

OPUNTIA 505



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.

AROUND COWTOWN

photos by Dale Speirs

On the cover: Seen along the Stephen Avenue pedestrian mall in downtown Calgary. As we get closer to herd immunity, the mall becomes more lively.

Below: I like to photograph the reflections in the glass canyons downtown.



Above: This coming October 8, there will be municipal elections across Alberta. Calgary Mayor Naheed Nenshi is retiring, as a result of which there is a mad rush for the mayoralty position. They’re already campaigning.

There was a half-hearted Stampede rodeo with a few minor events and a partial midway. I didn't go, even though I have both my vaccinations. I'll wait for herd immunity to be declared.



I took these photos in April in the Inglewood district of central Calgary, where the Smith-Bilt company has its hat factory.



Street electrical box on Nose Hill Drive NW in the Crowfoot district.



Life at Chez Opuntia: Sitting on the front steps on July 11, feeding the squirrels in my yard.



FAR SPEAKING STORIES: PART 10

by Dale Speirs

[Parts 1 to 9 appeared in OPUNTIA's #313, 327, 337, 361, 372, 389, 410, 444, and 473.]

Remote Control Murder.

The idea of using telephones to commit murder from a long distance was not a new one. Hugo Gernsback, the founder of modern science fiction, tried a variation with a short story “The Killing Flash” in one of his magazines (1929 November, SCIENCE WONDER STORIES, available as a free pdf from www.archive.org)

The protagonist decided to kill a rival in business and love by hooking up a 350,000 volt generator to his telephone line. He would ring up his enemy and when the victim answered, step back and throw a switch to send the jolt down the line.

The fallacy was that telephone lines are grounded at intervals. The voltage would not have and didn't make it out of the building before grounding. It happened that the nearest ground was in the apartment upstairs from the would-be killer. The electricity earthed back to kill him. The intended victim knew nothing of that, as he had picked up the phone and heard only dead air. He hung up and went to bed. The police, meanwhile, were puzzling over a charbroiled corpse.

BOSTON BLACKIE aired on old-time radio from 1944 to 1950, and was also a series of 14 movies. His real name was Horatio Black but everyone, including his girlfriend Mary Wesley, called him Blackie. The radio shows are leavened with humour and quips. Writers were not credited, although the actors were. Episodes are available as free mp3s from www.otrrlibrary.org

Blackie had been a jewel thief in Boston and was supposedly reformed now that he lived in New York City. Supposedly, because he had no day job and took no fees as an amateur detective, yet lived well in a nice apartment and squired Wesley around to the fanciest nightclubs.

Blackie's nemesis was NYPD Homicide Inspector Farraday. In the early episodes of the series, Farraday would arrest Blackie on sight, then gather evidence to fit him. Over time their relationship moderated to being sparring

partners. Blackie liked to barge into hot cases and race Farraday to the solution, while Farraday always had the snappiest lines.

One amusing aspect of the series was the berserk organist who provided all the music. Scenes were punctuated, and that is the correct word, by abrupt chords on the organ. Dramatic lines spoken by the cast were followed by crescendos, although the opening and closing themes were more sedate.

“Robertson Poisons Wife Beverly Over The Telephone” was a 1948 episode. The title summed up the opening sequence. The man phoned his wife Beverly from downtown to verify she was going to take her medication then and there. She did as directed and died at the 2m25s mark. The last words she heard were her husband gloating over the telephone that she had just taken poison.

Inspector Farraday figured it was suicide, while Boston Blackie thought it was murder. Blackie went over to the Tom Robertson residence. They sparred verbally then physically. After Blackie left, Robertson telephoned his colleague Carol Martin. They set up a rendezvous out on the highway for an illegal business.

Martin made a comment that it was too bad Beverly had to be eliminated because she had found out what Tom did for a living. The business was hijacking. Martin and her assistant Helen played damsels in distress, who convinced a truck driver to pull over. Robertson snuck around the other side and shot the driver dead.

After a pause for a Champagne Velvet beer commercial, the episode resumed. Blackie summed up the plot for Farraday, in case any listener had forgotten it while getting a beer out of the refrigerator. Both agreed Beverly's death and the hijacking were related.

Blackie romanced the telephone operator who handled the last telephone call from Beverly. She was asked by him and Farraday to set up Robertson. She called him with a blackmail demand, claiming that his wife had named him as the murderer.

The idea was to stir up the gang, which certainly succeeded. The two women typed up a fake suicide note with which to frame Robertson. Blackie tailed Robertson and got all three into custody. Cue the berserk organ music and another beer commercial.



Dr. Jekyll *and* Mr. Hyde At the Telephone

Courteous and considerate co-operation is as essential at the telephone as in the office or home.

In every use of the telephone system, three human factors are brought into action—one at each end, one or both anxious and probably impatient, another at the central office, an expert, at least as intelligent and reliable as the best stenographers or bookkeepers.

For the time being, this central office factor is the personal servant of the other two and

is entitled to the same consideration that is naturally given to their regular employees.

Perfect service depends upon the perfect co-ordinate action of all three factors—any one failing, the service suffers. This should never be forgotten.

All attempts to entirely eliminate the personal factor at the central office, to make it a machine, have been unsuccessful. There are times when no mechanism, however ingenious, can take the place of human intelligence.

The marvelous growth of the Bell System has made the use of the telephone universal and the misuse a matter of public concern. Discourtesy on the part of telephone users is only possible when they fail to realize the efficiency of the service. It will cease when they talk over the telephone as they would talk face to face.

**AMERICAN TELEPHONE AND TELEGRAPH COMPANY
AND ASSOCIATED COMPANIES**

One Policy,

One System,

Universal Service.

In answering this advertisement it is desirable that you mention THE RAILROAD MAN'S MAGAZINE.

INNER SANCTUM MYSTERIES was an old-time radio mystery anthology series that aired from 1941 to 1952. (This and other episodes are available as free mp3s from www.otrrlibrary.org) The host was a smarmy man who liked to make ghoulish puns.

“Over My Dead Body” was written by Robert Sloane and aired on 1947-06-23. Edgar Finley was an eccentric old millionaire who wanted to test his nephew Robert and niece Eleanor. He arranged to be laid out in a glass-sealed coffin in the family crypt, looking dead. He had a telephone hidden inside to contact the housekeeper Mary to let him out.

Robert spotted the telephone wire and locked the coffin to speed up his inheritance. He wouldn't let Mary answer the telephone, so dear Uncle Edgar suffocated. She got even by suggesting the telephone bells were still ringing, often enough that Robert actually began to hear them. He went mad and killed her.

The family lawyer Cadman arrived and told Robert that his uncle had specified the will could only be opened and read by Mary. Robert later visited Cadman in his office, got the will, and then shot him dead.

When Robert returned, Eleanor told him she had traced the telephone wire to the crypt. She wanted to check the crypt. Robert dragged her there where they found Finlay still alive. He had a secret panel in the side of the coffin and was living in the crypt pending developments.

Uncle was a poor judge of character, as Robert shot him. Finley, however, managed to get his hands around Robert's throat, what Canadians call a Shawinigan handshake, and strangle him. Eleanor fled in terror and returned with the police, who had quite a bit of paperwork.

The plot of telephoning from a casket had been used elsewhere, which see previous installments of this column.

At left: A magazine ad from 1910 July.

THE HAUNTING HOUR was an anthology series which aired on radio from 1944 to 1946. (This and other episodes are available as free mp3s from www.otrrlibrary.org) No credits of any kind were given. "Death By Request" aired on 1945-09-08. The episode began with architect Roger Stevens relaxing by the fireplace when his telephone rang. The caller was a man who told Stevens that revenge was nigh for him having successfully covered up the murder of his business partner Mike ten years ago.

Stevens never had any such partner but the caller he would be dead in two days and disgraced after being exposed to friends and family. Stevens reported the call to police but they weren't anymore helpful than they would be today. The calls kept coming. They evidently were a campaign of psychological warfare designed to drive Stevens into the grave for a crime he didn't commit.

Once he had been turning into a gibbering wreck, he, and the listening audience, discovered that the calls were from a business rival trying to beat him out of a lucrative contract. The attempt backfired in the worst way.

Weird Calls.

"The Telephone In The Library" by August W. Derleth (1936 June, WEIRD TALES, available as a free pdf from www.archive.org) worked a familiar trope. Andrew Hope had departed this world suddenly while making a telephone call. He had suspected his sister Elida had been poisoning him and weakening him to the point that his heart gave way.

The body was buried and the will was probated. Elida did not have any chance to enjoy her inheritance of Andrew's estate. She began receiving telephone calls from Andrew beyond the grave. He was not in a forgiving mood, and made certain that she joined him in the next life not long after.

THE LIFE OF RILEY was a comedy series that aired on radio from 1941 to 1951. It was a domestic sitcom about Chester A. Riley, his wife Peg, and their two teenaged children Junior and Babs. He was an abusive father, hot-tempered, and constantly leaping to false conclusions. Archie Bunker was a paragon of virtue compared to him.

"The Telephone Is Rationed" aired on 1948-01-17. Chester Riley was upset because he couldn't get through on the telephone to tell his wife Peg he was going to be late for dinner. He came home for dinner to complain.

His decision was to charge Peg, Babs, and Junior a tariff of 5-cents per call. Further, he put the telephone in a closet to which he had the only key. The way he talked to them would have him arrested these days for abusive behaviour.

Visitors to the house found his idea of telephone rationing disturbing. Various misunderstandings kept him in a tizzy. The script played him as stubborn and insecure but in our time he seemed psychopathic. Riley got his comeuppance when a radio game show telephoned him. He couldn't get to the telephone in time to win \$1,000, having lost the closet key.



*Postcard from
the 1910s.*

LITERA SCRIPTA MORTEM: PART 5

by Dale Speirs

[Parts 1 to 4 appeared in OPUNTIA's #424, 428, 440, and 469.]

Characters In Search Of Their Authors.

The idea of characters coming to life and jumping from the printed page into the real world is an old one.

“The Thought Devil” by A.W. Calder (1932 July, WEIRD TALES, available as a free pdf from www.archive.org) was about Ronald Ganly, an author of crime novels whose characters duplicated his plots, and very bloodily.

In particular, Vipra Honelli, a gangster who featured in many stories, had come to life. The details in the stories matched actual crimes so closely that police took Ganly into custody. Mass suggestion was offered as a reason why Honelli came to life but didn’t seem believable.

A newspaper tried printing a headline that Honelli was dead in the hopes of killing him. The plan failed. Even then, broadcast media was hurting print media, so in an inspired idea it was announced over the air that Honelli was dead. Since there were far more radio listeners than readers, the plan worked. The archfiend died and Ganly could rest easy.

