forgettable even then).

The early shows were rough, but over time the characters were refined and their social circle elaborated. Molly always called her husband by his surname. Try that with your spouse and see what happens.

The normal format was a parade of regular characters. Mayor La Trivia was a pompous man usually reduced to red-faced sputtering by the McGees misinterpreting his remarks. The Old Timer had a different job every week. During the war years, Alice Darling was a sweet young thing who roomed with them while working at the aircraft factory.

"A Fresh Start For New Year's" was aired on December 28, 1943. Fibber had woken up that morning with a ribbon tied around his pinkie finger but couldn't think what it was supposed to remind him to do.

As a result, he spent the day rushing about doing errands. He returned borrowed items to neighbours, fixed things around the house, and settled up debts he owed. No matter what he did, he couldn't remember what he was supposed to remember.

After a continual run of gags and supporting characters, the finale was when Molly admitted she was the one who tied the ribbon on him while he was sleeping. The catch was that she couldn't remember what it was for either.

"New Year's Day Visiting" aired on New Year's Day 1952, written by Phil Leslie and Keith Fowler. Instead of the parade of characters coming through the McGee house, they went out visiting the characters.

Fibber had eaten a hearty meal the night before, turkey dinner on the day, cleaned up all the popcorn balls on the Christmas tree, and ate heartily of refreshments at all the places they visited. The standard refreshment was fruitcake.

One stop was Mayor La Trivia, who recited for them a speech he had given to town council on the occasion of the new year. In it, he mentioned the year 1949, which got a mild chuckle from the audience and a correction from Fibber. Only then did La Trivia realize he had been giving the same speech for four years without updating the year in it.

The final stop was their friend Doc Gamble, who like all the others before him, offered some fruitcake. It was the tipping point for Fibber, whose diet finally caught up with him. He turned green in the face at the sight and was fortunate that there was indeed a doctor in the house.

One popular OTR series was THE ALDRICH FAMILY, created and written by Clifford Goldsmith, and which ran from 1939 to 1953. The lead character was Henry Aldrich, a teenager in his awkward years always getting in and out of trouble. His parents were Sam and Alice, and his sister was Mary. Henry's classmate Homer was often a part of the contretemps of each episode.

"New Year's Eve Party" aired on December 30, 1948, and was a litany of misunderstandings. This time it wasn't Henry's fault. His father had promised Alice he would go with her to a masquerade party on the Eve, which was but hours away.

Sam had forgotten that he had also promised to take Henry to a professional hockey game. Meanwhile, Mary was hoping to have the house to herself and her boyfriend, which needless to say worried her mother. The complications grew as Sam kept making promises to both Henry and Alice that he couldn't possibly keep.

Henry sold his hockey tickets to rent a costume for the masquerade, but at that late hour the only one left was a pantomime horse. He tried to convince Homer to be the back half, who declined to spend the Eve bent over as a horse's arse. Most of the complications worked out the hard way, but Sam was regretting what the new year would bring when he had to fulfill all the promises he made to get himself out of his messes.

The series was never cutting-edge or risque. It was meant as a family show that parents could listen to with their kids. In those days, before the advent of television, radio was a large cabinet set in the living room that the family gathered round to listen. It was a different world.

Another family sitcom series was OUR MISS BROOKS, which aired from1948 to 1957 on radio, and from 1952 to 1956 on television. Constance Brooks was a high school English teacher suffering from unrequited love for Philip Boynton the biology teacher. Osgood Conklin was the bombastic school principal who made life difficult for Brooks, while his daughter Harriet made life difficult for him, mainly because of her obnoxious boyfriend Walter Denton. Brooks roomed in the house of the widow Margaret Davis, who had been at school with Osgood.

The basic structure didn't change much each week. Each episode opened with Brooks and Davis at the breakfast table, where the plot would be set up as they discussed the day ahead of them. Then Brooks went off to Madison High School where she played out the consequences. Sometimes the action happened at the Conklin house.

