

# OPUNTIA 540



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**THE CANADIAN PACIFIC HOLIDAY TRAIN**
2022-12-11  
 photos by Dale Speirs

The pandemic has faded. COVID-19 will always be with us, just as influenza didn't go away after the previous pandemic. Calgarians got back on track, if you'll pardon the pun, when the CPR Holiday Train stopped overnight at the Anderson LRT station.

Thousands attended not just the light show but the musical acts. One of the boxcars had a platform that folded down as a stage for the band and singer.



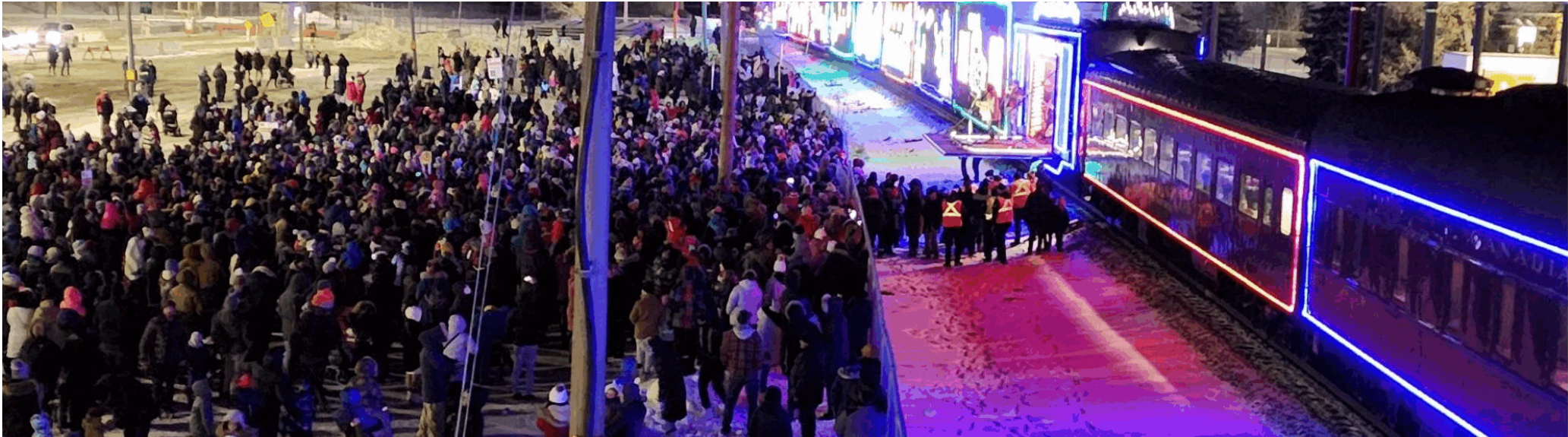
The light displays were animated, so I tried to get a couple of photos of each.











# CHRISTMAS FICTION: PART 6

by Dale Speirs

[Parts 1 to 5 appeared in OPUNTIA's #430, 431, 463, 490, and 514.]

## Cheapskate Santas.

In his time, Jack Benny (real name Benjamin Kubelsky) was by far the most successful comedian in North America on radio, from 1932 to 1955. His radio shows are available as free mp3s from the Old Time Radio Researchers at [www.otrr.org/OTRRLibrary](http://www.otrr.org/OTRRLibrary).

He made the transition to television in the middle 1950s but was never as successful. He died in 1974. Benny used a large group of writers, who collectively wrote the episodes. He could ad-lib on occasion but was famous for saying to someone who had just insulted him: *“You wouldn’t dare say that if my writers were here!”*

He played the part of a miser, vain about his blue eyes but not ashamed to admit he wore a toupee. His valet was Rochester Van Jones, a gravel-voiced Negro who was more a companion than a servant. Benny occasionally got into trouble with southern audiences who thought Rochester was too uppity and didn’t know his place.

“Mary Buys Jack A Pencil Sharpener For Christmas” aired on 1949-12-18. This episode was part of the Lucky Strike sponsorship series and was officially called “The Lucky Strike Program”. Outside the offices of the American Tobacco Company, everyone called it “The Jack Benny Show”.

Jack Benny was notorious for his cheap Christmas gifts, such as shoelaces for Don Wilson. The episode began with Benny and Mary Livingstone at the front of a crowd waiting for a department store to open. The doors opened and the herd rumbled inside.

The floorwalker snapped a whip over their heads to control them. Benny wanted to complain to the store manager because the whip tore his jacket. Livingstone dissuaded him because she wanted to get on with shopping.

Benny mentioned that the previous year he had sent his sister Florence a pencil sharpener as a Christmas gift. They spotted Dennis Day, the show’s tenor

singer, shopping for his mother, a battleaxe. He annoyed the sales clerk with a line of gags. The clerk asked him to shoplift something so he could be arrested.

Livingstone asked a clerk for a suitable gift for her boss. (Most listeners assumed she was Benny’s girlfriend but she was actually his assistant.) The clerk suggested a gold tie clasp, gold key chain, or gold cuff links. She said she wasn’t going to buy Benny anything he would melt down.

She told the clerk Benny treated her like a sister. Whereupon the clerk suggested a pencil sharpener. Just then Benny came up to the counter. The clerk recognized him and said a pencil sharpener had already been shipped to Florence as per usual.

Jump cut to bandleader Phil Harris. He was a drinking man, vain about his good looks, and his confidence increased in proportion to his ignorance. A shopgirl was summarizing his purchases.

One item was a black negligee, at which point he said it was for his wife. The clerk burst into tears at the disappointment of learning he was married. Harris calmed her down. He then bought a pair of socks as a gift for Benny. He took off the socks he was wearing, put on the new ones, and told the clerk to gift wrap the old ones.

The next routine was Rochester shopping for his girlfriend. The clerk suggested a \$4,000 diamond ring, available on easy terms. Filling out the credit application got a few laughs, since Rochester seldom had two nickels to rub together.

Benny and Livingstone met Wilson, who had bought a toy merry-go-round that played a Lucky Strike jingle. All three separated after the commercial.

Benny went to the perfume counter. The salesman was a rough-speaking character with a Noo Yawk accent. Benny dithered about what type of perfume to buy for Florence. One brand had penicillin in it. Another was Odeur la Vie Crayon, which had the aroma of freshly sharpened pencils.

Benny and Livingstone spent the entire day in the store without actually buying anything. When the closing bell sounded, the floorwalker reappeared with his whip to drive out tardy shoppers. Benny got another tear in his jacket.

**Dead Santas.**

ROCKY FORTUNE aired for the 1953-54 season. Writers were seldom credited in the episodes although everyone else was, but references say they were George Lefferts and Ernest Kinoy. The scripts were untitled, as a result of which many episodes circulate under multiple titles.

Frank Sinatra played the hero Rocky Fortune, born Rocko Fortunato, as was specifically mentioned in the second episode. The character was an odd-job man, sent out by his employment agency to a different and strange job each week.

“The Plot To Murder Santa Claus” aired just before Christmas on 1953-12-22. Rocky Fortune was working a two-week job as an auxiliary department store detective during the busy season. He was assigned duty in the toy department to keep an eye out for shoplifters.

The Krakenbaum store had problems with jewelry thefts, which had been in the newspapers. Head detective Mr Krim preferred not to talk about the stolen \$8,000 worth of pearls. He was confident they would be recovered.

Fortune learned, to his dismay, that he would also relieve as Santa Claus while the regular man Herman was on his lunch break. He protested that he wasn’t built for the job (Sinatra was skinny in those years). Krim said that neither was the regular man: “*They’re running thin this year. Just ask Big Elf to stuff you.*” The network censor missed that line.

A little girl Gail Grayson handed Fortune qua Santa a threatening note. She said a big man with a mustache paid her a nickel to deliver the message. She wanted an elf doll but her big sister Laura arrived and towed her away.

After finishing his stint as Santa and returning to floor patrol, Fortune caught Laura shoplifting an elf doll. He let her off, paid for the doll, and let her go. Herman wanted to know Laura’s name and address, and got vicious about the matter.

The listener will immediately guess where the pearls were hidden. Herman got himself murdered and the police picked Fortune as the most available suspect. Visiting the Grayson apartment, Fortune asked Laura for the doll back.

The doll was empty. The alarums moved back to the store, where all the characters convened. After the usual commotion and rendering of persons unconscious, the police arrived to clear up the details.

Santa and the murderer were the pearl thieves. Gail had found the pretty marbles inside the doll and took them out. Fortune got a kiss from Laura. Merry Christmas to all.

DEATH AT HOLLY LODGE (2021) by Louise R. Innes was the third novel in a cozy series about Daisy Thorne of Edgemoor, England. She owned a hair salon and Marpled on the side.

A new resident, a rock-and-roll singer, was renovating the manor house Holly Lodge. One of the contractors found the remains of a man dressed like Santa Claus stuffed into the chimney. The deceased was identified as Thom Pierce, who had gone missing two years ago on Christmas Eve. Trouble was, the manor had been vacant for five years.

The police and Marples alike began investigating. The remains had a head wound indicating murder. Business at the hair salon boomed as the village women rushed in to hear the gossip. This being the third novel, Daisy was by now well known for being at the heart of any murder case.

As the facts came out slowly after two years, the death toll increased. The Christmas fete was a deadly affair. Pierce was discovered to have been Thomas Macpherson, a swindler wanted by numerous police forces and angry investors.

In the denouement, one of those creditors had committed suicide after being left destitute. Her son vowed revenge and succeeded in locating Macpherson qua Pierce. With the discovery of the remains, he had to keep killing.

The opening paragraphs of Chapter 21 stopped me in my tracks. Daisy had gone out to her car and found snow and ice covering the windshield. Apparently the English method of deicing a windshield was to throw hot water on it.

This will astound all Canadians, who would use a plastic scraper. Besides the chance of the hot water cracking the cold glass, the water would then quickly re-freeze.

GINGERDEAD MAN (2020) by Maya Corrigan was the seventh novel in a cozy series about Val Deniston of Bayport, Maryland. The annual Dickens Festival was underway. Denison was hosting a costume party that doubled as a Christmas party. Someone dressed as the Ghost of Christmas Present gave Santa Claus a gingerbread man dusted with poison.

Santa aka Jake Smith had been a nasty man. He was soon followed by another victim. The sleuthing alternated with poisonings. If you are ever in Bayport and someone offers you a chocolate bonbon, then decline.

The ending revealed there were two murderers who inadvertently were working to the same goal, that of shortening a line of succession for a big inheritance. Deniston got herself in trouble in the denouement, as Jessica Fletchers often do, but her line of succession was assured.