THE LIBRARY OF THE UNWRITTEN (2019) by A.J. Hackwith was set in Hell, where Claire was the Head Librarian of the Unwritten Wing. Uncompleted books, every manuscript that any human ever started but never finished, lined the endless shelves. If the author was still alive, then the books were preserved in case they decided to complete the text. If the author was dead, then the book could be shelved and forgotten for eternity.

The great problem was that not a few books would come to life and generate their characters into real beings. A library cannot have characters wandering about looking for their authors. Clair and her assistant Brevity, assisted by the demon Leto, had to keep the characters from escaping the library and returning to Earth.

The MacGuffin of the novel was the Codex Gigas, also known as the Devil’s Bible. Heaven and Hell were contesting for possession, the former through

archangels since God was missing, and the latter through its library staff. Paradoxically Hell had a library but Heaven didn’t.

The flow of the story halted at intervals for infodumps and flashbacks. For example, on one occasion the librarians were trapped by Hellhounds trying to destroy their souls. As the beasts prowled outside, Claire unburdened herself to the others about how she got her job, afflicted with guilt for her past actions in a vicious bureaucratic battle. It seems to me that if I were pursued by Hellhounds, I would not pause to reflect on my past life and contemplate what might have been done differently.

The plot more or less petered out with a victory of sorts. Possibly as a setup for a sequel, Brevity became the new Head Librarian while Claire made a lateral transfer to the Archives. The novel read well overall but could have been tightened up in the middle.

Authors In Search Of Characters.

“In A Graveyard” (1935 October, WEIRD TALES) by Eando Binder, pseudonym of brothers Earl and Otto Binder, was about an author Kent Dawson with writer’s block. He wanted to write a vampire story, so decided to get atmosphere for it by hauling his typewriter out to a cemetery and writing it in the early morning hours by lantern light.

A kibitzer appeared as if by magic and was most interested to learn what Dawson was writing. The reader will quickly guess who the fellow was but Dawson was slow on the uptake and paid for it with his life.

The old-time radio series BOX 13 aired from 1947 to 1949. This was a syndicated series sold as transcribed disks to radio stations, as a result of which the mp3s are very good quality because they were copied from disks, not as taped air checks. The show was produced by movie actor Alan Ladd, who also starred as Dan Holiday.

The series was about a journalist Dan Holiday who quit his job at the STAR-TIMES newspaper to become a freelance fiction writer. The problem was he couldn’t think of plots or characters on his own initiative, which most will agree is an impediment to writing fiction. Today such people write novelizations of movies or fan fiction.

Box 13 was Holiday's mailing address at the newspaper. He ran an ad in the classifieds: *Adventure wanted. Will go anywhere, do anything.* He had a scatterbrained secretary named Suzy, although how he paid her was mystifying. He must have been earning good royalties from his fiction since he did not charge fees to his clients.

"A Book Of Poems" was written by Frank Hertosig and aired on 1947-12-12. Dan Holiday received a book sent to Box 13 but no letter. The poems were a collection of Sir Walter Scott and the bookplate was that of Robert Chase. The book was broken at the spine to fall open at a particular poem.

Holiday went to his old newspaper to research the name. He learned that Chase had died in a house fire ten years before, leaving his son an invalid, and a daughter who wasn't there the night of the fire. Holiday took the book to her, which agitated her considerably.

She said her brother, a paraplegic, lived in the remaining portion of the burnt-out mansion. Holiday went to the manor house where the son resided, and ran interference with a battleaxe woman who lived in the gatehouse. She and her husband Carl preferred books like REVELATION, from which she quoted freely.

Undeterred, Holiday went up to the manor and received the traditional slugging unconscious after spotting a body. Once he recovered, he went back and tried to communicate with the son. He managed to get one clue.

The body was found by police in a nearby ravine and proved to be Carl. Holiday revisited the sister, who worked off some resentments against her family. He hypothesized what happened the night of the fire and how she set it in a moment of anger against her parents.

Carl had figured out what happened and sent the book as an anonymous clue. The sister found out and killed him. As Holiday told her, there was no proof that she set the fire but the police would be able to convict her for the murder.

The episode closed to a mixture of end music and her shouts of denial. It was almost weird fiction.

"Last Will And Nursery Rhyme" was written by Russell Hughes and aired on 1948-04-02. Dan Holiday was invited by a friend Ted Kenworth to stay at his

estate Fair Oaks for a relaxing vacation. Since that wouldn't make much of an episode, the listener can be certain the alarums and excursions would abound.

Kenworth was selling the manor. He had inherited the place from his Uncle Thaddeus but couldn't afford to pay for its upkeep. Holiday, who had known Uncle, was suspicious that there was no other wealth. The old man was a notorious skinflint and must have piled up a fortune. But where was it? Even the taxmen couldn't find the money.

Helen Stark, who had been Thaddeus' secretary, was on the premise sorting out old documents and memorabilia. That night Holiday heard footsteps in the room above his but Kenworth didn't believe him. The next morning they searched the room, formerly the nursery but found nothing.

The lawyer Martin Wilson arrived. Holiday asked to see the will, to which Kenworth agreed. The document said Kenworth was to receive the house and all that was in it. No other assets were listed. After an attempt on Kenworth's life, the duo began searching the nursery but to no avail.

Kenworth was certain one of his old toys was missing but couldn't recall which one. Wilson completed the sale which required buyer occupancy in two days. That seemed suspiciously fast. Kenworth began following Wilson.

Holiday tracked Stark. She went from one secondhand store to another, showing the clerk a book and obviously trying to find another copy. When she returned home, Holiday barged in and interrogated her. She pulled a gun but Holiday disarmed her and took the book, which turned out to be nursery rhymes.

Back at Fair Oaks, Kenworth said the book was the missing item. They looked through the book and discovered one page of rhymes was missing. That was why Stark had been looking for another copy, to find out what the missing page contained. Someone else had torn out the page.

Kenworth remembered the missing rhyme was "Hickory, Dickory, Dock". That led them to a grandfather clock in the house wherein they found a letter with directions to Uncle's treasure. He had a fortune in negotiable bonds hidden in the column of the garden sundial.

I got to thinking about how that ending is now obsolete. All bonds these days are electronic and by law in every country must be registered to a name so the

tax auditors can track them. However there is an easy fix, as gold coins would make a good substitute.

“The Biter Bitten” was a 1948 episode written by Robert Light. Dr Theodore Miller was a herpetologist who wanted Dan Holiday who help him find a missing king cobra. He had the snake with him when he checked into the hotel. Holiday got him to admit that the escape might have been deliberate sabotage.

What Miller didn’t say, but Suzy discovered during her research, was that he had an estranged partner Dr Roy Cunningham. Both men were in town for a medical convention. Cunningham was going to announce the use of cobra venom for treating hemophilia. In doing so, he would be invalidating any possible patents on the method since his talk would put the procedure in the public domain. Holiday suspected Miller didn’t like that because it would cost him a fortune in royalties.

Miller had trained the cobra to return when he played flute music. It didn’t. Needless to say, the hotel manager Larkin was upset. A short while later, Cunningham staggered into his hotel two blocks away and died in the lobby from snake venom.

Holiday and Larkin found the snake in Miller’s room while he was elsewhere. They tricked him into admitting he killed Cunningham. Then the cobra got loose in the room. Fortunately Larkin could play the flute.

“Extra!, Extra!” was written by Ted Hediger and aired on 1948-09-19. Holiday was typing his latest novel: “*He leaned over the shining halo of her blond hair reflected in the soft glow of the new moon.*” Holiday groaned when he realized what was wrong with that sentence. I’m sure you’ll instantly spot the mistake. Answers on a postcard please.

Suzy burst in, having just returned from the newspaper office to see what was in Box 13. One postcard was all there was, from a newsboy Johnny Moran, who worked the corner at Holiday’s building. He asked Moran why he hadn’t just come upstairs to see him, to which the boy replied he wanted to keep it on a professional basis.

The boy’s father John was facing a grand theft rap for a jewelry store heist. Some of the loot was found in his room at the boarding house where they lived. Johnny didn’t believe it and had boundless faith in Holiday to free his father.

Unfortunately there wasn’t much that could be done. The case broke open when an intruder was spotted by Johnny rummaging through the Moran apartment.

Holiday talked to a neighbour named Grace Willis, who kindly offered him coffee but didn’t mention the sedative drug it was flavoured with. Why she did it was puzzling. Holiday woke up in an alley and the police had a new lead. Johnny was the next victim, a deliberate hit-and-run by a car. He wasn’t killed but was in a poor way in hospital.

More clues led to a dance hall where a roomer at the boarding house liked to visit. He was dancing with Willis. Alarums and excursions culminated in a confrontation in the boarding house where the thieves were packing for a getaway.

Holiday did some clever talking to split Willis from her boyfriend. She blabbed all about how John was set up to take the rap. The rest was details for the epilogue, concluding with a gush of sentimentality.

“House Of Darkness” aired on 1949-07-03, written by Sam Walders. A blind man named William Michaels was reading in the Braille room. Someone had embedded a message of distress in pinpricks into a book, giving an address.

Michaels’ son read the Box 13 ad and thus his father was referred to Dan Holiday. The first step was a drive-by of the house, where Holiday saw a doctor driving away. (In those days, some states gave special licence plates to medical doctors.) Holiday paid a call to the doctor and found him a liar but had no proof.

Holiday went back to the house and faked his way in as an electrical inspector. He found a blind woman Martha Corbett being held hostage by her nephew and the doctor. They wanted her to change her will in favour of the nephew.

Assorted alarums followed, including an excursion in an ambulance. Not too often that a car chase involved an ambulance. Justice was served.

“The Clay Pigeon” was written by Russell Hughes and aired on 1949-08-07. The letter writer was Mr Alexander, who asked Dan Holiday to book an appointment with a Dr Ogden, then telephone Alexander for further instructions.

So it was done, with an appointment for the next day. Peculiarly, Ogden didn't ask for a name. He told Holiday he preferred to find out his way at the time of meeting. Next was a telephone call to Alexander. His instructions were to use the name Matthew Kerry and say to the doctor "*The dead shall not stay dead*".

The next day Holiday kept the appointment. They sparred verbally sitting at a table. Ogden turned out to be a psychic. He asked Holiday to write his name on a slip of paper and under it a question or comment, then fold it and slip it under a teacup in the middle of the table. The listener will easily guess what Holiday wrote.

Ogden dimmed the lights and began a seance. He suddenly surmised the name Matthew Kerry and went into a panic. He loudly demanded Holiday leave immediately. Later Alexander called Holiday and asked him to continue playing the game. Alexander said it would keep him from being killed.

That night Ogden arrived at Holiday's apartment, having followed him home earlier. Ogden was still agitated and offered to pay him to keep quiet and not go the police. Since Holiday had no idea who Matthew Kerry was, he necessarily had to give a vague answer. He said he needed time to think, with which Ogden had no choice but to accede.

