

OPUNTIA

275

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Opuntia is published by Dale Speirs, Calgary, Alberta. Since you are reading this only online, my real-mail address doesn't matter. My eek-mail address (as the late Harry Warner Jr liked to call it) is: opuntia57@hotmail.com When sending me an emailed letter of comment, please include your name and town in the message.

HUMOUROUS FANTASY

by Dale Speirs

Fantasy based on medieval or sword-and-sorcery themes is a staple of publishers but not of my own reading. I do, however, enjoy the parodies thereof, which usually aren't that far away from the originals. Like television news or sports broadcasts, it is often difficult to distinguish the straight-faced version from the parody. As I thin out my library, I first re-read them before they are donated to the Co-op Book Exchange. Which brings me to a series of mass-market paperbacks I bought during the 1990s, all written by Andrew Harman.

THE SORCERER'S APPENDIX (1993) is the first of the series. It opens in the kingdom of Rhyngill, where the young King Klayth and his court are wondering why they are having trouble with their country's economy. The answer is to raise more taxes, such as increasing the Food Tithe (which sounds better than Food Tax) from 70% to 75%. Such logic would never be used in our world, of course. Snyderwinder, the Lord Chancellor of Rhyngill, is the power behind the throne.

Meanwhile, an entrepreneur makes his fortune harvesting dead lemmings that stampede annually off a cliff on the border of Rhyngill. Lemming fur is the latest fashion. This causes the adjacent kingdom of Cranachan to become greedy since the top of the cliff is their land and the lemmings live on Cranachan territory before going all suicidal on Rhyngillian land. Wars have been fought for less good reason. However, the Cranachans adhere to international law, and decide that instead of war they will do some massive engineering and move the cliff back far enough to ensure the lemmings land on Cranachan territory. Rhyngill takes exception, declares war, and loses in two and a half minutes, the time it takes the Cranachan army to swarm them.

Firkin, a young lad who wants to unseat the king as per standard fantasy practice, sets off on his quest, accompanied by his sidekick Hogshead. It turns out that Snyderwinder was a traitor. He was ostensibly working for Cranachan as a spy but had his own agenda. All ends well though, as Firkin befriends the King instead of deposing him, and the two countries sign a free-trade agreement.

The novel is fairly bland, and the author is obviously just feeling his way and following the usual template of such novels. This is what many readers want, something different but the same.

THE FROGS OF WAR (1994) is the follow-on novel. It opens in the village of Losa Llamas where thaumaturgical physicists, led by Arathoostra (Harman is not subtle about puns and name correspondences), have summoned up giant man-eating frogs, scientific name *Rana militaria*. Elsewhere, Snyderwinder is doing hard labour on a chain gang in the mountains, and is scheming for a way to escape and make a comeback.

The novel spends some time developing the supporting characters, such as Firkin's little sister Dawn, who was a sickly child in the previous novel but is now healthy and overcompensating with too much physical action. There is also Courgette, the cook's daughter, for whom the word Pollyanna was invented. Firkin's sidekick Hogshead found some books on magic and is studying to be a wizard, having tired of being a sidekick. I don't blame him. Ch'tin is a bookworm, the actual insect type critter, which ate through a ensorcelled book on magic, absorbed its powers, and is now a sentient talking worm. King Klayth is struggling to govern his kingdom. Boy-kings aren't taken very seriously, although when he sent Snyderwinder to the chain gang the kingdom's populace at least started paying lip service to His Majesty.

Snydewinder escapes as you knew he would, but the novel instead diverts to the attempts by Firkin and his plucky young band to have a magician send them back in time. After various alarums and excursions, they succeed in changing the course of history, and prevent Rhyngill from being defeated. This in turn would prevent Snydewinder from doing anything with the frogs of war. Huzzah! and all that. I was rather annoyed with this wish-fulfillment but Harman wasn't as syrupy as I thought he was going to be. When Firkin et al return to the present day, they find their land a smoking ruin, with nothing but blasted trees and smouldering embers, a consequence of having changed their timeline. Be careful what you wish for, as they learn.



Harman not only gets carried away with name puns, he also interjects references to real-world events and places that jar the reader out of the story. If a novel is to be a fantasy about magical kingdoms, it shouldn't mention contemporary things that no one from Ye Olde Kingdom would know about.

THE TOME TUNNEL (1994) picks up immediately after the last book. While the kids are scrambling about trying to undo what they have done, a group of con men posing as end-of-the-world preachers are busy bilking gullible yokels out of their property. It gets worse when Harman introduces a new timeline of fictional characters made real. Apparently a hole has formed in the Space-Tome Continuum because of the kids altering the timeline, and everyone is slipping through. Farce isn't particularly funny at the best of times and Harman does not have the knack to carry it off. Instead, the characters do a lot of shouting at each other, constantly go mad from fear or hysteria, and carry on like Keystone Cops. There are more than enough idiots to sustain the idiot plot. In real life you would be unable to restrain yourself from grabbing some of the characters and slapping them good and hard.

