

OPUNTIA 486



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OUT YONDER IN CARSELAND

2020-09-28

photos by Dale Speirs

I had some business in the village of Carseland, about a half-hour drive east-southeast of Calgary. The drive was actually longer than that because on my way out of the city I went through the Highway 22X spaghetti junction and got switched off in the wrong direction twice because of the confusing ramps. I seldom drive that route, so haven't developed the instinct to change lanes at appropriate moments.

The junction spreads over about 10 km and switches traffic between Macleod Trail (the main drag in south Calgary), Deerfoot Trail (8-lane freeway cutting through east Calgary), Stoney Trail (6-lane bypass) and Highway 22X (2 to 6 lanes out to the country). There must be about 30 off-ramps, with no consistency as to which side they're on. Instead of always exiting to the right, some are off to the left and a few are the centre lanes, which was why I got lost.

Having finally made it through, at times traveling west or north instead of southeast, I arrived in Carseland and disposed of my business. I didn't take any photos because it was an ordinary rural village out on the flatlands. The only tourist attraction was a provincial park along the Bow River several kilometres south of the village.

The park access road was a gravel switchback, one-and-a-half lanes wide, which meant that passing vehicles had to slow to a crawl and run their outside wheels on the grass. The park is deep in the valley of the river and is technically an irrigation headworks, where water is diverted by a giant weir.

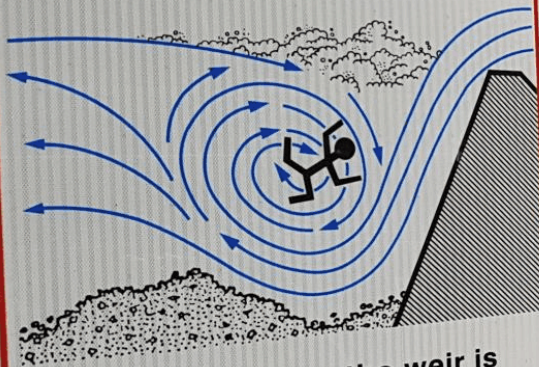
The cover photo and the two on this page are general views of the park.

The park is infamous for the number of canoeists, rafters, and swimmers it has killed over the years because they tried to float over the irrigation weir instead of portaging. The photo on the next page says it all.



EXTREME DANGER SUBMERGED WEIR

THE DROWNING MACHINE



- Venturing over the weir is **RISKING CERTAIN DEATH.**
- Escape is **IMPOSSIBLE** once caught in the whirling water.
- Portage as directed.

EMERGENCY DIAL 911

Alberta
Environment



AROUND COWTOWN: THE ZOO DISTRICT
photos by Dale Speirs

A miscellany of photos I took on my walkabouts.

Below and top right: The north parking lot of the Calgary Zoo has a giant egg.
Because someone paid for it, apparently.

Bottom right: This Brontosaurus sculpture was built in the 1930s on the south side of the Zoo and is one of the few remaining parts of the original Zoo.



The ramp off Memorial Drive NE leading to the Zoo north parking lot.



SCOOTING AROUND COWTOWN
photos by Dale Speirs

The pandemic didn't stop the re-appearance of electric scooters. Download the app, connect a credit card to it, then tap and go. The three competitors are Bird, Dollar, and Lime. The scooters are tracked electronically with GPS and can only be used in central Calgary.

These scooters were seen on the Stephen Avenue pedestrian mall in the downtown core.



Next page:

Top photos show the three types of scooters.

Bottom photo: Gig workers collect the scooters at night, recharge them at home, and set them back out in the streets the next morning.



Below: I took this photo on August 22 when the temperature was blazing in the low 30s. The driver of this moped had to be overcooked in his outfit.

At right: Bicycle propaganda in the East Village district.



HALLOWEEN FICTION: PART 3

by Dale Speirs

[Parts 1 to 2 appeared in OPUNTIA's #427 and 458.]

Cozy Mysteries.

Three novellas from as many authors were published as an anthology in 2019 under the title HAUNTED HOUSE MURDER, as edited by Leslie Meier. That was a bit confusing because the lead story by Meier had the same title.

All three were set in different seaside villages of the Maine coast, each with its own Jessica Fletcher. Between them and other similar series, one would think that the shoreline of Maine would now be an uninhabited wasteland dotted with abandoned fishing ports.

“Haunted House Murder” (2019) by Leslie Meier took place in Tinker’s Cove where Lucy Stone was the local Jessica Fletcher. The story opened with Ty and Heather Moon moving into the village and taking over a decrepit mansion, supposedly haunted. Strange noises and lights kept the neighbours and Stone in an agitated condition, especially after Stone’s grandson went missing.

Suspicion was then thrown about like rock salt on an icy road. It all came down to a terrible misunderstanding, as Ty Moon was an SFX designer and was trying out some of his inventions at home. The kid was okay, everyone shook hands all around, and nobody died. No ghosts haunted the house either.

“Death By Haunted House” (2019) by Lee Hollis (pseudonym of siblings Rick Copp and Holly Simason) moved the action down the coast of Maine to Bar Harbor, where Hayley Powell was the local snoop. The house next door had been vacant two years after the previous owner died mysteriously. It had just been sold to the Salinger family. Wendi Jo Willis, the realtor who handled the sale, disappeared and Powell leaped into action.

Halloween was approaching, so the village folk and the Powell family were busy thinking of costumes and pumpkins. At home, the big problem was whether the young Powell kids could watch PSYCHO or HERBIE: FULLY LOADED. Her husband Danny liked to scare the kids with stories about the house next door.

After annoying the Salingers with her intrusions, Powell was left with egg on her face when the murder was discovered to be a Willis family feud gone extreme. The Salingers decided to move to where the neighbours weren’t so noseey.

“Hallowed Out” (2019) by Barbara Ross shifted to Busman’s Harbor where the Halloween festivities were under the aegis of Julia Snowden. The village decided to stage the festival to draw in tourists in the slow season after the leaf-peeping was over and before the Christmas festival began.

Every old, peeling paint house in the village became a haunted house, and stories were manufactured to go with them. A re-enactment of a Prohibition-era gangster incident ended with the death of an actor when someone used real bullets instead of blanks.

The Marpleing revealed the defunct was the marrying kind, with three or more wives (no one was certain about the number). One of the wives decided to solve the problem with a revolver.

The three novellas were easy reading, although they tended to be a bit rushed near the end. All three authors normally wrote as novelists in their cozy series, so they seemed to have some trouble adapting to a shorter length.

THE SPOOK IN THE STACKS (2018) by Eva Gates (pseudonym of Vicki Delaney) was a novel in a cozy series about librarian Lucy Richardson of Bodie Island in the Outer Banks of North Carolina. The story opened with wealthy businessman Jay Ruddle thinking about donating his collection of North Carolina historical documents to the Bodie Island Lighthouse Library. Some members of the family objected and thereby hangs the tale.

It was Halloween, and the library was hosting related events. The gala got too spooky when murder was done and Ruddle’s body was found in the rare book stacks. Meanwhile, ghostly horses were seen in the marsh, strange lights were about, and someone was tinkering with a model ship display.

Richardson looked after any Marpleing that needed to be done in addition to her regular library work. The two threads came together, as a reasonable hypothesis was that the murderer wanted to stop Ruddle from making the donation. There were lots of melodrama in the family, who thought they could flog the documents for goodly loot, and would stop at nothing to get the inheritance.

Most of the troubles were resolved in a fight to the finish at the lighthouse. Richardson tied off most of the loose threads in the denouement, save one. She could not solve the mystery of the ghost horses. Perhaps for a future Halloween novel.

Regular Mysteries.

HALLOWE'EN PARTY, with an extraneous apostrophe, was a 1969 novel by Agatha Christie, reprinted many times since. This was in the Hercule Poirot series.

Events opened at a manor house where a Halloween party for teenagers was in progress. Joyce, aged 13, got no older when she bragged she had once seen a murder committed. Not long after, her body was found in the apple-bobbing tub in the library.

Poirot was called in. His first concern was to establish if he was looking for one murderer or two. Think about it. The second consideration was who in the mansion had been seen with wet clothes. If a murderer was going to drown a healthy 13-year-old girl by holding her head under water in the tub, there would be a struggle and lots of water splashed about.

Poirot pattered about the village, dredging up old stories about the first murder back then and who might have been seen now in wet clothing. As surmised, the girl's killer was someone who was afraid of being exposed for the first murder.

POISONED TARTS (2007) by G.A. McKeveit (pseudonym of Sonja Massie) was a novel in a series about plus-sized private detective Savannah Reid of southern California. She was originally a Georgia cracker and was obsessed by her weight problem, notwithstanding which she would vacuum up any food left lying about. Her friend was police detective Dirk Coulter, who liked women with a little meat on them and married her later in the series.

