

OPUNTIA 468



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

About The Cover: Photographed at the Devonian Gardens, an indoor park in downtown Calgary. The plants were along the edge of raised beds.

THIRTY YEARS ON

by Dale Speirs

In March 1991, I diffidently mailed out issue #1 of this zine. It was print only until March 2014, when Canada Post jacked up postage rates to ruinous heights. I am not poor but neither was I able to sustain the new postage costs, so OPUNTIA became a pdf zine. It pained me to leave the Papernet, but I had no choice. The good news was that I could now run colour photographs with abandon. I have a Nikon digital SLR with telephoto that I use when hiking out in the mountains, and my trusty Samsung Galaxy smartphone is great for snapshots around town.

Three decades. Where did the time go? When I started, only a few computer techies had heard of the World Wide Web. In my neighbourhood, a typical residential suburb of Calgary, every second street corner had a newspaper box. Every morning on my way to work, I would first walk down to the corner and buy a newspaper before backing the car out of the driveway. The last newspaper boxes vanished in December 2019 but most had gone a decade before. The news agents vanished a couple of years earlier or became convenience stores.

My step-grandfather served in the European theatre during the last war, doing his part to bring down the Gestapo and the Nazi thought police. Today we have cancel culture and toxic tweeters, who cannot and will not separate creators from their works, and refuse to admit that writings and art stand independent of their creators. Nor do they acknowledge what all major religions do, that it is better to forgive and realize that no one is without sin, then look to the future and move on to better things.

When OPUNTIA #1 appeared, it was difficult to track citizens. Today it is being done with breath-taking efficiency, combining facial recognition

technology with financial databases and GPS locators. In China, right now, dissidents cannot buy bus tickets or have telephones. In the USA, police use a database of images harvested from Facebook and the rest of the Internet to match for suspects. If you happen to look like a murderer, may God protect you because no one else will.

George Orwell and subsequent generations worried about Big Brother watching us. What never occurred to them was that the sheeple would gladly give their personal information away. A few years ago, my neighbour across the street had his house ransacked because he posted on Facebook that he was off to sunny Mexico for a couple of weeks. In March 1991, it never would have occurred to anyone that their mother's maiden name was valuable information.

Governments only had to stand back and observe the rush to a cashless society, where everything is paid for by a card or smartphone tap. It won't happen in my time (I am 64) but a few decades from now cash will be outlawed and no one will complain because they never used it anyway. The sheeple won't think things through about what happens if they lose their smartphone, have it hacked, or their bank makes a mistake. With no alternative to cash, it will be impossible to pay for anything, not even a bus ticket to get home.

Neither Orwell nor any science fiction writer predicted that listening devices would soon be in a large number of homes, not by government edict but because the sheeple gladly welcomed them. It is too difficult to use television remotes or get out of the chair and walk over to the light switch, so Alexa will do it, in exchange for listening to you always.

Streaming is so much easier and cheaper but those who scorn owning CDs and DVDs forget that the media companies can easily delete items or suddenly boost prices. Several movie companies deliberately withdraw older movies from the market because they can. Not a few performers had their catalogues deleted because they became politically incorrect. Ebooks are as expensive as printed books despite the blethering by science fiction writers about how costly and inefficient paper books are.

How much longer will OPUNTIA go on? When I first began publishing, I was worried that I wouldn't have enough material, but soon built up a backlog which still exists today. At any given moment I have about 150 pages of material waiting to be cut and pasted into future templates of OPUNTIA. I'm glad I found zinedom as a means of expression.

BIRDING ABOUT COWTOWN
photos by Dale Speirs



On February 25, I was waiting at a bus stop when I heard a strange whap-whap sound behind me. I turned around and saw a crow diligently punching away at a piece of ice. There must have been something edible frozen in, because the crow worked the ice quite a while.

I took these photos with my smartphone. Photographing a pure black bird on snow on a bright sunny morning is nearly impossible, and will drive every light meter berserk. For what it's worth, here is the action sequence.



The crow then hopped up onto the hood of a parked vehicle nearby. For a moment I thought it was going to peck through the windshield, but it only rested briefly before flying away.



I took the bus downtown and walked to the post office to check my mail. I saw this magpie searching for food scraps in a gutter next to a restaurant. Magpies were rare on the Canadian prairies until the arrival of the Europeans. Like their cousins the crows, they are scavengers. Magpies originally followed behind bison herds but soon found life in the city much easier.



Behind City Hall, across from the New Central Library where I frequently visit, was this pair of Canada geese surveying their domain from the back steps of the building. On the other side of the wall was a day care playground, but the noise of the tots didn't seem to bother them.



The following day, February 26, I saw the geese out for a stroll. There is a pedestrian crosswalk with flashing lights between the City Hall back steps and the New Central Library, so someone punched the button for the geese.



Many shopping malls with large atriums have problems with birds sneaking in and scavenging in the food courts. I photographed this English house sparrow in Southcentre Mall in southern Calgary.



THE GROVES OF ACADEMIA: PART 6
by Dale Speirs

[Parts 1 to 5 appeared in OPUNTIA's #67.1F, 262, 358, 372, and 428.]

Personnel Problems.

SCOOP TO KILL (2010) by Wendy Lyn Watson is a novel from a food cozy series about Tallulah Jones of Dalliance, Texas, who owned an ice cream shop called the Remember The A-la-mode. However, there was so little to do with food and so much on academia that I moved the review here.

Jones's niece Alice Anders was a student at Dickerson College. The college was a second-rate institution at best, and so were the faculty. The first murder, done by the end of Chapter 1, was graduate student and teaching assistant Bryan Campbell, done in by a blunt instrument. He was not mourned by either students or faculty.

Jones did some Marpleing, occasionally remembered she had an ice cream shop to run, but mostly mooned over Finn Harper, an ex-boyfriend who had returned to town and who she was hoping to make a current boyfriend again. Anders took after her aunt and did some snooping as well, although not with the same degree of success.

The college was a hotbed of layabouts with doubtful credentials and academic failures who couldn't get a better position. The trustees believed in papering over problems as a standard method of dealing with personnel issues. That came back to haunt them.

Campbell's supervisor Emily Clowper was the second victim, strangled. Aunt and niece hardly have time to run the ice cream shop as they raced to beat the police to a solution of the case. In a nod to our modern times, something rarely seen in cozies, they investigate a suspect's blog, after first explaining to the reader what a blog was.

Nevermind the murders, the serious crimes were a dean faking data for one of his papers, and diversion of academic funds to pay for a sick wife's medical care. The ice cream shop hardly got a mention, so this was basically an academia mystery novel.

Just to keep the faith though, the appendix included recipes for Pink Pepperberry Milk Shakes (as in Dr Pepper soda pop, not the spices) and Peanut Butter S'mores Ice Cream Cake. Don't forget your Lipitor.

“Dead People’s Clothes” by Hollis Seamon (2019 Jan/Feb, ELLERY QUEEN MYSTERY MAGAZINE) was the chronicle of staff grievances against the Dean of Arts and Humanities at a small college. She had been using dirty politics to reshape the faculty in her image and eliminate her enemies, real or imagined. Prof. Sandra Swinburn, known to the faculty as The Swine, was done in by a blunt instrument at a Christmas party.

The narrator, a tenured professor, spent most of her time gushing about a cashmere sweater she just bought at a bargain price. There was a reason she got it cheap, and it almost got her arrested. In the end, the original owner of the sweater, who was the murderer, was sussd out by the police but by then she had skipped the country.

Extreme Academic Debates.

THE AVENGERS were once not a mob of American superheroes prancing about in brightly-coloured spandex, but a 1960s British television spy series. John Steed was the main protagonist, a suave, bowler-hatted debonair agent working for MI5. 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.

“A Sense Of History” (1966), written by Martin Woodhouse, was an episode that could be revived today with astonishing relevance. It began with the murder of an economics professor who was considered a brilliant man. That must have been so because he drove a Rolls-Royce, not something he bought with his academic salary.

He had been spearheading a plan for the complete economic integration of Europe. At the time the episode was made, the European Common Market was a subject for debate in Britain. Ruin was forecast if Britain joined. Nothing like today, where ruin was forecasted if it left.

Steed and Peel were called in by MI5 to investigate because of the international ramifications. Someone was obviously violently opposed to the plan. The trail led to a stately university, one of those brick piles founded in the 1600s by some

bishop or other. The only clue was a copy of a thesis opposing European integration, produced years ago, but without the author’s name.

Peel tried to infiltrate the university as a new student, but given that she was a woman of a certain age, she was rather conspicuous amongst the early-20s students. Steed pretended to be an old alumnus and was conspicuous because he didn’t know any of the university customs and traditions.

The place was plagued by a rowdy gang of students stirring up trouble and disrespectful to their professors. They wore gowns, not brown shirts, but it was obvious their leader was the murderer. As with many other campuses around the world at the time, some of the students were not there to get an education.

Peel’s first thought was to check the university archives for another copy of the thesis that might have the author’s name on it and thereby identify the ringleader. The archives were a poorly organized mess, and shortly afterward so was the archivist.

From there, many tangles occurred with the students. The climax came at a fancy dress party where everyone was dressed in medieval costumes. It was a wilder party than anything I attended in my student days, what with all the judo fights, archery, and swordplay. The culprits were run to ground and the European union saved. Huzzah!

Failing To Make The Grade.

THE GRIM STEEPER (2016) by Amanda Cooper took place in October as Gracious Grove celebrated its annual Fall Fling Townwide Tea Party. Every other place in North America celebrates Oktoberfest but since the village was in a dry county, they were stuck with caffeine instead of ethanol. Sophie Taylor and her grandmother’s tea shop, called Auntie Rose’s, were in the thick of it as might be expected.

Also in the thick of it was Taylor’s current boyfriend Jason Murphy. He was an English instructor at Cruickshank College and had been accused by the Dean of padding a star athlete’s grades. Murphy denied it and said he had given the player, Mac MacAlister, a D grade, which someone in the Registrar’s Office had inflated to an A. The basketball coach Heck Donovan was under pressure to keep the basketball team winning with MacAlister, and Dean Asquith was under pressure to uphold the reputation of the college.

Asquith got as far as Chapter 9 before someone revoked his appointment by stabbing him through the heart, then dumping the body in front of Auntie Rose’s tea shop. It might not have been academic matters since Asquith was a womanizer and his estranged wife had all the money.