"Babysitting On New Year's Eve", written by Al Lewis, first aired on January 1, 1950. Brooks had been hoping to spend the night with Boynton, but he could only afford one ticket to the Biology Club ball. Conklin's wife Martha had a young nephew who was in town for the holidays, but since she was away and Osgood wanted to step out with his old classmates from college, he talked Brooks into babysitting for him.

Other people kept changing their commitments and assorted complications developed. If you've ever seen any family sitcom on television, it was like that. Brooks was played by Eve Arden whom Boomers will recognize by her very distinctive voice. She was a character actor who cracked wise and always had snappy comebacks no matter how put upon she was.

The rest of the group felt sorry for Brooks and gathered in the Conklin home, minus Osgood. They turned on the radio for the countdown, and heard a broadcast from a nightclub. The compere was none other than Osgood, all

smiles and bad jokes. Harriet and company listened in shock as he shed his stodgy image to play the fool.

The humour is repetitious if you listen to too many mp3s in a row, but quite good in small amounts. Worth putting a batch of episodes on your player for the workday commute.

FATHER KNOWS BEST aired on radio from 1949 to 1953, then went a decade on television. Jim and Margaret Anderson were a middle-class suburban couple with three young children, Betty, Bud, and Kathy. Like other family sitcoms, the plot depended on taking a simple idea and complicating it with misunderstandings. The episodes were written by Ed James.

"Party Preparations" was an episode that aired on December 28, 1950. It opened with Jim complaining about the endless turkey menu the family had been eating since Christmas as Margaret used up the leftovers. He spoke too soon. He had put 10 cents on a charity lottery and the organizer arrived with the wonderful news that he had won a 35-pound live turkey.

Jim decided to dispose of all the turkey in one go by hosting a New Year's Eve party for all those to whom the Andersons owed social obligations. His thinking was that it would cost next to nothing since the turkey was free, or at least only cost him a dime. Margaret took him at his word and invited forty people.

The main course may have been no problem, but there were all kinds of ancillary expenses that added up in a hurry. Paper plates and napkins, about five pounds of nuts, trimmings, side dishes, and paying a local restaurant to cook the bird since it was too big to fit into their oven. Jim began to regret having spent the dime on a chance.

The usual sort of family and friend contretemps and consternation took place. The show could be aired today with almost no change. If you have a long commute, then series like this could kill a half hour on the drive. The plot and characters were bland, but then again, so are most of our lives.

New Year's Eve: Variations On A Theme By Jim And Marian Jordan.

FIBBER MCGEE AND MOLLY celebrated the holidays. "New Year's Eve Dance" aired on December 28, 1948, written by Don Quinn and Phil Leslie. The McGees, who were middle income but somewhat lower class, had been invited to Wistful Vista's most prestigious event, the New Year's Eve party at the local country club. They were going as guests of Mayor La Trivia and were very conscious of the high honour they had been awarded. The episode opened with Fibber and Molly preparing at home, excited to be in tuxedo and ballgown.

After a few routines with doorbell ringers, the orchestra played a number to allow the McGees to make it out to the club. La Trivia introduced them to the governor. Fibber didn't make himself too much of a fool. A couple more routines with stock characters came and went before a new character was introduced, Old Man Macdonald, president of the Third National Bank. Harlow Wilcox got in a plug for Johnson's Wax while dancing with Macdonald's wife, mentioning how the ballroom floor shone thanks to the wax.

The Chinese Consul was there, which enabled Fibber to get in an extended dialect joke that, to say the least, would not be aired today. To wash that away, the King's Men sang a forgettable but unobjectionable harmony song. And so to home, Fibber having managed to not make himself a complete fool. He did, however, managed to provoke La Trivia into making a fool of himself.

"The New Year's Dance", which aired on December 30, 1952, was a rewrite. This time it opened with Fibber excitedly rushing home and telling Molly that Old Man Macdonald had invited them to the dance. The banker had car trouble by the roadside when Fibber drove by and stopped to help him out. In gratitude, he invited the McGees to the dance.