As the novel lurches to an end, the adjectives and exclamation marks splatter the pages like a bad accident in a paint factory. With a lot of handwaving and

unnecessary shouting, the Space-Tome Continuum is patched up and the supervillain suitably dispatched. Almost as an afterthought the con men are conned out of their loot. Too many alarums and excursions in this book.

101 DAMNATIONS (1995) continues on in Harman's universe but while the setting is the same, the cast of characters is completely different and not a moment too soon. At the time the novel was published, Al Gore had just invented the Internet, so this novel revolves around Cheiro Mancini, who specializes in creating virtual animals. Meanwhile, back at the desert, a goatherd discovers some scrolls in a cave and flogs them to an antiques dealer who in turn sells them on to a customer. No one realizes the scrolls are magical and imbued with power. The final subplot involves a court functionary named Dewlap trying to find a virtual pet who will please the Empress, a woman who has a bad habit of shouting "Off with their heads!". She ends up with 101 real demonic pets called damnations, which are white dogs with black spots, very large fangs, and glowing red eyes.

These plot threads gradually converge to the chaotic climax. Assorted mages learn about the scrolls and track them down, intending to use them for the good of us all. Mancini invents virtual pets which are independent of a display platform and have physical presence, which might be all right for a toy poodle but is awkward when the aforesaid mages hire him to create a dragon. And the Empress is missing one of her pet damnations. The scrolls are used by the mages to release immense amounts of thaumaturgical power, which in turn releases the Prime Evil. It had been bound and tossed into the pit 85 thousand centuries previous during the last battle between the forces of good and evil. Now the Prime Evil must be returned to its prison lest it destroy the planet and return it to primordial ooze, its native habitat. The final chapters reach new heights in florid adjectives and adverbs. Nobody speaks or says anything, they all shriek, scream, gasp, roar, shout, and every other bit of purple prose in the thesaurus. But finally the Prime Evil is contained, albeit thanks to an annoying deus ex machina Guardian who suddenly comes out of nowhere.



FAHRENHEIT 666 (1995) carries a few characters over from previous novels, as well as partially being set in Cranachan. Demons down below in Helian are busy campaigning for political office. One of them decides to get an edge by possessing humans topside and triggering a war, which is sure to send a fresh flood of arrivals to the afterlife and make him a winner in the bargain. The device used is a sort of gold lace that placed on one's head can enable the wearer to take possession of the target's mind and make him or her do anything. Complications ensue as the cast of characters run about both topside and the other place. As usual, the characters only scream or whimper, adjectives litter the pages like confetti, and people's minds go insane at the drop of a hat. Since nothing much happens at great length, I began skipping pages about two-thirds of the way through without missing anything.

I had the rest of the Harman books but didn't go any further. To read them one at a time at intervals of six months or so isn't bad, but taking them in continuous sequence is entirely too much.

ZINE LISTINGS

by Dale Speirs

[I only list zines from the Papernet. If the zine is posted on www.efanzines.com or www.fanac.org, then I don't mention them since you can read them just as easily yourself.]

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

[SF means science fiction. An apazine is a zine for an amateur press association distro, a perzine is a personal zine, sercon is serious-constructive, and a genzine is a general zine]

Banana Wings #55 (The Usual from Claire Brialey and Mark Plummer, 59 Shirley Road, Croydon, Surrey CR0 7ES, England) SF fanzine with extended reports of fannish matters, some reviews, and lots of letters of comment.

Chorrada #2 (The Usual from Kris Mininger, Calvo Sotelo 13B, #4B, Plasencia 10600, Caceres, Spain) Perzine with anecdotes reminiscing about past events, tying them in with a list of shoes he used to wear.

Cuneiform #6 and #7 (US\$2 for a sample copy from James Dawson, Box 950, Spokane, Washington 99210) This is an apa bundle, not just an apazine. Several zines stapled into one, discussing life on the Papernet (making me feel rather guilty).

Curt Phillips For TAFF (US\$5 from Curt Phillips, 19310 Pleasant View Drive, Abingdon, Virginia 24211) One-shot zine advocating Curt for the 2014 Trans-Atlantic Fan Fund (TAFF), which each year sends an SF fan on tour to SFdom on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, alternating direction each year. This year North America imposes on Europe, and Curt proposes to be the man to do it. No price is listed for this one-shot but it is a very nicely done compilation of Curt's past writings, and, I think, worth \$5 to him for the fund.

Flag #14 (The Usual from Andy Hooper, 11032 - 30 Avenue NE, Seattle, Washington 98125) The lead-off essay is about postcard collecting as an adjunct to genealogy, then letters of comment and zine reviews.