Not until the end of Chapter 10 was it that Asquith’s first name was mentioned: Dale. Needless to say, that got my undivided attention. I particularly resented Murphy’s remark: “*I have thought for some time that if any man was asking to be murdered, it was Dale.*”

[rant deleted]

The tangled lives, romantic and academic, were gradually sorted out. One of Asquith’s mistresses did him in. She was involved in bribery for grade inflating. Parents had bought their kids’ way in. MacAlister was expelled because his parents bribed Donovan to get him into the college on a scholarship. I’m glad these things only happen in cozies, not in the real world.

Since this novel was part of a nominally food cozy, the book wrapped up with a recipe for Blueberry Pecan Yogurt Tea Cake, plus instructions on how to make tea.

Libraries.

“Fragments From The Library Of Cygnus X-1” by Chris Willrich (2019 July/August, ASIMOV’S) was a sampling of texts preserved from alien cultures. On the planet Krifora, it was the custom of scholars to write their comments about codices in the margins of the books, followed by other commenting on the comments, until there was no more room for even the most microscopic writing. On a gas giant planet, books were written on balloons, to float where they may. A planet where trees were mobile was littered with inscribed leaves. And so forth. Some clever ideas in a good story.

VALENTINE MURDER (1999) by Leslie Meier was a novel in a cozy series about Lucy Stone, part-time newspaper reporter and full-time Miss Marple. She lived in the blood-soaked village of Tinker’s Cove, Maine. She now turned her attention to the public library.

While Stone was attending a library board meeting, the librarian Bitsy Howell was murdered in the basement. Away to the chaos. Stone and Detective

Lieutenant Horowitz got on each other’s nerves, to say the least. The second murder, and there was one, was obviously intended to deflect suspicion but you can’t stop the inexorable onslaught of Miss Marple.

There were people with something to hide, and it appeared that Howell had been about to expose someone. The murderer was a contractor who fiddled the books on a recent addition to the library and short-changed the quality of building materials. The State of Maine was saved the cost of a trial when the addition collapsed on top of him during a storm.

BY BOOK OR BY CROOK (2015) by Eva Gates (pseudonym of Vicki Delany) was the first novel in a cozy series about Lucy Richardson, who gave up the big city life in Boston and migrated to Bodie Island in the Outer Banks of North Carolina. She obtained a job as librarian at the local library, located in a lighthouse. The murders soon followed.

Richardson got off to a rough start when a Jane Austen first-edition was stolen from the library. Things went from bad to worse after Jonathan Uppiton, the library board chairman, failed to survive past Chapter 2. He was murdered in the library, so as to give Richardson a flying start as a Miss Marple.

Uppiton was not a nice man but to be fair to him he was as much sinned against and was trapped in a loveless marriage. The book thief complicated matters but he was a lower priority. The killer was revealed as a man upset that Uppiton didn’t give his girlfriend the librarian job.

The confrontation between Richardson and the murderer, as traditional as it was for Miss Marples, was only the penultimate event. The library board elections, as vicious as anything in federal politics, resulted in a coup-d’etat and purge.

BOOKED FOR TROUBLE (2015) was the sequel. Lucy Richardson’s mother Suzanne blew into town like a hurricane and did about the same amount of damage. Besides interfering with Lucy’s private life, Suzanne met up with an old classmate and enemy Karen Kivas.

It was not a pleasant reunion but a very public spat. After Kivas’ body was found outside the library, the Deppity Dawgs knew who to suspect. To save her mother from doing hard time on a bum rap, Lucy went Marpleing. Kivas’ ex-husband Norm seemed one suspect. He thought libraries were a waste of public funds, so that gave Lucy motivation to investigate him.

Lucy was well on her way to developing a reputation as a snoop. A coworker remarked of the police: *I won't be surprised if they decide they might as well go ahead and open a branch office here.*

There were old stories behind the murder, done by a man who had been pained by the return of both Suzanne and Kivas. He lashed out at the nearer of the two evils, and went after Suzanne in the denouement. The past was not dead for him.

READING UP A STORM (2016) kept Lucy Richardson busy with a shipwreck on the shore by the Lighthouse Library. A small boat actually, with two survivors. One of them didn't last long on shore before being murdered. The first sentence of this novel was: *It was a dark and stormy night.* We'll let that slide by as the author was obviously having fun, even if the characters weren't.

The defunct was William Williamson, an unpopular sharp-practice man. His dealings with the village folk provided a plentitude of suspects. It did provide good business for the library. *The morning was busy. Something about police activity and folks needing an excuse to find out what was going on, so they pretended to have been intending to come to the library anyway.*

The sudden influx of pedestrian traffic made it easier for Richardson to sleuth from behind her counter under the guise of gossiping. Non-admissible in court, but Miss Marples seldom worry about that.

The Williamson family had a son worried that his father would spend his inheritance or let a stepmother grab what was left. Then appeared an illegitimate daughter whom the son did not know about and who had the same concerns.

The denouement was a blabs-all explanation, whereas the murderer could have escaped a guilty verdict by insufficient evidence had he kept his mouth shut. The son had set up fake navigational harbour lights along jagged rocks to lure the old man into a shipwreck. When he survived, direct action was then required. It happens in the best of families.

SOMETHING READ, SOMETHING DEAD (2019) produced something blue for a bridal shower hosted by Lucy Richardson at the library. The bride was her cousin Josie O'Malley, who was swamped by other relatives wanting to plan the wedding.

They included Mirabelle, a cousin on the opposite side of the family, who ate something at the shower that fatally disagreed with her. Setting aside all the family feuds, which were a given, there were other matters for Richardson to investigate. Mirabelle had been involved in a shaky business deal. She had enough enemies that anyone could have added the poison to the food.

Richardson uncovered the real tragedy, as explained in a J'accuse! meeting, that the poison was intended for someone else. The murderer was an O'Malley who wanted to hurry along an inheritance but instead took out a poor cousin.

There were some happy endings. The wedding went smoothly. The publicity brought in donations to the library renovation fund. It's an ill wind that blows no good.

A LIKELY STORY (2015) by Jenn McKinlay was a novel in a cozy series about Lindsey Norris of the Briar Creek Public Library, Connecticut. It began with her delivering books from the library to the Rosen brothers, elderly recluses who lived on an island. One was found dead with a bullet hole in his chest and the other was missing.

This was a job for, no, not the police, as interested in the matter as they may have been, but for Miss Marple. Evelyn Dewhurst was buying up all the islands along the shore, or at least trying to. The Rosen brothers weren't selling. There were other back stories, sufficient to spread the motives and guilt around.

The library was having its problems. A nearby library was poaching attendees of the children's story hour because their presenter was a gorgeous young stud who attracted all the young mums. One doesn't usually think of such contretemps in the life of a library.

The final confrontation dredged up a lot of genealogical information about the Dewhurst and Rosen families. Big-money inheritance was involved, enough to make people forget their scruples.

BETTER LATE THAN NEVER (2016) started as the library declared an amnesty for overdue books and was swamped with returns. While sorting them out, Norris came across a book that had been checked out twenty years ago. Looking up the borrower, she found it was Candice Whitley, who had been murdered later that day after checking out the book. The killer was never identified.

No one saw who brought the book back but Norris wasn't going to let it go. She and the Deppity Dawgs began rehashing past events and trying to make deductions based on events of two decades ago. They did succeed in stirring up emotions. That eventually led to the murderer, who had done the killing because of romantic jealousy.

The book had not been returned by the murderer, but by someone who wanted justice without exposing himself. The novel ended with Norris vowing: *I will not be doing any more investigations. From now on I am going to mind my own business and let the police handle things.*

The next novel in the series was DEATH IN THE STACKS (2017), which put paid to that resolution, as we knew it would. Dinner In The Stacks, the library's biggest fundraiser of the year, was a night to remember. Olive Boyle, the new library board president, was found murdered in the stacks while the party was in progress.

Boyle was a loudmouthed bully who had several altercations with Norris and other staff members, so there was no shortage of suspects. Notwithstanding Norris's prior resolution, she went Marpleing among the books. Boyle had threatened many people, claiming to have secrets about them. In a word, blackmail.

The real motives, however, came from elsewhere. Boyle had an unacknowledged child decades before. There was a sizable inheritance involved, several angry adult children, and a complicated genealogy. The murderer wanted to prune the lines of descent. As Norris summed up in the final line: *The library is never dull.*

Following on was HITTING THE BOOKS (2018), which pulled Lindsay Norris into the attempted murder (twice) of Theresa Huston. The first attempt was by a hit-and-run driver in front of the library. That certainly gave the book club something to talk about. The alarums that followed kept the plot moving briskly. The Deppity Dawgs had their hands full, as a half-dozen self-appointed Miss Marples kept barging into crime scenes. Norris was greatly annoyed. She was supposed to be the only Miss Marple, and deeply resented the competition.

Lots of family feuds and old broken romances that still festered years later. Much researching at the library, including who was checking out what books. Gunfire peppered the denouement, for a librarian's work is not as quiet as

people think. The murderer was an ex-wife who vanished 15 years ago but came back to take care of unfinished business.

A MURDER FOR THE BOOKS (2017) by Victoria Gilbert (pseudonym of Vicki L. Weavil) was the debut novel of a cozy series about Amy Webber of Taylorsford, Virginia. She had just taken up a position with the public library. Her neighbour Richard Muir was looking into a 1925 murder that took place in the house he inherited, a scandalous poisoning. He asked her for research help and away the plot went.

Of greater concern to Webber was a murder in the here and now, that is, Chapter 1, when Webber and Muir found the body of Doris Virts in the archives. The deceased was a paranoid on day leave from a local institution. As it turned out, sometimes paranoids really do have enemies out to get them.

Muir's research into his family's past evidently stirred up someone who preferred the past remain dead. The problem may not have been family feuds as first thought. Muir and Webber uncovered possible shady land deals, unsettled property boundaries, and a coverup of contaminated water wells.

The denouement was signaled with the sound of shots fired, then fugitives fleeing and other assorted alarums. Eventually a journal book was discovered containing evidence about the real perpetrator of the 1925 murder. They were all dead now.

The matter would have been moot except that one woman in the current generation had too much family pride and wanted to protect the good name of her ancestors. For such reasons of honour and pride, people die.

THE BODIES IN THE LIBRARY (2019) by Marty Wingate was the first novel in a new series about Hayley Burke, who had taken up a new job in Bath, England. She became curator of Lady Georgina Fowling's First Edition Library, kept in Middlebank House.