Ogden left, and Holiday waited a few moments before following him. Out on the street Holiday was intercepted by Alexander, who had been lurking in the shadows. He sucker-punched Holiday unconscious then fled.

Upon reviving, Holiday checked his wallet and keys. They hadn't been stolen but his office key had a few flecks of modeling clay on it. The assumption was obvious that Alexander intended paying a surreptitious visit.

Holiday called out Suzy to help check over the office. They couldn't find anything out of place. Suzy, always played as a scatterbrain, suggested an obvious idea that the listener would have been wondering about since the episode began. She said to find out who Matthew Kerry was. "*Hey, that's an idea!*", Holiday enthusiastically exclaimed. No wonder he had trouble thinking up plots for his story.

The next morning, Holiday and Suzy, went to the STAR-TIMES archives to research. They found a buried story that the murder of Matthew Kerry had never been solved. The only suspect was Marvin Smith, who had disappeared.

Kerry and Smith had been partners in a mind-reading act. Kerry's body had been claimed by his brother Philip.

That blew the plot wide open. Obviously Ogden was Smith and Alexander was Philip. Holiday contacted police but Ogden had vanished again. However later Ogden telephoned Holiday and said he agreed to his terms.

Since Holiday hadn't offered any, this was puzzling. As soon as he hung up the telephone, it rang again. This time Alexander was calling to set up an appointment at a dark and lonely place at midnight.

Holiday decided to arrive early. Ogden was also lurking nearby. He had \$5,000 as per a letter that Holiday didn't send. Holiday put himself in charge. He took Ogden's gun and they set a trap for Philip Kerry qua Alexander. Shots were fired but the trap was sprung successfully.

In the epilogue, Holiday explained to Suzy that Philip had used his copied key to type the fake blackmail letter on his stationery with his typewriter. No one would notice a single missing piece of letterhead.

Alexander figured Ogden would shoot Holiday, after which he would shoot Ogden, put his gun in the dead Holiday's hand, and make the deaths look mutual. Suzy was the only other witness. She was perturbed when Holiday told her she would have been the final victim. A clever plot that tied together neatly at the end.

"Archimedes And The Roman" was written by Russell Hughes and aired on 1949-07-31. A young boy named Marty Kennedy wrote to Box 13 because the adults wouldn't take him seriously. His friend astronomer Ted Whitman was missing. Dan Holiday drove out to see the boy.

Kennedy filled in the details for Holiday. Whitman was an assistant to Prof. Irving in the observatory up on the mountain top. Once a week Whitman made a grocery run into town and also gave Kennedy an astronomy lesson. If Whitman couldn't get down, he would flash a signal with a mirror to Kennedy. No signal had come, and Kennedy was worried.

Holiday drove up to the mountain and met a man claiming to be Whitman. The professor came out, there was an altercation, and Holiday was taken prisoner by the faker. Frank, as he was, and his girlfriend Milly had taken the two

astronomers hostage while hiding out after a bloody jewelry store robbery. Whitman was dying from a gunshot.

Holiday told Frank the story of Archimedes' death by the sword of a Roman soldier but to no avail. Notwithstanding that, Holiday began a campaign of psychological warfare against Frank. Prof. Irving tried his own stratagem. Frank had made Holiday signal with the mirror to Kennedy that all was well. Irving convinced Frank to allow a message about a comet.

The police arrived in the nick of time. In the epilogue, Holiday explained to Suzie the trick of the message. It told Kennedy to look for Halley's comet that night. The boy knew enough about astronomy to know that the comet wasn't due until 1985 (sic; actually 1986). He finally convinced his parents to call the police.

"Round Robin" aired on 1949-08-14, written by Arthur Boland. It was the final episode of the series. The letter at hand requested Dan Holiday to register as John Johnson at a hotel and await further instructions. Those were to go to room 502.

A woman there, Teresa Clements, gave him an envelope under obvious duress, then pointed a gun at him. He got it away from her, then straightened her out as to who he was. The package contained a diamond necklace. Holiday was being used as a courier for a blackmailer, the letter writer.

Holiday proposed to walk out of the hotel with the empty package to smoke out the blackmailer. He caught the man, who claimed to be a private investigator. Holiday put him under duress and forced him to lead the way to the detective agency. Once there, they talked to the boss, named Barrett.

Barrett admitted writing the letter but on behalf of a client. He had only dealt with the client by mail and didn't know who the person was. He denied knowing about the blackmail, but said that on the basis of the new information from Holiday, his fee to the client had suddenly gone up. Blackmail can sometimes boomerang.

Mrs Clements got a special delivery letter from the blackmailer that afternoon, who was miffed. Holiday went back to Barrett, then to Clements, in both cases to call a bluff. Much mysterious activity transpired that left the listener uninformed.

In the denouement, Holiday got Clements to admit to her husband that no blackmailer existed. She had sold the diamond necklace to pay off gambling debts and devised the fraud to explain the necklace's disappearance.

Bookselling.

Within living memory of the older generation (that's us, the Baby Boomers) books were sold in stores. It still remains to be seen if the coronavirus pandemic will not only kill bookstores but physical books.

Certainly the youngest generation see no need for anything that can't be read on a smartphone screen. Fiction about booksellers is already classifiable as historical fiction, like gothic novels and Sherlock Holmes.

Speaking of which, Sherlock Holmes was very successful on radio. He aired on several networks with several sets of actors from 1930 to 1956, basically 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 the Old Time Radio Researchers Website at www.otrrlibrary.org.)

"The Adventure Of The Hangman And The Book" was a 1949 episode, written by Howard Merrill. Holmes and Watson were taking a vacation in Paris. They were the only ones who didn't speak in bad French accents. Obviously no real francophone actors were in this episode.

The story began with a bookstore employee Albert de Clerc. His boss Marcel Bonton had told him never to go into the cellar, and was very angry to catch him there. Jump cut to some time later when Marcel was angry at his young wife Alice stepping out every night. It was a loveless marriage.

Having set up all that, Alice broke off her affair with Albert. Later that night, strolling through a dark neighbourhood, she was strangled and left hanging from a tree. The Sûreté called in Holmes to assist the investigation.

The great detective visited Marcel at his bookstore, then de Clerc. The latter hadn't been seen for two days. Holmes and Watson returned to the bookstore for some illegal midnight prowling in the cellar. They found de Clerc, tied up in the dark and subjected to Chinese water drop torture. He had gone insane.

Bonton arrived with gun in hand, just as Holmes found a book RARE TECHNIQUES IN HOMICIDE that the bookseller had been using. The explanation as to how Holmes knew what to find and where to look was improbable. After some exposition on both sides, equally unbelievable and over-acted at the top of their lungs, the Sûreté arrived in the nick of time.

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)

“Disappearance Of Mr Dizell” was a 1950 episode written by Alonzo Deen Cole. Rare book dealer Adam Dizzel was kidnapped for \$150,000, shots were fired, and he disappeared from a locked room in his house.

Neil Lawrence, nephew of Dizzel, was a friend of Bruce Madden Jr, who once tried to extort money from his rich father. What attracted even more suspicion was the delivery of a ransom note in Dizzel's handwriting, which somehow appeared in the house despite a lockdown and police cordon around it.

About the same time in another part of town, another rare book dealer Vladomir was murdered. An informant told Casey that Dizzel had murdered Vladomir over a book deal that went sour. Both men dealt in stolen or fake rare books.

The claim was that Dizzel staged the kidnapping to raise money to do a runner to South America. Casey figured he knew where Dizzel was hiding. He convinced the police to drop tear gas into the house to flush Dizzel out of a secret room in the house.

The nephew was innocent. The last five minutes were taken up with Casey explaining away all the loose threads to Ann Williams. He was miffed when, after his monologue, she left for a date with Lawrence.

Book Clubs.

“An Author’s Reading And Its Consequences” was a short story from the collection THE CARCELLINI EMERALD WITH OTHER TALES (1899) by Mrs. Burton Harrison. It is available as a free download from

www.gutenberg.org A celebrated author Timothy Bludgeon, at least celebrated by the Sutphen Literary Club, had been invited to town. The politics of the club were as vicious as might be expected, and three different banquets were staged by rival factions in his honour.

With twenty to thirty guests at each banquet, the hostesses were not prepared to stage the meals themselves for obvious reasons. The easiest method was to hire a caterer. The only one in town was Simonson. Unbeknownst to each other, the three women all hired him separately, each with the same menu and set of china and cutlery.

Bludgeon was only in town for the day, so he had a lunch, supper, and evening soiree with the same food and dishes three times within twelve hours. Needless to say, he noticed the pattern. An embarrassing situation for the literary elite of Sutphen, and one which led to a coup d’état in the club as a consequence.

JOAN DAVIS TIME was an old-time radio comedy series that aired from 1941 to 1950. The format changed but was mostly a sitcom with Davis as a single woman running a business such as a tea shop. Davis was a pioneer since few prime-time shows had a leading lady as the sole star. At that time, most women mentioned above the titles had a husband or major leading man taking priority.

“Joan Joins Literary Society” aired on 1946-01-28, written by Jay Sommers, Jack Harvey, and Si Wills (Davis’ ex-husband).

Joan Davis was social climbing and wanted to join the local Literary Society. The club was reviewing a book by P.D. Somerset, the eminent globetrotter. She noticed the show announcer Harry Von Zell looked much the same as the photo on the dust jacket of the book. All he needed was a Van Dyke beard.

She browbeat Von Zell into posing as Somerset. What she didn’t know was that the real author was being brought in as a surprise by the club president. That set the stage for the obvious mixup. Von Zell went off in search of a fake Van Dyke beard, not something easily found then or now.

While he was away, the real Somerset arrived. Davis thought he was Von Zell and chatted him up in familiar terms that shocked Somerset. He was indignant at being accosted by such a woman and left. Von Zell arrived, having found a beard in a theatrical supply shop. He was promptly taken in tow by the club president, who presented him to the membership.

They began peppering him with questions about his travelogue books. Von Zell had no idea what they were talking about and tried to fake his way through the meeting. He didn't succeed, and dismayed the club, no doubt costing Somerset a few book sales.

Song Sung Blue, Everybody Knows One.

Song writing seems much simpler than writing a short story or novel because one only needs to come up with a few verses and a chorus, which can be repeated to make up the time.

Which brings us to MY FAVORITE HUSBAND, a radio comedy series which aired from 1948 to 1951. (Available as free mp3s from the Old Time Radio Researchers at www.otrrlibrary.org)

This was a domestic sitcom with Lucille Ball playing the scatterbrained housewife Liz Cooper, married to a young bank executive. She later took the show to television where because of legal reasons she had to change the title to I LOVE LUCY and alter the character names.

George's boss was Rudolph Atterbury, played by Gale Gordon, a character actor who specialized in pompous blowhard roles. He followed Ball into all of her television series without missing a beat. His wife Iris was a second mother to Liz and was played by Bea Benederet, better remembered as Kate the hotel owner on the television series PETTICOAT JUNCTION.