Halloween parties were underway everywhere. Reid's was one of them and it was a point of pride to overstuff her guests to the point of incapacity. There was still work to be done, however.

Her current case was missing teenager Daisy O'Neil. The girl had been a hanger-on of the Skeleton Key Three, a trio of young women who were Hollywood celebrities of no accomplishment. Like the Kardashians and the

Gabor sisters before them, they hadn't done anything of substance but were just famous for being famous.

One of the Three was of the Dante family. Their Halloween party was the most sensational ever when Daddy Dante was found in his Dracula costume lying in a coffin with a stake driven through his heart. O'Neil's kidnapping was resolved but was unrelated to the murder.

One of the Three had deliberately gotten herself pregnant by Dante in a bid for his wealth. He told her to get an abortion and there was no way he would divorce his wife and marry her. It being Halloween, the woman scorned decided to get into the spirit of things with a wooden stake.

MURDER IN THE CORN MAZE (2019) was a flashback novel to Savannah Reid's childhood. Set in the 1980s in the village of McGill, Georgia, she was 12 years old and living with her grandmother Stella Reid.

The Halloween season was underway. Homemade costumes for the kids because Stella couldn't afford much. The Halloween parade was fun, although there was an ugly mixup in the costume contest results. From there to the corn maze. Most of the children were too frightened to make it to the centre of the maze. Stella and Savannah were made of sterner stuff.

That was just as well, for when they arrived at the centre of the maze, they found a half-buried human skull. Not a Halloween decoration, but part of a mostly decayed woman's body, buried for decades. Stella went Marpleing, digging up back stories from the past, some of which involved the Reid family.

The murderer was still around and wanted to remain a free man. There was the usual confrontation in the denouement. The culprit blabbed all instead of remaining silent and letting the case be dismissed because Miss Marple contaminated the evidence. A memorable Halloween for young Savannah.

HAUNTED (2012) by Jeanne Glidewell was set in Rockdale, Missouri, where Stone Van Patten had turned an old mansion into a bed-and-breakfast. His girlfriend Lexie Starr and her grown daughter Wendy convinced him to convert it into a haunted house for Halloween.

They hired a college kid Walter Sneed to dress as a vampire, lie in a coffin in the parlour, and when guests walked by, pop up and scare them. Unfortunately

he didn't pop up after someone murdered him in his coffin. Lexie took up amateur detecting, notwithstanding that Wendy was a deputy coroner and didn't need Mom's help.

For such a young man, Sneed had quite a history. He came from a white trash family, and had offended several co-eds by playing the field. It turned out that he had also offended the father of one of the co-eds, who dealt with the matter by direct action.

Dad was equally offended by Lexie's snooping. His attempt at further direct action was ultimately stymied. She lived to the end of the book and the explanations of who did what.

Carolyn Haines has a lengthy series about Sarah Booth Delaney, who had a part-time detective agency in Zinnia, Mississippi. She and her family struggled to keep their manor going, once a plantation and now a white elephant. The village's murder rate was high enough that Delaney could earn a steady living as a private investigator.

BONE TO BE WILD (2015) began with Sarah Delaney having a rough time when her fiancé Graf Milieu moved to Hollywood without her. She drowned her sorrows by going to the Black and Orange Halloween Ball in New Orleans. Her former boyfriend Scott Hamilton was leading his jazz band at the ball. He got a threatening note but the band played on.

It was the kitchen staff who suffered when a bartender stepped out into the back alley for a smoke and was blasted down by a shotgun. The middle third of the novel expanded the cast of characters and plot complications.

The venue shifted to Zinnia, with a mix of religious fanatics and shady business deals. It being Mississippi, many of the arguments were settled with gunfire. Various threads were left hanging for future novels, including an escaped murderer. A Halloween to be remembered.

CHARMED BONES (2018) was a subsequent Halloween in Zinnia which saw the arrival of three sisters, Faith, Hope, and Charity Harrington. They were self-proclaimed witches who were opening a Wiccan boarding school in the village. That was controversial enough, but their property was prime redevelopment land, lusted after by a local contractor.

When his son went missing, his wife hired Sarah Delaney to investigate. The boy was recovered unharmed but there were other problems. The witches held midnight skylad dances under the moon, an insensitive thing to do in backwoods Mississippi. Dispensing love potions wasn't quite so bad. What was bad was the murder of the man who had sold the property to the sisters.

The local politics and family feuds were vicious. They became more vicious when a cranky old woman fell off the balcony of the Wiccan school. No one believed it was accidental. The bloodshed escalated but the witches had their own trickery.

There were several false endings before the final one established that real estate fraud was behind it all. A last bit of magic from the witches helped Delaney bed the man of her dreams. And that's all she wrote.

Irregular Mysteries.

CAT AMONG THE PUMPKINS (2014) by Mandy Morton was a novel in what was billed as a cozy but was an anthropomorphic fantasy. It was the second in a series about two cats who operated the No. 2 Feline Detective Agency.

Halloween was approaching and the bunting was up everywhere. An old case came to light about a family murdered on Halloween years ago. Mostly it was about cats as English villagers who couldn't pronounce the letter H.

To be honest, I skimmed through this book at high speed. Too bleedin' cute, mate. But I'll mention it for the record.

Old-Time Radio: Comedy.

Halloween was a natural fit for old-time radio series. Screenwriters desperate for a plot could always rely on it for the end of October. By the 1930s, network radio shows were having an effect throughout Canada and the USA in spreading local customs nationwide and inventing new ones.

As an example, the Halloween custom of children going trick or treating was not widely established in North America until after World War Two. I have heard several episodes of different radio series from the late 1940s and early 1950s where parents discussed the new idea and wondered if it was a good thing instead of going to a party.

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.

“Halloween Blues” was an episode written by Ed James which aired on October 29, 1953, a month before the series transferred to television. A measles epidemic was going through the town. The Anderson kids were to have attended a party at a neighbour’s but on the day that house was quarantined due to one of the kids getting measles.

The children suggested trick or treating but Jim didn’t like such a newfangled idea, and in 1953 it was indeed still newfangled. The Andersons decided to host a party instead, with all sorts of complications developing to spin the story out to a half-hour.

The kids wanted to invite certain friends but not others, and the adults had to find, at the absolute last moment, enough food for 22 children. Margaret found a bakery still open and bought a gross of doughnuts. 144 doughnuts divided by 22 kids plus supervising adults would barely suffice.

The party had the expected contretemps but seemed to be going well until Kathy reported sick with a fever. The doctor told Jim that his house would be quarantined until he could get over there and make the diagnosis. 22 children were barely survivable for the adults for a few hours, but the idea of being confined with them for a week or so was staggering.

After much panicking and emergency survival planning by the adults using a worst-case scenario, the doctor arrived and attended Kathy. His diagnosis was not measles but rather overeating. Kathy had a bellyache from eating several dozen doughnuts. On that cheerful note, the episode wrapped up.

Old-Time Radio: Serious Stuff.

CASEY, CRIME PHOTOGRAPHER aired on radio from 1943 to 1955. The series was based on novels by George Harmon Coxe. The hero was Casey, first name never given, who was a newspaper photographer. He was accompanied by reporter and girlfriend Ann Williams.

The episodes were generally murder mysteries, but there was an occasional variation. (Available as free mp3s from www.otrrlibrary.org)

“Great-Grandfather’s Rent Receipt”, written by Alonzo Deen Cole, aired on 1947-10-30 with a Halloween theme. Casey was sitting at the bar with Ann Williams in the Blue Note Cafe, complaining about the same old tired Halloween decorations along the back mirror every year.

The bartender replied that he never bought new ones since only the regular customers would notice. Because most of them owed money on their tab, he wasn’t going to listen to them, speaking of which Casey owed \$28.40 and it would be nice to have something on account. Having shot himself with his own gun, Casey reluctantly handed over \$20 but asked for a receipt.

That reminded Casey of his great-grandfather Patrick Casey, who had a bad experience as a young man in County Cork. His fiancée Molly McBride and him were en route to the landlord's manor to pay the rent. At this point I almost stopped listening because the voices were very bad stage Irish accents left over from vaudeville. I persevered anyway.

The couple squabbled along the way and arrived late. The landlord, Lord Timothy O’Hara, suddenly died of a heart attack before giving a receipt. After the commotion died down, it was noticed the rent money had disappeared. The manservant Michael Healy was willing to testify the cash had been received, but that might not be enough to keep the heir John from demanding the rent again.