There were some hassles. The secretary Mrs Woolgar didn't approve of a new broom sweeping clean. There was a noisy book club meeting in the library whose members specialized in writing pastiches of Agatha Christie, one of which involved zombies. Charles Henry Dill was a greedy nephew lurking in the background, trying to overturn the will and grab the manor for himself.

The excitement began with a member of the writers group getting his head bashed in. Burke found his body in the stacks. The police had gotten lazy over the years. When they went to backtrack everyone's movements on security cameras within and outside the manor, they found there were blank spots. Apparently England isn't quite the surveillance society we thought.

That left room for a Marple to operate, and so Burke did. It also made an opportunity for Dill to try and seize the estate on the grounds that it wasn't managed competently. The mess was finally untangled when the murderer was revealed as another member of the writers group who had gone off the deep end.

Dill was eliminated as a threat to the library by some well-placed blackmail to keep him quiet. That's one way to tie off a loose thread.

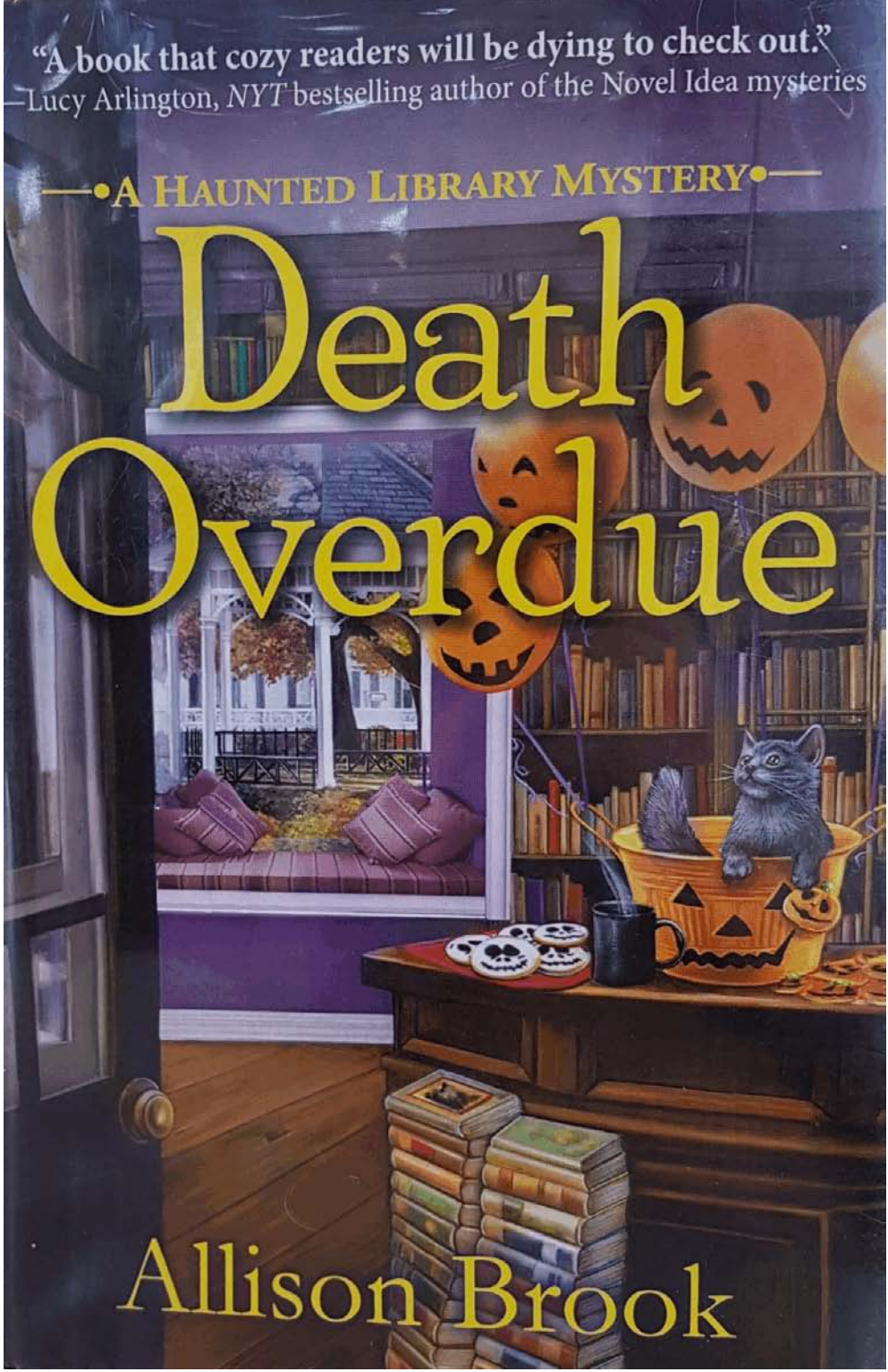
DEATH OVERDUE (2017) by Allison Brook was the debut novel in a cozy series about librarian Carrie Singleton of Clover Ridge, Connecticut. She was the only person, other than a small girl, who could see and talk with the resident ghost Evelyn Havers, a very former librarian. Havers was helpful in dealing with library politics, which were often vicious.

But not as vicious as what happened during a talk by retired detective Al Buckley. He spoke about the unsolved murder 15 years ago of library aide Laura Foster. In his retirement, he began investigating it as a cold case and thought he had discovered who committed the murder. Before he could name a suspect, he keeled over in the middle of the lecture. Someone, almost certainly the original murderer, had poisoned him.

Singleton went Marpleing into Foster's murder. In the library attic, she found a diary of Foster which detailed an adulterous affair she had with a neighbour. Their diary only referred to her lover as 'L', and of course every man who went near her had a name beginning with L.

As she got near the solution, the alarms increased, including the traditional run-her-off-the-road-over-a-cliff scenario. That caught the killer for both murders, who was the wife of L. From there a quick wrap-up.

What puzzled me about the book was its cover, as Halloweenish as possibly could be, yet with only an incidental mention of the day in the text. A few paragraphs in the middle of the novel mentioned the library's costume party and that was it.



Library Cats.

Miranda James (pseudonym of Dean James) has a cozy series about Charlie Harris and his cat Diesel. The novels appear to be an attempt to capture both the cat cozy and the library cozy markets. Harris was a grandfather in Athena, Mississippi. He volunteered at the local public library, and worked part-time at the Athena College library and archives. Diesel walked through occasional scenes, say once a chapter, to attract the interest of the cat cozy crowd.

FILE M FOR MURDER (2012) put Charlie Harris in an uncomfortable position when playwright Connor Lawton was appointed Athena College’s writer in residence. Harris’ daughter Laura was a substitute professor who had a connection with Lawton. So did others, as Lawton was a ladies man, at least until he was murdered.

Laura became a suspect so Harris went sleuthing to protect her. A second murder upped the stakes. Harris found cryptic notes made by Lawton that seemed useful. It did require library research since not everything is digitized. Step by step, Harris’ research uncovered a family story related to a murder decades ago. An attempt at arson failed and a mail bomb arrived for Laura. No quietude in Athena.

Lawton was a small boy when the murder happened but the trauma prompted him to write a roman-a-clef when he returned to Athena as an adult. The two murderers, brother and sister, got wind of the play and halted it with extreme measures.

Having gotten away with their first murder back when, they weren’t about to be exposed for it by a playwright. There is no statute of limitations for murder. Harris did an analysis of the play compared to known facts. It was indeed the case that the play was the thing to catch the murderers.

OUT OF CIRCULATION (2013) demonstrated that society galas could be as vicious as a battlefield skirmish. The Friends of the Athena Public Library held their annual fund-raising event. There were hostilities between the Ducote sisters An’gel and Dickce on the one side, and Vera Cassity on the other.

Cassity was not well liked. It was no surprise when someone pushed her down the stairs at the gala and broke her neck. Charlie Harris was on the job as librarian and sleuth, plus the police of course. There weren’t just skeletons in

people’s closets; they were coming out and dancing around the room. The Friends were in a tizzy, but the Ducote and Cassity families even more so when they learned the two families were just one. That scandal was eclipsed when an older member of the family had to silence Cassity before she could drag him out of the closet and expose him as a homosexual.

ARSENIC AND OLD BOOKS (2015) documented the struggle that erupted after grande dame Lucinda Beckwith Long donated a set of Civil War diaries to the Athena College archives. They were written by Rachel Afton Long, an ancestor of Lucinda’s husband.

Her son Beck was campaigning for Mississippi state senator. The diaries could establish his credentials as a good ole boy who would understand the Suth’n way of life and not rock the boat. His opponent Jasper Singletary also wanted to see the diaries, claiming the Longs had a history of sharp practice and Beck was no different.

Others pushing and shoving in the crowd were lecturer Marie Steverton, an aggressive historian who demanded exclusive access to the diaries. She was in a last-ditch attempt to get tenure and if she failed, would probably end up working in a fast-food outlet. A freelance journalist Kelly Grimes was looking for scandal and thought she might be able to get some from the diaries.

Charlie Harris was caught in the middle as the college archivist. It was quite obvious by this point that a corpse would make its appearance sooner rather than later. The only question was who would have the honour. The diaries were stolen and shortly afterward Steverton was murdered by a hit-and-run driver.

Further complications arose. An additional volume of the diaries turned up after the theft but was soon ascertained to be a forgery. Grimes was discovered to have a secret relationship with Singletary. Diesel the cat made cameo appearances, mainly to remind everyone he was still there.

Family feuds and overweening pride in ancestry were exposed by Harris. The difficulty was that all the suspects seemed to be in the clear. Eventually Grimes was fingered. She was white trash hoping to step up into Southern aristocracy by marrying a Singletary, and stopped at nothing to achieve her goal, including murder.

The diaries were recovered, minus some damage, and a lot of reputations were damaged even worse. With a final meow from Diesel, the village settled back into quietude, at least until the next novel.

Which was NO CATS ALLOWED (2016). Athena College had a new library director Oscar Reilly, whose mother never taught him manners. He instituted budget cuts, harassed the staff, and worst of all, banned Diesel from the stacks. Unlike the previous book, it was obvious who the first murder victim would be, and Reilly did not disappoint, murdered in the library.

A stranger in town followed him a few chapters later. Charlie Harris went sleuthing. There were some of the traditional alarums, such as the murderer breaking into the library administration offices in search of something. In a nod to our modern age, Harris noticed that someone had locked down a large quantity of ebooks on the library computer.