"Liz Writes A Song" aired on 1950-01-27, no writers credited. The episode began with the Coopers and Atterburys relaxing after a dinner. They decided to gather round the piano and have a sing-along. Apparently this was the first time they had done it because they quickly discovered that Liz couldn't sing. She was off key, off beat, and way too loud.

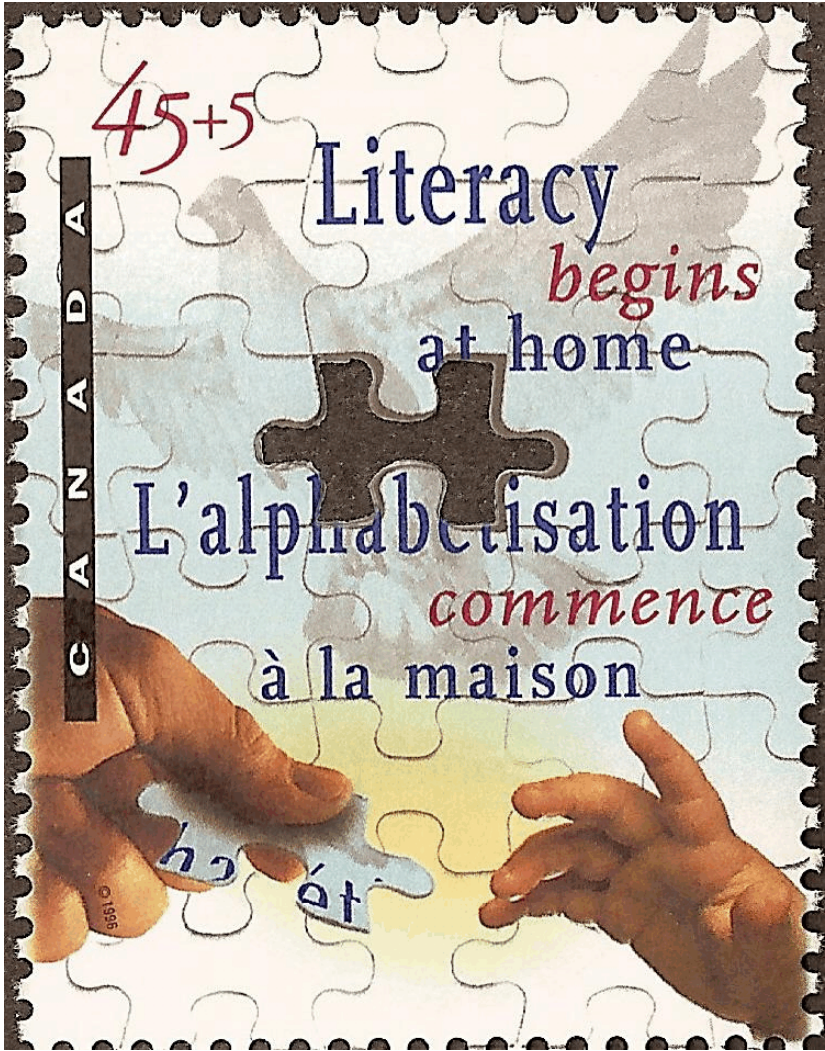
The next day she hired a music teacher. He worked unsuccessfully with her trying to get her to stay on key, finally giving up. He told her she was "*a natural born listener*" and quit. The Coopers' maid Katie commiserated with Liz and told her she should consider song writing instead.

Katie said her sister wrote songs, clipping phrases from popular songs and mashing them together. So as you see, sampling is nothing new. A local radio station was conveniently having a song writing contest, so Liz cobbled together

a winning entry. She teamed up with her next-door neighbour Benjamin Wood, who supplied the music while she clipped together phrases from bygone hit songs.

They won the contest. A condition was that the contestants had to sing their songs. That initially wasn't a problem because Wood had a fine voice and all Liz had to do was hum along. Unfortunately he came down with laryngitis, so their roles had to be switched, a recipe for disaster.

The Atterburys and George were in the audience. Their catcalls were hilarious, as was the discomfort as the announcer who couldn't get Liz to quit. It's nice to know that today there are no hit songs cobbled together from other composers' works and sung by mediocre voices.



TWISTED FICTION

by Dale Speirs

There were several old-time radio series that relied on twist endings. They are available as free mp3s from the Old Time Radio Researchers at www.otrrlibrary.org

Whistle While You Murder.

THE WHISTLER was an old-time radio anthology series that aired from 1942 to 1955. It was not a mystery show. Both the narrator and the protagonist explained everything to the listener as a perfect crime was plotted and carried out. The criminal would gloat after the crime and get in a few bwah-ha!-ha!s.

After the final commercial, the epilogue would reveal some detail the criminal overlooked that tripped him up. It was for the listener to keep track of the little details and discard the red herrings, then predict what the twist ending would be.

“The Tangled Web” aired on 1943-09-10. Hester Mayberry was an elderly widow who inherited a fortune. She then raised her husband’s nephew Claude Mayberry and her dead sister’s daughter Lita Davers.

Hester wanted to keep the fortune inside the family, so she dictated a will that Claude and Lita must marry each other to inherit or else default on their inheritance. The difficulty was that Lita had secretly married Alan Brent and Claude had secretly married Pearl Wallace.

Claude and Lita were in a quandary. They began scheming together and separately. Their plans were indeed tangled and involved the possibility of murder, each other's and Auntie's. They ended up disinheriting each other.

The only way out was for Hester to die, leaving the two to quietly divide the estate. Claude and Lita visited her in her bedroom. Claude shot her. Alan and Pearl heard the shots and found Hester dead. The four began squabbling and finger-pointing.

The first twist was that Claude used blanks. The attending physician said Hester died of a heart attack. He didn’t know she died of fright. The second twist came a week later in a lawyer’s office. Hester’s will stated that Claude and Lita had to have been married before her death. If not, the estate would go to charity.

“Practically Foolproof” was written by Harriet Reig and aired on 1944-09-03. Edward Bowman and Marco Lorenz opened a private lending library in an upscale neighbourhood. Their main interest was not in lending books but borrowing \$100,000 in negotiable bonds from a local company without permission or intent to return.

The catch was that the only method into the vault room was through a window too small for a normal human to fit through. The remedy was a customer named Shorty Johnson, a midget who had been an acrobat Back East but had come out west to work in an aircraft factory. He was rooming with a widow named Miles, also a customer.

Lorenz and Bowman dragooned Johnson into doing the job for them. He was about to leave town and had packed a suitcase. They took him and his luggage, thinking to kill him after the robbery. His sudden disappearance would take suspicion away from them.

The heist went okay but Johnson suspected a double cross. They shot him inside the vault, left him for dead, grabbed the bonds, and ran for it. In an attempt to throw the police off track, they went to a precinct and reported hearing gunshots.

What they didn’t know was that Johnson had been carrying one of their books on him when they shot him. Further, they still had his suitcase in the back of their car. When the police opened the suitcase, they found jewels inside from Mrs Miles’ safe. She had been shot dead by Johnson.

Except that the police thought Bowman and Lorenz killed her. Their car had been seen by neighbours when they had grabbed Johnson. The two men would go to the electric chair for a crime they didn’t commit. Johnson barely survived, but he was left paralyzed by the gunshot wound. The rest of his life would be as a vegetable in a institutional ward. Justice was served for all.

“Quiet Sunday” was written by Bernard Gerard and aired on 1946-06-10. Henry Parker was betwixt and between his wife Ruth and his mistress Daphne. Both of them demanded resolution. That came sooner than Ruth expected. In a physical altercation with Henry, she fell down the basement stairs and broke her neck. Did she fall or was she pushed? Daphne was on the scene and was pleased to see a chance for a resolution for herself.

After a commercial by the sponsor on the importance of car maintenance, they loaded Ruth's body into his car. Daphne did the planning to take the body elsewhere to a lake lodge and re-stage the body as an accidental death. All sorts of complications developed, one after another.

With the body in the trunk, the car had a flat tire. A friend offered to help change the tire but Henry managed to stop him from opening the trunk. The tire got changed but Henry became a gibbering wreck. More complications piled on.

Finally he got to the lake where Daphne was waiting. It looked like they made it. They hauled the body inside, only to be greeted by a crowd who had arranged a surprise party for Ruth. The surprise was on everyone.

"Delivery Guaranteed" was written by Frank Burt and Robert Libbott and aired on 1946-08-19. Philip Linden was planning a vacation in the mountains with his wife Cathy, hoping to reconcile with her and save their failing marriage.

As they packed a trunk, Cathy said she was leaving him. "*I'd rather see you dead*", he said and acted on that, choking her to death. There was a pause for a commercial from Signal Gasoline about how their product made for better traveling on long trips.

Philip decided to take her body to the mountains, drop it off a cliff, and then report Cathy missing while hiking. He loaded her body into the trunk and had an express company take it up to the mountain cabin.

Before he could leave the house, one problem after another developed. Charlie, a neighbour who was a police officer, came by to say goodbye and wondered where Cathy was. Philip turned into a blithering idiot.

Next up, the express delivery man returned with the trunk. He said it wasn't properly packed and he could feel the load inside shifting. Philip discovered that the key was missing. Cathy had it on her when he stuffed her inside and then snapped the lock shut.

Charlie returned and offered to help open the trunk. He jimmied the lock while Philip had a nervous breakdown. The trunk proved to contain only old clothes. The delivery man had returned the wrong trunk. Philip called the delivery company, who apologized for the mistake. At the other end, he heard them opening his trunk. He snapped and confessed to Charlie.

After the final commercial, the twist came. The company hadn't forced the trunk after all because they found the shipping tag just before they opened it. They sent the trunk to the cabin unopened where the police were waiting for it.

Burt and Lippert recycled this script for THE UNEXPECTED as "Handle With Care", aired on 1948-11-07. The only difference was that this series had 15-minute episodes instead of a half hour as with THE WHISTLER, so the script was compacted.

"The Two Lives Of Colby Fletcher" aired on 1947-07-09. The aforementioned titular character had been running a scam on investors for a new manufacturing process. They funded a laboratory for the project. Fletcher never equipped the laboratory nor did any development work. He supposedly was researching in the facility as a secret one-man operation so that the competition wouldn't steal his ideas.

Fletcher needed an escape when he took off with the cash plus \$100,000 life insurance for his wife Cynthia. To do so, he wanted to fake his death. Unbeknownst to anyone else, he hired a man as an employee to unknowingly die in the laboratory.

The method was to rig explosives in the building. Fletcher's idea was that the body would be left unidentifiable and the explosion written off as an industrial accident. Since he made it known that he was working alone, everyone would assume the body was his.