Lord Timothy’s ghostly voice was heard, causing Healy to suffer a shock and join his master in the next world. It also left Patrick and Molly with no proof the rent had been paid. Lord John, as he now was, demanded the money by All Saints Day or else the Caseys would be evicted.

Halloween was a grim night for the Caseys. Much soppy melodrama and sad violin music was followed by the ghosts of Lord Timothy and Healy come to take him away. What followed was supernatural goings-on and an equally supernatural receipt. Lord John reformed faster than Scrooge, and God bless us all. The episode jumped back to the bar in the present and God bless them all as well.

THE ADVENTURES OF PHILIP MARLOWE was based on the character created by Raymond Chandler. It aired on radio from 1947 to 1951, changing

networks in midstream. The series was slightly darker than most mystery shows, although never as dark as the noir novels upon which it was based. (Available as free mp3s from www.otrrlibrary.org)

“The Green Witch” aired on 1949-10-29 just before Halloween, written by Robert Mitchell and Gene Levitt. It began with Philip Marlowe hired to protect a man named John Bishop whose testimony had put away Dale Estes (no relation) a criminal who escaped prison and was heading his way.

Bishop also wanted protection for his fiancée Madeline Hughes, a green-eyed redhead. He felt that any attempt would be made at a Halloween masquerade out at a country club. The only clue was that Estes really liked Spanish food, so Marlowe checked ethnic restaurants but with no results.

The next venue was a costume shop where he rendezvoused with Bishop to get outfits for the party. A devil’s costume for Bishop and an Ancien Regime French count for Marlowe. Upon arrival at the party, Marlowe met Hughes and found her dressed in green as a witch.

The country club was perched on a cliff over the sea. The party was an eyeopener for Marlowe, especially after someone told him that Bishop’s real name was John Estes, brother of Dale. Even more eye opening was the body at the bottom of the cliff, that of John, dressed in plain clothes. That meant Dale was wearing the devil’s outfit.

Alarums abounded, shots were fired, and Marlowe ran about hither and yon. It was revealed that John perjured his testimony. Hughes was an accessory, and previously entangled with Dale.

Lots of switcheroos after Dale killed his brother. He then used the masquerade to get in close to his former amour, none other than Hughes, whom he tried to kill. He failed and the rest was details.

THE SHADOW, as the opening blurb put it, was in reality Lamont Cranston, wealthy young man about town. He had traveled to Tibet where he learned how to cloud minds so that people could not see him, only hear him. His voice also changed when he became invisible, courtesy of switching to a crystal microphone. He always announced himself as The Shadow with maniacal laughter.

The lovely Margo Lane was the only one who knew his real identity. Her main functions were to scream every time she saw a corpse, be frequently kidnapped or trapped with a killer, and to have the loose threads explained to her in the denouement.

What was interesting for those days was that she and Cranston were supposedly single and living in different apartments, but they commonly had scenes where they ate breakfast or stayed in hotels together. The network executives and sponsors of those times weren’t as prudish as often thought.

The Shadow began as a narrator on a radio show. He then became a character in his own right and spawned a monthly magazine, followed by books and movies. There was no continuity between his appearances in different media. In the movies, for example, he was a middle-aged radio reporter who used The Shadow name as the title of his show but was known to his coworkers by his real name.

The radio series had a complicated genealogy that began in 1930 and didn’t evolve the familiar version of The Shadow until 1933. The series lasted until 1954. Like the print stories, no real-name credit was given to writers. Sometimes a house name was credited, but usually nothing was said in the closing credits about who the writer was. Never expect logical plots.

“Death Rides A Broomstick” aired on 1941-03-02 but was as Halloweenish as anything done in October. The MacAvery family had, in the Scottish Highlands of 1741, burned a woman to death as a witch. On the pyre she vowed retribution in exactly 200 years. While revenge is said to be a dish best served cold, this seemed over-doing it.

The curse was transplanted overseas to New York State. The MacAverys had done well and were millionaires back when a million was real money. But in 1941, the curse appeared to be real when one MacAvery after another departed this life in mysterious circumstances.

Jamie MacAvery narrated the tale to Lamont Cranston, Margo Lane, and Commissioner Weston. His brother Tom, healthy as a horse, died at sea from disease. Another brother Donald was shot dead with Jamie’s gun. After each death, the cackling of a witch was heard.

As a result, Jamie was sent up the river for life. He told his story to the trio while awaiting transport to the big house. Cranston had originally barged into the case when visiting Jamie’s uncle Garth in a different big house. A stranger calling himself the Smiler had taken over the place and denied the uncle was there.

Meanwhile, back at the police station, Weston had received a ransom note from the Smiler for Garth. The villain took Cranston and Lane hostage, who found Jamie there as well. The Smiler had taken him off the train carrying him to Sing Sing. Quite the audacious fellow, that Smiler.

The Shadow went to work and rescued all and sundry. Information received led them to a waterfront dive, where Garth was held. After assorted alarums, the gang convened and Garth was revealed as their leader.

He had converted the MacAvery fortune to cash and was taking a trip to sea so as to cheat his nephews out of their inheritance. Uncle Garth shot Jamie and then tried to run the gauntlet of the police but didn’t survive. That cleaned out all the MacAverys. The witch’s cackle was heard again, but Cranston said it was only the wind.



Halloween cupcake from Sobeys.

**IF YOU AREN'T SQUAMOUS,
THEN WHY ARE YOU TRYING TO BE ELDRITCH?: PART 13**
by Dale Speirs

[Parts 1 to 12 appeared in OPUNTIA's #298, 333, 340, 352, 365, 395, 410, 415, 422, 443, 465, and 480. Issues #22 and 63.1A have related articles on H.P. Lovecraft.]

Anthologies.

THE MAMMOTH BOOK OF CTHULHU (2016), edited by Paula Guran, was an anthology of 24 original pastiches and two essays. The stories are not necessarily straightforward Mythos pastiches, where mad scientists summon the Elder Gods or the brave hero stops Cthulhu in its tracks. A few of them are reviewed here.

The first two stories, for example, are obviously set in the Mythos as anyone who has read the canon will recognize, but are not blatant about it. The pastiches viewed the lives of those who lived in the Mythos but never saw a shoggoth in their lives.

“In Syllables Of Elder Seas” by Lisa L. Hannett was about one of the batrachian half-breeds of the Massachusetts coast. He was a young boy sternly raised by authoritarian aunties to the point of child abuse. They were determined he should fulfill his heritage in the sea. So he did.

“The Peddler’s Tale, Or Isobel’s Revenge” by Caitlin R. Kiernan was a fantasy tale inserted into the Mythos by using a few passing mentions of Shub-Niggurath and Kadath. It was not the usual wish fulfillment of the rightful heir to the throne defeating the overlord. She was and she did, but then abolished the throne.

Neither story directly dealt with the Mythos; it was implied. A more traditional approach was “It’s All The Same Road In The End” by Brian Hodge. Two brothers went searching for their father, who had disappeared decades ago in western Kansas.

Out on the flatlands they picked up a trace with the help of a local woman. It led them to an abandoned farmstead once tenanted by a batrachian granny. She also had long since vanished but in a tornado shelter she left behind an eldritch statue of a creature not seen on Earth since aerobic life developed.

For those who might wonder why the Elder Gods would settle on the dry flatlands, the answer is that geologically speaking Kansas has spent most of its time under water, covered by ancient seas. The Elders were still waiting and recruiting new acolytes, such as one of the brothers.

“The Cthulhu Navy Wife” by Sandra McDonald was a helpful guide to service wives whose husbands were just stationed to R’lyeh. Matters such as security and moving house when the husband was transferred began the advice, all very prosaic.

Gradually the advice humourously shifted to matters of Mythos. For example, an Old One goes to the head of a cashier lineup when shopping for groceries at the local base exchange.

From there, procedures were to be followed when betraying friends to the Old Ones. If the Captain’s wife was taken away without charge or explanation by military police, the subject was not to be mentioned at the next cocktail party. That might embarrass him. The guide ended in pathos: *“A Navy wife serves the Old Ones, as does all mankind.”*

“Those Who Watch” by Ruthanna Emrys was about a newly-minted librarian who found out there was a surfeit of newly-minted librarians and little demand for them. As a result she accepted the only job offered to her, from a Louisiana college somewhere in the most humid part of the state.

Working in the library, she was stung by a book in the eldritch section of the shelves. A sting that developed into certain physical changes. Another librarian who had already been through the process guided her along, for she was destined to be a guardian of (insert synonym for eldritch) books. The kind printed in fonts that moved when read.