And so to the recipes, sans poison. They included Grasmere Gingerbread, Almond Brittle Cookies, Chocolate Cranberry Nut Mounds, Cranberry Apple Crisp, and Chicken Casserole. Wash all of it down with Spiced Cider.

MRS CLAUS AND THE SANTALAND SLAYINGS (2020) by Liz Ireland (pseudonym of Elizabeth Bass) was billed as the first novel in a new series. The book sort of read like a cozy, if you can believe Mrs Claus as a Miss Marple.

April Claus was newly married to Nick, younger brother of the late Chris. They were living at the North Pole in Santaland. She became a Miss Marple when an elf Giblet Hollyberry was murdered.

The deceased was an obnoxious twit whom everyone agreed that he had it coming. Nick had a public argument with Hollyberry just before the murder. Someone put a black widow spider in the elf's stocking but Constable Crinkle ruled the death was accidental.

The reader will doubt the officer was competent for anything more than writing a ticket against an illegally parked sleigh. Charlie the Snowman, no relation to Frosty, was the next victim. Someone melted him to death. So as you can see, this is not your mother's cozy.

April carried on sleuthing. She was hampered because the elves were an unruly bunch to begin with and were not helpful in divulging information. The Claus family, out to the cousins, weren't much better.

Assorted alarums came and went. Santaland was not a happy place and April realized she wasn't in Oregon anymore. One wonders why the elves hadn't yet unionized.

There was a confrontation with the murderer, who, as it transpired, had assisted Chris off the snow in addition to Hollyberry and Charlie. The killer was an ambitious Santa wanna-be who was hoping to shovel a path to the succession. Ho, ho, ho, indeed.

**Christmas Cozies.**

MANY UNPLEASANT RETURNS (2014) by Judith Alguire was set at the Pleasant Inn, a lake resort somewhere in the wilds of Ontario. The proprietors were Trevor and Margaret Rudley, who were hosting guests over the Christmas holidays.

One of the guests was Miss Miller, a freelance reporter and married despite her honourific. Basically a Miss Marple, and soon to annoy OPP detectives Michael Brisbois and Chester Creighton when the murders began.

The inn was self-sufficient with its own diesel generator and lots of supplies. When a blizzard set in, no one was concerned. However, the little Santa dolls distributed by a person unknown were concerning, dressed as they were like horror movie clichés.

Another Santa was a real human, a hotel guest, or rather was one until a car ran over his snow-covered corpse out on the highway. What was he doing out there? Just to up the ante there was another murder, and the plot was well on its way. The investigations turned up assorted soap opera melodramas. The culprit didn't like his wife playing around and took direct action.

WE WISH YOU A MURDEROUS CHRISTMAS (2016) by Vicki Delany was set in Rudolph, New York, where Merry Wilkinson operated a year-round Christmas store called Mrs Claus's Treasures.

Over at the Yuletide Inn, the new owner Gord Olsen said bah-humbug to Christmas, or words to that effect. He announced he was converting the place to a franchise mall. His plans were stymied when someone stuck a knife into him.

Olsen basically offended everyone he met, so the entire village was under suspicion. This put a crimp on their Christmas festival but their main worry was warm weather that might melt the snow. Santa and dirty slush don't go together.

Wilkinson went Marpleing. Besides digging up the usual slush on villagers, pardon me, back stories on villagers, Wilkinson came up with lots of rumours. The Mafia was involved, etcetera.

The denouement was a confrontation with the enraged mother of Olsen's unacknowledged half brother, who had been left out of the will. The rest was screaming and a last-minute save. However the last few paragraphs had a twist. The murderer's evil twin (yes, I know) arrived and threatened vengeance.

MURDER IN SEASON (2020) by Jessica Fletcher and Jon Lord took place in blood-soaked Cabot Cove, Maine, during the Christmas season. Fletcher organized the parade but the real excitement was at her house. The building was under renovation.

Two sets of bones were discovered, one of them ancient and the other emplaced about a year ago. Television reporter Tad Hollenbeck arrived in the village to do an expose about the murder capital of the country. Unfortunately for him, his name was added to the long list of victims who should have steered clear of Cabot Cove.

Fletcher was on the case. As the sheriff remarked in Chapter 2: *"I've got no idea where she finds the time to write in between solving murders."* He seemed unaware the two were related. No murders, no books to write. This would add credence to the popular hypothesis that Fletcher committed all those murders and pinned the blame on others.

But I digress. The plot continued as it must. Hollenbeck had actually been hunting treasure when he met his demise. That added a MacGuffin to divert energies as the murders piled up. Honestly though, how was it that Cabot Cove was still populated and not a ghost town?

Meanwhile, it was the season, and Fletcher was busy with the Christmas parade. The village founders' descendants included Asa Cabot, who was invited to march in the parade.

Given the history of the village, the parade had a heavy police presence, including state police, with spotters on the rooftops. The march was a barnburner, but the real action was at a shopkeeper's store where the treasure had been hidden for decades. Hollenbeck and the other victim were on to him so he had to silence them.

MISTLETOE, MOUSSAKA, AND MURDER (2020) by Tina Kashian was the fifth novel about Lucy Berberian of Ocean Crest, New Jersey. She was manager of her family's Armenian restaurant Kebab Kitchen, and Marpled as a sideline.

The deceased was Deacon Spooner, who, like Berberian, was competing in the Polar Bear Plunge. Unlike her, he didn't survive, giving new meaning to the phrase "in cold blood". He had been the landlord of the village reception hall and notorious as a nasty man, so there was no shortage of suspects.

Berberian's sleuthing was hampered by planning for her forthcoming wedding nuptials and the present-day Christmas season. The restaurant was running full speed. The moussaka special sold out, and apparently Jersey shore residents had a thing for eggplants.

The Christmas party at the restaurant was a humdinger and not just because of the spicy hummus. Berberian caught the killer in the kitchen or, more correctly vice versa. No prizes for guessing how that turned out. The murder had been over wads of cash from drug dealing. The recipes appendix was brief, with Moussaka, Pilaf, and Lemon Meringue Pie.

A MURDER YULE REGRET (2021) by Winnie Archer was part of a series about Ivy Culpepper of Santa Sofia, California. She was an apprentice baker at Yeast Of Eden, and a journeyman Marple. She was trying to build a photography business on the side and was hired to work at a Christmas party. Actress Eliza Fox hosted the Dickens-themed party, and attendees dressed as characters therefrom.

An obnoxious guest was tabloid reporter Edward Yentin, who made a nuisance of himself trolling for scandals. Fox's mansion was perched on top of a cliff overlooking the Pacific Ocean. Applying the rule of Chekhov's gun, that meant someone was going to take a dive onto the rocks below. There are no prizes for guessing who went over. Yentin was not mourned.

Fox was the prime suspect, so Culpepper went sleuthing in between baking bread. She had no difficulty collecting scuttlebutt about Yentin. Enough people hated him that motive would not solve the case.

Culpepper’s photographs would help but because everyone dressed like characters from Dickens, some were difficult to recognize. That mattered since Yentin didn’t jump. He was pushed. Ironically, while she tried to solve the murder, Culpepper dredged up just as much scandal as Yentin would have.

Fox faced blackmailers and impersonators. A supporting character departed this world the hard way. In the denouement, the murderer was only interested in money but her reach exceeded her grasp.

The recipes began with Yule Log, and to wash it down, Sparkling Peppermint Swirl, with four kinds of liquor and an optional candy cane. A slightly less toxic combination was Star Bread and Christmas Punch.

SLASHING THROUGH THE SNOW (2021) by Jacqueline Frost (pseudonym of Julie Anne Lindsey) was the third novel in a cozy series about Holly White of Mistletoe, Maine. She and her family operated the Reindeer Games Christmas Tree Farm, and had just opened a bed-and-breakfast.

Karen Moody, a vicious online reviewer with a toxic blog, checked into the B&B and just as quickly was checked out by someone with a blunt instrument. There were a plethora of enemies who might have murdered her. The Deppity Dawgs fixated on Delores ‘Cookie’ Cutter as the prime suspect.

Holly began Fletcherling (well, it was Maine) not only to prove her friend innocent but because the B&B was a crime scene not conducive to the tourist trade.

Moody had been dispatched by a pair of Holly’s nutcrackers, and the only fingerprints on it were Cookie’s. My question was about how big those nutcrackers were. I’ve never seen a pair big and heavy enough to bash in a skull.

Be that as it may, there were assorted alarums and confusions. A Christmas sleigh ride was sabotaged and strange men were stalking Holly. All the usual daily life in a Maine village.

The killer came out of nowhere. He has silenced Moody, who was going to tell all about his crime cartel past. He then went after Holly because he resented her stirring up trouble. But it all ended well. Not only that, but the sheriff proposed to Holly and was accepted. Merry Christmas.

THE TWELVE JAYS OF CHRISTMAS (2021) by Donna Andrews was the 30<sup>th</sup> novel and 8<sup>th</sup> Christmas story in this cozy series. The protagonist was Meg Langslow of Caerphilly, Virginia. She was married with children, an arts-and-crafts blacksmith, and the biggest murder magnet in the state.

Christmas was nigh, Meg’s brother Rob was getting married on New Year’s Eve, and her grandfather was breeding wombats in the basement. The villagers had their annoyances as well. The library was occupied by wildlife artist Roderick Castlemayne, who was painting birds on commission for Grandfather.

Castlemayne was obnoxious and self-centred, with delusions of grandeur. He was pursued by ex-wives, creditors, and process servers galore. That he would be the murder victim was a given, but the mystery was why he survived until Chapter 14.

Meg found his body of course. This being the 30<sup>th</sup> novel, and supposing an average of two murders per novel, the explanation as to why all the 9-1-1 dispatchers recognized her voice instantly was obvious. She was in fact on a first-name basis with them. Off she went Marpleing.

The Deppity Dawgs knew enough to let her have free rein. Meg was, however, busy, busy, busy. Relatives were swarming about her house, blue jays fluttered about the library, and process servers were disappointed on hearing the news about Castlemayne. In short, all the usual problems a Miss Marple faces when planning Christmas parties.

The final confrontation with the murderer was in the local zoo. Meg took refuge in the wombat enclosure. She managed to silence the killer with one of the zoo’s tranquilizer dart guns. By contrast, Christmas and her brother’s wedding were anti-climaxes.

**Cozy Anthologies.**

The novella is relatively uncommon in cozy mysteries, as the main market is novels. CHRISTMAS CARD MURDER (2020) was an anthology of three cozy novellas on Christmas themes.

Starting off was “Christmas Card Murder” by Leslie Meier from the series about Lucy Stone, the resident Jessica Fletcher in Tinker’s Cove, Maine. She and her husband Bill were renovating their old house and found a Christmas card behind the drywall. The message was “*You lied and I hope you rot in Hell.*” The card was from decades ago, but a cold case never stopped Fletcher nor Lucy herself.