The third victim was Reilly’s predecessor as library director. Harris discovered that the Accounts Payable clerk and her girlfriend had been embezzling money from the college using a fake ebooks company. They had to take out both directors, who independently had discovered the defalcations. From there, events snowballed until the police put the cuffs on them.

CLAWS FOR CONCERN (2018) was the eleventh novel in the series, by which time Harris had solved enough murder cases to make people pay attention. In particular, true-crime writer Jack Pemberton arrived to compile a book about Harris.

Another subject was a library customer Bill Delaney, researching the genealogy of a man who turned out to be a Harris in-law. Pemberton became convinced that Delaney was a mass murderer in an unsolved case in a nearby town. Harris wasn’t thrilled that this around it might be his ox being gored.

A hit-and-run driver put Delaney in the hospital. Harris and Pemberton researched the murder of the Barber family that Delaney might have been connected with. Lots of white trash melodrama was exposed, demonstrating that the Barber family deaths were murder from within. Diesel meowed occasionally to remind everyone he was there.

THE PAWFUL TRUTH (2019) began with Charlie Harris going back to school at Athena College, auditing a course on early medieval history. It was taught by

handsome young professor Carey Warriner. Harris felt out of place, being the oldest student by far. That was a minor detail after classmate Dixie Belle Compton was murdered.

She and Warriner had argued in public just before her death, supplying one of the basic motives of mysteries. Warriner’s marriage wasn’t doing well, and his wife Irene was another suspect. Everyone had past histories and not the medieval type.

Irene published novels under the name Lucy Dunne. Harris attended a book signing of hers which turned into a brouhaha when Carey physically attacked a man he thought was getting too close to Irene. Gossip circulated around the campus at the speed of light.

The culprit was trying to break up the marriage and insert himself into the wreckage (pardon the expression). Harris figured out that the killer was manipulating people into doing his dirty work. In the confrontation, the murderer almost got Harris with a Shawinigan handshake but since Harris was booked for the series, he survived.

Bookmobiles.

Bookmobiles are still around in Alberta. Rural counties use them to service hamlets and crossroads, and the Calgary Public Library for suburbs not convenient to transit lines. There are several cozy series about bookmobiles. Strangely, they always have a cat riding with them, probably to pick up the cat cozy readers.



Laurie Cass (pseudonym of Janet Koch) had a series about Minnie Hamilton, who drove a bookmobile in the Chilson district of Michigan. The vehicle usually included a library volunteer along for the ride and a cat named Eddie. The mobility meant the murders were distributed around the county, although library patrons might wonder if it was safe to visit the bookmobile at its stops.

LENDING A PAW (2013) was the first novel in the series. It was the first day on the job for Minnie Hamilton driving the bookmobile. After a pause to introduce Eddie the cat, Hamilton drove off with her feline co-pilot. At the final stop on the route, Eddie was the one who found the body.

The victim was Stan Larabee, who had donated the money for the bookmobile. Little did he know. Rather unfair that he should have the honour of being the first victim in the series. The next third of the book paused to fill in the history of the library, Hamilton's biography, and village politics.

When the plot resumed, it was divulged that Larabee was a rich man with at least one impatient heir. The library board was in a twist because Larabee had left them money and his six sisters were contesting the will.

Hamilton got herself kidnapped by the murderer while snooping in his house in the usual Miss Marple manner, that is, break and enter. She survived the ordeal. The killer thought he was in Larabee's will but was not, and was bitterly disappointed to learn he shot a man dead for nothing.

TAILING A TABBY (2014) was the sequel. It began with the bookmobile serving ambulance duty when Minnie Hamilton was flagged down to rush artist Russell McCade to hospital. He later walked out of the hospital and was eventually found crouching over a fresh corpse.

Several men who had connections with the dead woman began suffering accidents. Eddie the cat provided the vital clue when he scratched up a weekend supplement of a newspaper. Hamilton went aha! and realized that all the alarms only happened on weekends.

The killer was a jealous man who didn't like the deceased woman dating other men and tried to do a clean sweep. The evidence against him was doubtful but that was solved by having him blab a confession.

POUNCING ON MURDER (2015) occurred during the maple syrup season. Henry Gill died in a sugaring accident, distressing Minnie Hamilton because he provided syrup to her. While on her bookmobile route, a patron named Adam Deering told her he thought Gill's death was murder.

The police wouldn't take him seriously. By now Hamilton had a reputation around the county as a Miss Marple, so Deering asked her to investigate. He thought he might have been the intended victim. Hamilton was busy with a book fair, plus her job and personal life but she went snooping in her spare moments.

Eddie the cat could tolerate small children in single doses but not a horde descending on him in the narrow confines of a bookmobile. He had greater travails when the murderer of Gill catnapped him to bait Hamilton into a trap. She fell for it, of course, and in the finale struggled to keep from drowning in the icy waters of Lake Michigan where the killer had tossed her.

She was needed to drive the bookmobile in the next novel, so she survived. The murderer tried to toss Eddie into the water but cats have claws and aren't afraid to use them. The Deppity Dawg arrived in time to save both cat and Marple. Gill died because he had seen the murderer and his girlfriend together and was likely to blab it to his wife, a jealous sugar mama.

BORROWED CRIME (2015) began with Minnie Hamilton worrying about the loss of funding for the bookmobile. The murder of Roger Slade during a bookmobile stop displaced that concern.

His widow Denise was involved in the Friends of the Library, a hotbed of vicious politics that surpassed any federal election. His sister Tammy sued for negligence and the library board of directors thought about shutting down the bookmobile. Not a good time for Hamilton.

In self-defense she began Marpleing while trying to keep her job. Denise had no manners and was not liked by the villagers. Nonetheless it wasn't her. Denise had exposed a woman for plagiarism. The murderer had been planning a career and didn't want the embarrassment. Why she killed Roger was never satisfactorily explained.

CAT WITH A CLUE (2016) began in the main library when Minnie Hamilton found a body in the stacks. Andrea Vennard was an outlander visiting Chilson

for a funeral, who instead went to her own funeral. Hamilton had the advantage of mobility in her bookmobile to do her sleuthing. The library director position was vacant and she was debating whether to apply. Denise Slade was out and about, annoying the library staff and Friends as much as she did before her widowhood.

Vennard was the victim's married name. She had been born and raised in Chilson. Her brief return triggered the murderer. Someone kept trashing bookstores, the library, and the bookmobile, obviously looking for something. The murderer, Vennard, and a few others were on the track of a rare book in the million-dollar class that the library unknowingly had. Honour among thieves and all that was what touched off the troubles.

BETTER OFF READ (2018) by Nora Page (pseudonym of Ann Perramond) was the first novel in a series about Cleo Watkins, a librarian in Catalpa Springs, Georgia. The village was on the Florida border as it was specifically stated that some residents had their back yard on the state line.



Watkins drove the bookmobile Words On Wheels about the county dispensing books and recruiting support against the mayor's plans to close the library system. Surprisingly he wasn't the first murder victim.

Buford Krandall, library trustee, had ordered a pile of books from Interlibrary Loans on the theme of unsolved murders. Watkins delivered them but was unsettled about Krandall's intent. It didn't matter, as she found him murdered in his house.

She went into the Miss Marple business, although she had to divide her time between that, feuding with the mayor over the library budget, and driving the bookmobile. Her sleuthing revealed that half the neighbours were feuding with Krandall and/or each other. The death toll rose and the books circulated. The mayor had been embezzling library funds and Krandall was on to him. There were other characters involved in sharp practice. It would take a while to sort out. The graves wouldn't wait. Ah, the idyllic life of a village.

READ ON ARRIVAL (2019) was another installment in the series, where Cleo Watkins was on the trail of a book overdue for 40 years. The patron who had it was Dixie Huddleston, who was murdered. Watkins was away in her merry bookmobile and its obligatory cat Rhett Butler.

As the Words On Wheels bookmobile trundled about the countryside, Watkins did her sleuthing, checking out various melodramas and family feuds. She also had to fend off library politicians who kept trying to cut the budget.

Watkins got close to the murderer, too close. The bookmobile was torched but the fire was quickly extinguished and damage was minor. The killer had personal issues with Huddleston. When that damned Miss Marple wouldn't let up, the murderer started a game of tag around the bookmobile, played with a gun. But Watkins was signed for the series, so there was no surprise about the outcome.



Nothing to do with murders, at least as far as I know, but I'll wedge this photo in here for lack of any better place. I took this photo at the Fish Creek library in southern Calgary, where Canada's premier science fiction writer had his virtues extolled.

ZINE LISTINGS

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

[The Usual means \$5 cash (\$6 overseas) or trade for your zine. Americans: please don't send cheques for small amounts to Canada or overseas (the bank fee to cash them is usually more than the amount) or mint USA stamps (which are not valid for postage outside USA). US\$ banknotes are still acceptable around the world.]

BANANA WINGS #76 (The Usual from Claire Brialey and Mark Plummer, 59 Shirley Road, Croyden, Surrey, CR0 7ES, England) SF fanzine with lots of commentary on fandom. This issue has a report on the Dublin Worldcon, with side trips to Beatle songs and American aircraft carriers, and lots of letters of comment.

WORLD WIDE PARTY ON JUNE 21

Founded by Benoit Girard (Quebec) and Franz Miklis (Austria) in 1994, the World Wide Party is held on June 21st every year. 2020 will be the 27th year of the WWP. Mark your calendars now!

At 21h00 local time, everyone is invited to raise a glass and toast fellow members of zinedom around the world. It is important to have it exactly at 21h00 your time. The idea is to get a wave of fellowship circling the planet. Rescheduling it to a club meeting or more convenient time negates the idea of a wave of celebration by SF fans and zinesters circling the globe. At 21h00, face to the east and salute those who have already celebrated. Then face north, then south, and toast those in your time zone who are celebrating as you do. Finally, face west and raise a glass to those who will celebrate WWP in the next hour.

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

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO NIKITA? PART 2

by Dale Speirs

[Part 1 appeared in OPUNTIA #416.]

The early years of the Cold War between 1945 and 1959 were the height of paranoia in North America. Most Americans don't realize that the McCarthy hearings had their roots in the Igor Gouzenko scandal of 1945, when a Soviet spy of that name defected in Ottawa.