Concluding the anthology was “Variations On Lovecraftian Themes” by Veronica Schanoes, an essay about H.P. Lovecraft’s bigotry against Jews. His father died of syphilis when he was a boy. His mother died in the same sanitarium, quite insane from the disease her husband gave her, but actually killed by botched gallbladder surgery.

Lovecraft’s boyhood was surrounded by relatives not too far removed from the Mythos. As the twig is bent, so grows the tree. His upbringing was among people who defined themselves by their ancestors, not by what they had

accomplished themselves. Lovecraft’s marriage to a New York City Jew affected him in more ways than one. For the first time, he had to associate in close quarters with people whose ancestors had never been near Providence.

Lovecraft sneered at immigrants who worked for a living at menial jobs while he, in his superiority, slowly starved on a small inheritance. Had stomach cancer not killed him in 1937, he would have died in a poorhouse.

Schanoes contrasted Lovecraft’s remarks about Jews in his letters of the 1930s with what was happening to her relatives in Europe at that time. She was descended from the New York City Jews he vilified. Lovecraft did not have the sophistication to realize he was no better and probably worse than those he condemned.

Lovecraft is a litmus test for cancel culture. His personal beliefs can easily be denounced but his stories stand apart. The premise is that art must be judged not by its creator but on its own merit.



HALLOWEEN AROUND COWTOWN
photos by Dale Speirs

The Plus 15 pedestrian overpass connecting the skyscrapers of Bow Valley Square with Brookfield Place have an ongoing video display of works by local art students. I previously showed some in OPUNTIA's #426 and 437.

This was a Halloween sequence photographed on October 16. Closeups of the centre panels are on the next page.





A neighbour house just down the avenue from Chez Opuntia.

We had our first snowfall on October 14, unusually late.



This Little Free Library was in Rotary Park at 1 Street NE and 4 Avenue, in the Crescent Heights district. Rather surprising to see a design like this in a public park. Not actually related to Halloween since it was obviously there for a few years but certainly on the theme.



RICH GIFTS WAX POOR WHEN GIVERS PROVE UNKIND:

PART 3

by Dale Speirs

[Parts 1 to 2 appeared in OPUNTIA's #392 and 456.]

Waxworks seemed to be a favourite of many villains, who bwah-ha!-ha!-ed at the thought of turning their enemies into statues.

“The Fetish Of The Waxworks” by Victor Rousseau (1927 February, WEIRD TALES, available as a free pdf from www.archive.org) was a different twist on waxworks. Paul Dupuy, a Frenchman who had come to America as a waxworks artist, had been making figures of naval officers such as John Paul Jones and Admiral Nelson.

The problem was that Nelson’s statue was trying to kill Dupuy. The hero of Trafalgar hated the French and his spirit was determined to reduce the number of Frenchies by at least one. After several alarms, the only possible protection was discovered, for Dupuy to wrap himself in a Union Jack and thence to wear a small flag on his clothing thereafter.

“The Horror In The Museum” by Hazel Heald (1933 July, WEIRD TALES) brought the hero Stephen Jones to a lesser waxworks museum in London, England. The museum was operated by George Rogers, who had been with Tussaud’s but had left at their request, and none too polite about it they were.

I could almost file this story with my H.P. Lovecraft column reviews but since it was more about waxworks than Elder Gods, I’ll put it here. The museum’s displays included waxworks from the Mythos:

Others were drawn from darker and more furtively whispered cycles of subterranean legend: black, formless Tsathoggua, many-tentacled Cthulhu, proboscidian Chaugnar Faugn, and other rumored blasphemies from forbidden books like the Necronomicon, the Book of Eibon, or the Unaussprechlichen Kulten of von Junzt.

But the worst were wholly original with Rogers, and represented shapes which no tale of antiquity had ever dared to suggest. Several were hideous parodies on forms of organic life we know, while others seemed taken from feverish dreams of other planets and other galaxies.

The wilder paintings of Clark Ashton Smith might suggest a few, but nothing could suggest the effect of poignant, loathsome terror created by their great size and fiendishly cunning workmanship, and by the diabolically clever lighting conditions under which they were exhibited.

Jones became friends with Rogers and was a frequent visitor to the museum. There was, however, that day when eldritch noises were heard from the back rooms. Jones learned that Rogers had been in Alaska and had brought back a creature whose spaceship had crashed there 3 million years ago. The beast, or perhaps elder god, was revived in the museum. Jones spent a harrowing night there, but not as harrowing as Rogers.

Not long after, a new wax figure appeared in the museum, that of the creature. The head was similar to Rogers. When Jones leaned in for a closer look, he discovered it wasn’t just a wax head.

(This issue of WEIRD TALES also contained a story by HPL himself, “The Dreams In The Witch House”, plus a story by Clark Ashton Smith.)

Video Wax.

THE GIRL FROM U.N.C.L.E. was a short-lived spin-off series of THE MAN FROM U.N.C.L.E. It only survived one season before both series were cancelled after the fad for spy shows died.

TGFU was April Dancer, played by Stefanie Powers. Her partner was Mark Slate, played by Noel Harrison, son of the actor Rex. They did their best and were good actors, but couldn’t overcome bad scripts and shoddy SFX that would have embarrassed a 1950s B-movie producer. I bought the DVD set recently but would have passed had I known what most of the episodes were like.

“The Mother Muffin Affair”, written by Joseph Calvelli, was aired in 1966 as the third episode. It is considered the best one because of its humour. Boris Karloff was featured in drag as Agnes Twicksbury alias Mother Muffin. Part of the episode was filmed on location. Karloff mentioned later that, while in full drag, as he was walking to the camera setup past some spectators, a young boy remarked to a companion “*That is the ugliest broad I’ve ever seen.*” Karloff took it as a compliment.

As with several episodes from both series, it was a crossover. Instead of Mark Slate, April Dancer worked with Napoleon Solo from TMFU in trying to destroy Mother Muffin's school for assassins. The school's cover was a waxworks museum called Twicksbury's House Of Murder.

There was much to-ing and fro-ing by both sides in search of plot coupons. Mother Muffin was working an elaborate plot. In keeping with the James Bond tradition that both UNCLE series parodied, no one was ever threatened with a normal murder.

Mother Muffin decided to convert Dancer and Slate into waxified dummies, specifically Lady MacBeth and Hamlet. She had her doubts about how well Dancer would look in the part, but she would have to do in the absence of anyone better.

Since there were another 26 episodes, that obviously didn't happen. Once Dancer and Slate escaped from the museum, the plot concluded at a pier where Mother Muffin got what she deserved.

CARRY ON SCREAMING, written by Talbot Rothwell, was a 1966 British comedy movie in the famous Carry On series. Set in Edwardian times, the basic plot was about the machinations of siblings Orlando and Valeria Watt. He was a mad scientist churning out Frankensteinian monsters, while she was a voluptuous vamp who looked after the front end of the manor house.

They financed their operations and the cost of running the manor by kidnapping pretty young women and vitrifying them in wax, then selling them to shopkeepers as mannequins. This brought in a pair of bumbling detectives to eventually bumble their way to a successful conclusion.

The shopkeepers not knowing about how the waxworks were created, they used them for window displays. One young man who lost his girlfriend spotted her in a window, which led to assorted contretemps. Valeria decided it would be safer to get the mannequin back and sent one of her Frankensteins to fetch it, thereby providing more excitement on the high street.

Much ado about everything followed. Orlando got into a struggle with the detectives and they fought a battle in the manor dungeon where the vats of boiling wax were kept. No prizes for guessing who fell into the vat and was vitrified.

Valeria wound up as the mistress of one of the detectives, being too sexy to vitrify. She couldn't cook that well, but that hardly mattered. As for the shopkeepers, they would have to find another source of mannequins.

Old-Time Radio.

The PHILO VANCE series aired on old-time radio from 1945 to 1950, based on the novels by S.S. Van Dine. (This and other old-time radio shows are available as free mp3s from www.archive.org or www.otrrlibrary.org.) The detective was also found in a series of movies.

Philo Vance was a know-it-all amateur sleuth, a wealthy man who moved in high society. In the radio series he was usually asked by District Attorney John Markham to investigate, as apparently the local police could not be trusted to find the killer.

"Strange Music" was a 1945 episode written by Bob Shaw. Philo Vance and Lane Randall had been dining out in the country and were returning home. En route they saw a carnival and stopped to visit.

One of the attractions was a wax museum. Randall thought one of the displays was a real man but it was only wax. Indeed. After exiting the waxworks, they assisted a woman who had twisted her ankle and was unable to walk. Her husband Bertram was brusque and refused to help her.

Frances Newberry, as she introduced herself, asked Vance to carry her home to a house adjacent to the field. Her nephew Ed Newberry and a neighbour Tom Rhinelander were at the house. Bertram was ruder than before, and finally ordered Vance and Randall out of the house.