The sleuthing was mainly digging through old files in dusty archives. Eventually Lucy located the sender of the card, a man who had been wrongfully convicted by the recipient’s testimony. He served three decades in prison before exoneration.

What was done, was done. Lucy spoke to the man, everyone else being dead years ago. He said destroy the card, so Lucy threw it into the fireplace. With that, the story faded to an end.

“Death Of A Christmas Carol” by Lee Hollis (pseudonym of brother and sister Rick Copp and Holly Simason) was part of a food cozy series about Hayley Powell of Bar Harbor, Maine. Yes, another Jessica Fletcher.

Hayley and other women received Christmas cards from the village hussy Carol Waterman. Her message was that she was going to run off with one of their husbands.

Instead of an appendix, the recipes were intercalated into the text. After a pause for Candy Cane Cocktail and Candy Cane Bark, someone strangled Carol and left her body under her Christmas tree. Twas the season, eh?

Away went the Fletchering, spraying suspicion about like rock salt from a snowplough. The murderer was one of Carol’s many men friends, jealous and angry enough to kill. He wasn’t the one she had intended to run away with, and when he learned that from her, he lost his cool.

The novella concluded with recipes for Hot Buttered Rum and No Bake Cheesecake. A good way for the village residents to calm down.

“Death Of A Christmas Card Crafter” by Peggy Ehrhart had an entire crew of Miss Marples, the Knit and Nibble Club of Arborville, New Jersey. Pamela Paterson was the main sleuth. The victim was art teacher Karma Karling, murdered on the opening day of the Holiday Craft Fair.

In between designing handmade Christmas cards, knitting, and baking, the group learned Karling had many enemies, so motive wouldn’t solve the case. The Deppity Dawgs found some knitwear at the crime scene, so that was good enough for them. They arrested one of the knitters and began collecting evidence to fit her.

Pamela could tell the difference between a thousand varieties of yarn. She identified the murderer as a jealous woman who wanted Karling to stay away from her boyfriend.

In the appendix, the Cozy Doll Sweater knitting was beyond me but there were recipes I wouldn’t say no to, for Chocolate Mousse Cake and Quick Bread (with fruits and nuts).

**Sentimental Christmases.**

THE WHISTLER was an old-time radio anthology series that aired from 1942 to 1955. “Next Year Is Mine” was written by Joel Malone and aired on 1946-12-23. Johnny Hale was a prisoner who edited the prison newsletter. Not a merry Christmas for either the prisoners or the guards (note the air date). Hale’s cellmate was an old man named Ed Holliday, who was inside 31 years.

Hale had a temper and probably would serve his full five years. He couldn’t keep his smart mouth shut, which caused him no end of trouble. Ed was dying and Hale resented how the trustees made fun of him, especially reading his letters.

The sender of those letters was a woman who didn’t know Ed was a prisoner. Hale started a fight with a trustee and spent Christmas in solitary confinement. He was sprung briefly to visit Ed on his deathbed in prison hospital.

Ed’s dying wish was for Hale to tell his correspondent about his death. The twist came after the final commercial. The woman had died seven years previously. The warden had been faking the letters ever since to protect Ed’s feelings.

by Joe Siclari

[Extracts from the newsletter as below. For the full newsletter, visit [www.fanac.org](http://www.fanac.org), where you can also sign up to receive the newsletter directly for free. All the publications listed below are free pdfs.]

**Context, Context, And More Context: APA Mailing Listings.**

[An apa is an amateur press association. Instead of mailing zines individually, editors send a bundle of their issue to a central mailer, who collates all the contributed zines into sets and mails one to each contributor. This was the Papernet version of a chat room.]

[Mentioned below is FAPA, Fantasy APA, founded in 1937 and still in existence. It is the oldest science fiction apa.]

Having the chronological list lets you see what was published in any given time frame. What it doesn't let you understand is which fans received the zines and presumably read them. We have a partial solution.

APAs provided fandom with a long standing and very viable approach to having a large correspondence circle without having to maintain an individual mailing list. Traditionally, FAPA especially had a membership of BNFs [big name fans], and provided Internet-like levels of interaction.

With the APA Mailing listings, we are providing a navigation aid to contents of the major APAs which are available on the FANAC digital archive. For each mailing, you can easily see and access the zines that were part of it which we have in the archive. As we add more zines which were distributed in the APAs, those issues will be added to the Mailings list.

If we don't have any zines from a mailing online, we'll omit it from the Mailings list. Software to generate the Mailing listings courtesy of Mark Olson. Thanks, Mark!

We're focusing on FAPA first. Unsurprisingly, the mailings of FAPA where we have the most content are the ones that were in Retro Hugo years, since we had a push on digitizing zines from those years.

For many mailings, we only have 1 or 2 zines so far, but our ambitions are to do this for FAPA, VAPA, SAPS, OMPA, ANZAPA, N'APA and some of SFPA. We're also using this format to provide a table of contents for mailings of the Futurian War Digest. I am unreasonably excited about this enhancement.

Rich Lynch has led a SFPA project to provide a rich view of several years of SFPA mailings. He's scanned hundreds of zines of early 2000s issues of SFPA, almost all online now, providing a very full look at the mailings of the time. It was a huge effort. Thanks, Rich!

The APA mailing listings are a work in progress so both be kind, and send us info and corrections for any gaps or errors that you see. If you can help identify APA mailings for fanzine titles, please send them to us. or if you have Inventory sheets for APA mailings and can scan or copy them, please send them to us. [https://fanac.org/fanzines/APA\\_Mailings/](https://fanac.org/fanzines/APA_Mailings/)

**FANAC By The Numbers.**

Fanzines: 19,086 issues (covering 1,702 titles) with more than 342,002 pages.

Conpubs: 3,447 publications, with 63,816 pages, representing 822 conventions.

Fancylopedia: 29,538 pages which include 6,341 for people, 4,593 for fans (a subset of people), 8,338 for fanzines, another 1,518 for clubs and apas, and 6,191 for conventions.

YouTube: 149,402 views, 1,189 subscribers and 137 recordings.

**CHRISTMAS CARDS RECEIVED AT CHEZ OPUNTIA**

Thanks to: Lloyd and Yvonne Penney (Etobicoke, Ontario), Garth Spencer (Vancouver, British Columbia), Brant Kresovich (Getzville, New York), and Clay, the lettercarrier whose route includes Chez Opuntia.

**RICH GIFTS WAX POOR WHEN GIVERS PROVE UNKIND: PART 5**  
by Dale Speirs

[Parts 1 to 4 appeared in OPUNTIA's #392, 456, 486, and 508.]

**Litera Scripta Manet In Cera.**

THE CORPSE IN THE WAXWORKS by John Dickson Carr was first published in 1932. The novel was re-issued in 2021 by Poisoned Pen Press, which was the version I read. This was part of a series about Paris police detective Henri Bencolin.

Mme Odette Duchene was last seen alive walking into the waxworks museum of Monsieur Augustin (no first name ever given). She was next seen when the police fished her body out of the Seine River.

Bencolin and his party visited the museum and found the body of Claudine Martel, who was the best friend of Duchene. Her corpse was cradled in the arms of a waxwork figure. The plot was convoluted but straightened out to a logical finish.

Two murderers had acted in sequence, one to hide the shame of his daughter's misbehaviour. Too much family pride, which was why the murders occurred in the museum, where stiff and formal characters were the rule.

"The Adventure Of The Wax Gamblers" (1952) by Adrian Conan Doyle and John Dickson Carr (in THE EXPLOITS OF SHERLOCK HOLMES) was about sharp practice in horse race betting. Yes, yes, not a new thing.

The question was how the culprits were communicating inside information about which horse to bet on. Holmes hypothesized a line of communication from a typist Eleanor Baxter, who overheard secret information from her boss, to the gambler who placed the bets.

Her grandfather was night watchman at Madame Taupin's (not the other one) wax museum. One of the exhibits in the crime section was two gamblers sitting at a table, playing cards in hand and gold coins on the table.

Baxter's after-hours access to the museum to visit grandfather enabled her to change the cards and use them to transmit the name of the favoured horse. The

cards were a substitution code. The gambler could then saunter by during the day as an ordinary visitor, read the cards, decipher the code, and place his bets. No one else would notice the order of the cards or realize they were a coded message.

"Chamber Of Vengeance" by Joslyn Chase (2021 October, MYSTERY MAGAZINE, [www.mysterymagazine.ca](http://www.mysterymagazine.ca) or Amazon print-on-demand) was mostly a web of complicated family entanglements set in a wax museum.

A costume company in Seattle was the focus. The business was run by a dysfunctional family. Two decades prior the now-deceased patriarch had fathered an illegitimate son, who had come back for revenge on behalf of his dead mother.

She had committed suicide in a wax museum at the rear of the store, after giving him up for adoption. The museum had since been closed off but was now being revitalized.

The waxworks had a coded message imbedded into them. There was also high drama between the staff repairing and refreshing the wax figures. The denouement worked itself out with a bit of blood along the way.

**Gimme That Old Time Radio.**

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

"The Adventure Of The Fabulous Celebrities" was written by Max Ehrlich and aired on 1949-01-17. Someone was murdering famous citizens, such as a prize fighter and a beautiful actress.

Holmes was well known because of the STRAND MAGAZINE stories. Two attempts on his life were made in one night. Sir Hartley Ames, Governor of the Bank of England, was also attacked that night. Ames didn't want the police involved for fear of causing a financial panic when the news got out.

Pause for a commercial from the sponsor Clipper Craft for their men's suits, reasonably priced at \$45. Then a message came, purportedly from Sir Hartley asking for a rendezvous at a warehouse. Holmes observed the letter was a forgery.

They attended the warehouse and found Sir Hartley's body. Shots were fired but the killer escaped. Despite the uproar, Holmes deduced the killer resided at a waxworks museum.

Off to the museum, where they found a freshly minted wax effigy of Sir Hartley, then one of Holmes. They caught the killer, an elderly artist with a giant ego. He was about to be involuntarily retired and resented the management pushing him out the door. The murderer was hauled in.

As a sidelight, the wax museum had a Sherlock Holmes on display. Holmes didn't like his effigy. He said his face was too narrow and his nose too beak-like.

### **Revival Radio.**

BEYOND MIDNIGHT was a South African radio series that aired from 1968 to 1970, written and produced by Michael McCabe. He didn't write original scripts but based them on stories by other authors. The free mp3s are available from the Old Time Radio Researchers at [www.otrr.org/OTRRLibrary](http://www.otrr.org/OTRRLibrary).

"A Night In The Waxworks" was based on a story by A.M. Burrage and aired on 1969-01-31. The episode title said it all. The wax museum had just closed for the day.