Fletcher set up a hideaway in another town under a false name. His employee suddenly quit before the plan could be carried out. In desperation he picked up a bum to stay in the laboratory overnight in the guise of charity.

Fletcher arranged for the bomb to be detonated by remote control when he made a telephone call into the laboratory. Instead, the replacement pulled a gun on Fletcher, rendered him unconscious in the laboratory, and stole Fletcher's car.

The story paused for the final commercial from Signal Oil, who cautioned motorists on the importance of proper vehicle maintenance. That wasn't the problem for the bum. He didn't get far because a police officer recognized the car and arrested the thief. The officer telephoned the laboratory to let Fletcher know the car had been recovered. There was the sound of distant thunder.

“Bright Future” aired on 1948-08-18 and was written by Robert Eisenbach and Jackson Gillis. It began as Harry Simpson rented an apartment just vacated by Frank Coulter, a man supposedly killed in a chemical factory fire. While settling in, he found \$35,000 in \$1,000 bills.

Soon after, he got a call from Joe Boyle, a private detective tracking another man named John Jamieson. Coulter’s girlfriend Roseanna arrived, there was an ex-wife, and the plot tangled. Simpson later spotted Coulter still alive.

The traffic through the apartment was steady as people searched for the cash, unaware that Simpson had hidden it elsewhere. There were assorted romantic entanglements, such as Roseanna and Jamieson, information supplied by Boyle. Simpson attempted to play the field.

Coulter and Simpson had a confrontation. Simpson murdered Coulter, believing that no one would look for a dead man. Back at the apartment, everyone, including the police, met for the grand finale and the unexpected twist.

Jamieson was Coulter’s alternative identity, which he set up before the fire. Because Coulter was officially dead, Simpson could not be arrested for his murder. Instead, the police arrested him for murdering Jamieson. Simpson had forgotten that Boyle was still following Jamieson and had seen the murder.

“Stormy Weather” aired on 1948-12-12, written by E. Jack Neuman. Kitty Gablin was a doctor’s wife who had been an actress before marrying him. Miles Keating was an alcoholic reporter who discovered Kitty had a secret.

Tim Brady had been a racketeer who was murdered in his apartment years ago. Keating found proof that Kitty had been there the night he died. Keating was not looking for blackmail. He told her that he was going to run the story. He was not working steadily because of his alcoholism and wanted to get back in with a good scoop.

He had told a newspaper editor Gunther that he was sending in a story that would name the woman. Before he could do so, he was run over by a car. A genuine accident, that was accepted by all. He had stumbled drunk into the street without looking for traffic.

Kitty’s husband was the only one who could operate on Keating’s head injuries. The hospital called but he wasn’t home at the time. When he arrived, she was

so distraught she didn’t tell him about the telephone call. Gunther arrived at the house, looking for the doctor about Keating. If the doctor didn’t operate soon, Keating would die. She told him her husband wasn’t home.

In the end, the doctor operated. She told him about Brady and was forgiven. Keating survived and in gratitude told Gunther that he had amnesia and couldn’t remember the woman’s name. An unusual twist in that the episode had a happy ending.

“Perfect Alibi”, written by James Cullen, aired on 1949-06-12. Private detective Johnny Seltzer wasn’t doing well working for the Silver Detective Agency. He also had gambling problems. Drowning his sorrows in a bar, he was accosted by a fancy woman named Alice Collins, niece of the lumber magnate Charles Collins. She offered him \$20,000 to help speed up her inheritance.

Her boyfriend Franky Benson was a mutual acquaintance from the underworld. She owed Benson \$33,000 from his casino. Benson wanted payment or marriage in lieu. She wanted Seltzer to eliminate her uncle, for which she would provide an alibi. Benson was a jealous man. He immediately and correctly tagged Seltzer as trouble.

Seltzer planned the murder so as to frame Benson. It relied on Alice vouching that he was with her at the time. The police arrived the next morning at Seltzer’s apartment. Benson had murdered Alice while Seltzer was murdering Charles. They were arrested for the other’s murders since they only had alibis for their own murders but not the other. A very neat double twist.

“The Clock On The Tower” was written by Edward Bloodworth and aired on 1950-12-10. Joe Brill was on Death Row for the murder of his wife Martha. From his prison cell he could see a clock tower and watch the time go by as his lawyer worked to free him.

The episode opened with 20 hours to go before Joe entered the gas chamber. There followed an extended flashback about the events and court trial. There seemed to be an impregnable case against Joe.

A key witness was Frank Barnes, who had dropped out of sight after the murder. His body was found with a few hours to go before the execution. The corpse was buried behind the Brill house.

The lawyer came and talked to Joe, as a loud ticking sound from the clock tower filled the background. The twist came when Joe confessed he had caught Barnes and Martha in each other's arms.

He hid Barnes' body and blamed Martha's murder on him. He hoped the police would search for Barnes as a fugitive, but the evidence had pointed to Joe regardless. A guilty man would be executed.

"Little Red Book" aired on 1952-02-10. The setting was the freighter Augusta Queen transiting the Panama Canal en route to San Francisco. The ship stopped briefly at Panama City, and some of its few passengers stepped ashore.

Larry Layton had been trying to romance another passenger Julie Frazier, but with no luck. He stalked her ashore and spied from a distance as she argued with fellow passenger Roy Tate down a back alley. She concluded the conversation with a knife into his belly.

After she fled the scene, Layton checked the body. Relieving the corpse of a thick wad of banknotes, he then wrapped the knife in a handkerchief and returned to the ship. Without mentioning the contretemps, Layton now successfully romanced Frazier.

He unsuccessfully tried to pump her for information about Tate. Later he saw her consulting a little red address book, circling an address. Meanwhile, an alcoholic passenger named Marie kept weaving in and out of the story, making a play for Layton.

As the ship entered San Francisco Bay, Layton saw Frazier leave her stateroom. Taking the opportunity, he snuck inside and inspected the red book, copying down a highlighted address. And so to terra firma, after a tearful farewell from Marie (on her part), who insisted Layton take her address.

Once ashore, Frazier brushed off Layton. He wasn't so easily disposed. He followed her to a tavern where he saw her give the little red book to a bartender, then walk away. He lost track of her, but still had the address he copied. That was indeed where she was.

She expected a payoff of \$30,000, for what Layton didn't know, but he wanted half. Her objections were silenced when he pulled out the knife she had used on Tate and made her the second murder victim. Layton looked forward to

receiving the full \$30,000. The doorbell rang seconds after the murder. It was an SFPD homicide detective. That was fast.

The twist began. Marie followed within a few moments. She was the one supposed to make the payoff. She had decided to double-cross Frazier by telling the police about her murdering Tate, then keep all the cash. Marie hadn't expected the police to trace her telephone call so fast and then surveil her. The real joke was on Layton, when the detective entered while the body was still warm.

"The Calculator" aired on 1952-11-23. Glen Philman and Max Lindman were partners in the Marathon Chemical Company. Philman casually strolled out to a nearby diner to establish an alibi when the plant blew up, killing Lindman.

Except that Lindman survived the blast. Philman had stolen blueprints to a valuable new invention which he had stashed in his apartment. Johanna arrived, a buyer of the blueprints for a competitor. She surmised too much and figured to get in on the action. She said she knew the explosion was not an accident.

Philman visited Lindman in hospital, who was only mildly injured but highly suspicious. If Lindman learned the blueprints were missing, he would know the explosion was no accident. Philman rushed to get the blueprints back into the office, only to learn Lindman had been there before him.

A three-way cat-and-mouse game developed. Philman shot Lindman, who was following Johanna. She set up a double-cross. The police found the gun in Philman's luggage. The rest was just whistling in the dark.

"Ticket To Nowhere" aired on 1953-10-11, no writer credited. The only available mp3 was from an Armed Forces rebroadcast, so the credits were probably cropped.

Lee Corvey was an independent taxicab driver in Los Angeles who owned his own car. He was not above using his job to glean useful information overheard from the passengers. As this episode began, he had a particularly talkative passenger. The man in the back seat was slightly drunk hugging a briefcase tightly, and bragging about how he had just hit the jackpot.

The first stop was a bungalow at Cypress Lodge, where the man said he had to pick up a few things before they went on to the train station.

Moments after the man entered the bungalow, Corvey heard a single gunshot from within. He ran over and looked into the window, where he saw the man lying dead. Back to his taxicab, and a quick U-turn to hastily exit. As he did so, a woman came out of the bungalow, carrying the briefcase.

Corvey offered her a ride. She also wanted the train station. In the city, the cab was momentarily halted at a traffic light. In the next lane was a police car. Corvey took the opportunity to blackmail her. He told her to toss her purse and gun into the front seat, otherwise he would holler to the cops. She complied. Then the briefcase. From there to a cocktail lounge, where he examined the items and interrogated her.

The briefcase contained a diary, belonging to Paul Winslow, a newspaper reporter whose body had just been found floating in the bay. The diary contained detailed notes about local gangsters and was the obvious MacGuffin.

Elaine Brandt, as she said she was, told Corvey that the dead man and now her were taking the diary to people in San Diego who were most anxious to receive the book. The duo made contact for the sale.

Corvey pulled a double-cross and sold them a blank diary for \$5,000. He then tried to parley the real book into bigger money, ten times the amount. Brandt wasn't happy but agreed to match him with the real contact Sanchez, just over the border in Tijuana.

Another double-cross transpired. Before leaving San Diego, Corvey shot Brandt dead in her hotel room and went to meet Sanchez in a Tijuana café. This time Corvey was the victim of a double-cross. Brandt had made a two-part deal with Sanchez, unknown to Corvey.

The first part was \$50,000 for the diary, and the second part was to deliver Winslow's murderer. Sanchez was a private investigator representing the newspaper organization for whom Winslow had worked. The café was filled with police from both sides of the border.

Corvey protested his innocence in the murder of Winslow. No problemo, señor, said Sanchez. We and the police will all go together to Brandt's hotel room, where she will name the killer.

Everybody Dead But The Cat, And We Couldn't Find It.

INNER SANCTUM MYSTERIES was an old-time radio mystery anthology series that aired from 1941 to 1952. (This and other episodes are available as free mp3s from www.otrrlibrary.org) The host was a smarmy man who liked to make ghoulish puns.

"Death's Little Brother" was written by Louis Vittes and aired on 1949-08-29. The narrator Danny had skipped town just after robbing a store. On the train he got to talking with Clark Davis, who was on his way to reunite with his sister Suzie. The two had just inherited a fortune from their uncle.

Davis said he hadn't seen in his sister in twenty years, so Danny formulated a plan. The brother didn't survive the trip to the house. Danny swapped wallets so the body would be identified as him. Suzie accepted Danny's imposition.

Complications quickly developed. An eyewitness tried to blackmail Danny and met the same fate as Davis. The latter's body reappeared in the house, much to Danny's shock.