The doorbell ringer characters began dropping by to do their routines, different from the previous episode. The Old Timer was one of them, with a particularly hilarious routine about a New Year's dance he had attended where the band only knew one song, "John Brown's Body", and played it continuously. They tried to mix it up by changing the musical style of the song with each turn. As the Old Timer remarked: "*If you haven't heard "John Brown's Body" played as a rhumba, you just haven't lived.*"

Molly wondered if she should wear a corsage but Fibber said with her figure she didn't need one. He was thinking of 'corset'. The McGees went out for a stroll, not so much to prepare for the dance but so they could brag to other characters. With the last few minutes of the show ticking away, the McGees returned home, got dressed, and were about to leave when the Old Timer burst in. Big news in Wistful Vista, for the country club had just caught fire and burned to the ground.

DINING IN STYLE

In 1854, a series of life-sized dinosaurs were unveiled in London, England, and are now in Crystal Palace Park. They were a sensation. Five years later, Charles Darwin published ORIGIN OF SPECIES, and the world began to look at biology in a new way.

The sculptures were designed by Sir Richard Owens, one of the founders of palaeontology, and made by Benjamin Waterhouse Hawkins. To celebrate the launch of the models, Hawkins held a New Year's Eve celebration in 1853. The company sat down to a long table inside one of the models. That was a Hogmanay to remember!

And for dessert in 2020, these cupcakes from Safeway. Too pricy for me.

SEEN IN THE LITERATURE

Pontes, A.C., et al (2020) **The evolutionary origin of associative learning.** AMERICAN NATURALIST 195:doi.org/10.1086/706252

Authors' abstract: *Learning is a widespread ability among animals and, like physical traits, is subject to evolution. But how did learning first arise? What selection pressures and phenotypic preconditions fostered its evolution? Neither the fossil record nor phylogenetic comparative studies provide answers to these questions.*

Here, we take a novel approach by studying digital organisms in environments that promote the evolution of navigation and associative learning. Starting with a nonlearning sessile ancestor, we evolve multiple populations in four different environments, each consisting of nutrient trails with various layouts.

Trail nutrients cue organisms on which direction to follow, provided they evolve to acquire and use those cues. Thus, each organism is tested on how well it navigates a randomly selected trail before reproducing. We find that behavior evolves modularly and in a predictable sequence, where simpler behaviors are necessary precursors for more complex ones.

Associative learning is only one of many successful behaviors to evolve, and its origin depends on the environment possessing certain information patterns that organisms can exploit.

Environmental patterns that are stable across generations foster the evolution of reflexive behavior, while environmental patterns that vary across generations but remain consistent for periods within an organism's lifetime foster the evolution of learning behavior.

Both types of environmental patterns are necessary, since the prior evolution of simple reflexive behaviors provides the building blocks for learning to arise. Finally, we observe that an intrinsic value system evolves alongside behavior and supports associative learning by providing reinforcement for behavior conditioning.

Salmon, J., et al (2020) **Late Miocene origin and recent population collapse of the Malagasy savanna olive tree (Noronhia lowryi).** BIOLOGICAL JOURNAL OF THE LINNEAN SOCIETY 129:27-243

Authors' abstract: *Debates regarding the origin of tropical savannas have attempted to disentangle the role of human, biotic and abiotic factors. Understanding the origins of savanna remains essential to identifying processes that gave rise to habitat mosaics, particularly those found in the Central Plateau of Madagascar. Documenting the evolutionary history and demography of native trees occurring in open habitats may reveal footprints left by past and recent environmental changes.*

We conducted a population genetic analysis of an endangered Malagasy shrub (Noronhia lowryi, Oleaceae) of the Central Plateau. Seventy-seven individuals were sampled from three sites and genotyped at 14 nuclear and 24 chloroplast microsatellites. We found a highly contrasting nuclear and plastid genetic structure, suggesting that pollen-mediated gene flow allows panmixia, while seed-based dispersal may rarely exceed tens of metres.