On the second floor, Raymond Huston was talking with the manager, who explained he often received requests from people wanting to settle a bet by staying the night. The answer, as it always was, was no.

However, Huston negotiated a deal for extra publicity from his newspaper. The evening began with an inventory of the murderers on display. One waxwork was of a serial killer named Doctor Beaudette, who had vanished before being arrested.

Huston thought he saw Beaudette's effigy move. The manager said pish posh, twas just an optical illusion. Huston was soon left by himself as night

descended. All the figures seemed to be moving. Just his imagination, he thought. After some more blithering by Huston, the plot sped up. Beaudette came to life and bwah-ha!-ha!-ed at Huston. He was the real man, who had been hiding in the waxworks. Or was he? Huston died of fright from an over-active imagination. How could a waxwork kill him?

THE DARKNESS was a radio revival series performed by the Roger Rittner Players, available as free mp3s from [www.otrr.org/OTRRLibrary](http://www.otrr.org/OTRRLibrary). I haven't been able to find more than a few fragments of information about the series.

The show apparently aired in late 1979 on the American network National Public Radio. Rittner still has his own company specializing in radio promotions but doesn't mention the series on his website.

Each episode opened with a woman's full-throated scream. As the decibel meter sank back to normal, there followed a smarmy "*Good evening, I'm your host Claude*", an imitation of Raymond from the Inner Sanctum series.

"Funhouse" was, not surprisingly, set in a carnival. The writer was credited but his name was muddled in the mp3 so I couldn't catch who it was.

Oscar was one of the barkers in the carnival. He and Madame Florio of the wax museum were called in by the manager because of declining admissions. They were given 90 days to improve the waxwork displays. Madame was angry but sullenly promised a blood-curdling display.

Oscar helped by terrorizing customers inside the funhouse ride and turning them over to the waxworks. Much screaming and running about in the tunnels. "*Oscar is a wonderful embalmer*", said Madame to the customers just before they became part of the exhibits.

## TRAIN OF EVENTS: PART 6

by Dale Speirs

[Parts 1 to 5 appeared in OPUNTIA's #403, 416, 461, 489, and 522.]

### Death En Route.

BARRIE CRAIG, CONFIDENTIAL INVESTIGATOR aired on radio from 1951 to 1955. The episodes are available as free mp3 downloads from the Old Time Radio Researchers at [www.otrr.org/OTRRLibrary](http://www.otrr.org/OTRRLibrary)

“Death Buys A Bedroom” was written by John Roeburt and aired on 1954-07-27. Barrie Craig was taking a week’s vacation to the Adirondacks to evade the summer heat of New York City.

On the train, a woman named Claire Roberts accosted him and asked him to hold an envelope. As they were talking, the club car waiter served her a drink. Craig saw him drop something into the drink. He let the waiter go, then knocked the glass out of Claire’s hand, pretending it was an accident.

He took her to her bedroom compartment, then went to his, where a gunman named Wiley was waiting and demanded the envelope. Craig refused, having hidden it in Claire’s compartment. They were interrupted by a telegram delivery man. Wiley departed.

The telegram was a blank slip of paper. The delivery man then demanded the envelope. Craig got the drop on him and rendered him unconscious. In going through his pockets, Craig took away his gun and checked his identification, which was James Bryant, recently released from prison.

Deciding to check on Claire’s safety, Craig went to her compartment. En route he found the body of the club car waiter slumped in a vestibule. There was a knife in him, so he wasn’t just sleeping on the job. Craig didn’t even break stride and continued to Claire’s compartment.

She refused to say what was in the envelope. When Craig mentioned the names Wiley and Bryant, she fainted. Craig let her fall, and took the opportunity to snoop through her things. When she revived, she was evasive.

As they talked a gunman fired through the door but missed both of them. The shots brought the conductors running but the two gave them no information. After they left, Craig surmised that because they passed the vestibule but said nothing about a body, someone had thrown the waiter’s body off the train.

Craig went back to his compartment and wasn’t surprised that Bryant had left. Thinking to brush his teeth, he discovered that someone had switched his toothbrush and substituted one dipped in cyanide, which has the odour of almonds.

Once more down the corridor, this time to talk to the head conductor. Craig confirmed that there was a man named Wiley in a compartment. He also learned that two weeks prior, down the line at Martindale, there had been a big payroll robbery. The train wasn’t directly involved but had been detained several hours while the police searched it.

Next stop was Wiley’s compartment. He gave himself away about the toothbrush and lied about knowing Bryant or the waiter. Craig bluffed that the waiter was going to testify about being bribed by Wiley to poison Claire’s drink.

And so to the Adirondacks resort. Craig watched all the other principals in the case get off the train. Wiley and Bryant ignored each other and Claire. When Craig left, his taxicab was followed by two others. He stopped, Wiley stopped, Bryant stopped, and the entire parade stepped outside to argue.

Craig proposed opening the envelope then and there, but the other two were strangely reluctant. They finally agreed. He opened it and showed them it was empty. Both men fled. “*Till we meet again*”, said Craig.

He checked into his hotel and enjoyed a good night’s sleep. Anticipating Claire, he waited at the railroad station baggage room. She arrived with a claim check that had obviously been in the envelope. The baggage had the payroll.

Bryant intercepted them and grabbed for the bag, saying that he had already killed two people for it and wasn’t afraid to kill more. Shots were fired and needless to say Craig won. Bryant was only wounded and as Craig remarked: “*He’ll be in perfect health by the time they get around to electrocuting him.*”

The police took Claire into custody and Craig went fishing. One plot thread was left dangling: What happened to Wiley?

In 1954 and 1955, a television series SHERLOCK HOLMES was aired on NBC. The episodes are in the public domain and therefore available in several different DVD box sets. I have this episode on the set issued by the St. Clair Entertainment Group, “Ultimate Sherlock Holmes TV”.

“The Case Of The Night Train Riddle” was written by Lou Morheim and aired on 1955-04-11. Holmes and Watson were on an overnight train for the Scottish highlands and four days of relaxation.

A young boy Paul went missing en route. The conductor saw Holmes’ name on the passenger list and asked him to help. The boy was being escorted by his governess to a boarding school. The lad was unhappy about that and might have run away. The plot abruptly stopped for a flashback about Paul’s home life in the manor.

Once the infodumps were over, Holmes, Watson, and the governess searched along the tracks. The boy supposedly jumped off the train while it was slowly labouring up a steep gradient, but the camera showed tracks on level ground. The trio allegedly saw Paul’s footprints along the gravel ballast of the rails. I found that difficult to believe. Footprints in coarse gravel?

Watson had some humorous scenes dealing with stubborn stationmasters and railway bureaucrats. From there to a circus, where Paul was a not-unwilling hostage. His Uncle Cecil had arranged the matter. He wanted Paul to die in a tragic circus accident, thereby changing the line of inheritance of the manorial estate.

A dramatic conclusion, with Watson saving the boy by sandbagging the uncle. And so back to the vacation, with three days still left.

DESTINATION MURDER (2004) by Jessica Fletcher and Donald Bain took the sleuth to Vancouver, British Columbia. A friend of Fletcher’s in Cabot Cove suggested a rail excursion through the coastal mountains of the province.

Reggie Weems was a railfan who belonged to an excursion group called the Track and Rail Club. The trip would take pressure off Cabot Cove, as Vancouver wouldn’t notice an extra murder or two.

The rail excursion went from Vancouver to the Whistler ski resort, then continued through the mountains to 100 Mile House, thence to the port of Prince George.

Along for the ride were club members, including the president Alvin Blevin, a sharp-practice man whose second wife Theodora may have murdered her first husband Elliott Vail.

The train began rolling, and so did the plot just before Whistler. Blevin was given a poisoned drink. After unloading the corpse onto the Whistler detachment of the RCMP, the tour continued, accompanied by plainclothes Mounties.

Various alarums ensued and there was a plethora of suspects. Lots of infodumps about wildlife, B.C. history, and a description of Prince George as a rundown town with rundown buildings that made me smile. It’s funny because it’s true.

The back stories and old feuds were filled in as the train chugged along and everyone admired the scenery. Rail club politics were just as vicious as federal or provincial politics. After arriving at Prince George, the group returned to Vancouver.

Fletcher attended an emergency meeting of the railfan club, there now being a vacancy on the executive. Then off on another excursion, this time a local day trip. That tour was a barnburner with several twists.

Elliott Vail was discovered alive and living in disguise when he tried to poison Theodora. The couple had faked his death for insurance fraud, the she double-crossed him by marrying Blevin.

Fletcher tied up the loose ends as the train returned to the city. And so back to Cabot Cove, the deadliest town in the world.

### **Murder Off Station.**

MR MONK IN TROUBLE (2010) by Lee Goldberg was a novel in a series about Adrian Monk, a private detective in San Francisco. The book series was an offshoot of a television series which aired from 2002 to 2009. The novels continued the storyline after the show was cancelled.

Adrian had compulsive-obsessive disorder and a germ phobia which was balanced by an eidetic memory and an ability to notice details overlooked by police crime scene investigators.

The book at hand took him to Trouble, California, a village left over from the gold rush of the 1850s. There had been a train robbery in 1962 on the Golden Rail Express line, where two crewmen were murdered and bags of gold coins stolen. The loot had never been recovered.

The actual case that brought Adrian to Trouble was the murder of a museum night watchman Manny Feikema, a retired San Francisco police officer. Adrian was accompanied by his assistant Natalie Teeger, whose job was to run interference for him. Not an easy task because he had no social graces.

The village terrified Adrian or, more correctly, he was terrified by tumbleweeds, butterflies, burros, and dirt roads. The first three because they moved about randomly instead of orderly fashion and the latter because of his germ phobia.

Working past those woes, Adrian, Natalie, and the local sheriff arrived at the Gold Rush Museum, whose centrepiece was the locomotive and a passenger car from the Golden Rail Express.

The train had been thoroughly examined for the missing gold. Every summer, tourists searched along the tracks hoping to find the loot. Nothing but nothing, though.

What was something occurred when visiting another museum next door. Adrian discovered there had been a pioneer settler at Trouble named Artemis Monk, who looked just like him, was a private detective, had compulsive-obsessive disorder, and employed an assistant Abigail Guthrie to run interference for him.

The novel then alternated between Artemis and Guthrie in the 1850s and Adrian and Teeger circa now. Various alarms ensued in both eras. The museum killing was connected to the train robbery.

The original thieves had tossed the gold into the locomotive boiler furnace. The gold melted and mixed with the ashes, which the thieves then painted onto the boiler, to be gathered later and reprocessed.

They didn't get the chance until fifty years later. The guard Feikema died because he was in the wrong place at the wrong time. There were a few twists in the denouement but the case was finally solved. Adrian could then head back to the city where there were no tumbleweeds, burros, or dirt streets.