Vance and Randall departed. As they walked back to the carnival they heard strange organ music coming from the Newberry house. They went back into the wax museum and found Bertram's body amongst the exhibits.

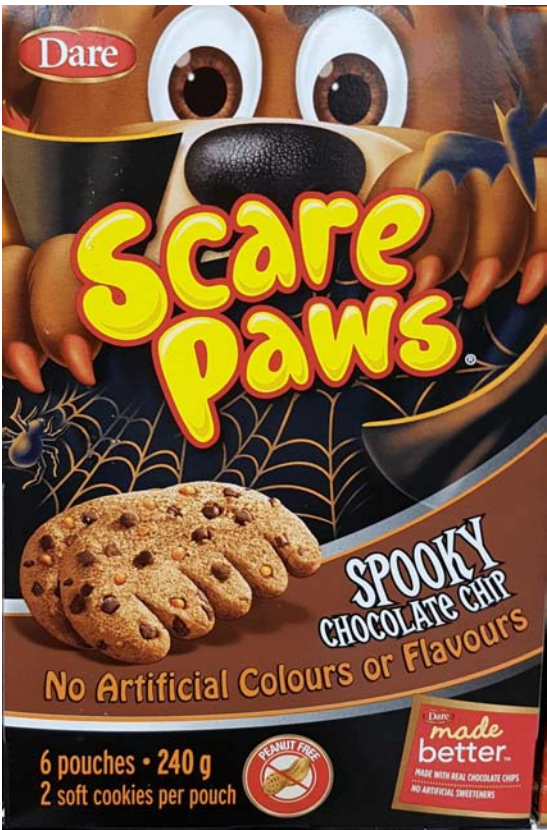
Only a minute of air time had elapsed, which made it unbelievable, but later it was specifically stated that 20 minutes had elapsed. Vance called District Attorney John Markham to investigate. He came over immediately, leading one to wonder why a prosecutor would take part in forensic field work instead of leaving it to the police.

Everyone adjourned to the Newberry house to have the cliches and backgrounds enunciated. Rhinelander was having an affair with Frances. Ed was sponging off the family and waiting for his uncle to die in hopes of a bequest.

The knife that killed Bertram belonged to Ed but had only Frances' fingerprints on it. Ed had no alibi. He said he had been listening to the radio in his room. He was able to describe the plot of the show, so Vance said "*Good boy*".

Lane, presumably jealous over Vance's previous attentions to Frances, was convinced she did it. Frances said she was playing the organ during the 20 minutes when Bertram was murdered. Vance asked her to play a sample on the organ. It didn't match the music he and Lane had heard. He then inserted a roll of music into the player organ, which had been the actual music they had heard.

Frances then admitted that she and Rhinelander had been preparing to elope during that time. She used the roll music to cover up the sounds of their intended departure while Bertram was upstairs. Since everyone seemed innocent, Vance invited all of them back to the waxworks for the final J'accuse! meeting and re-enactment. The body was still there and no sign of police.



The denouement was a boo-hiss revelation that Bertram had committed suicide amongst the waxworks. He used an elaborate plan with the idea of framing Frances and Rhinelander for murder. One of the waxworks had a spring in it, which he used to fire Ed's knife into his heart.

SHERLOCKIANA: PART 34

by Dale Speirs

[Parts 32 to 33 appeared in OPUNTIA #470 and 474.]

The original Sherlock Holmes stories written by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle are referred to as the canon, while stories written by other authors are called pastiches.

Old-Time Radio.

Sherlock Holmes was very successful on radio. He aired on several networks with several sets of actors from 1930 to 1956, encompassing the entire lifespan of old-time radio. Basil Rathbone and Nigel Bruce had a long run, but others played the parts before and after. (These and other old-time radio shows are available as free mp3s from www.otrrlibrary.org.)

"The Vanishing White Elephant" was a 1945 episode written by Dennis Green and Anthony Boucher, with the principal parts played by Basil Rathbone and Nigel Bruce. Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson had been summoned to India by a maharaja. It was mentioned by Watson that the voyage was five weeks by sea. One presumes the maharaja paid for the tickets.

Upon arrival the maharaja's brother provided an infodump on white elephants. His family's prestige depended on them despite their high cost and uselessness. The current elephant was never seen except on ceremonial occasions, the next one due in a fortnight. Holmes and Watson heard it trumpeting somewhere in the jungle.

The current maharaja was not well. The physician attending him tried to evict the two men from the palace but the brother over-ruled them. Watson was asked to examine him and told the maharaja the local doctor was not treating him properly. He provided some medication.

Holmes and Watson then went to see the white elephant, only to discover it had been stolen. Holmes had just began to search the elephant house for clues when the two men were summoned back to the palace. The maharaja had taken a sudden turn for the worse. His death was attributed to the shock of learning the white elephant was gone.

The elephant keeper did not long outlive his master. Searching the house they found a device used to simulate the trumpet of an elephant. Holmes confronted the brother. The white elephant had been dead for months. The maharaja had suppressed the news. Watson wondered how one discreetly disposes of an elephant. The answer was it had been chopped up and removed piece by piece. The maharaja had been poisoned, equally discreetly.

The brother was now maharaja. He dismissed them, secure in the knowledge that no prosecution could be brought against them. The native doctor assured them that he would arrange for a more subtle revenge. And so he did for the new maharaja only sat on the throne a few days.

“The Singular Affair Of The Babbling Butler” was a 1947 episode written by Dennis Green and Anthony Boucher. London had been covered with dense smog for days. Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson were going stir crazy but fortunately a client appeared, a butler named Jenkins, in service to Sir Roderick Martin.

Jenkins feared for his master’s safety and asked Holmes to visit the Martin house. The two men accompanied Jenkins and met Sir Roderick. As soon as the introductions were made, Jenkins bolted from the room, leaving the three men puzzled by his behaviour. The mystery deepened when Sir Roderick asked Holmes what he was doing there, then sent him off with rude remarks.

Holmes and Watson went down to the servant’s quarters to ask Jenkins for an explanation. He was in fear of his life he said, not Martin’s, and thought Sir Roderick was trying to silence him over a suppressed scandal. Sir Roderick had trifled with the affections of a young woman. After he tossed her aside, she committed suicide. His connection with her was only known to Jenkins.

Holmes asked Jenkins to write out a complete report for safekeeping at 221B, then let Sir Roderick know that the report would be released if Jenkins died. The butler agreed to bring a copy to 221B the next morning. Apropos of nothing, before leaving Holmes asked Jenkins the name of his doctor. Puzzled at how he had guessed, the butler replied it was Dr David Stanley.

Holmes and Watson trotted off to Stanley’s residence. The great detective made a giant leap of faith that Stanley’s sister Angela was the unfortunate maiden and her brother was out for revenge. They were admitted by his wife Sylvia, who refused to let them see David, saying he was of unsound mind.

He heard the ruckus and let them in, flattered that the famous man had called upon them. David insisted they hear his piano composition “Rhapsody For A Dead Sister”. He was quite put out when he learned they were not investigating Angela's death but just wanted to verify Jenkins’ state of mind.

The next morning Holmes and Watson interrupted Sir Roderick at his breakfast. More insults were rendered, along with the news that Jenkins had committed suicide during the night. He had died in his locked room after drinking down strychnine.

Holmes found on the floor a piece of clay with a boot imprint. Analyzing it in his laboratory he proved it came from a doctor's office. That was one heck of a piece of forensic work. Holmes surmised that the doctor had prescribed medicine to be drunk just before retiring and flavoured it with strychnine to kill Jenkins.

Dashing back to Sir Roderick’s house, they proceeded to bother him once more and vice versa. He told them he was expecting his personal physician momentarily, none other than Dr David Stanley. It was Sylvia who arrived first, but who was quickly followed by David.

By now Sir Roderick was quite put out with all these people barging into his house and annoying him en masse. Almost a J'accuse! meeting. After clearing out a few people, David got down to business with Sir Roderick and prescribed a soothing draught to steady his nerves.

It was, of course, strychnine. Holmes and Watson stopped him in time. David was trying to clean house. Exposed, he grabbed the draught and committed suicide. Sir Roderick, unfortunately, survived. There were some improbable plot turns. However, Sir Roderick’s flow of sarcastic remarks enlivened the episode considerably.

New-Time Radio.

THE NEWLY DISCOVERED CASEBOOK OF SHERLOCK HOLMES was a radio comedy series that aired on BBC in early 1999 (available as free mp3s from www.otrrlibrary.org) The shows were well done spoofs of the canon performed before a live audience. All six episodes were written by Anthony Hare. Enjoyable and worth repeated listening.