Only then did the Canadian government find out how deep the Soviets had infiltrated their spies into Canada. There followed a purge in the government that made McCarthy look benign. The Korean War began in 1950 and inflamed suspicions in Canada, which sent 27,000 troops as part of the United Nations forces.

The Fear.

Swedish teenagers go about frightening people about climate change but since humans evolved in the midst of far worse, I can't be bothered about it. I grew up in the Cold War era when people decided not to have children since they would die in the next few years from a global thermonuclear war.

In Alberta, we never had the duck-and-cover exercises which American schoolchildren were taught. Instead, we learned the Soviet missiles coming over the North Pole would be intercepted by American missiles over Canada and we would be showered with radioactive isotopes. Those were the days.

If you know of a young person made hysterical by the climate change doomsayers, point them to a story by George H. Smith titled "The Last Days Of L.A." (1959 February, *WORLDS OF IF*, available as a free pdf on www.archive.org) It was about a drinking man who lived in fear of atomic war.

Every night he had dreams of mushroom clouds, and every day he tried to drown the memories with alcohol. Each day he visited a different church or UFO organization trying to find solace. He never did, and went insane. All for nothing as it transpired. That is why I don't take doomsayers seriously. Or to put it another way, Matthew 24:6.

What Could Have Been.

The idea of an atomic bomb had been circulating a decade before the real one was first tested. The story "Deadline" by Cleve Cartmill was published in the 1944 March issue of *ASTOUNDING SCIENCE FICTION*, edited by John W. Campbell Jr. It was sufficiently close to reality as to trigger an investigation, the details of which appeared in a history of the incident written by Albert I. Berger and published in the 1984 September issue of *ANALOG*. But Cartmill was by no means the first.

One fear about nuclear fission in the early days was that an atomic bomb would cause a runaway reaction and destroy Earth. This was the theme of "The World Aflame" by Isaac R. Nathanson (1935 January, *AMAZING STORIES*, available as a free pdf on www.archive.org). It was about a scientist initiating fission in a beryllium sphere, which caused a runaway reaction that melted half the university campus before the beryllium was fully fissioned.

Fortunately it was a microscopic amount of beryllium. Unfortunately the Japanese Empire heard about it and put their best scientists to work. They fired a giant ball of fissioning beryllium at New York City, which missed and landed in the Catskills. This time it wasn't a microscopic amount.

The beryllium set off an endless reaction as it melted its way into Earth's core. Humanity was doomed. The Americans began building spacecraft to colonize Mars and provide a safe haven as Earth slowly turned into a molten ball.

The story wasn't ridiculous then in the face of what little knowledge existed about fission. Even the physicists weren't certain what might happen. A cautionary tale.

A few months later "World Gone Mad" by Nat Schachner (1935 October, *AMAZING STORIES*) detailed the origin and ultimate mutual assured destruction of civilization when the USA used rockets against China and Europe. They retaliated and after all the superscience bombs and poison gas had been used, there was no further humanity.

In 1935, people were just beginning to realize the drift of the world into madness, so the story was not over prescient. The Nazis were in power, and the Great Depression had spawned the belief that if democracy couldn't fix the economic problems, then perhaps strong men could.

“The Castaways” was an August 11, 1950, episode of the old-time radio science fiction series DIMENSION X, written by Ernest Kinoy and George Lefferts. (This and other old-time radio shows are available as free mp3s from www.archive.org or www.otrrlibrary.org.)

The story was placed on a South Pacific atoll where a hydrogen bomb test was about to be performed. The commanding officer had trouble relocating the natives, who didn’t want to move. The problem was resolved when the tribe committed suicide en masse by walking into the lagoon waters.

That wouldn’t look good on the C.O.’s record but in the meantime he had to hustle to get everyone else off the island. From a safe distance, the countdown proceeded to zero, but nothing happened. The bomb failed to ignite. On returning to find out what went wrong, the military discovered a spaceship hidden at the bottom of the lagoon and the tribe inside.

They were actually aliens who made a bad landing four centuries ago. The spaceship was repaired but lacked fuel to be up and going. That fuel was radioactive elements. The aliens had been waiting all that time for humans to develop atomic power so the spaceship could be refueled. There was a twist ending that was unbelievable and could have been clipped out with no loss to the story.

At the time the episode was aired, atomic power was less than a decade old, and the general public’s knowledge of the bombs only five years old. The episode was dated just a few days after the fifth anniversary of Nagasaki. It was a cutting edge script that seems dated today but was reasonable for the times.

The Bomb.

The well-regarded old-time radio series SUSPENSE had a 1955 episode titled “Report On The X-915”, no writer credit given. The episode was narrated as a formal report filed by a military officer, in a style identical to DRAGNET or 21ST PRECINCT.

It was set in 1952, when the X-915 atomic submarine began its shakedown cruise as the Korean War slowly trickled to an informal truce. It was the first such submarine. A security officer discovered that nuclear warheads had been stolen from the base. The only place they could have been taken was on board X-915 where they were fitted into its ballistic missiles.

The submarine had the range to bomb New York City with them. Communications from X-915 suddenly ceased and the decision had to be made what to do. The final choice was to depth charge the submarine and force it back to the surface before it could launch missiles. There were eleven survivors, who testified that eight enemy agents had infiltrated the shipyard a year before and managed to get themselves assigned to the submarine.

Listening to this episode in our modern times, it seems overblown and excessively dramatic. To the audiences of 1955, it was not implausible, and would have seemed realistic. In fact, the episode opened with a stern statement from the announcer that it was fiction. Presumably the management wished to avoid a War Of The Worlds panic like the one Orson Welles incited in 1938.

Once the secret of the atomic bomb was out, it only took a few decades for the technology to be used by many countries. After 75 years, anyone sufficiently versed in engineering technology can build the basic style of fission bomb, although getting weapons-grade uranium or plutonium isn’t as simple.

Which brings us to BARNEY MILLER, a comedy television series that aired from 1975 to 1982. This was about a group of NYPD police detectives stationed in Greenwich Village, Manhattan. Almost every scene past the first season was staged in one set, the second floor squad room of a decrepit precinct station.

Capt. Barney Miller was the officer commanding, with a motley crew of detectives, mostly at the sergeant level. One of Miller’s detectives, Arthur Dietrich, had a genius-level mind which led to everyone wondering why he was a policeman instead of a scientist or doctor. He would reply, with a quivering lip, that he didn’t want to talk about it.

The 1977 episode “Atomic Bomb”, written by Reinhold Weege and Tom Reeder, began with the arrest of a bomb maker. The culprit was a graduate student working for a degree in physics. For his project, he had built a workable fission bomb, albeit with no fissionables.

There was a misunderstanding about what kind of bomb it was. The NYPD bomb squad technician didn’t believe it and wasn’t equipped to deal with the situation. Dietrich walked by and asked where the atomic bomb came from, which settled the matter. Miller called in the Feds, who sent a scientist who spoke with a German accent and obviously still regretted how the war turned out. He confirmed that it was a bomb but was inclined to be lenient about it.

With that, the matter was left to fizzle out. The episode was evidently based on real-life incidents where bright high-school or university students built workable replicas of fission bombs. We forget how old the technology now is. It has been refined tremendously by the military, but the basic flash-bang methodology is easily reproduced.

Thar's Uranium In Them Thar Hills.

After the war, both the USA and Canada encouraged exploration for uranium deposits. Previously a nearly worthless metal with few uses, the bounties set off a mad rush of prospectors hoping to strike it rich. Geiger counters suddenly became mass-produced items instead of specialized laboratory equipment. Old-time radio shows found uranium a fertile topic, even if the writers didn't always understand the details.

THE ADVENTURES OF SAM SPADE, DETECTIVE was an OTR series that aired from 1946 to 1950, based on the novel by Dashiell Hammett, who did not write any of the episodes. They were all pastiches, available as free mp3s from www.otrrlibrary.org. The series died after Hammett and several actors and crew were named during the Red Scare, which frightened away advertisers.

“The Stopped Watch Caper” was a 1949 episode written by Robert Tallman and Gil Doud. Spade had been hired by wealthy dowager Rowena Raven, who had been getting threatening letters at her estate on a mountaintop near San Francisco.

Upon arrival, Spade found a strange household, beginning with the butler, played by an actor who did a very good impersonation of Peter Lorre. Rowena was ill, as was her nephew Ralph Raven. He and his sister Lenora welcomed Spade into a tropical conservatory with a giant carnivorous plant. Ralph reassured Spade it had just been fed, so not to worry. However all the other plants were poisonous species, so Spade was cautioned against touching them.

After entering the conservatory, Spade noticed his watch had stopped, and so had everyone else's. The astute listener could guess that the mountaintop wasn't just boring old sandstone or granite, but since there were still twenty minutes to, that point was skipped over.

Rowena said the threatening letters had gone missing. They were apparently intended to drive her and her family away from the manor. Other letters and

objects appeared and disappeared mysteriously from table tops and drawers. This made it obvious the culprit lived within the big house. Lurking about was the family doctor, as suspicious of a man as ever walked through a mystery story.

Ralph and Rowena soon checked out of this life from poisoning. The Medical Examiner said natural causes, which indicated his lack of competence. Lenora began getting threatening letters but she seemed suspicious as well. While searching for evidence, Spade found a Geiger counter. The writers were waving a red flag, letting off fireworks, and otherwise making obvious where the plot was headed.

The doctor objected with a gun but was taken out by either a booby trap left by Ralph or the gun battle with police when they suddenly arrived. There was a uranium deposit underneath the manor house, but it was not entirely clear how the doctor intended to profit by it.

Each episode of this series ended with Spade explaining to his secretary all the details. So many loose threads were left hanging that she protested vociferously, indicating the writers weren't even trying anymore. To be fair, the show was being investigated by senators at that time, so people had other things on their minds.

OUR MISS BROOKS was a mild sitcom which aired on radio from 1948 to 1954 and made a successful transition to television. Constance Brooks was a high school teacher who roomed with the widow Margaret Davis. Every episode opened at their breakfast table where their discussion would set up the plot.

Osgood Conklin was the school principal, a pompous blowhard, whose daughter Harriet attended there. Her boyfriend was Walter Denton, whom Osgood heartily detested. Denton habitually stopped by the Davis house in the morning to give Brooks a ride to school in his rustbucket jalopy.