There were some twists, for Suzie was determined not to share the inheritance. She shot and wounded Danny. He choked her to death before dying of his wounds. No one was left standing.

Short Twists.

THE UNEXPECTED was a syndicated anthology radio series that aired in 1947 and 1948, and repeated in subsequent years by stations who bought the series at a later date. The episodes were all written by Robert Lippert and Frank Burt. The 15-minute episodes are available as free mp3s from the Old Time Radio Researchers Website at www.otrrlibrary.org

"Finale" aired on 1947-08-01. The episode began with a woman named Mona dithering about some unknown problem. She twittered and bleated in emotional upset without saying why. She constantly verbally abused her maid Julie.

Eventually Mona let on that she was going to dump her boyfriend Kent. The poor lump arrived and was baffled by her vagueness. Eventually she stopped beating around the bush (his phrase) and told him their romance was over.

She made up a story about a new lover named Arthur. Naturally Kent stormed out in anger. Mona burst into tears. In the twist ending, she revealed she was going blind. A maudlin tearjerker indeed, fit for any soap opera.

“Understudy” aired on 1947-10-08. A jealous understudy named Joyce Michaels, working for leading lady Marion Danton in a hit play, raged at the unfairness of it all. Danton was oblivious to her, asking her to do unpaid maid’s work and making catty remarks about Michaels’ life as a menial understudy.

A stagehand Ned Carpenter told Michaels the play was closing next week because Danton was going to Hollywood for a part in a big movie. That meant the company would be laid off. Carpenter mentioned he was the only person up on the catwalk during the performances of the play.

That gave Michaels an idea, so she began romancing him. She worked him around to the idea that something accidentally falling on Danford and hurting her would force her out of the role before the end of the play’s run. Michaels could then take over the part and from there achieve fame, glory, and all the rest, including keeping the company employed for an extended act.

So far so good, but wait for the unexpected twist. After the final commercial break, Michaels was told before the start of the play that Danton had been in an accident and she was to take over.

What wasn’t mentioned was that it was an automobile accident. Michaels thought it was the stage accident and hurriedly dressed in Danton’s costume. Carpenter didn’t know any of that. From above, one head looked the same as the next. When a woman walked on stage wearing Danton’s costume, he let go.

“The Revere Cup” aired on 1947-12-24, written by Robert Lippert and Frank Burt. Janice Trevor passed by the mansion house where she had spent the first seven years of her life. She asked the butler if she could come inside. He said the Stevenson family lived there. Trevor narrated to the audience why she had been forced to leave the house. Her father, ostensibly a millionaire, went bankrupt and fired a gun through his head.

Tom Stevenson then came into the room and introduced himself. She replied she was Janice Martin, not telling him about her history. He thought he recognized her but she was noncommittal. Most of the house decorations from the Trevors remained.

Stevenson made fun of some of them, such as a silver cup. Trevor was upset because she had been told by her mother that the cup had been made by Paul Revere, whose day job had been a silversmith. She immediately began scheming how to get the cup.

Stevenson dated her, and after some ups and downs he proposed marriage. Trevor wasn’t enthusiastic but acquiesced so she could get the cup. She managed to steal it and headed home in triumph, unaware there was a twist ending awaiting her.

He caught her stealing the cup and snatched it back. He said he had been planning to give her the cup as an engagement gift but now the wedding was off.

“Two Of A Kind” aired on 1948-09-26 and was written by Frank Burt and Robert Lippert. A hunting guide named Billings met his latest client Howard Willmer, who was a doppelganger of him. “*The man who shook my hand was me.*” Billings was a fugitive mail robber who lived in Brazil because he had to, or else face prison back home.

They were off to the Amazon basin. Willmer wanted to go upriver for hunting. After two weeks, they hadn’t found anything and Willmer was angry. The natives said the jungle hated him.

The boat was escorted by a swarm of piranhas. Willmer wanted to take a swim. Billings couldn’t stop him. He tried to throw him a rope but by then Willmer didn’t have any hands to catch it. In minutes, Willmer was picked clean and the bones settled into the silt.

Back at the village, Billings had his chance to assume Willmer’s identity. He got a telegram that Willmer had just inherited a fortune. He arrived back home and was met by the FBI. The telegram was a ruse to flush out Willmer, who had been a spy for the Germans during the war. Billings qua Willmer was arrested as a traitor.

“Heard But Not Seen” aired on 1948-11-28, written by Robert Lippert and Frank Burt. Aunt Mary was a blind old woman looked after by her nephew Robert and a noisy parrot inevitably named Polly. Robert went out for the night, leaving her alone in the big house out in the country, not far from an insane asylum.

All that having been set up, Mary turned on her radio. The news broadcast said a homicidal maniac James ‘Question’ Mark had escaped from the asylum. He was a serial killer with ten victims known, each left with a question mark carved into their foreheads by his knife.

Mary panicked. Assorted alarums followed. Robert came back to kill her, so he could put the blame on Mark and then enjoy his inheritance. He succeeded, until Mark arrived moments later and claimed Robert as his next victim.

“Heat Wave” aired on 1948-11-14 and was written by Robert Lippert and Frank Burt. Gangster Whitey Malone was in a garret hiding from police as a heat wave gripped the city. He was feeling a different kind of heat.

A local spiv named Spike warned Malone that his girlfriend Inez had squealed on him. Before skipping town, Malone went looking for revenge. En route he stopped at a tavern for a drink. The barmaid recognized him and refused service. He was too hot to handle. Everyone knew the police were on his trail.

Malone staked out Inez's apartment building but so did the police. He waited up a nearby dark alley, but after three hours the police were still there. Spike found him but Malone brushed him off.

Impatiently Malone sneaked into the building after sunset and broke into her apartment. He entered the bedroom and pointed a gun at the bed. Shots were fired, then the commercial break interrupted.

Following that, the twist was revealed by a police officer telephoning headquarters. They got Malone in the hallway as he fled the scene. He had fired in the dark bedroom at crumpled bedsheets where he thought Inez was slumbering. She, like thousands of others, was sleeping out on the fire escape because of the heat wave.

SEEN IN THE LITERATURE

Stevenson, D.S. (2021) **The impact of tectonic-style on marine transgression and evolution.** INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ASTROBIOLOGY 20:doi.org/10.1017/S1473550421000082

Author’s abstract: *Plate tectonics drives variation in sea-level, over intervals of approximately 10^7 to 10^8 years. These variations may have significant effects on the pace of (biological) evolution through the elimination of terrestrial niches and the expansion of shallow-water marine niches.*

However, within the solar system, only the Earth experiences this kind of tectonism. Venus displays regional tectonism, characterized by rising diapirs within the plastic mantle. Impinging on the lithosphere, these plumes produce a range of structures of varying dimensions; the uplift of which would raise sea-level, were Venus to have oceans.

Using Magellan observations of Venus, we model the impact of regional tectonism on sea-level for given areas of Venusian ocean, then compare the effect with terrestrial tectonic processes for similar oceanic area. We show that despite variation in the geographical extent of Venusian-style tectonic processes, the styles of regional tectonism on Venus can produce the same order of magnitude changes in sea-level, for a given area of ocean, as plate tectonics.

McDonough, W.F., and T. Yoshizaki (2021) **Terrestrial planet compositions controlled by accretion disk magnetic field.** PROGRESS IN EARTH AND PLANETARY SCIENCE 8:doi.org/10.1186/s40645-021-00429-4 (available as a free pdf)

[When the planets formed from the dust cloud that gave birth to the Sun, the heavier elements were closer in, thus Mercury has a larger iron core relative to its size than Earth.]

Authors’ abstract: *Terrestrial planets (Mercury, Venus, Earth, and Mars) are differentiated into three layers: a metallic core, a silicate shell (mantle and crust), and a volatile envelope of gases, ices, and, for the Earth, liquid water. Each layer has different dominant elements (e.g., increasing iron content with depth and increasing oxygen content to the surface).*

Chondrites, the building blocks of the terrestrial planets, have mass and atomic proportions of oxygen, iron, magnesium, and silicon totaling = 90% and variable Mg/Si (~ 25%), Fe/Si (factor of =2), and Fe/O (factor of = 3). What remains an unknown is to what degree did physical processes during nebular disk accretion versus those during postnebular disk accretion (e.g., impact erosion) influence these planets final bulk compositions.

Here we predict terrestrial planet compositions and show that their core mass fractions and uncompressed densities correlate with their heliocentric distance, and follow a simple model of the magnetic field strength in the protoplanetary disk.

Our model assesses the distribution of iron in terms of increasing oxidation state, aerodynamics, and a decreasing magnetic field strength outward from the Sun, leading to decreasing core size of the terrestrial planets with radial distance. This distribution enhances habitability in our solar system and may be equally applicable to exoplanetary systems.

Surendra, V.S., et al (2021) **Complex structures synthesized in shock processing of nucleobases: Implications to the origins of life.** INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ASTROBIOLOGY 20:doi.org/10.1017/S1473550421000136 (available as a free pdf)

Authors' abstract: Nucleobases are nitrogenous bases composed of monomers that are a major constituent of RNA and DNA, which are an essential part of any cellular life on the Earth. The search for nucleobases in the interstellar medium remains a major challenge, however, the recent detection of nucleobases in meteorite samples and laboratory synthesis in simulated analogue experiments have confirmed their abiotic origin and a possible route for their delivery to the Earth.

Nevertheless, cellular life is based on the interacting network of complex structures, and there is substantial lack of information on the possible routes by which such ordered structures may be formed in the prebiotic environment. In the current study, we present the evidence for the synthesis of complex structures due to shock processing of nucleobases.

The nucleobases were subjected to the reflected shock temperature of 3500 to 7000 K (estimated) and pressure of about 15 to 34 bar for over ~2ms timescale.

Under such extreme thermodynamic conditions, the nucleobases sample experiences superheating and subsequent cooling.

Electron microscopic studies of shock processed residue show that nucleobases result in spontaneous formation of complex structures when subjected to extreme conditions of shock. These results suggest that impact shock processes might have contributed to the self-assembly of biologically relevant structures and the origin of life.

Traspas, A., and M.J. Burchell (2021) **Tardigrade survival limits in high-speed impacts: Implications for panspermia and collection of samples from plumes emitted by ice worlds.** ASTROBIOLOGY 21:doi.org/10.1089/ast.2020.2405 (available as a free pdf)

Authors' abstract: The ability of tardigrades to survive impact shocks in the kilometer per second and gigapascal range was investigated. When rocks impact planetary surfaces, the impact speeds and shock pressures are in the kilometer per second and gigapascal range. This investigation tested whether tardigrades can survive in impacts typical of those that occur naturally in the Solar System.

We found that they can survive impacts up to 0.9 km s^{-1} , which is equivalent to 1.14 gigapascal shock pressure, but cannot survive impacts above this. This is significantly less than the static pressure limit and has implications for tardigrade survival in panspermia models.