Holmes was played in the style of a music hall comedian. Dr Watson narrated the episodes like a clichéd poofter but not a blithering idiot like Nigel Bruce. Mrs Hudson was a much put-upon housekeeper always grumbling about Holmes, whom she and Watson called a toffee-nose ponce.

The first episode of the mini-series was “The Case Of The Clockwork Fiend”, which aired on 1999-01-16. The prologue explained that during renovations to the British Museum in 1998 the curator found a casebook of Dr John Watson. It had been misfiled in the Erotic Literature section next to a first edition of JANET AND JOHN GO BRASS RUBBING. The BBC was therefore proud to present the cases for the edification of its audience.

The story began in 221B as Holmes and Watson breakfasted and read the morning newspapers. Inspector Lestrade arrived and said he had a body for Holmes to look at, to which came the reply: “*Honestly, Inspector, you’re such a flirt*”. However the body was in Brixton, that of Bert Quasimodo.

The deceased had been done in by curare released from a mechanical mustache twirler. When Lestrade mentioned the autopsy would be done by a female surgeon, Watson objected. Better a man should do it, in which case he was available for his usual fee, hint, hint. Lestrade accepted (sound of cash register).

Watson and Holmes took the corpse home on the #35 bus. Mrs Hudson objected to the post mortem being performed on her dining room table. Afterwards, Holmes told her to deal with the corpse. “*Put him out back; the dustmen come on Tuesdays.*”

Holmes announced a dinner engagement with Lord and Lady Fark at their stately home Fark Hall. (Say that in an English accent and you’ll understand why the audience fell into the aisles.) Holmes and Watson attended in disguise, the better to snoop.

Clues led to a Professor Orinoco Quills, who was giving a talk on Borneo at the soiree. Various jokes and routines filled out the party. Lestrade interrupted with news of another body, this one in Pimlico. Cause of death was an electric nose picker, manufactured by the Acme Paint, Clockwork, and Electric Paraphernalia Company.

Fark Hall was the epicentre of the plot. Many alarums at the castle, which culminated in the escape of Professor Moriarty qua Quills. He left behind a wax

cylinder to explain events, but was pre-empted by a long-winded explanation by Watson. Watson raced to explain all the excruciating details before time was called for the episode but didn’t quite make it. An hilarious take-off on stereotypical J’accuse! denouements.

“The Mystery Of The Obese Escapologist” aired on January 23 and began with a jaunt to the music hall. Watson wanted to hear a comedian, Willie Eckerslack, the Yorkshire Wag. Also performing were Hubert Truss the uplifting balladeer, Freeman, Hardy, and Willis the foot fetishists in harmony, Dolores and Her Yodelling Gerbils, and Huge Deenie the obese escapologist.

Alas, Eckerslack was scratched from the playlist. Substituting was Eleanor Mentary the Swedish Nightingale. Watson didn’t catch the name when she was announced, so Holmes repeated it for him: “*Ellie Mentary, my dear Watson*”.

A week later, Mrs Hudson mentioned she and her sister had been to the music hall and Eckerslack was still indisposed. The two men speculated why he should be missing. Having nothing better to do, they went to the music hall to investigate.

The manager said Eckerslack was last heard of in his dressing room where he received an unknown visitor. He was then hustled away, minus his artificial leg. Watson expressed surprised at the idea of a one-legged stand-up, to which Holmes testily replied Eckerslack was a comedian, not a tap dancer.

Off they went investigating, which brought them to the Battersea Workhouse, in charge of Dick Nasty. “*Call me Dick*”, he said. Holmes called him Mr Nasty. Eckerslack was indeed there. Workhouse policy required the inmates have their ankles shackled, which didn’t work so well with him.

Eckerslack was deluded that he was a Scotsman, much funnier since he was speaking with a Yorkshire accent. Huge Deenie’s name kept appearing in various connections, so Holmes and Watson went undercover as singers to get closer to him.

As the investigation proceeded, the artificial legs piled up. They were being used to smuggle opium. Deenie arrived at 221B where he was exposed as Dick Nasty wearing a fat suit. He was the leader of the opium ring. But wait! There’s more! Tearing the mask off Nasty’s face, Holmes exposed Professor Moriarty, who promptly escaped.

Movies.

Sherlock Holmes was popular in movies as soon as they were invented. In the canon, Holmes and Watson were young men, but because most of the actors who played them were middle-aged or even elderly, that was the impression the public had of them for decades. Since the turn of the Millennium, a number of movies and television shows have depicted them at younger age.

All the old black-and-white movies are in the public domain, and there are many DVD box sets of them available. The movies mentioned here are from a metal box set issued by Allegro Corporation, titled “Best Of Sherlock Holmes Collection”.

THE SIGN OF FOUR (1932) was adapted from the canon with a screenplay by W.P. Lipscomb. It was a revenge story which, unlike the canon version, told the background first. The movie began in the Andaman penal colony, involving stolen jewels and the betrayal of the thief Jonathan Small, a one-legged man. The man who stole the jewels a second time was Major Sholto.

Years later, Small escaped the Andamans and arrived in London to get the jewels back. The Sholto family, representing everything that was wrong with the class system, lived in fear of him for good reason. Small thinned out their numbers.

The movie was filmed as a contemporary story, with telephones, motor cars (1932 vintage) and all the impedimenta of modern life, not the gaslight era. Nothing wrong with that, for the canon stories were written as contemporary fiction. This is something readers forget, who associate the gaslight stories as period pieces when in fact they were up-to-date at the time of publishing. (Except of course the stories told by Watson as flashbacks.)

The chase began for revenge (Small) and the Sholtos (father and two sons). Holmes and Watson were not assisted by Scotland Yard Inspector Atherly Jones. The latter was played as a blithering idiot, while Holmes egged him on with jibes.

Mary Morstan’s father had been part of the Sholto gang. The survivors had an attack of conscience, so they sent her some of the loot as penance. Alarums and excursions followed with the jewels, so she sought the assistance of Holmes.

The investigation got off to a silly start when Holmes analyzed the handwriting of a threatening letter sent to Morstan. From it he deduced that the writer was a one-legged man. Watson sarcastically asked him what colour eyes the letter writer had, so even the screenwriter had his doubts.

Holmes went into a long-winded explanation about how leg amputees write differently because of the way they sit in the chair. Watson and Morstan didn’t believe it and neither will the viewer.

Small and his accomplices were hiding in a carnival show. Watson and Morstan decided to do their own investigating at the carnival, which got her kidnapped. Thereupon followed a high-speed chase in the dark along the River Thames in speedboats. It was well done, especially for 1932, but was brief.

Everyone converged at a waterfront warehouse where the climactic battle took place. Small had his own form of kickboxing with his wooden leg. The damsel in distress was rescued. Smiles all around, especially for Watson, who proposed to Morstan. He got off the final line of the movie: “*Elementary, my dear Holmes.*”

The movie was fairly good, especially considering that talkies were still in their infancy in 1932. (The first sound movie was released in 1927.)

THE TRIUMPH OF SHERLOCK HOLMES (1935) was an adaptation of the canon story “The Valley Of Fear”, with minor additions from other stories. The screenplay was by H. Fowler Mear and Cyril Twyford. Although this movie was well done, paradoxically it was too close to the canon.

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle believed his historical novels were his best work. Had he never written Sherlock Holmes and only had the other books published, today he would be forgotten. Any interest in his other novels today is a spillover from Holmes.

“The Valley Of Fear” consistently ranks at the bottom of popularity polls for the best Holmes story. The reason is that it consisted of a typical but clever for its time detection story with an historical novel about the Pennsylvania coal fields violence jammed into the middle.

As a standalone story the historical would be deservedly forgotten. It was used to provide background for the rest of the story, but that could have been

supplied with a few paragraphs. Doyle had the material, and was determined to wedge it all into the story.

The movie made the same mistake. Holmes did his detecting, then suddenly one of the characters went into a long flashback about the Pennsylvania coal mine wars and why that affected the victim. A minute of dialogue would have sufficed to explain the connection.

Be that as it may, the movie began with Holmes decrypting a coded message that suggested there would be trouble at Birlstone Castle. Even as he jotted down the final lines of the decrypt, the news arrived that John Douglas, lord of the castle, had his head blown away by the shotgun of an intruder.

Professor Moriarty made a brief appearance at the beginning of the movie, first to 221B where he politely threatened Holmes, then went off to his lair to meet with a Pennsylvania man about a job. Moriarty stayed offstage for most of the movie, only reappearing in the final moments when he tried to kill Holmes at the castle but fell to his death from the battlements.