The 1950 episode “Rare Black Orchid”, written by Al Lewis, Joe Quillan, and Lester White, took note of the fuss about uranium. The alternative title was “Mrs Conklin's Birthday Presents”. (Many OTR episodes had no titles, which were added afterward by fans.)

The episode opened at the Davis residence with Denton arriving to give Brooks a ride to school. First though, he presented her with a black orchid as a token of

his esteem. He mentioned that he had apparently discovered uranium somewhere, as the previous day a Geiger counter in the school laboratory had gone off when his shoe passed by it. Now all he had to do was retrace his steps and find out where he had stepped in uranium-rich soil.

He mentioned that the government paid a bounty of \$10,000 to anyone locating mineable uranium. This got Brooks in with him on a partnership. Denton wanted to use the school Geiger counter to locate his riches but Osgood forbid it being taken off school property. Brooks' part in the partnership was to get the Geiger counter.

To soften up Osgood, she put the black orchid in a box and took it to him as a present for his wife Martha, whose birthday was that day. Denton didn't know about that and was horrified when he learned about it because he had stolen the orchid from the Conklin garden.

That set the stage for assorted gags as Brooks tried to retrieve the box before Osgood opened it and found his stolen orchid. There were excursions, specifically to the garden after dark where Brooks and Denton replaced the orchid.

Denton had brought along the Geiger counter, as his next excursion was to backtrack his previous travels and find the uranium. Osgood had hidden a radium-dial clock in the garden so that Martha wouldn't find it before he was ready to give it to her as a present.

The Geiger counter went off, and it was immediately obvious that no one in the production crew had ever heard one or bothered to do any research. The sounds it made were not the click-click-click noise but wild looping sirens that might well have been produced on a theremin. As it happens, when I was a university student I used a Geiger counter in some of my science classes, so I know what it sounds like. Whoop-whoop-whoop was not it.

They thought the clock was an atomic bomb, although why the Reds would plant it in the Conklin garden was a matter of bafflement. Just as they destroyed the clock, Osgood came out to see what all the racket was and caught them. He was mollified to see his orchid back as he had wanted to give it to Martha, but understandably angry at seeing the clock demolished.

With a few quips, the episode broke away for the final commercial. In the

epilogue, Brooks wondered how it was that Denton had uranium on his shoe. The answer soon came. The school laboratory had a small glass vial of uranium, which Denton had stepped on, contaminating his shoe.

It was evident in this episode that public knowledge of uranium, as typified by the writers and sound man, was appalling. Since it was a weekly show and the producers always in a rush, one didn't expect them to do a detailed study. The series was recorded in Hollywood, so it couldn't have been that difficult for the sound man to make a telephone call to the UCLA campus and ask a physicist what a Geiger counter sounded like.

World War Three.

"First Stage: Moon" by Dick Hetschel (1954 December, *WORLDS OF IF*, available as a free pdf on www.archive.org) was a short story written entirely as dialogue, with no expository sentences. It was a conversation between excited astronauts who were returning to Earth after making the first Moon landing.

They expected to be welcomed as heroes. As their spacecraft descended through the atmosphere, they saw nuclear missiles diving past them to ground targets. They had arrived just as an atomic war began.

The Aftermath.

DOCTOR TIM, DETECTIVE was an old-time radio serial with 15-minute episodes about a medical doctor who spent most of his time explaining the obvious. A 1948 episode, no writer credited, was "Mystery Of The Man From Hiroshima". The title gave away the secret of the episode, assuming anyone over 9 years couldn't guess it in the first few minutes.

The good doctor was in his laboratory. He had taken some X-rays of patients but not yet developed them. The janitor came in, a Japanese man with the phoniest accent ever to come out of Hollywood. He left his coat momentarily on the stack of X-rays. When Dr Tim developed them, they were fogged. He blamed the machine or the operator, and re-did the X-rays the next day with his patients.

The second time around, he had half of them developed and they came out okay. He was momentarily interrupted, during which time the janitor came in and moved them off the table so he could clean it. The second half of the X-rays

came out fogged. Dr Tim was baffled, and as there were no 10-year-old children to tell him the obvious answer, he spent considerable time deducing and thinking on the subject.

The answer was, as every home listener was probably shouting at the radio set, that the Japanese janitor was hotter than Three Mile Island. As this was three years after Hiroshima, one wonders how the janitor lived so long despite being so radioactive he could fog X-rays.

Ozymandias.

“The Planet Zevius”, written by Robert A. Arthur and David Kogan, was a 1951 episode of the old-time radio series THE MYSTERIOUS TRAVELER. About half the plot was taken up with the testing of a spacecraft at the dawn of the Space Age, then a trip on an approved prototype. Lots of military commands barked back and forth, and technical terms no real astronaut ever used.

Finally, about halfway through the episode, the astronauts were off and running, gone to visit the planet named by astronomers as Zevius. About 300 years prior, astronomers of that day had observed the planet briefly covered by many bright flashes of light, then nothing.

Upon landing, the astronauts find nothing but ruins. Gigantic buildings had been lived in by gigantic humanoids. All was rubble, caused by a full-scale nuclear war. They found a book written in a language completely unrelated to the astronauts’ languages.

By now the astute listener will have guessed the ending. One of the astronauts was apparently an incredible linguist, because five minutes later he came back and said he had decoded the text. The inhabitants of Zevius called their planet Earth and themselves humans.

Worth listening to once, not for any literary quality but as a reminder about how little the public and script writers knew of spaceflight six years before Sputnik.

The script was recycled in the 1953 episode of the old-time radio series ESCAPE titled “North Of Polaris”, written by Charles B. Smith. A landing party arrived on a planet that was basically one giant cinder. They poked about a bit and discovered the ruins of a city. In it were two humans, the only survivors, who were being pursued by giant rats.

The astronauts saved the pretty girl (tough luck on the old man) but found themselves attacked by the rats. After assorted trials and tribulations, they escaped. The woman told them she was amazed that anyone survived in Europe or the Americas with a working spaceship.

The planet was (insert drum roll) Earth. The twist ending was that the astronauts were not Earthlings. They were humanoids who spoke English and had no trouble communicating with the woman. They told her they came from a planet 20 million miles away, north of Polaris.

Quite obviously, Smith knew nothing of astronomy and couldn’t be bothered to consult a textbook at the library. 20 million miles wouldn’t even reach to Venus or Mars. Further, how did the astronauts know the Earthlings called the north star Polaris?

The story was badly written from ignorance, which was a shame, because with a few minor tweaks it could have been much more plausible. Since it was radio, no SFX were needed. The aliens could have been protoplasmic blobs with pseudopods, carrying universal translators.

The Invasion.

It was never likely that Russia or China could sustain an invasion of continental USA, but that didn’t stop the fear that the Reds could show up at any time. This belief is popularly said to be the reason why there were so many alien or monster invasion science fiction movies during the 1950s. During World War Two, it seemed more plausible and citizens more supportive. The Cold War reactivated the Ground Observer Corps in the USA in 1952 for Operation Skywatch but it fizzled out by 1958.

“Operation Skywatch” was a 1953 episode of FIBBER MCGEE AND MOLLY, an old-time radio comedy that ran from 1935 to 1953 as a half-hour show before a live audience. The episodes were mostly written by Don Quinn. It was a propaganda episode that tried to encourage listeners to join the GOC, but had difficulty convincing anyone.

Molly was a member of the GOC, standing on guard for the town of Wistful Vista. Fibber was not, and scoffed at the uselessness of watching the skies in the middle USA on the off-chance that an enemy bomber might sneak through. He was correct, but nonetheless was lectured by Molly and supporting characters.

The episode ended with a USAF bomber making a treetop pass over Wistful Vista and dropping leaflets saying they could have been bombs. Fibber converted faster than Saul on the road to Damascus and rushed off to join the GOC. Not believable.

During World War Two, this series had devoted every fourth episode to propaganda, explaining some new regulation such as rationing or rumour controls with a comedy about Fibber trying to get around the rules and failing. The audience was ripe for it and all for it, so these episodes carried more weight. The Cold War didn't have the same urgency. North Korea never bombed the USA. Historically the American public have been reluctant to become involved in foreign wars when there was no direct and immediate threat to them.

The Other Invasion.

The deployment of USAF forces on British soil in the 1950s was not popular at the time. HANCOCK'S HALF HOUR was a BBC radio comedy starring Tony Hancock. An episode of his show made fun of the controversy by pointing out that for every Brit opposed to the arrival of the Yanks, there was another wondering how to make money off them.

Britain was still suffering from austerity. Compared to the average British man, the American servicemen were better paid, had better health, and swept away the girls. They drove up prices for room rentals, since the air bases were short housing and so was the country.

"The Americans Hit Town" was a 1958 episode written by Ray Galton and Alan Simpson. It is still under BBC copyright, so copies have to be purchased. I heard it on CHQR 770AM, a Calgary station which has a programme of old-time radio shows. Check Google if you are looking for mp3 downloads.

Hancock and his household of friends lived in the fictional town of East Cheam. They were set abuzz at the arrival of a USAF deployment against the Soviets. There were problems. The shopkeepers quickly jacked up prices, and the pubs were so full of servicemen that the regulars couldn't get a look in.

Hancock's obese secretary Griselda was desperately looking for a husband. None of the local men would have anything to do with her, so she set her cap for the Yanks. She had some luck, including an airman who told her he had a ranch with 8,000 head of cattle back in Brooklyn, NYC.

One of the characters was Sidney James, a spiv who quickly dashed about leasing nightclubs and acting as an agent for landlords to rent at high prices to airmen. Hancock denounced James until he found out that he could get 20 guineas a week per tenant.

He quickly jettisoned his principles and managed to squeeze in ten servicemen, which would total about \$1,000 per tenant per week in rents in today's depreciated currency. The shoddy condition of the house was explained by passing everything off as 500-year-old antiques. Americans liked antiques.

An inspector arrived from the Ministry of Housing, sending Hancock and James into a panic, as there were severe penalties for overcharging on rents. Fortunately all the servicemen were away on leave.

Hancock and James had a few minutes advance warning, so they tried to impersonate the American officers using their uniforms, with hilarious accents garnered from Hollywood movies. They assured the inspector that they were only paying a few shillings in rent per month.

It almost worked until a USAF messenger arrived from the base and told them an alert had been called and they were to report to their bombers at once. Since they were illegally wearing American uniforms and the inspector was still there, they could not disclaim their fraudulent identities.