From a phylogeny based on full plastomes, we dated the surprisingly old crown age of maternal lineages back to ~6.2 Mya, perhaps co-occurring with the global expansion of savanna.

In contrast, recent demographic history inferred from nuclear data shows a bottleneck signature ~350 generations ago, probably reflecting an environmental shift during the Late Pleistocene or the Holocene. Ancient in situ adaptation and recent demographic collapse of an endangered woody plant highlight the unique value and vulnerability of the Malagasy savannas.

Tryjanowski, P., et al (2020) **The emergence of tolerance of human disturbance in Neotropical birds.** JOURNAL OF TROPICAL ECOLOGY 36:1-5

Authors' abstract: *Animals living close to human settlements more often experience disturbance, but also reduced predation risk. Because an escape response is costly, behavioural adjustments of animals in terms of increased tolerance of humans occurs and is often reported in the literature. However, most such studies have been conducted in and around long-existing cities in Europe and North America, on well established animal populations.*

Here, we investigate the degree of tolerance of human disturbance across 132 bird species occurring in disturbed (small farms) and undisturbed (intact wetlands and grasslands) areas in Pantanal, Mato Grosso (Brazil), a region with only a very recent history of human induced disturbance.

We found a clear across-species trend toward higher tolerance of human disturbance in birds near farms when compared with birds in wild areas. Such a flexible and perhaps also rapid emergence of tolerance when facing small-scale and very recent human disturbance presumably involves learning and might be attributed to behavioural plasticity.

The ability of birds to modify their degree of tolerance of human disturbance may play a key role in the facilitation of wildlife-human coexistence.

Gallant, L.R., et al (2020) **A bat guano deposit in Jamaica recorded agricultural changes and metal exposure over the last >4300 years.** PALAEOGEOGRAPHY, PALAEOCLIMATOLOGY, PALAEOECOLOGY 538:doi.org/10.1016/j.palaeo.2019.109470

Authors' abstract: *Bats are excellent ecological indicators because they are long-lived, globally distributed, and show predictable responses to environmental stressors. Unaltered bat guano deposits, although rare, can serve as environmental archives to reveal changes in dietary patterns over millennial time scales.*

We inferred changes in agricultural and industrial practices using a continuous 4300-year-old bat guano deposit from Jamaica. Cadmium, mercury, lead, and zinc increased during the Industrial Revolution, (which began in ca. 1760), a period characterized by elevated emissions of metals to the atmosphere.

Beginning in the early 20th century, decreases in 206Pb/207Pb isotopes tracked the history of leaded gasoline use. Metal concentrations in the bat guano deposit exceeded those recorded in two nearby lake sediment cores from Jamaica.

Carbon, nitrogen, and sulfur stable isotope profiles in bat guano tracked the agricultural history of Jamaica, specifically the introduction of nitrogen fertilizers, sugarcane, and possibly fungicides.

Melchionna, M., et al (2020) **Macroevolutionary trends of brain mass in primates.** BIOLOGICAL JOURNAL OF THE LINNEAN SOCIETY 129:14-25

Authors' abstract: *A distinctive trait in primate evolution is the expansion in brain mass. The potential drivers of this trend and how and whether encephalization influenced diversification dynamics in this group are hotly debated. We assembled a phylogeny accounting for 317 primate species, including both extant and extinct taxa, to identify macroevolutionary trends in brain mass evolution.*

Our findings show that Primates as a whole follow a macroevolutionary trend for an increase in body mass, relative brain mass and speciation rate over time. Although the trend for increased encephalization (brain mass) applies to all Primates, hominins stand out for their distinctly higher rates.

Within hominins, this unique trend applies linearly over time and starts with Australopithecus africanus. The increases in both speciation rate and encephalization begin in the Oligocene, suggesting the two variables are causally associated.

The substitution of early, stem Primates belonging to plesiadapiforms with crown Primates seems to be responsible for these macroevolutionary trends. However, our findings also suggest that cognitive capacities favoured speciation in hominins.