A lengthy interrogation took place in the castle drawing room, as Holmes questioned everyone. The widow Douglas then began explaining her late husband's connection to Pennsylvania, which began a long flashback sequence set in the coal fields.

Finally back to the castle. Holmes deduced the dead man was not John Douglas but his assailant from Pennsylvania. That man had been sent to kill him but Douglas was the better fighter and blew away his opponent. The widow hadn't been grieving, suggesting that she knew. Her husband had been hiding in a secret room in the castle, but Holmes sniffed him out.

A common criticism about movie adaptations is that they stray too far from the book. In this case, it would have been better had the director done the pruning that Doyle's editor failed to do.

Television.

In 1954 and 1955, a television series SHERLOCK HOLMES was aired on NBC. It was written and produced by Sheldon Reynolds in France, where production costs were much lower. Ronald Howard was Holmes and H. Marion Crawford played Watson. Howard was relatively young and fit the canon better

than the more famous Rathbone. Crawford was well into middle age but played Watson as an intelligent man, not the blithering idiot that Nigel Bruce did.

The episodes are in the public domain and therefore available in several different box sets. The collection I'll cite here is from the metal box set issued by Allegro Corporation, "Best Of Sherlock Holmes Collection".

Most of the episodes were pastiches but some were based on canon stories, however loosely. Interestingly there was some continuity between episodes when characters referred back to previous events. That was unusual for the times, as most television shows were zero-reset.

"The Case Of The Shy Ballerina" was a 1954 episode written by Charles Early. As the story opened, Holmes and Watson were about to leave 221B when the doctor discovered that somewhere he had taken the wrong overcoat and hat without noticing. Found in a pocket was a handwritten note "*twelve heroes with broken feet*".

Holmes deduced it was written by a woman but before he could go any further, the real owner of the overcoat, Harry Chelton, arrived with Watson's coat. There had been a mixup at their club. The exchange was made but after Chelton left, Watson discovered that their hats were still mixed up.

This time Watson and Holmes went to the Chelton house. Harry wasn't there, but they talked to his wife Elaine. She asked if Holmes was available for consulting. The answer being yes, she explained Harry was a military attaché who was being blackmailed for an affair he had with a ballerina Olga Yaclanoff while stationed in Moscow. Holmes said he'd look into the problem.

Watson didn't get his hat back until later until Inspector Lestrade arrived with it. The hat had been found next to Harry Chelton's body, stabbed to death in St. James Park. That was good enough for Lestrade to arrest Watson, which makes one wonder how the man made it to his rank. He was barely qualified to be a night watchman.

Lestrade had a butterfly mind, what today we call attention deficit disorder, and quickly turned his attention to Yaclanoff, who had arrived in London to press her blackmail. She was played by a woman of a certain age with the figure of a barmaid and the grace of a stevedore.

Even less convincing was the actor who played her manager Serge Smernoff, badly overacted and wearing the phoniest handlebar mustache and Van Dyke beard ever seen on any stage.

After some more overacting by Lestrade, Watson, and Smernoff in turn, Holmes solved the case and accused Elaine Chelton of murdering her husband and trying to pin it on Yaclanoff. Elaine had an affair with Smernoff while Harry was diddling his ballerina, and decided to simplify matters by becoming a rich widow. The actors having exhausted themselves, the episode concluded.

“The Case Of The Blind Man’s Bluff” (1954), written by Lou Morheim, was a darker episode. Unsavory men with hidden pasts received warnings, not as orange pips but as chicken feet with black ribbon tied on them. Death soon followed, shown from behind the killer so the his face was not seen but the dying agony of the victim was.

The common factor among the victims was that they had been on board the ship Gloria North five years previous. Now the killer was stalking them for revenge. He posed as a blind man. Holmes caught him by silently moving around a room, yet the killer still knew where he was. It was a subtle scene but the observant viewer had a fair chance to guess the clue.

The motive was revenge for the ship’s crew being responsible for the death of his wife and son. He spoke a long monologue to Holmes to explain the background, unaware that Lestrade and Watson were standing behind him. Anything he said was taken done and used in evidence, to paraphrase the standard police caution.

WHEN WORDS COLLIDE 2021

August 2021 may be cutting it close for a convention to re-open but Calgary’s annual readercon When Words Collide will give it a go. August 13 to 15 will be the 10th anniversary of the readercon, which should have been 2020 but alas for the coronavirus. Information from whenwordscollide.org

They are planning an in-person festival for August 2021. Should health concerns prevent a real-world convention, the entire festival (except the banquet and autograph session) will move online. As of October 2020, the convention is 80% sold. Attendance is capped at 750, plus volunteers and guests.

SEEN IN THE LITERATURE

Carrillo, J.D., et al (2020) **Disproportionate extinction of South American mammals drove the asymmetry of the Great American Biotic Interchange.** PROCEEDINGS OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES USA 117:26281-26287

Authors’ abstract: *The biological interchange between North and South America associated with the formation of the Isthmus of Panama is key to defining current gradients of species diversity. A major gap in our understanding of the interchange is its asymmetry, where mammals of North American origin attained higher diversity in South America than vice versa.*

The prevailing view is that this asymmetry resulted from higher origination of immigrant mammals in South America. In contrast, we find that asymmetry results from high extinction of native mammals in South America, which reduced the diversity of native mammals available to disperse northwards. The interchange between the previously disconnected faunas of North and South America was a massive experiment in biological invasion. A major gap in our understanding of this invasion is why there was a drastic increase in the proportion of mammals of North American origin found in South America.

Four non-mutually exclusive mechanisms may explain this asymmetry:
1) Higher dispersal rate of North American mammals toward the south,
2) higher origination of North American immigrants in South America,
3) higher extinction of mammals with South American origin, and
4) similar dispersal rate but a larger pool of native taxa in North versus South America.

We test among these mechanisms by analyzing ~20,000 fossil occurrences with Bayesian methods to infer dispersal and diversification rates and taxonomic selectivity of immigrants. We find no differences in the dispersal and origination rates of immigrants.

In contrast, native South American mammals show higher extinction. We also find that two clades with North American origin (Carnivora and Artiodactyla) had significantly more immigrants in South America than other clades. Altogether, the asymmetry of the interchange was not due to higher origination of immigrants in South America as previously suggested, but resulted from higher extinction of native taxa in southern South America.

Authors’ abstract: *We describe a long prehistoric human trackway (1.5 km) of Late Pleistocene age at White Sands National Park (New Mexico, USA). The trackway indicates two journeys. The outbound tracks are crosscut by giant ground sloth and Columbian Mammoth tracks.*

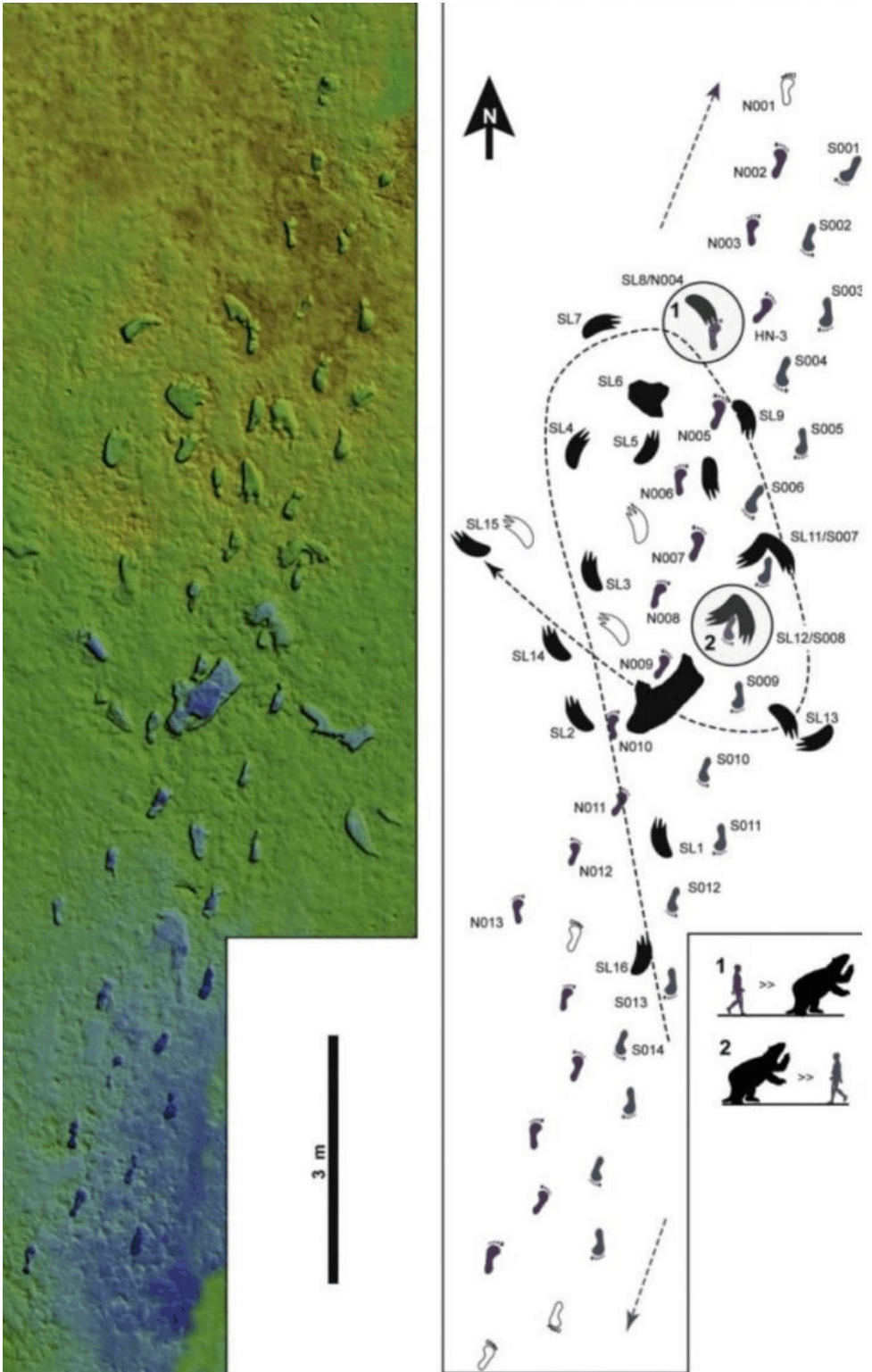
Human tracks at White Sands National Park record more than one and a half kilometres of an out-and-return journey and form the longest Late Pleistocene-age double human trackway in the world. An adolescent or small adult female made two trips separated by at least several hours, carrying a young child in at least one direction.