The inspector offered to drive them to the base, and the messenger told them that if he rode with them, he could have the car go straight up to the plane. So it was that Hancock and company took up a bomber. They found an instruction manual in the cockpit and managed to get the plane up into the air. They didn't succeed for long, and belly flopped the plane into the heart of the Yorkshire Moors.

Seeking shelter afterwards, they found a farmhouse in the middle of the moors. The farmer, seeing their uniforms, offered shelter at £20 per person. As Hancock remarked, "*Shot with me own gun!*"

SEEN IN THE LITERATURE

Schiller, M., et al (2020) **Iron isotope evidence for very rapid accretion and differentiation of the proto-Earth.** SCIENCE ADVANCES 6:doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.aay7604 (available as a free pdf)

Authors’ abstract: *Terrestrial planet formation is thought to occur in stages, where first-generation bodies of a few hundred kilometer radii form rapidly by streaming instabilities, followed by growth dominated by gas drag-assisted accretion of millimeter-sized particles onto these bodies to form Mars-sized planetary embryos during the protoplanetary disk stage.*

In the inner solar system, these embryos are inferred to have formed from thermally processed and, hence, dry and reduced solids. After dissipation of the gas, the terrestrial planets are assembled over several tens of millions of years via large collisions between embryos, many of which will have differentiated into metal cores and silicate mantles.

In these models, water and other volatile elements are inferred to have been delivered to Earth and oxidized its mantle during the last phase of accretion after core formation, possibly by volatile-rich, outer solar system bodies scattered inward by the outward migration of Jupiter.

However, a recent study of the isotope composition of the siderophile element ruthenium in solar system objects, including Earth and the parent bodies of chondrite meteorites, suggests that Earth’s volatile element budget may have been acquired much earlier, perhaps during its main accretion phase. Moreover, new planet formation models based on the rapid accretion of pebbles onto asteroidal seeds suggest that Earth’s main accretion phase may have been completed within the ~5-million year lifetime of the protoplanetary disk.

Nucleosynthetic isotope variability among solar system objects provides insights into the accretion history of terrestrial planets. We report on the nucleosynthetic Fe isotope composition (⁵⁴Fe) of various meteorites and show that the only material matching the terrestrial composition is CI (Ivuna-type) carbonaceous chondrites, which represent the bulk solar system composition.

All other meteorites, including carbonaceous, ordinary, and enstatite chondrites, record excesses in ⁵⁴Fe. This observation is inconsistent with protracted growth of Earth by stochastic collisional accretion, which predicts

a ⁵⁴Fe value reflecting a mixture of the various meteorite parent bodies. Instead, our results suggest a rapid accretion and differentiation of Earth during the ~5-million year disk lifetime, when the volatile-rich CI-like material is accreted to the proto-Sun via the inner disk.

Marchi, S., et al (2020) **A compositionally heterogeneous Martian mantle due to late accretion.** SCIENCE ADVANCES 6:doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.aay2338 (available as a free pdf)

Authors’ abstract: *The late accreted mass required to account for Mars’ highly siderophile element (HSE) abundances may have been supplied by a very small number of large projectiles. In the standard assumption that all of a projectile’s HSE were retained in the Martian mantle, a single bulk chondritic projectile with $D \sim 103$ km could suffice, assuming a projectile density of 3000 kg/m³.*

At least one impact of this scale is needed to account for Mars’ largest putative preserved crater, the 10,600 × 8500 km Borealis basin. Large projectiles ($D > 500$ km) are likely to have been differentiated, with most of their siderophile elements sequestered in their metallic cores. A large projectile’s core may not be efficiently dispersed within the target’s mantle during a collision. Hence, large projectiles may lead to a nonchondritic and initially nonuniform distribution of HSE in the Martian mantle.

Here, we present smoothed particle hydro-dynamics impact simulations that show that Mars’ HSE abundances imply one to three late collisions by large differentiated projectiles. We show that these collisions would produce a compositionally heterogeneous Martian mantle. Based mainly on W isotopes, it has been argued that Mars grew rapidly in only about 2 to 4 million years (Ma). However, we find that impact generation of mantle domains with variably fractionated Hf/W and diverse ¹⁸²W could imply a Mars formation time scale up to 15 Ma.

Reinhardt, C., et al (2020) **Bifurcation in the history of Uranus and Neptune: the role of giant impacts.** MONTHLY NOTICES OF THE ROYAL ASTRONOMICAL SOCIETY 492:5336-5353

Authors’ abstract: *Despite many similarities, there are significant observed differences between Uranus and Neptune: While Uranus is tilted and has a*

regular set of satellites, suggesting their accretion from a disc, Neptune’s moons are irregular and are captured objects. In addition, Neptune seems to have an internal heat source, while Uranus is in equilibrium with solar insolation. Finally, structure models based on gravity data suggest that Uranus is more centrally condensed than Neptune.

We perform a large suite of high-resolution SPH simulations to investigate whether these differences can be explained by giant impacts. For Uranus, we find that an oblique impact can tilt its spin axis and eject enough material to create a disc where the regular satellites are formed. Some of the discs are massive and extended enough, and consist of enough rocky material to explain the formation of Uranus’ regular satellites.

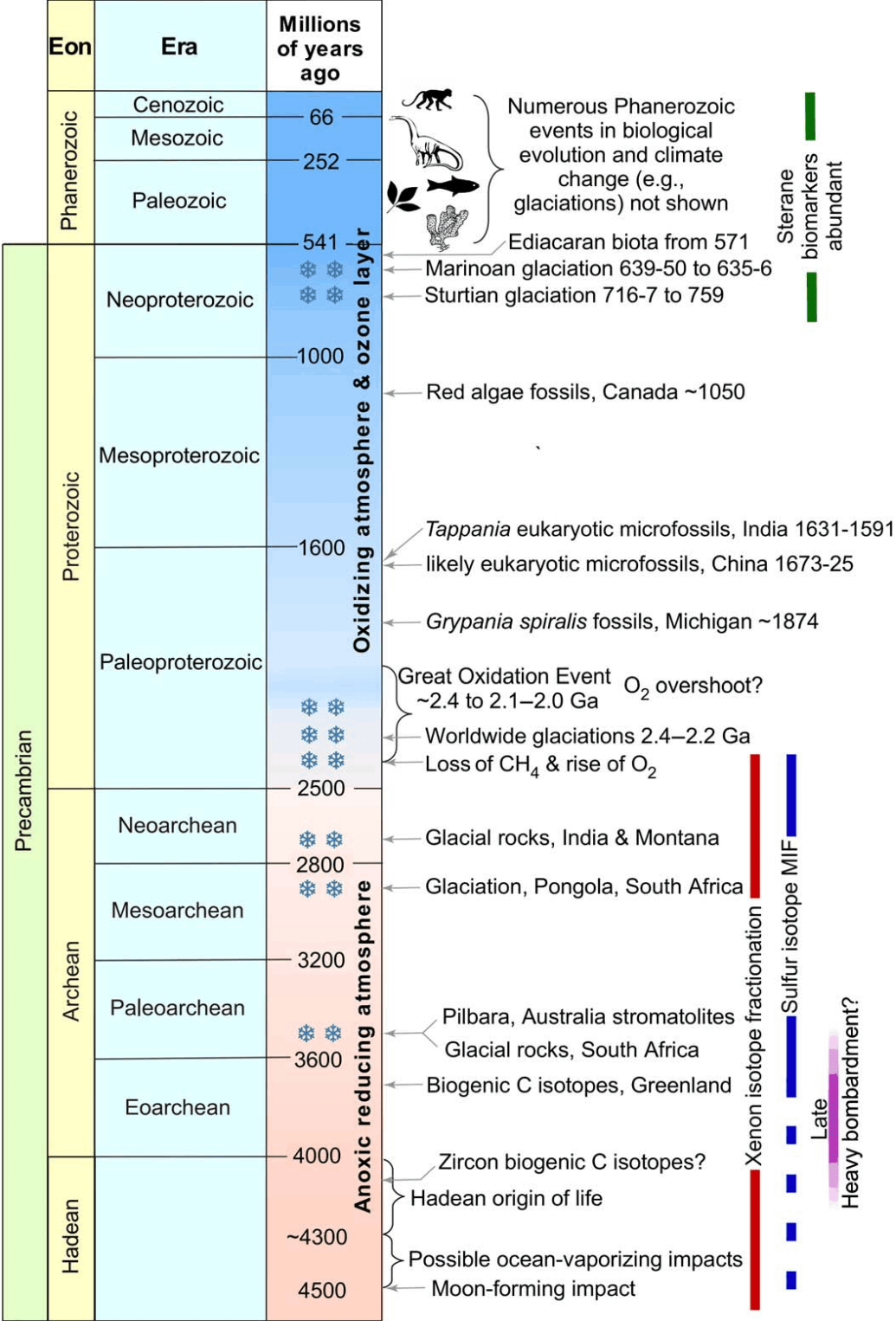
For Neptune, we investigate whether a head-on collision could mix the interior, and lead to an adiabatic temperature profile, which may explain its larger flux and higher moment of inertia value. We find that massive and dense projectiles can penetrate towards the centre and deposit mass and energy in the deep interior, leading to a less centrally concentrated interior for Neptune. We conclude that the dichotomy between the ice giants can be explained by violent impacts after their formation.

Catling, D.C., and K.J. Zahnle (2020) **The Archean atmosphere.** SCIENCE ADVANCES 6:doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.aax1420 (available as a free pdf)

Authors’ abstract: The environment of the Archean eon from 4 to 2.5 billion years (Ga) ago has to be understood to appreciate biological, geological, and atmospheric evolution on our planet and Earth-like exoplanets. Its most distinguishing characteristic was negligible O₂, unlike today’s air, which contains, by dry volume, 21% O₂, 78% N₂, 0.9% Ar, and 0.1% other gases.

With its radically different atmosphere and lack of macroscopic, multicellular life, the Archean world was alien. However, at that time, the beginnings of modern Earth emerged. For example, cyanobacteria probably evolved during this period, and these oxygenic photoautotrophs eventually oxygenated the air, setting the stage for later, complex life, including us.

The atmosphere of the Archean eon, one-third of Earth’s history, is important for understanding the evolution of our planet and Earth-like exoplanets. New geological proxies combined with models constrain atmospheric composition.



They imply surface O₂ levels <10⁻⁶ times present, N₂ levels that were similar to today or possibly a few times lower, and CO₂ and CH₄ levels ranging ~10 to 2500 and 102 to 104 times modern amounts, respectively.