Kappeler, P.M., and L. Pozzi (2019) **Evolutionary transitions toward pair living in nonhuman primates as stepping stones toward more complex societies.** SCIENCE ADVANCES 5:doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.aay1276

Authors' abstract: *Nonhuman primate societies vary tremendously in size and composition, but how and why evolutionary transitions among different states occurred remains highly controversial. In particular, how many times pair living evolved and the social states of the ancestors of pair- and group-living species remains contentious.*

We examined evolutionary transitions in primate social evolution by using new, independent categorizations of sociality and different phylogenetic hypotheses with a vastly expanded dataset. Using Bayesian phylogenetic comparative

methods, we consistently found the strongest support for a model that invokes frequent transitions between solitary ancestors and pair-living descendants, with the latter giving rise to group-living species.

This result was robust to systematic variation in social classification, sample size, and phylogeny. Our analyses therefore indicate that pair living was a stepping stone in the evolution of structurally more complex primate societies, a result that bolsters the role of kin selection in social evolution.

About one-third of all extant primate species are solitary, about one-fifth are pair living, and the rest live in multimale, multifemale groups, some of which include hundreds of individuals that are organized hierarchically across multiple levels.

Mordechai, L., et al (2019) **The Justinianic Plague: An inconsequential pandemic?** PROCEEDINGS OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES USA 116:25546-25554

Authors' abstract: *Existing mortality estimates assert that the Justinianic Plague (circa 541 to 750 CE) caused tens of millions of deaths throughout the Mediterranean world and Europe, helping to end antiquity and start the Middle Ages. In this article, we argue that this paradigm does not fit the evidence.*

We examine a series of independent quantitative and qualitative datasets that are directly or indirectly linked to demographic and economic trends during this two-century period: Written sources, legislation, coinage, papyri, inscriptions, pollen, ancient DNA, and mortuary archaeology. Individually or together, they fail to support the maximalist paradigm.

None has a clear independent link to plague outbreaks and none supports maximalist reconstructions of late antique plague. Instead of large-scale, disruptive mortality, when contextualized and examined together, the datasets suggest continuity across the plague period.

Although demographic, economic, and political changes continued between the 6th and 8th centuries, the evidence does not support the now commonplace claim that the Justinianic Plague was a primary causal factor of them.

Ongaro, L., et al (2019) **The genomic impact of European colonization of the Americas.** CURRENT BIOLOGY 29:doi.org/10.1016/j.cub.2019.09.076

Authors' abstract: *European and African genomic signature in the Americas shows high complexity. Sex-biased gene flow occurred between European and American mixing groups. Admixture is geographically and chronologically correlated with historical records. Source-specific demographic histories reveal the huge impact of recent admixture.*

The human genetic diversity of the Americas has been affected by several events of gene flow that have continued since the colonial era and the Atlantic slave trade. Moreover, multiple waves of migration followed by local admixture occurred in the last two centuries, the impact of which has been largely unexplored.

Here, we compiled a genome-wide dataset of ~12,000 individuals from twelve American countries and ~6,000 individuals from worldwide populations and applied haplotype-based methods to investigate how historical movements from outside the New World affected (1) the genetic structure, (2) the admixture profile, (3) the demographic history, and (4) sex-biased gene-flow dynamics of the Americas.

We revealed a high degree of complexity underlying the genetic contribution of European and African populations in North and South America, from both geographic and temporal perspectives, identifying previously unreported sources related to Italy, the Middle East, and to specific regions of Africa.

Larmuseau, M.H.D., et al (2019) **A historical-genetic reconstruction of human extra-pair paternity.** CURRENT BIOLOGY 29:doi.org/10.1016/j.cub.2019.09.075

Authors' abstract: *Combining genetic and genealogical data illuminates our ancestors' sexual behavior. Gene-genealogy mismatches imply extra-pair paternity (EPP). Historical EPP rates were low overall (~1%) but varied depending on social context. EPP rates were highest (~6%) among urban families with low socioeconomic status.*

Paternity testing using genetic markers has shown that extra-pair paternity (EPP) is common in many pair-bonded species. Evolutionary theory and

empirical data show that extra-pair copulations can increase the fitness of males as well as females. This can carry a significant fitness cost for the social father, who then invests in rearing offspring that biologically are not his own. In human populations, the incidence and correlates of extra-pair paternity remain highly contentious.