## **Heists.**

THE SHADOW, as the opening blurb put it, was in reality Lamont Cranston, wealthy young man about town. He had traveled to Tibet where he learned how to cloud minds so that people could not see him, only hear him.

His companion and constant companion was the lovely Margo Lane. Her main duties were to scream, be kidnapped, and to have loose details explained to her in the epilogue.

The radio series had a complicated genealogy that began in 1930 and didn't evolve the familiar version of The Shadow until 1933. Several dozen episodes are available as free mp3s from [www.otrr.org/OTRRLibrary](http://www.otrr.org/OTRRLibrary) The series lasted until 1954.

"The Giant Of Madras" aired on 1948-05-16 and was written by Peter Barry. Lamont Cranston and Margo Lane were on a transcontinental train somewhere over the Great Plains.

They asked the porter to wake them at 01h00 for their stop, and went to bed. Separate but adjacent lower berths, mind you, for the network censors were alert for any canoodling.

At a remote water stop, a gang of men moved in to execute some sort of robbery on the train. There was a jump cut to Cranston and Lane, who awoke at 10h00 by her watch without having been called for their stop.

The conductor didn't answer. Another passenger, a small bald man, said no one else could find the conductor but the time was 05h45 by his watch. A conductor, not the original, showed up and began arguing with Cranston about the correct time. He said the time was 00h45, then abruptly left. Rude boy, that man.

The bald man's wife appeared looking for him. They all found him together, with a knife in his back. He had been carrying the Giant of Madras, a 25-carat diamond.

The conductor suddenly returned and pulled a gun, revealing himself as a member of the gang after the diamond. Everyone realized together that the diamond must have been hidden in the pocket watch casement.

The wife, elderly woman that she be, was faster on the draw and had her own gun. She and Cranston disarmed the rude boy. They then checked the watch but no diamond.

Just then Margo noticed the station they were passing was not on their route. The gang had diverted the train onto a deserted track. They found the real conductor, who told them a bridge was out, the reason the track was deserted. The gang might not have known.

Cranston eliminated some of the gang and worked his way forward to find the leader. There were contretemps and a last-second save, in which The Shadow played no part. He took all the credit though.

The diamond was recovered and the train switched back to its regular route. The epilogue wrapped up a few details except the important ones. What time was it? And did Cranston and Lane get back to their intended stop?

The first robbery of a moving train took place in 1855 in England. THE GREAT TRAIN ROBBERY was a 1978 movie released on DVD in 2014. Both the screenplay and a novel upon which the movie was based were written by Michael Crichton.

The movie roughly followed the true story, excepting that Hollywood added a romantic interest. Mastermind Edward Pierce was given a girlfriend who was part of the theft, not something that happened during the real event.

The first half of the movie was how the plan was devised and carried out. The gold shipment was contained in two safes in a baggage car of the train. There were four keys held by three people, and all were needed to open the safes. The trick was to make copies of the keys without anyone knowing, then infiltrate the train.

The plot was a standard heist movie but for all that was quite watchable. The 1855 setting made the movie a period piece, particularly the clothing styles worn by the general public.

Suspense was added in by a few mistakes of the thieves, who were not infallible cracksmen, and by outside events they had no control over. Worth watching.

### **Alarums En Route.**

HIGH ADVENTURE aired in South Africa from 1972 to 1985 on the commercial network Springbok Radio. It should not be confused with an American series of the same name which aired from 1947 to 1954.

The South African series is available as free mp3s from the Old Time Radio Researchers at [www.otrr.org/OTRRLibrary](http://www.otrr.org/OTRRLibrary)

“Tea Kettle #4630 ” was written by Norman Parkinson, airdate unknown. The story was set in the twilight of steam locomotives. As the episode began, an engine driver was being joshed about his locomotive #4630, jokingly referred to as a tea kettle.

A railroad bridge buckled during a river flood, leaving an electric locomotive dangling at the edge. The crew tried to uncouple it from the rest of the train to save the passengers, but the couplings were twisted and jammed.

The power lines were down, so the tea kettle was called to the rescue. The passengers were reluctant to disembark into the rain. Alarums both electric and steam followed, with lots of shouting to describe the situation.

#4630 huffed and puffed, and pulled the train back from the precipice. Even better, because the power lines would take time to repair, the steam locomotives would be used on the main lines. Huzzah!

What baffled me was why South Africa was using electric instead of diesel locomotives. There were economic sanctions against the apartheid regime at the time this series was aired, but they had synthetic fuel production.

SEEN IN THE LITERATURE

Astronomy.

Arcones, A., and F.K. Thielemann (2022) **Origin of the elements.** ASTRONOMY AND ASTROPHYSICS REVIEW 31:doi.org/10.1007/s00159-9-022-00146-x (available as a free pdf)

Authors’ abstract: *Astrophysical environments from the Big Bang to stars and stellar explosions are the cauldrons where all these elements are made.*

*A steady stream of nuclear experiments and nuclear structure theory, astrophysical models of the early universe as well as stars and stellar explosions in single and binary stellar systems has led to a deeper understanding.*

*This involved improvements in stellar models, the composition of stellar wind ejecta, the mechanism of core-collapse supernovae as final fate of massive stars, and the transition (as a function of initial stellar mass) from core-collapse supernovae to hypernovae and long duration gamma-ray bursts (accompanied by the formation of a black hole) in case of single star progenitors.*

*Binary stellar systems give rise to nova explosions, X-ray bursts, type Ia supernovae, neutron star, and neutron star-black hole mergers.*

*All of these events (possibly with the exception of X-ray bursts) eject material with an abundance composition unique to the specific event and lead over time to the evolution of elemental (and isotopic) abundances in the galactic gas and their imprint on the next generation of stars.*

Vissapragada, S., et al (2022) **The possible tidal demise of Kepler’s first planetary system.** ASTROPHYSICAL JOURNAL LETTERS 941:doi.org/10.3847/2041-8213/aca47e (available as a free pdf)

Authors’ abstract: *We present evidence of tidally-driven inspiral in the Kepler-1658 system, which consists of a giant planet orbiting an evolved host star. Using transit timing measurements from Kepler, Palomar/WIRC, and TESS, we show that the orbital period of Kepler-1658b appears to be decreasing at a rate of 131 microseconds yr<sup>-1</sup>, corresponding to an infall timescale » 2.5 megayears.*

*We consider other explanations for the data including line-of-sight acceleration and orbital precession, but find them to be implausible. The observed period derivative implies a tidal quality factor in good agreement with theoretical predictions for inertial wave dissipation in subgiant stars.*

*Additionally, while it probably cannot explain the entire inspiral rate, a small amount of planetary dissipation could naturally explain the deep optical eclipse observed for the planet via enhanced thermal emission.*

*As the first evolved system with detected inspiral, Kepler-1658 is a new benchmark for understanding tidal physics at the end of the planetary life cycle.*

De Marco, O., et al (2022) **The messy death of a multiple star system and the resulting planetary nebula as observed by JWST.** NATURE ASTRONOMY 6:1421-1432

Authors’ abstract: *Planetary nebulae, the ejected envelopes of red giant stars, provide us with a history of the last, mass-losing phases of 90% of stars initially more massive than the Sun. Here we analyse images of the planetary nebula NGC 3132 from the James Webb Space Telescope (JWST) Early Release Observations.*

*A structured, extended hydrogen halo surrounding an ionized central bubble is imprinted with spiral structures, probably shaped by a low-mass companion orbiting the central star at about 40 to 60 AU.*

*The images also reveal a mid-infrared excess at the central star, interpreted as a dusty disk, which is indicative of an interaction with another closer companion.*

*Including the previously known A-type visual companion, the progenitor of the NGC 3132 planetary nebula must have been at least a stellar quartet. The JWST images allow us to generate a model of the illumination, ionization and hydrodynamics of the molecular halo, demonstrating the power of JWST to investigate complex stellar outflows.*

*Furthermore, new measurements of the A-type visual companion allow us to derive the value for the mass of the progenitor of a central star with excellent precision:  $2.86 \pm 0.06$  solar masses.*

[Image is from the Webb telescope.]



Ezcurra, E., et al (2022) **Ancient inhabitants of the Basin of Mexico kept an accurate agricultural calendar using sunrise observatories and mountain alignments.** PROCEEDINGS OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES USA 119:doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2215615119 (available as a free pdf)

Authors’ abstract: *Before the Spanish conquest, the Basin of Mexico had a highly productive farming system able to feed its very large population. However, how they managed to keep their farming dates in synchrony with the solar year is not known.*

*In this paper, we show that the observation of sunrise against the Basin’s eastern horizon could have provided an accurate solar calendar and that some important sunrise landmarks coincide well with the themes of seasonal festivities described in early codices.*

*We also show that a long stone causeway in the summit of Mount Tlaloc aligns perfectly with the rising sun on February 23 to 24, in coincidence with the Basin’s new year in the Mexica calendar.*

*Third, we demonstrate that, when viewed from the sacred Mount Tepeyac in the bottom of the Basin, sunrise aligns with Mount Tlaloc also on February 24. The importance of Mount Tlaloc as a calendric landmark seems to be corroborated by illustrations and texts in ancient Mexica codices.*

*Our findings demonstrate that by using carefully developed alignments with the rugged eastern horizon, the inhabitants of the Basin of Mexico were able to adjust their calendar to keep in synchrony with the solar year and successfully plan their corn harvests.*



[Image is from this paper. Shown is the stone causeway by day, and sunrise at the beginning of the Mexica annual calendar on the morning of February 25.]



**Aliens.**

Zuckerman, Ben (2022) **‘Oumuamua is not a probe sent to our solar system by an alien civilization.** ASTROBIOLOGY 22:doi.org/10.1089/ast.2021.0168 (available as a free pdf)

Author’s abstract: *‘Oumuamua, the first known object of extrasolar origin seen to enter our Solar System, has multiple unusual characteristics that, taken together, are very difficult to explain with conventional astronomical entities like asteroids and comets.*

*Consequently, it has been hypothesized that ‘Oumuamua is an interstellar probe that was constructed by an alien civilization. We demonstrate that the accomplishments that can be achieved with large space telescopes/interferometers in the alien’s planetary system will completely quench any motivation for construction and launch of an ‘Oumuamua-like probe.*

*The absence of any such motivation attests that ‘Oumuamua is not an alien creation. The existence of large space telescopes has important implications for a range of topics that include interstellar space travel, the Zoo Hypothesis, METI, and UFOs.*

*At the measured velocity at infinity of ‘Oumuamua relative to the Sun, 26 km/sec, it would take of order 50,000 years to travel between the nearest star (1.3 parsecs away) and the Sun. Going out to a distance of 10 parsecs would encompass only 357 main sequence stars.*

*From 10 parsecs it would take about 400,000 years to arrive here at a velocity of 26 km/sec. Thus, any technological civilization that could have sent the ‘Oumuamua probe must have anticipated that it would still be in existence (at least) 50,000 years later, and very likely far longer.*

*Our species has had technology for only a few 100 years, and the capability to go into space for only about 50 years. In this brief time interval, we have developed the technological potential to build space telescopes with a variety of designs to detect and characterize nearby extrasolar rocky planets that are potentially capable of supporting life.*

**Panspermia.**

[Panspermia is the idea that life on Earth originated elsewhere and was seeded on our planet by microbes from passing comets or asteroids. There are several objections to this idea.]