The greenhouse gas concentrations were sufficient to offset a fainter Sun. Climate moderation by the carbon cycle suggests average surface temperatures between 0° and 40°C, consistent with occasional glaciations. Isotopic mass fractionation of atmospheric xenon through the Archean until atmospheric oxygenation is best explained by drag of xenon ions by hydrogen escaping rapidly into space. These data imply that substantial loss of hydrogen oxidized the Earth.

[chart taken from this paper]

Schulz, F. (2020) **Giant virus diversity and host interactions through global metagenomics**. NATURE 578:doi.org/10.1038/s41586-020-1957-x (available as a free pdf)

Authors' abstract: *Large and giant viruses of the nucleocytoplasmic large DNA viruses (NCLDV) supergroup have complex genomes with sizes of up to several megabases, and virions that are a similar size to, or even larger than, small cellular organisms. These viruses infect a wide range of eukaryotes [organisms whose cells have nuclei] from protists to animals.*

Marker gene surveys have shown that NCLDVs are not only extremely abundant and diverse in oceans, but can also frequently be found in freshwater and soil. However, the discovery of large and giant viruses has mainly been driven by their co-cultivation with amoebae or isolation together with their native hosts.

Only recently, metagenomic and single-cell genomic studies have facilitated the discovery of several new NCLDV members and showed that cultivation-independent methods are applicable to these viruses just as they are to uncultivated Bacteria and Archaea.

Our current knowledge about nucleocytoplasmic large DNA viruses (NCLDVs) is largely derived from viral isolates that are co-cultivated with protists and algae. Here we reconstructed 2,074 NCLDV genomes from sampling sites across the globe by building on the rapidly increasing amount of publicly available metagenome data. This led to an 11-fold increase in phylogenetic

diversity and a parallel 10-fold expansion in functional diversity. Analysis of 58,023 major capsid proteins from large and giant viruses using metagenomic data revealed the global distribution patterns and cosmopolitan nature of these viruses.

The discovered viral genomes encoded a wide range of proteins with putative roles in photosynthesis and diverse substrate transport processes, indicating that host reprogramming is probably a common strategy in the NCLDVs.

Furthermore, inferences of horizontal gene transfer connected viral lineages to diverse eukaryotic hosts. We anticipate that the global diversity of NCLDVs that we describe here will establish giant viruses, which are associated with most major eukaryotic lineages, as important players in ecosystems across Earth's biomes.

Dawson, R.R., et al (2020) **Eggshell geochemistry reveals ancestral metabolic thermoregulation in Dinosauria**. SCIENCE ADVANCES 6:doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.aax9361 (Available as a free pdf)

Authors' abstract: *Studying the origin of avian thermoregulation is complicated by a lack of reliable methods for measuring body temperatures in extinct dinosaurs. Evidence from bone histology and stable isotopes often relies on uncertain assumptions about the relationship between growth rate and body temperature, or the isotopic composition (delta¹⁸O) of body water.*

Clumped isotope (delta⁴⁷) paleothermometry, based on binding of ¹³C to ¹⁸O, provides a more robust tool, but has yet to be applied across a broad phylogenetic range of dinosaurs while accounting for paleoenvironmental conditions.

Applying this method to well-preserved fossil eggshells demonstrates that the three major clades of dinosaurs, Ornithischia, Sauropodomorpha, and Theropoda, were characterized by warm body temperatures. Dwarf titanosaurs may have exhibited similar body temperatures to larger sauropods, although this conclusion is provisional, given current uncertainties in taxonomic assignment of dwarf titanosaur eggshell.

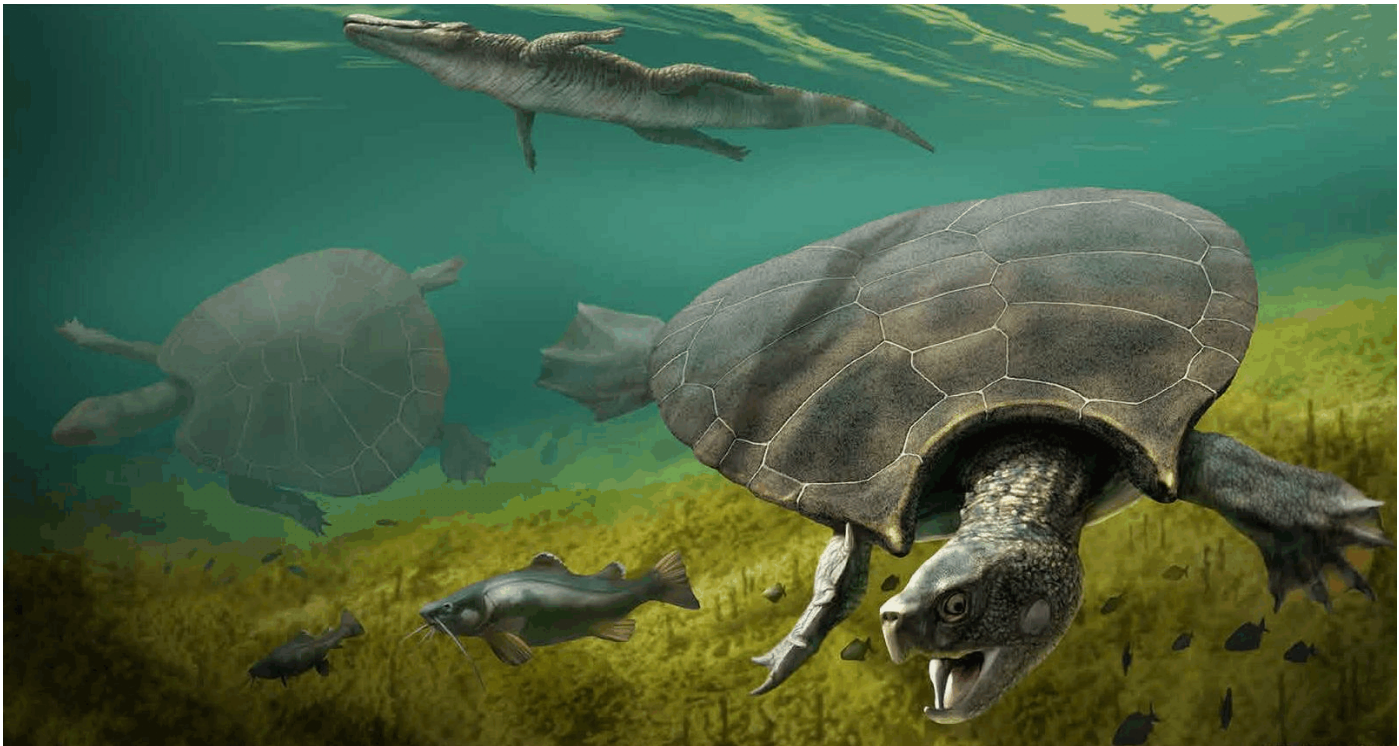
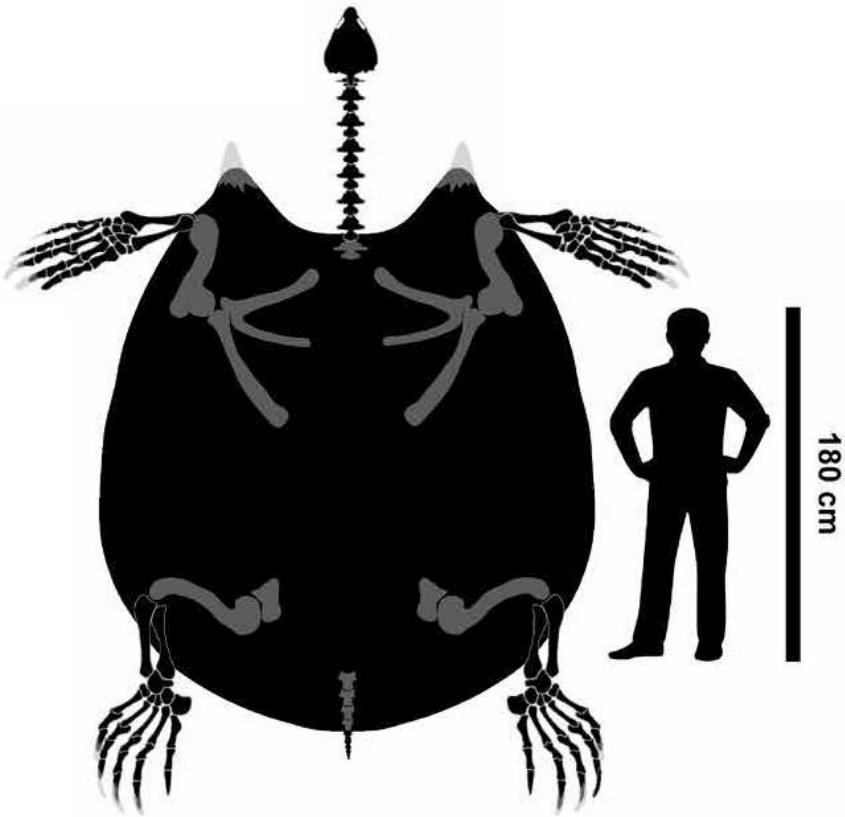
Our results nevertheless reveal that metabolically controlled thermoregulation was the ancestral condition for Dinosauria.

Cadena, E.A., et al (2020) **The anatomy, paleobiology, and evolutionary relationships of the largest extinct side-necked turtle.** SCIENCE ADVANCES 6:doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.aay4593 (Available as a free pdf)

Authors’ abstract: *Despite being among the largest turtles that ever lived, the biology and systematics of Stupendemys geographicus remain largely unknown because of scant, fragmentary finds. We describe exceptional specimens and new localities of S. geographicus from the Miocene of Venezuela and Colombia.*

We document the largest shell reported for any extant or extinct turtle, with a carapace length of 2.40 m and estimated mass of 1,145 kg, almost 100 times the size of its closest living relative, the Amazon river turtle Peltocephalus dumerilianus, and twice that of the largest extant turtle, the marine leatherback Dermochelys coriacea.

The new specimens greatly increase knowledge of the biology and evolution of this iconic species. Our findings suggest the existence of a single giant turtle species across the northern Neotropics, but with two shell morphotypes, suggestive of sexual dimorphism. Bite marks and punctured bones indicate interactions with large caimans that also inhabited the northern Neotropics.



[Images taken from this paper]