Here, we use a population-level genetic genealogy approach to reconstruct spatiotemporal patterns in human EPP rates. Using patrilineal genealogies from the Low Countries spanning a period of over 500 years and Y chromosome genotyping of living descendants, our analysis reveals that historical EPP rates, while low overall, were strongly impacted by socioeconomic and demographic factors.

Specifically, we observe that estimated EPP rates among married couples varied by more than an order of magnitude, from 0.4% to 5.9%, and peaked among families with a low socioeconomic background living in densely populated cities of the late 19th century.

Our results support theoretical predictions that social context can strongly affect the outcomes of sexual conflict in human populations by modulating the incentives and opportunities for engaging in extra-pair relationships.

Nurunnabi, M., et al (2019) **Oral ionic liquid for the treatment of diet-induced obesity.** PROCEEDINGS OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES USA 116:25042-25047

Authors' abstract: *We have developed an ionic liquid that interacts with fat to form micrometer-sized particles. The ionic liquid prevents the fat from penetrating through the intestinal membrane. We have observed that a regular dose of 10 μL of CAGE (equivalent to a 500-mg human dose) resulted in 12% less body weight gain compared with the rats treated without CAGE. The results from the animal studies support oral CAGE as a promising approach for treating obesity.*

More than 70% of American adults are overweight or obese, a precondition leading to chronic diseases, including diabetes and hypertension. Among other factors, diets with high fat and carbohydrate content have been implicated in obesity.

In this study, we hypothesize that the choline and geranate (CAGE) ionic liquid can reduce body weight by decreasing fat absorption through the intestine. In vitro studies performed using docosahexaenoic acid (DHA), a model fat molecule, show that CAGE forms particles 2 to 4 μm in diameter in the presence of fat molecules. Ex vivo permeation studies in rat intestine showed that formation of such large particles reduces intestinal fat absorption.

In vivo, CAGE reduces DHA absorption by 60% to 70% compared with controls. DHA administered with CAGE was retained in the intestine even after 6 h. Rats fed with a high-fat diet (HFD) and 10 μL of daily oral CAGE exhibited 12% less body weight gain compared with rats fed with an HFD without CAGE for 30 d. Rats that were given CAGE also ate less food than the control groups. Serum biochemistry and histology results indicated that CAGE was well tolerated by the rats.

Collectively, our data support the hypothesis that CAGE interacts with fat molecules to prevent their absorption through intestinal tissue and potentially providing a feeling of satiety. We conclude that CAGE offers an effective means to control body weight and a promising tool to tackle the obesity epidemic.

Yang, J., et al (2019) **Population dynamics modify urban residents' exposure to extreme temperatures across the United States.** SCIENCE ADVANCES 5:doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.aay3452

Authors' abstract: *Exposure to extreme temperatures is one primary cause of weather-related human mortality and morbidity. Global climate change raises the concern of public health under future extreme events, yet spatiotemporal population dynamics have been long overlooked in health risk assessments.*

Here, we show that the diurnal intra-urban movement alters residents' exposure to extreme temperatures during cold and heat waves. To do so, we incorporate weather simulations with commute-adjusted population profiles over 16 major U.S. metropolitan areas.

Urban residents' exposure to heat waves is intensified by 1.9° ± 0.7°C (mean ± SD among cities), and their exposure to cold waves is attenuated by 0.6° ± 0.8°C. The higher than expected exposure to heat waves significantly correlates with the spatial temperature variability and requires serious attention.

This finding reveals that residents' exposure to heat waves is more likely to be underestimated in a spread-out city, where the daily commute between residential areas and urban cores would induce a large change in the exposure temperature.