[Firstly, it doesn’t solve the mystery of the origin of life but only pushes it back to some other extra-solar planet. Secondly, what we now know that original panspermia supporters didn’t was that life on Earth can survive in extreme environments such as undersea volcanic vents and bedrock kilometres underground.]

[Thirdly is that panspermia doesn’t solve the Fermi Paradox, commonly stated as “Where are they?”, meaning that if alien life existed then we should have seen it by now.]

Milton, Simon (2022) **A short history of panspermia from antiquity through the mid-1970s.** ASTROBIOLOGY 22:doi.org/10.1089/ast.2022.0032 (available as a free pdf)

Author’s abstract: *Panspermia is the philosophical proposition that the precursors of life are present in space and able to initiate life on reaching a suitable environment (especially the Earth). Only in the past century has the subject advanced from the lowly status of a dreamy hypothesis to a vibrant new science that is testable and observable.*

*This history of panspermia presents the major figures associated with such hypotheses. It examines their motives, methods, and arguments, situated when possible in their historical context and culture rather than their impact on the present.*

*From antiquity to the early modern period (1500 to 1800), the debates on the plurality of worlds and panspermia overlapped considerably. In the later modern period (1800 to the present), the narrative thread interweaves panspermia with the origin of life and the theory of evolution, and we can see authentic inputs from scientists rather than philosophers.*

*The historical literature is sometimes confusing: to correct for that, I have personally examined the original sources of every work cited rather than simply accepting the published findings of other scholars at face value.*

Adams, F.C., and K.J. Napier (2022) **Transfer of rocks between planetary systems: Panspermia revisited.** ASTROBIOLOGY 22:doi.org/10.1089/ast.2021.0187 (available as a free pdf)

Authors’ abstract: *Motivated by the recent discovery of interstellar objects passing through the solar system, and by recent developments in dynamical simulations, this article reconsiders the likelihood for life-bearing rocks to be transferred from one planetary system to another.*

*The astronomical aspects of this lithopanspermia process can now be estimated, including the cross sections for rock capture, the velocity distributions of rocky ejecta, the survival times for captured objects, and the dynamics of the solar system in both its birth cluster and in the field.*

*The remaining uncertainties are primarily biological, that is, the probability of life developing on a planet, the time required for such an event, and the efficiency with which life becomes seeded in a new environment.*

*Using current estimates for the input quantities, we find that the transfer rates are enhanced in the birth cluster, but the resulting odds for success are too low for panspermia to be a likely occurrence.*

*In contrast, the expected inventory of alien rocks in the solar system is predicted to be substantial (where the vast majority of such bodies are not biologically active and do not interact with the Earth).*

McKay, C.P., et al (2022) **Directed panspermia using interstellar comets.** ASTROBIOLOGY 22:doi.org/10.1089/ast.2021.0188 (available as a free pdf)

Authors’ abstract: *It may be that habitable planets are common but life is rare. If future advances in telescopes increasingly suggest this is so, humankind might feel motivated to seed lifeless planets with resilient terrestrial organisms or synthetic forms designed to thrive on the target planet.*

*A useful mechanism for achieving this goal at a relatively low cost is to use interstellar comets transiting the Solar System to convey microbial cargoes toward nearby planetary systems, where they could disseminate the inoculum via their dust trails.*

*Conversely, it is conceivable that terrestrial life was deliberately seeded in this matter, a hypothesis that could be tested if we found evidence for life on other Solar System bodies that displayed common basic biochemical signatures. Our scenario raises a number of ethical and technological challenges that need to be addressed.*

**Paleobiology.**

Bobrovskiy, I., et al (2022) **Guts, gut contents, and feeding strategies of Ediacaran animals.** CURRENT BIOLOGY 32:doi.org/10.1016/j.cub.2022.10.051

Authors’ abstract: *The oldest animals appear in the fossil record among Ediacara biota communities. They prelude animal-dominated ecosystems of the Phanerozoic and may hold clues to the appearance of modern animal phyla in the Cambrian explosion.*

*However, little is known about the phylogeny of the Ediacaran organisms and even less about their diet and feeding behavior. An exception is mollusc-like Kimberella, for which a fossilized gut, feeding traces, and even potential coprolites have been found.*

*By contrast, Ediacaran organic-walled tubes, such as Sabellidites and Calyptrina, are thought to belong to tube worms comparable with modern Siboglinidae that have no gut but gain their nutrition from symbiotic bacteria. Here, we examine the gut contents of Ediacaran animals using biomarker molecules.*

*We show that 558-million-year-old tube worm-like Calyptrina and mollusc-like Kimberella possessed a gut and shared a diet of green algae and bacteria. Despite their ancient age, sterol metabolism within the gut of both organisms was already comparable to extant invertebrates.*

*Dickinsonia, one of the key Ediacaran animals, show no traces of dietary molecules, indicating a different feeding mode and possible external digestion analogous to modern Placozoa. Lipid biomarkers uncover a range of feeding strategies in Ediacaran communities, highlighting true eumetazoan physiology of some Ediacaran animals.*

Izquierdo-López, A., and J.B. Caron (2022) **The problematic Cambrian arthropod *Tuzoia* and the origin of mandibulates revisited.** ROYAL SOCIETY OPEN SCIENCE 9:doi.org/10.1098/rsos.220933 (available as a free pdf)

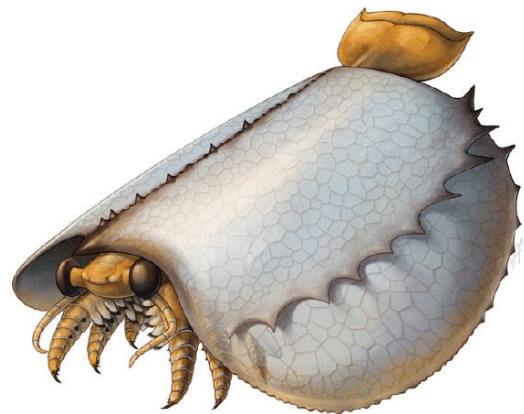
Authors’ abstract: *The origin of mandibulates, the hyperdiverse arthropod group that includes pancrustaceans and myriapods, dates back to the Cambrian. Bivalved arthropod groups such as hymenocarines have been argued to be early mandibulates, but many species are still poorly known, and their affinities remain uncertain.*

*One of the most common and globally distributed Cambrian bivalved arthropods is Tuzoia. Originally described in 1912 from the Burgess Shale based on isolated carapaces, its full anatomy has remained largely unknown.*

*Here, we describe new specimens of Tuzoia from the Canadian Burgess Shale (Wuliuan, Cambrian) showcasing exceptionally preserved soft tissues, allowing for the first comprehensive reconstruction of its anatomy, ecology and evolutionary affinities.*

*The head bears antennae and differentiated cephalic appendages. The body is divided into a cephalothorax, a homonomous trunk bearing ca 10 pairs of legs with heptopodomerous endopods and enlarged basipods, and a tail fan with two pairs of caudal rami.*

*These traits suggest that Tuzoia swam along the seafloor and used its spinose legs for predation or scavenging. Tuzoia is retrieved by a Bayesian phylogenetic analysis as an early mandibulate hymenocarine lineage, exemplifying the rapid diversification of this group in open marine environments during the Cambrian Explosion.*



[Image is from this paper.]

Xu, C., et al (2022) **High acoustic diversity and behavioral complexity of katydids in the Mesozoic soundscape.** PROCEEDINGS OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES USA 119:doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2210601119 (available as a free pdf)

Authors’ abstract: *Acoustic communication has played a key role in the evolution of a wide variety of vertebrates and insects. However, the reconstruction of ancient acoustic signals is challenging due to the extreme rarity of fossilized organs.*

*Here, we report the earliest tympanal ears and sound-producing system (stridulatory apparatus) found in exceptionally preserved Mesozoic katydids. We present a database of the stridulatory apparatus and wing morphology of Mesozoic katydids and further calculate their probable singing frequencies and analyze the evolution of their acoustic communication.*

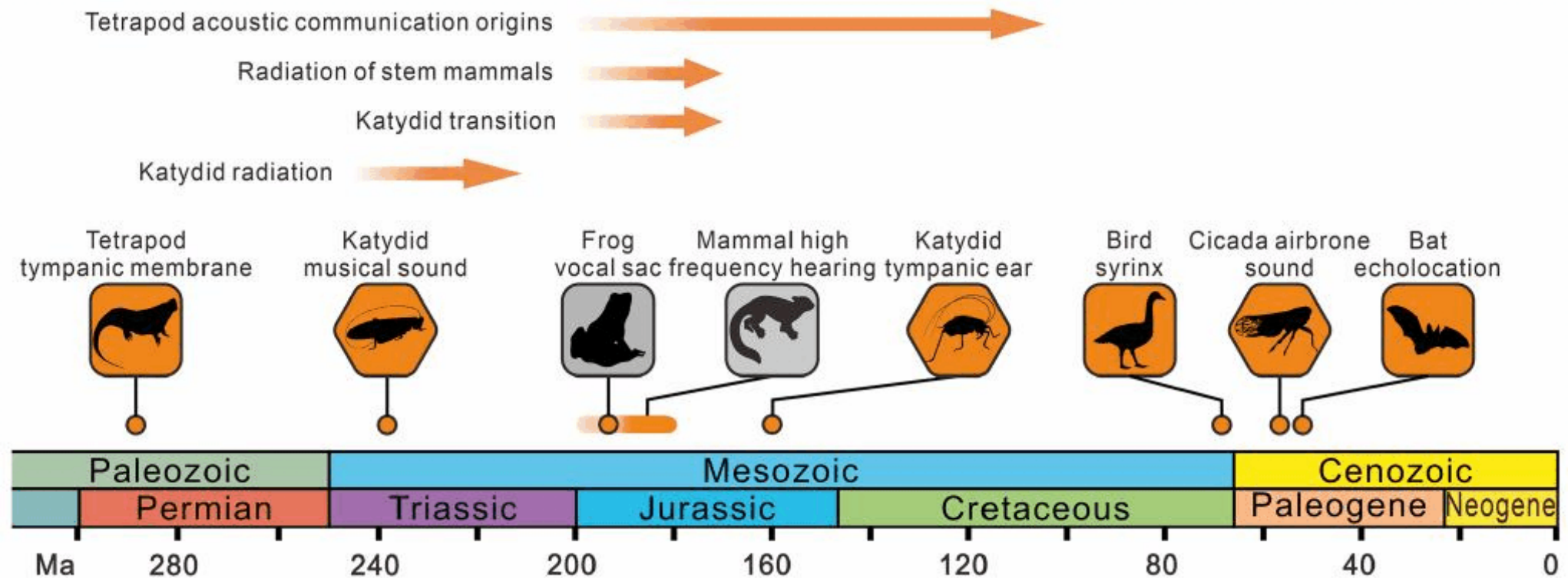
*Our suite of analyses demonstrates that katydids evolved complex acoustic communication including mating signals, inter-male communication, and directional hearing, at least by the Middle Jurassic.*