Despite giant ground sloth and Columbian Mammoth transecting them between the outbound and return journeys, the human tracks show no changes indicative of predator/prey awareness. In contrast, the giant ground sloth tracks show behaviour consistent with human predator awareness, while mammoth tracks show no such apparent concern.

The human footprints are morphologically variable and exhibit left-right asymmetry, which might be due to child carrying. We explore this morphological variability using methods based on the analysis of objective track outlines, which add to the analytical toolkit available for use at other human footprint sites.

The sheer number of tracks and their remarkable morphological variability have implications for the reliability of inferences made using much smaller samples as are more common at typical footprint sites. One conclusion is that the number of footprints required to make reliable biometric inferences is greater than often assumed.

[Image is from this paper.]



Louys, J., and P. Roberts (2020) **Environmental drivers of megafauna and hominin extinction in Southeast Asia.** NATURE 586:402-406(2020)

Authors’ abstract: *Southeast Asia has emerged as an important region for understanding hominin and mammalian migrations and extinctions. High-profile discoveries have shown that Southeast Asia has been home to at least five members of the genus Homo.*

Considerable turnover in Pleistocene megafauna has previously been linked with these hominins or with climate change, although the region is often left out of discussions of megafauna extinctions.

In the traditional hominin evolutionary core of Africa, attempts to establish the environmental context of hominin evolution and its association with faunal changes have long been informed by stable isotope methodologies.

However, such studies have largely been neglected in Southeast Asia. Here we present a large-scale dataset of stable isotope data for Southeast Asian mammals that spans the Quaternary period.

Our results demonstrate that the forests of the Early Pleistocene had given way to savannahs by the Middle Pleistocene, which led to the spread of grazers and extinction of browsers, although geochronological limitations mean that not all samples can be resolved to glacial or interglacial periods.

Savannahs retreated by the Late Pleistocene and had completely disappeared by the Holocene epoch, when they were replaced by highly stratified closed-canopy rainforest.

This resulted in the ascendancy of rainforest-adapted species as well as Homo sapiens, which has a unique adaptive plasticity among hominins, at the expense of savannah and woodland specialists, including Homo erectus.

At present, megafauna are restricted to rainforests and are severely threatened by anthropogenic deforestation.

Yamashita, H., et al (2020) **Dissection of hyperspectral reflectance to estimate nitrogen and chlorophyll contents in tea leaves based on machine learning algorithms.** SCIENTIFIC REPORTS 20:doi.org/10.1038/s41598-020-73745-2 (available as a free pdf)

Authors’ abstract: *Nondestructive techniques for estimating nitrogen (N) status are essential tools for optimizing N fertilization input and reducing the environmental impact of agricultural N management, especially in green tea cultivation, which is notably problematic.*

Previously, hyperspectral indices for chlorophyll (Chl) estimation, namely a green peak and red edge in the visible region, have been identified and used for N estimation because leaf N content closely related to Chl content in green leaves.

Herein, datasets of N and Chl contents, and visible and near-infrared hyperspectral reflectance, derived from green leaves under various N nutrient conditions and albino yellow leaves were obtained. A regression model was then constructed using several machine learning algorithms and preprocessing techniques.

Machine learning algorithms achieved high-performance models for N and Chl content, ensuring an accuracy threshold of 1.4 or 2.0 based on the ratio of performance to deviation values.

Data-based sensitivity analysis through integration of the green and yellow leaves datasets identified clear differences in reflectance to estimate N and Chl contents, especially at 1325 to 1575 nm, suggesting an N content-specific region.

These findings will enable the nondestructive estimation of leaf N content in tea plants and contribute advanced indices for nondestructive tracking of N status in crops.

Speirs: So much for reading tea leaves by psychics. That job is now automated.

Kollasch, A.M., et al (2020) **Leaf vibrations produced by chewing provide a consistent acoustic target for plant recognition of herbivores.** OECOLOGIA 194:1-13

Authors’ abstract: *Plant defenses that respond to the threat of herbivory require accurate sensing of the presence of herbivores. Herbivory cues include mechanical damage, elicitors from insect saliva or eggs, and airborne volatiles emitted by wounded plants.*

Plants can also respond to the leaf vibrations produced by chewing herbivores. However, previous studies of the influence of feeding vibrations on plant defenses have been limited to single species pairs.

In this study we test the hypothesis that chewing vibrations differ among herbivore species, both in their acoustic features and in their potential effect on plant defense responses. We first compare the acoustic traits of larval feeding vibrations in ten species from six families of Lepidoptera and one family of Hymenoptera.

We then test responses of Arabidopsis thaliana plants to variation among feeding vibrations of different individuals of one species, and to feeding vibrations of two species, including a pierid butterfly and a noctuid moth.

All feeding vibrations consisted of repetitive pulses of vibration associated with leaf tissue removal, although chewing rates varied between species and between large and small individuals within species. The frequency spectra of the vibrations generated by leaf feeding were similar across all ten species.

Induced increases in anthocyanins in A. thaliana did not differ when plants were played vibrations from different individuals, or vibrations of two species of herbivores with different chewing rates, when amplitude was held constant. These results suggest that feeding vibrations provide a consistent set of cues for plant recognition of herbivores.

Rivera, J., et al (2020) **Toughening mechanisms of the elytra of the diabolical ironclad beetle.** NATURE 586:543-548

Authors’ abstract: *Joining dissimilar materials such as plastics and metals in engineered structures remains a challenge. Mechanical fastening, conventional*

welding and adhesive bonding are examples of techniques currently used for this purpose, but each of these methods presents its own set of problems, such as formation of stress concentrators or degradation under environmental exposure, reducing strength and causing premature failure.

In the biological tissues of numerous animal and plant species, efficient strategies have evolved to synthesize, construct and integrate composites that have exceptional mechanical properties.

One impressive example is found in the exoskeletal forewings (elytra) of the diabolical ironclad beetle, Phloeodes diabolicus. Lacking the ability to fly away from predators, this desert insect has extremely impact-resistant and crush-resistant elytra, produced by complex and graded interfaces.

Here, using advanced microscopy, spectroscopy and in situ mechanical testing, we identify multiscale architectural designs within the exoskeleton of this beetle, and examine the resulting mechanical response and toughening mechanisms.

We highlight a series of interdigitated sutures, the ellipsoidal geometry and laminated microstructure of which provide mechanical interlocking and toughening at critical strains, while avoiding catastrophic failure.

These observations could be applied in developing tough, impact- and crush-resistant materials for joining dissimilar materials. We demonstrate this by creating interlocking sutures from biomimetic composites that show a considerable increase in toughness compared with a frequently used engineering joint.