The estimated risk based on the spatial average temperature performs poorly in large urban agglomerations, and the incorporation of population dynamics is essential for accurate characterizations of exposure temperature of urban residents in these regions. Existing heat mitigation/adaptation efforts have been mainly devoted to hot urban cores with high building densities, and these interventions are likely to be less efficient without considering residents' movement pattern.

Schwarting, W., et al (2019) **Social behavior for autonomous vehicles.** PROCEEDINGS OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES USA 116:24972-24978

Authors' abstract: *We present a framework that integrates social psychology tools into controller design for autonomous vehicles. Our key insight utilizes Social Value Orientation (SVO), quantifying an agent's degree of selfishness or altruism, which allows us to better predict driver behavior.*

We model interactions between human and autonomous agents with game theory and the principle of best response. Our unified algorithm estimates driver SVOs and incorporates their predicted trajectories into the autonomous vehicle's control while respecting safety constraints.

We study common-yet-difficult traffic scenarios: highway merging and unprotected left turns. Incorporating SVO reduces error in predictions by 25%, validated on 92 human driving merges. Furthermore, we find that merging drivers are more competitive than non-merging drivers.

Deployment of autonomous vehicles on public roads promises increased efficiency and safety. It requires understanding the intent of human drivers and adapting to their driving styles. Autonomous vehicles must also behave in safe and predictable ways without requiring explicit communication.

We integrate tools from social psychology into autonomous-vehicle decision making to quantify and predict the social behavior of other drivers and to behave in a socially compliant way. A key component is Social Value Orientation (SVO), which quantifies the degree of an agent's selfishness or altruism, allowing us to better predict how the agent will interact and cooperate with others.

We model interactions between agents as a best-response game wherein each agent negotiates to maximize their own utility. We solve the dynamic game by finding the Nash equilibrium, yielding an online method of predicting multiagent interactions given their SVOs.

This approach allows autonomous vehicles to observe human drivers, estimate their SVOs, and generate an autonomous control policy in real time. We demonstrate the capabilities and performance of our algorithm in challenging traffic scenarios: merging lanes and unprotected left turns.

Mello, F.S., and A.C.S. Friaça (2020) **The end of life on Earth is not the end of the world: converging to an estimate of life span of the biosphere?** INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ASTROBIOLOGY 19:25-42

[C3 plants are those adapted to average moisture and temperature conditions. C4 plants are dryland species such as prairie grasses and desert shrubs.]

Authors' abstract: *Environmental conditions have changed in the past of our planet but were not hostile enough to extinguish life. In the future, an aged Earth and a more luminous Sun may lead to harsh or even uninhabitable conditions for life. In order to estimate the life span of the biosphere we built a minimal model of the co-evolution of the geosphere, atmosphere and biosphere of our planet, taking into account temperature boundaries, CO_2 partial pressure lower limits for C3 and C4 plants, and the presence of enough surface water.*

Our results indicate that the end of the biosphere will happen long before the Sun becomes a red giant, as the biosphere faces increasingly more difficult conditions in the future until its collapse due to high temperatures. The lower limit for CO_2 partial pressure for C3 plants will be reached in 170(+ 320, - 110) megayears, followed by the C4 plants limit in 840(+ 270, - 100) Myr.

The mean surface temperature will reach 373 K in 1.63(+ 0.14, - 0.05) gigayears, a point that would mark the extinction of the biosphere. Water loss

due to internal geophysical processes will not be dramatic, implying almost no variation in the surface ocean mass and ocean depth for the next 1.5 billion years.

Our predictions show qualitative convergence and some quantitative agreement with results found in the literature, but there is considerable scattering in the scale of hundreds of millions of years for all the criteria devised. Even considering these uncertainties, the end of the biosphere will hardly happen sooner than 1.5 gigayears.

SEEN ON CALGARY TRANSIT

Two photos I took in November 2019 that I'll use here as spacefillers.
Below: Spidergirl and her mother had been to a fancy dress party when they got on the bus I was riding.

Below: A temporary art piece on the 3rd Street SW LRT station that probably meant something to somebody. Our tax dollars in action.