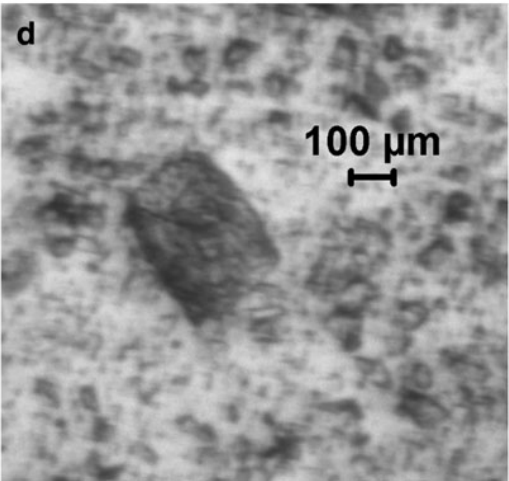
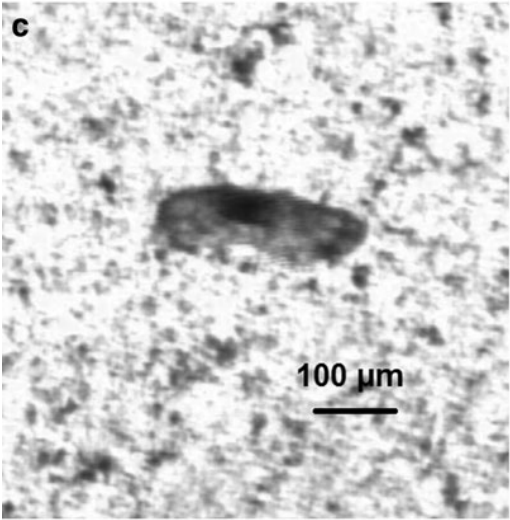
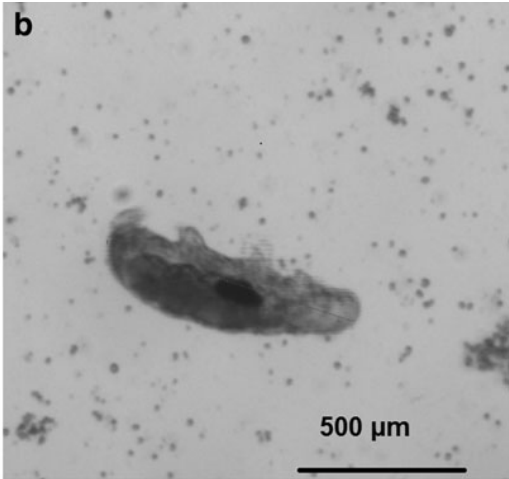
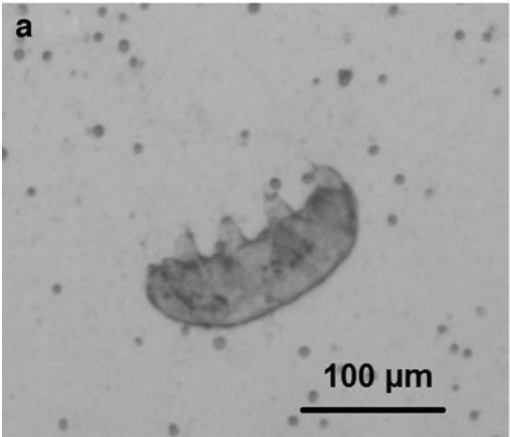
[For comparison, standard atmospheric pressure at sea level is 101,325 pascals.]

The potential survival of tardigrades in impacts of terrestrial impact ejecta on the Moon is shown to be impossible for the average lunar impact speed of such ejecta. However, a notable fraction (around 40%) of such ejecta impact at vertical speeds low enough to permit survival.

Similarly, Martian impact ejecta striking Phobos, for example, at a typical impact speed will not permit viable transfer of tardigrade-like organisms, but if a fraction of such material had a lower impact speed, survival may be possible.

We also consider the implications of this for the collection of viable samples by spacecraft transiting the plumes of icy water worlds such as Europa and Enceladus. We have found the limit on survival of shocks to be around 1 GPa, which is instrumental in determining appropriate mission scenarios and collection methods for the acquisition of viable materials.

[Images are from this paper. Top photos are tardigrades before impact, bottom images are after impact. Over to you, Star Trek fans.]



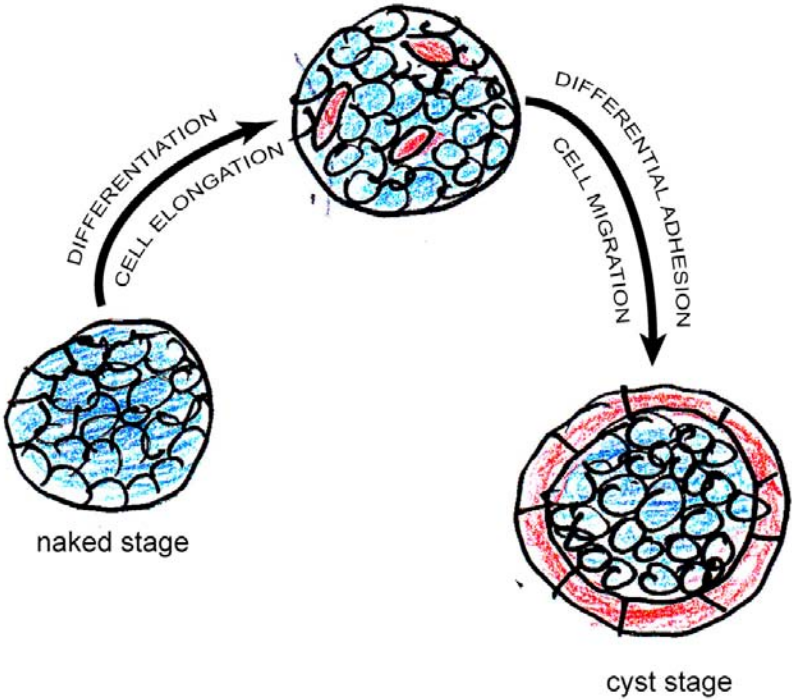
Strother, P.K., et al (2021) **A possible billion-year-old holozoan with differentiated multicellularity.** CURRENT BIOLOGY 31:2658-2665 (available as a free pdf)

Authors’ abstract: *Sediments of the Torridonian sequence of the Northwest Scottish Highlands contain a wide array of microfossils, documenting life in a non-marine setting a billion years ago (1 Ga). Phosphate nodules from the Diabaig Formation at Loch Torridon preserve microorganisms with cellular-level fidelity, allowing for partial reconstruction of the developmental stages of a new organism, Bicellum brasieri gen. et sp. nov.*

The mature form of Bicellum consists of a solid, spherical ball of tightly packed cells (a stereoblast) of isodiametric cells enclosed in a monolayer of elongated, sausage-shaped cells. However, two populations of naked stereoblasts show mixed cell shapes, which we infer to indicate incipient development of elongated cells that were migrating to the periphery of the cell mass.

Differentiation in a Billion-year-old Protist

new genus *Bicellum* demonstrates cell-cell adhesion



These simple morphogenetic movements could be explained by differential cell-cell adhesion. In fact, the basic morphology of Bicellum is topologically similar to that of experimentally produced cell masses that were shown to spontaneously segregate into two distinct domains based on differential cadherin-based cell adhesion.

The lack of rigid cell walls in the stereoblast renders an algal affinity for Bicellum unlikely: its overall morphology is more consistent with a holozoan origin. Unicellular holozoans are known today to form multicellular stages within complex life cycles, so the occurrence of such simple levels of transient multicellularity seen here is consistent with a holozoan affinity.

Regardless of precise phylogenetic placement, these fossils demonstrate simple cell differentiation and morphogenic processes that are similar to those seen in some metazoans today.

[Diagram is from this paper. There are many excellent images of the actual organisms.]

Shcherbakov, D.E., et al (2021) **Disaster microconchids from the uppermost Permian and Lower Triassic lacustrine strata of the Cis-Urals and the Tunguska and Kuznetsk basins (Russia).** GEOLOGICAL MAGAZINE 158:doi.org/10.1017/S0016756820001375

[The worst mass extinction in Earth's history was at the end of the Permian era 251 megayears ago when 97% of all life forms became extinct due to flood lavas and asteroid impacts.]

Authors' abstract: *We describe aggregative microconchid (Lophophorata) tubes from the uppermost Permian (upper Changhsingian) and Lower Triassic (Olenekian) lacustrine and fluvial strata of the Tunguska and Kuznetsk basins and the southern Cis-Urals, Russia.*

These attach to clam shrimp carapaces, bivalve shells, terrestrial plant fragments and a horseshoe crab head shield, and also form their own monospecific agglomerations.

Planispiral tubes of a wide size range (0.1 to 2.5 mm) create dense settlements on these firm substrates, which likely comprise multiple generations of the same

species. These finds confirm that this extinct lophophorate group was inhabiting non-marine continental basins during latest Permian and earliest Triassic time, when they were major suspension feeders in such limnic ecosystems.

Microconchids dispersed extensively and rapidly in the aftermath of the Permian-Triassic mass extinction into both marine and continental basins at low and moderately high latitudes, which were notably different in salinity, temperature, depth and redox conditions.

This confirms that small lightly calcified microconchids were a genuine disaster eurytopic group, whose expansion may have been promoted by low predator pressure and low competition for substrate.

Brocklehurst, N., et al (2021) **Mammaliaform extinctions as a driver of the morphological radiation of Cenozoic mammals.** CURRENT BIOLOGY 31:doi.org/10.1016/j.cub.2021.04.044

Authors' abstract: *The therian mammal radiation is usually associated with extinctions among dinosaurs. Mesozoic therians show greater morphological constraint than their close relatives. The release of this constraint occurred later than the extinction of the dinosaurs. The therian radiation was in part driven by extinctions among other mammaliaforms.*

Adaptive radiations are hypothesized as a generating mechanism for much of the morphological diversity of extant species. The Cenozoic radiation of placental mammals, the foundational example of this concept, gave rise to much of the morphological disparity of extant mammals, and is generally attributed to relaxed evolutionary constraints following the extinction of non-avian dinosaurs.

However, study of this and other radiations has focused on variation in evolutionary rates, leaving the extent to which relaxation of constraints enabled the origin of novel phenotypes less well characterized.

We evaluate constraints on morphological evolution among mammaliaforms (mammals and their closest relatives) using a new method that quantifies the capacity of evolutionary change to generate phenotypic novelty.

We find that Mesozoic crown-group therians, which include the ancestors of placental mammals, were significantly more constrained than other mammaliaforms. Relaxation of these constraints occurred in the mid-Paleocene, post-dating the extinction of non-avian dinosaurs at the K/Pg boundary, instead coinciding with important environmental shifts and with declining ecomorphological diversity in non-theriimorph mammaliaforms.