*Additionally, katydids evolved a high diversity of singing frequencies including high-frequency musical calls, accompanied by acoustic niche partitioning at least by the Late Triassic, suggesting that acoustic communication might have been an important driver in the early radiation of these insects.*

*The Early-Middle Jurassic katydid transition from Haglidae- to Prophalangopsidae-dominated faunas coincided with the diversification of derived mammalian clades and improvement of hearing in early mammals, supporting the hypothesis of the acoustic coevolution of mammals and katydids.*

*Our findings not only highlight the ecological significance of insects in the Mesozoic soundscape but also contribute to our understanding of how acoustic communication has influenced animal evolution.*

[Chart on the next page is from this paper.]



### Dinosaurs.

Arbour, V.M., et al (2022) **Palaeopathological evidence for intraspecific combat in ankylosaurid dinosaurs.** BIOLOGY LETTERS 18:doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.c.6302845.

Authors’ abstract: *Ankylosaurid dinosaurs were heavily armoured herbivores with tails modified into club-like weapons. These tail clubs have widely been considered defensive adaptations wielded against predatory theropod dinosaurs.*

*Here we argue instead that ankylosaurid tail clubs were sexually selected structures used primarily for intraspecific combat.*

*We found pathological osteoderms (armour plates) in the holotype specimen of Zuul crurivastator, which are localized to the flanks in the hip region rather than distributed randomly across the body, consistent with injuries inflicted by lateral tail-swinging and ritualized combat.*

*We failed to find convincing evidence for predation as a key selective pressure in the evolution of the tail club. High variation in tail club size through time, and delayed ontogenetic growth of the tail club further support the sexual selection hypothesis.*

*There is little doubt that the tail club could have been used in defence when needed, but our results suggest that sexual selection drove the evolution of this impressive weapon. This changes the prevailing view of ankylosaurs, suggesting they were behaviorally complex animals that likely engaged in ritualized combat for social dominance as in other ornithischian dinosaurs and mammals.*



Authors’ abstract: *Marine tetrapods occupy important roles in modern marine ecosystems and often gather in large aggregations driven by patchy prey distribution, social or reproductive behaviors, or oceanographic factors.*

*Here, we show that similar grouping behaviors evolved in an early marine tetrapod lineage, documented by dozens of specimens of the giant ichthyosaur Shonisaurus in the Luning Formation in West Union Canyon, Nevada, USA. A concentration of at least seven skeletons closely preserved on a single bedding*

*plane received the bulk of previous attention.*

*However, many more specimens are preserved across ~10 square meters and ~200 stratigraphic meters of outcrop representing an estimated >10 years. Unlike other marine tetrapod-rich deposits, this assemblage is essentially monotaxic; other vertebrate fossils are exceptionally scarce.*

*Large individuals are disproportionately abundant, with the exception of multiple neonatal or embryonic specimens, indicating an unusual demographic composition apparently lacking intermediate-sized juveniles or subadults.*

*Combined with geological evidence, our data suggest that dense aggregations of Shonisaurus inhabited this moderately deep, low-diversity, tropical marine environment for millennia during the latest Carnian Stage of the Late Triassic Period (237 to 227 megayears ago).*

*Thus, philopatric grouping behavior in marine tetrapods, potentially linked to reproductive activity, has an antiquity of at least 230 million years.*

[Image is from this paper.]

García-Girón, J., et al (2022) **Shifts in food webs and niche stability shaped survivorship and extinction at the end-Cretaceous.** SCIENCE ADVANCES 8:doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.add5040 (available as a free pdf)

Authors’ abstracts: *It has long been debated why groups such as non-avian dinosaurs became extinct whereas mammals and other lineages survived the Cretaceous/Paleogene mass extinction 66 million years ago.*

*We used Markov networks, ecological niche partitioning, and Earth System models to reconstruct North American food webs and simulate ecospace occupancy before and after the extinction event.*

*We find a shift in latest Cretaceous dinosaur faunas, as medium-sized species counterbalanced a loss of megaherbivores, but dinosaur niches were otherwise stable and static, potentially contributing to their demise.*

*Smaller vertebrates, including mammals, followed a consistent trajectory of increasing trophic impact and relaxation of niche limits beginning in the latest*

Cretaceous and continuing after the mass extinction. Mammals did not simply proliferate after the extinction event; rather, their earlier ecological diversification might have helped them survive.

**Pleistocene Life.**

Diedrich, C.G. (2022) Unicorn “holotype” skeleton from the Late Pleistocene spotted hyena den site Sewecken-Berge (Germany). ACTA ZOOLOGICA 104:doi.org/10.1111/azo.12392

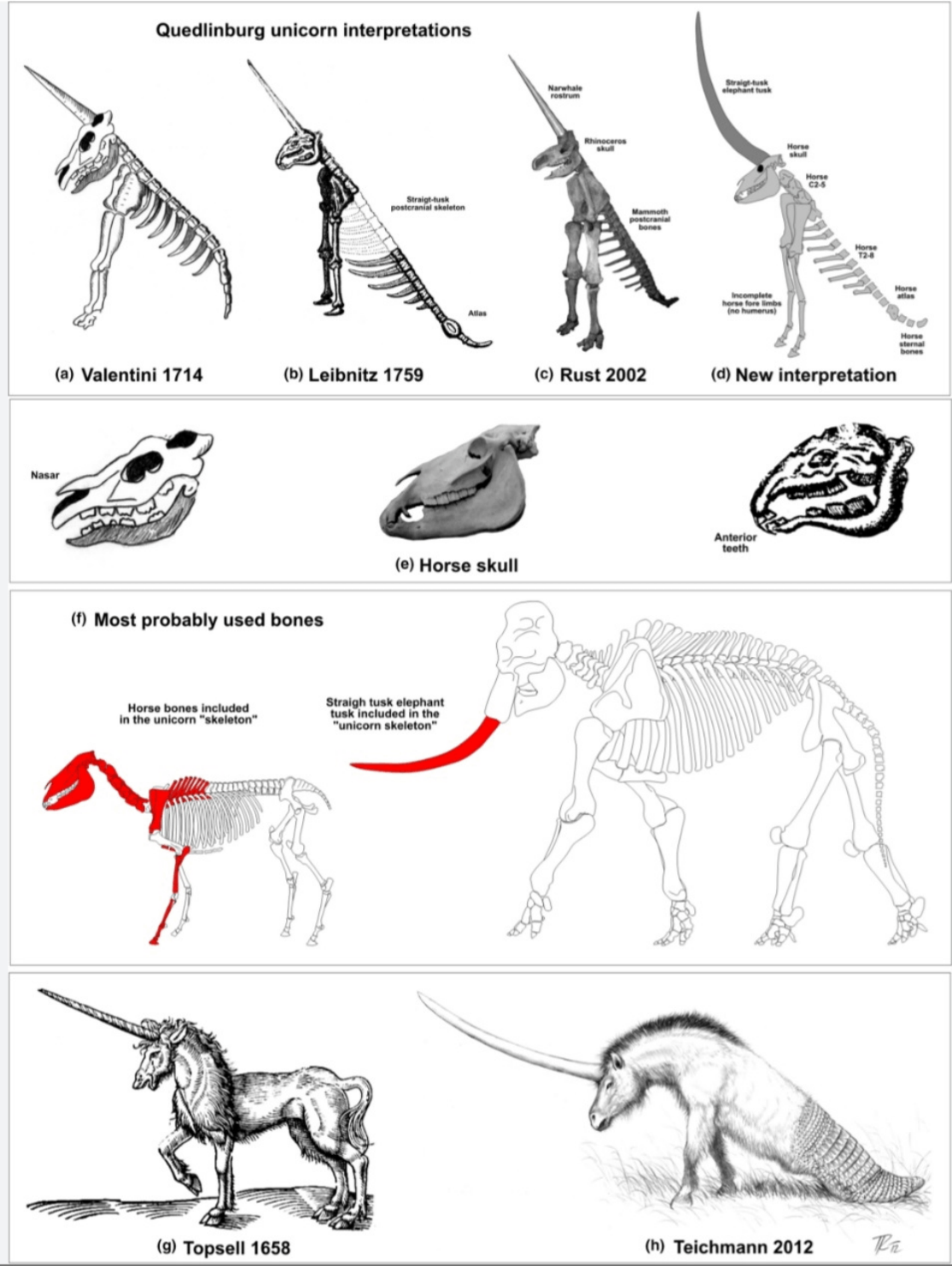
Author’s abstract: Late Pleistocene Ice Age spotted hyena remains are described from the “Unicorn holotype skeleton” gypsum karst site Quedlinburg-Sewecken-Berge, Germany (Central Europe). The hyena population consists of adolescent to late adult individuals (96% of hyena NISP; 15% of megafauna NISP) indicating a commuting den site type.

The comparisons to other European bone assemblages support hunting specialization on woolly rhinoceros (19% of NISP) and horses (27% of NISP). Specialization on bovids (Bison/Bos) can be added for this site. The megafauna contain few Eemian warm period remains of a large horse *Equus ferus fossilis*.

Most (95%) of the megafauna is attributed to the Late Pleistocene glacial (Weichselian/Wuermian). Horse bones are dominated by distal leg elements from the smaller Przewalski horses *Equus ferus przewalskii* (26% of NISP).

The Unicorn “holotype” skeleton originates from a composed horse skull, vertebrae, and front legs, whereas the elephant remains added to this biologically not valid species must have been a straight-tusked elephant tusk.

[Images are from this paper.]



Chatar, N., et al (2022) **Many-to-one function of cat-like mandibles highlights a continuum of sabre-tooth adaptations.** PROCEEDINGS OF THE ROYAL SOCIETY OF LONDON 289B:doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.c.6308901.