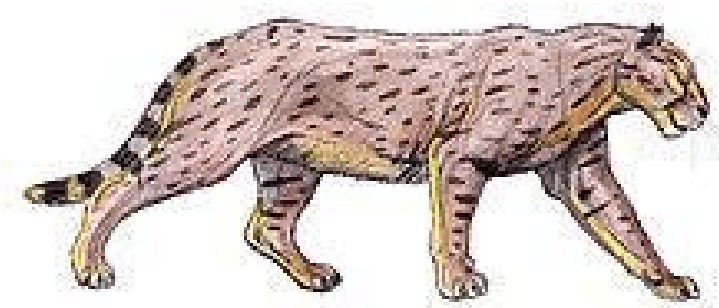
This relaxation occurred even in small-bodied Cenozoic mammals weighing <100 g, which are unlikely to have competed with dinosaurs. Instead, our findings support a more complex model whereby Mesozoic crown therian evolution was in part constrained by co-occurrence with disparate mammaliaforms, as well as by the presence of dinosaurs, within-lineage incumbency effects, and environmental factors.

Madurell-Malapeira, J., et al (2021) **First small-sized Dinofelis: Evidence from the Plio-Pleistocene of North Africa.** QUATERNARY SCIENCE REVIEWS 265:doi.org/10.1016/j.quascirev.2021.107028

Authors' abstract: We describe small-sized specimens of the metailurine felid *Dinofelis* from a new Plio-Pleistocene site in North Africa. *Dinofelis* is a genus of saber-toothed cats mainly recorded from East and South Africa with numerous leopard to jaguar-sized species.

The described specimens, clearly smaller than all the other African *Dinofelis*, resemble isolated remains from the Late Pliocene of France and the Early Pleistocene of Africa.

Present evidence suggests that our form represents a new species and/or new lineage of *Dinofelis*, smaller and probably occupying a different ecological niche compared to the previously known members of the genus, and thus it adds complexity to the high intraspecific competition among large carnivorans in the Plio-Pleistocene of Africa.



[Image from Wikipedia]

DeSantis, L.R.G., et al (2021) **Dietary ecology of the scimitar-toothed cat *Homotherium serum*.** CURRENT BIOLOGY 31:doi.org/10.1016/j.cub.2021.03.061

Authors' abstract: The scimitar-toothed cat *Homotherium* was one of the most cosmopolitan cats of the Pleistocene, present throughout Eurasia, Africa, and the Americas until at least ~28 thousand years ago.

Friesenhahn Cave (Bexar County, Texas) contains some of the best-preserved specimens of *Homotherium serum* alongside an abundance of juvenile mammoths, leading some to argue that *H. serum* preferentially hunted juvenile mammoths.

Dietary data of *Homotherium* are rare, with their ecology inferred from morphological, taphonomic, and genetic data. Here, we use a multi-proxy approach to clarify the dietary ecology of *H. serum* as compared to extinct and extant cats and their relatives.

Dental microwear texture analysis (DMTA) reveals that *H. serum* consumed soft and tough foods, similar to the extant cheetah, which actively avoids bone, but in stark contrast to extant lions and hyenas, which are observed to engage in durophagy (i.e., bone processing).

DMTA data are consistent with taphonomic evidence of bone defleshing and the absence of bone crunching behavior in *H. serum*. Stable carbon isotope values of *H. serum* indicate a clear preference for C4 grazers including juvenile mammoths, in agreement with taphonomic evidence suggestive of a *Homotherium* den and morphological data indicative of a relatively cursorial lifestyle.

Notably, the inferred diet of *H. serum* contrasts with the extinct dirk-tooth sabertooth cat *Smilodon fatalis*, which preferred forest/woodland prey and engaged in bone processing.

Homotherium serum exhibited a novel combination of morphological adaptations for acquiring open country prey, consuming their soft and tough flesh, including the tough flesh of juvenile mammoths.

Milleret, C., et al (2021) **GPS collars have an apparent positive effect on the survival of a large carnivore.** BIOLOGY LETTERS 17:doi.org/10.1098/rsbl.2021.0128 (available as a free pdf)

Authors’ abstract: *Are instrumented animals representative of the population, given the potential bias caused by selective sampling and the influence of capture, handling and wearing bio-loggers? The answer is elusive owing to the challenges of obtaining comparable data from individuals with and without bio-loggers.*

Using non-invasive genetic data of a large carnivore, the wolverine (Gulo gulo) in Scandinavia, and an open-population spatial capture-recapture model, we found a 16 percentage points lower mortality probability for GPS-collared individuals compared with individuals without GPS collars.

While the risk of dying from legal culling was comparable for collared and non-collared wolverines, the former experienced lower probability of mortality due to causes other than legal culling. The aforementioned effect was pronounced despite a potentially lower age, and therefore likely higher natural mortality, of collared individuals.

Reports of positive effects of bio-loggers on the survival of individuals are uncommon and we argue that GPS collars could shield animals from poaching. Our results highlight the challenges of drawing population-level inferences for populations subjected to poaching when using data from instrumented individuals.

Anderson, D., et al (2021) **Introgression dynamics from invasive pigs into wild boar following the March 2011 natural and anthropogenic disasters at Fukushima.** PROCEEDINGS OF THE ROYAL SOCIETY OF LONDON 288B:doi.org/10.1098/rspb.2021.0874 (available as a free pdf)

[Introgression is the incorporation of hybrid genes into a species from cross-breeding.]

Authors’ abstract: *Natural and anthropogenic disasters have the capability to cause sudden extrinsic environmental changes and long-lasting perturbations including invasive species, species expansion and influence evolution as selective pressures force adaption.*

Such disasters occurred on 11 March 2011, in Fukushima, Japan, when an earthquake, tsunami and meltdown of a nuclear power plant all drastically reformed anthropogenic land use.

Using genetic data, we demonstrate how wild boar (Sus scrofa leucomystax) have persevered against these environmental changes, including an invasion of escaped domestic pigs (Sus scrofa domesticus). Concurrently, we show evidence of successful hybridization between pigs and native wild boar in this area; however in future offspring, the pig legacy has been diluted through time.

We speculate that the range expansion dynamics inhibit long-term introgression and introgressed alleles will continue to decrease at each generation while only maternally inherited organelles will persist. Using the gene flow data among wild boar, we assume that offspring from hybrid lineages will continue dispersal north at low frequencies as climates warm.

We conclude that future risks for wild boar in this area include intraspecies competition, revitalization of human-related disruptions and disease outbreaks.

Keller, B.A., et al (2021) **Map-like use of Earth’s magnetic field in sharks.** CURRENT BIOLOGY 31:doi.org/10.1016/j.cub.2021.03.103

Authors’ abstract: *Sharks are known to undergo precise, long-distance migrations. The navigational mechanism used to facilitate these movements is unresolved. We show that sharks use the Earth’s magnetic field for homeward orientation. This ability is useful for navigation and possibly maintaining population structure.*

Migration is common in marine animals, and use of the map-like information of Earth’s magnetic field appears to play an important role. While sharks are iconic migrants and well known for their sensitivity to electromagnetic fields, whether this ability is used for navigation is unresolved.

We conducted magnetic displacement experiments on wild-caught bonnetheads (Sphyrna tiburo) and show that magnetic map cues can elicit homeward orientation. We further show that use of a magnetic map to derive positional information may help explain aspects of the genetic structure of bonnethead populations in the northwest Atlantic.

These results offer a compelling explanation for the puzzle of how migratory routes and population structure are maintained in marine environments, where few physical barriers limit movements of vagile species.

Ialongo, N., et al (2021) **Bronze Age weight systems as a measure of market integration in Western Eurasia.** PROCEEDINGS OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES USA 118:/doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2105873118 (available as a free pdf)

Authors' abstract: *Weighing technology was invented around 3000 BCE between Mesopotamia and Egypt and became widely adopted in Western Eurasia within ~2,000 years. For the first time in history, merchants could rely on an objective frame of reference to quantify economic value.*

The subsequent emergence of different weight systems goes hand in hand with the formation of a continental market. However, we still do not know how the technological transmission happened and why different weight systems emerged along the way.

Here, we show that the diffusion of weighing technology can be explained as the result of merchants' interaction and the emergence of primary weight systems as the outcome of the random propagation of error constrained by market self-regulation.

We found that the statistical errors of early units between Mesopotamia and Europe overlap significantly. Our experiment with replica weights gives error figures that are consistent with the archaeological sample. We used these figures to develop a model simulating the formation of primary weight systems based on the random propagation of error over time from a single original unit.

The simulation is consistent with the observed distribution of weight units. We demonstrate that the creation of the earliest weight systems is not consistent with a substantial intervention of political authorities. Our results urge a revaluation of the role of individual commercial initiatives in the formation of the first integrated market in Western Eurasia.

Speirs: Some fascinating photos of ancient weights used for measuring merchandise, as well as graphs showing how consistent these weights were across the Middle East and Mediterranean.

Delgado-Baquerizo, M., et al (2021) **Global homogenization of the structure and function in the soil microbiome of urban greenspaces.** SCIENCE ADVANCES 7:doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.abg5809 (available as a free pdf)

Authors' abstract: *The structure and function of the soil microbiome of urban greenspaces remain largely undetermined. We conducted a global field survey in urban greenspaces and neighboring natural ecosystems across 56 cities from six continents, and found that urban soils are important hotspots for soil bacterial, protist and functional gene diversity, but support highly homogenized microbial communities worldwide.*

Urban greenspaces had a greater proportion of fast-growing bacteria, algae, amoebae, and fungal pathogens, but a lower proportion of ectomycorrhizal fungi than natural ecosystems. These urban ecosystems also showed higher proportions of genes associated with human pathogens, greenhouse gas emissions, faster nutrient cycling, and more intense abiotic stress than natural environments. City affluence, management practices, and climate were fundamental drivers of urban soil communities.

Pilger, C., et al (2021) **Yield estimation of the 2020 Beirut explosion using open access waveform and remote sensing data.** SCIENTIFIC REPORTS 11:doi.org/10.1038/s41598-021-93690-y (available as a free pdf)

Authors' abstract: *We report on a multi-technique analysis using publicly available data for investigating the huge, accidental explosion that struck the city of Beirut, Lebanon, on August 4, 2020. Its devastating shock wave led to thousands of injured with more than two hundred fatalities and caused immense damage to buildings and infrastructure.*

Our combined analysis of seismological, hydroacoustic, infrasonic and radar remote sensing data allows us to characterize the source as well as to estimate the explosive yield. The latter is determined within 0.13 to 2 kt TNT (kilotons of trinitrotoluene). This range is plausible given the reported 2.75 kt of ammonium nitrate as explosive source.