Authors’ abstract: *Cat-like carnivorans are a textbook example of convergent evolution, with distinct morphological differences between taxa with short or elongated upper canines, the latter often being interpreted as an adaptation to bite at large angles and subdue large prey.*

*This interpretation of the sabre-tooth condition is reinforced by a reduced taxonomic sampling in some studies, often focusing on highly derived taxa or using simplified morphological models. Moreover, most biomechanical analyses focus on biting scenarios at small gapes, ideal for modern carnivora but ill-suited to test for subduction of large prey by sabre-toothed taxa.*

*In this contribution, we present the largest three-dimensional collection-based muscle-induced biting simulations on cat-like carnivorans by running a total of 1,074 analyses on 17 different taxa at three different biting angles (30°, 60° and 90°) including both morphologies.*

*While our results show a clear adaptation of extreme sabre-toothed taxa to bite at larger angles in terms of stress distribution, other performance variables display surprising similarities between all forms at the different angles tested, highlighting a continuous rather than bipolar spectrum of hunting methods in cat-like carnivorans and demonstrating a wide functional disparity and nuances of the sabre-tooth condition that cannot simply be characterized by specialized feeding biomechanics.*

**Human Prehistory.**

Drummond-Clarke, R.C., et al (2022) **Wild chimpanzee behavior suggests that a savanna-mosaic habitat did not support the emergence of hominin terrestrial bipedalism.** SCIENCE ADVANCES 8:doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.add9752 (available as a free pdf)

Authors’ abstract: *Bipedalism, a defining feature of the human lineage, is thought to have evolved as forests retreated in the late Miocene-Pliocene. Chimpanzees living in analogous habitats to early hominins offer a unique*

*opportunity to investigate the ecological drivers of bipedalism that cannot be addressed via the fossil record alone.*

*We investigated positional behavior and terrestriality in a savanna-mosaic community of chimpanzees (*Pan troglodytes schweinfurthii*) in the Issa Valley, Tanzania as the first test in a living ape of the hypothesis that wooded, savanna habitats were a catalyst for terrestrial bipedalism.*

*Contrary to widely accepted hypotheses of increased terrestriality selecting for habitual bipedalism, results indicate that trees remained an essential component of the hominin adaptive niche, with bipedalism evolving in an arboreal context, likely driven by foraging strategy.*

Yebara, G., et al (2022) **Multiclonal human origin and global expansion of an endemic bacterial pathogen of livestock.** PROCEEDINGS OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES USA 119:doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2211217119 (available as a free pdf)

[This caught my eye because mastitis, a bacterial infection of cow teats while nursing, is common among cattle. I grew up on a cattle ranch, plus my father was a livestock veterinarian, so I have seen the disease many times, not only in cattle but cats and dogs.]

[Humans have caught a number of diseases because of close proximity to animals, but sometimes it works the other way round.]

Authors’ abstract: *The study uses thousands of bacterial genome sequences to comprehensively dissect the evolutionary history of a leading bacterial pathogen of livestock.*

*Remarkably, contemporary bovine mastitis infections due to *Staphylococcus aureus* can be traced back to historic host switch events that originated in humans up to thousands of years ago.*

*The host jumps were followed by host adaptation by acquisition of different gene combinations followed by global dissemination via established cattle trade links. Our work reveals high-risk clones that undergo more frequent cross-species transmission and which may therefore represent greater threat to public or animal health.*

*Most new pathogens of humans and animals arise via switching events from distinct host species. However, our understanding of the evolutionary and ecological drivers of successful host adaptation, expansion, and dissemination are limited.*

*Staphylococcus aureus is a major bacterial pathogen of humans and a leading cause of mastitis in dairy cows worldwide. Here we trace the evolutionary history of bovine S. aureus using a global dataset of 10,254 S. aureus genomes including 1,896 bovine isolates from 32 countries in 6 continents.*

*We identified 7 major contemporary endemic clones of S. aureus causing bovine mastitis around the world and traced them back to 4 independent host-jump events from humans that occurred up to 2,500 years ago.*

*Individual clones emerged and underwent clonal expansion from the mid-19th to late 20th century coinciding with the commercialization and industrialization of dairy farming, and older lineages have become globally distributed via established cattle trade links.*

*Importantly, we identified lineage-dependent differences in the frequency of host transmission events between humans and cows in both directions revealing high risk clones threatening veterinary and human health.*

*Finally, pangenome network analysis revealed that some bovine S. aureus lineages contained distinct sets of bovine-associated genes, consistent with multiple trajectories to host adaptation via gene acquisition.*

**Modern Humans.**

Msemburi. W., et al (2022) **The WHO estimates of excess mortality associated with the COVID-19 pandemic.** NATURE 612:doi.org/10.1038/s41586-022-05522-2 (available as a free pdf)

*Authors’ abstract: Reported statistics on COVID-19 mortality are problematic for many countries owing to variations in testing access, differential diagnostic capacity and inconsistent certification of COVID-19 as cause of death. Beyond what is directly attributable to it, the pandemic has caused extensive collateral damage that has led to losses of lives and livelihoods.*

*Here we report a comprehensive and consistent measurement of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic by estimating excess deaths, by month, for 2020 and 2021. We estimate 14.83 million excess deaths globally, 2.74 times more deaths than the 5.42 million reported as due to COVID-19 for the period.*

*The COVID-19 pandemic caught the world unprepared, and it has exacted a toll many would have considered inconceivable in the modern era before its emergence. As of 31 December 2021, more than 287 million confirmed cases of COVID-19 across the world had been reported to the World Health Organization (WHO) including 5.4 million deaths.*

*From the documenting of initial COVID-19 cases in Wuhan, China, in December of 2019 through to the WHO declaring it a pandemic in March of 2020, accurately tracking COVID-19 and its impact has been riddled with challenges.*

*An initial major challenge was developing the diagnostic tools to correctly identify the presence of the virus. A number of countries relied on pre-existing platforms to achieve this and they quickly adapted and scaled up the available technologies to allow for COVID-19 testing. However, many countries lacked such capacity.*

**LETTERS TO THE EDITOR**

[Editor’s remarks in square brackets. Please include your name and town when sending a comment. Email to opuntia57@hotmail.com]

FROM: Lloyd Penney  
Etobicoke, Ontario 2022-12-15

OPUNTIA #536: Halloween was a non-starter for us this year. No parties, no candies, and to be honest, we were happy with that. Money not spent, and saved for Christmas, and more on that later.

The Jack Benny story [Halloween episode] sounds somewhat familiar. The modern Halloween traditions are forgettable, just like most of the Christmas

traditions that try to make you nostalgic for a time that didn't exist, as if all Christmases should have been straight out of a Currier & Ives print.

The bicycle rentals in Toronto are being spread even further afield, which means probably a hundred or so rental bikes will go missing every year, even with built-in GPS systems. I have never had cause to use them, but I do see the supply trucks refilling the rental racks when all the bikes are out being rented.

[Calgary bicycle rentals never recovered from the introduction of e-scooters.]

Re: the Jessica Fletcher book. Either Cabot Cove, Maine had the highest murder rate in America, or Mrs. Fletcher was the most successful serial killer of all time. All those murders in Cabot Cove, and she was close to someone who was killed, or knew what was happening? A little too convenient.

The 2023 When Words Collide sounds very good, but I know our finances would never allow for it. I have also heard that this one coming up will be the last one.

[Alas, yes. Details from [www.whenwordscollide.org](http://www.whenwordscollide.org) Calgary has conventions for anime, horror, and comics, but When Words Collide was our last best hope for literary genre fiction. There are several ordinary literary festivals but they are for mainstream or CanLitCrit fiction, the kind few read outside the trendy crowd.]

We are looking into going to the Winnipeg NASFiC, Pemmi-Con, in 2023, but that doesn't look good, either. Perhaps the Buffalo NASFiC in 2024 will be more affordable.

OPUNTIA #537: There is often a Remembrance Day service somewhere in Etobicoke, different locations every year, but I have never been able to find out where in the 25 years I have been at this address.

[Just use Google, which is what I do. Next November, type "Remembrance Day 2023 Etobicoke" and I'm sure you'll find something.]

Our local newspaper, the ETOBICOKE GUARDIAN, does not and will not deliver to apartment buildings. Half the population of Etobicoke lives in apartment buildings, so the paper poorly serves its community. So, I am fairly ignorant about what happens here. Their online version covers a lot of

communities across the Greater Toronto area, and so much of the small details of the paper never make it online.

[Re: Penney appointed new editor of AMAZING.] And there I am. AMAZING STORIES is one reason I have been so busy. Yes, the learning curve has been steep, and the Kickstarter campaign we had going when I came on board was not successful, so we now have to see what we can do going forward, and perhaps fall back on the website for fresh fiction.

Let's see what the future brings. I am discovering that while the editor-in-chief position seems to be the great title, most of the work right now is being done by Kermit Woodall, who was and is the artistic director and managing editor, and is now the new publisher.

Just for the record, I also work part-time for PAL Communication, a business office in east-end Toronto where I copyedit their magazines (one paper, two electronic). I also have as a client D.J. Holmes, author of the Empire Rising series of e-book SF. I am currently working on the 16th book in the series, my fourth.

[Re: dealer bourses at conventions and fairs] We got to three shows this fall, the last one this past weekend, and for all three, sales were poor to nearly non-existent. All are valuable lessons about where to go and where not to go. We will stick with the successful shows we had in 2022, and go to them again in 2023.

OPUNTIA #538 has the most delicious looking cover I think I have ever seen. [Chocolate fudge cake slice] I'd like a slice of that, and that size, too. We eat out seldom, but are often able to get some good food for not too much. With this, we are keeping fairly trim. In fact, fast food isn't as good as what we can make at home. All those cakes, donuts, croissants and pies; pointless calories.

OPUNTIA #539: [Re: Alberta discontinuing licence plate stickers] In this province, you have to apply for your annual license plate stickers, but they are now free of charge. Ontario probably has more vanity plates than California, but anything that if the least bit witty or connected to a popular pop culture property, is probably already taken.

FROM: Theo Nelson  
Calgary, Alberta

2022-12-21 [Here is Theo's quarterly postcard. View side on the next page.]

winsyncolour.com

Winter,  
For some,  
A pleasant change  
Of seasons,  
For others,  
A harsh reality.

Our tilted journey  
Around our star,  
Brings many perspectives.  
The Marvel  
And the Majesty of Life,  
Is wedded to this simple,  
Eternal for us,  
Fact.

Bamle in Tree

"Seasonal  
Greetings!"

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To:

Date - \_\_\_\_\_

May Winter be wonderful  
\_\_\_\_\_

and fulfilling.  
\_\_\_\_\_