Jiant #1 (The Usual from Sandra Bond, 40 Cleveland Park Avenue, London E17 7BS, England) Genzine with personal news, some lunacy in the British radio world, and a controversy over the Hugo Awards host at the upcoming SF Worldcon in London.

Junk Zine #8 (The Usual from James Dawson, Box 950, Spokane, Washington 99210) Genzine with lots of letters of comment, zine reviews, and general comments.

Probe #159 (The Usual from Science Fiction and Fantasy South Africa, Box 781401, Sandton 2146, South Africa) SF clubzine that specializes in short fiction by its members.

Quasi Quote #9 (The Usual from Sandra Bond, 40 Cleveland Park Avenue, London E17 7BS, England) Genzine with articles on the emotional after-effects of the 9/11 attack, being caught in an English snowstorm and stranded for hours on the highways, a previously unpublished interview with Robert Sheckley, and some miscellany.)

Vanamonde #923 to #927 and #1081 (The Usual from John Hertz, 236 South Coronado Street #409, Los Angeles, California 90057) Single-sheet weekly apazine with short comments on a variety of topics.

SIGNS, SIGNS, EVERYWHERE A SIGN

by Dale Speirs

Architects seldom live or work in the buildings they design, and don't give a thought to those who have to maintain them. Downtown Calgary has hundreds of slab-sided buildings not really adapted for winter climates. The most common problem is ice or slabs of snow blowing off the roofs. The favoured response is to put out warning signs, as if that resolved everything. If a pedestrian gets hit, then it was his fault for not reading the sign. The photos herewith that I took in January 2014 are typical of what can be seen in the downtown core every winter.



Some skyscrapers have overhangs, which indicates the architect was thinking a bit. Most of the modern buildings are on one or two story pedestals, which eliminate the problem.



When a slab of snow or ice slides off the roof, it wafts outward a bit rather than plummeting straight down. This is because of the boundary-layer air current along the slab side of the building that pushes it outward. A wise pedestrian therefore hugs the building wall when walking along the sidewalk. The photo above shows it beautifully.

On the next page is one of the funnier applications of falling ice signs. I took this photo in August 2013 inside a skyscraper lobby. A water pipe in the ceiling had sprung a leak and the janitor didn't have enough pylons to block off the wet floor, so he used an ice sign. We get cold weather in Calgary but not that cold.



THE MAN FROM MONTENEGRO: PART 3

by Dale Speirs

[Parts 1 and 2 appeared in issues #252 and #253 in 2012.]

Rex Stout (1886-1975) wrote 33 novels and 39 short stories between 1934 and 1974 involving the gargantuan detective Nero Wolfe and his assistant Archie Goodwin. Wolfe is generally ranked as fictional detective #2 after Sherlock Holmes in terms of greatness. Wolfe is a recluse living in a Manhattan brownstone with a greenhouse on the roof for his fabulous orchid collection. He is a big man in every way, one way of which is because he enjoys good food too much and exercise too little. Archie Goodwin is a handsome skirt-chaser who does the legwork for him and narrates the stories.



The earliest novels are the best. During his final years, Stout injected a bit of preaching into the canon, being a strong campaigner for the political causes of his day. The problem with topical writing is that it fades in brilliance quickly. Too many references to events of the day that every contemporary reader knew about become sludge in the eye of later readers, who will miss the snappy allusions. The stories under review here are from the early era, when the star of Stout (and Wolfe) was rising high. The novels are page-turners that I read in one sitting.

The Contract.

THE RUBBER BAND (1936), the third novel of the series, begins with Clara Fox, a young woman falsely accused of stealing \$30,000, but who is also mixed up in a claim for money from a titled English nobleman. The Englishman, the Marquis of Clivers, was in 1895 a reckless young expatriate in the Old West who was about to be strung up under lynch law. He bought his way out with a promise to pay members of a gang led by Rubber Coleman part of his inheritance when he inherited his title in due time. The gang were jocularly known as the Rubber Band to the townsfolk.

Fast-forward forty years to New York City, and the descendants of the gang, except Coleman, who has mysteriously disappeared, are trying to assert their claim to the money. They have no copy of the contract, no proof the debt was owed, and naturally turn to Wolfe to get the money. Clivers is now a British diplomat with immunity, who easily dismisses the claim as extortion and blackmail. The case would stop there except that the claimants are being murdered one by one. The police are involved, with lots of shouting, serving of warrants, and tailing suspects. The accusation of theft against Fox becomes more and more entangled with the claim; someone set her up, and it may be Coleman, now living under an assumed identity. Wolfe sorts it all out in a final J'accuse! meeting in his office.

As with the rest of the Wolfe canon, the interest is not in the plots, which are routine, but the conversational interplay between characters. Stout was a master at writing dialogue. Wolfe is unsurpassed at evading police officers without actually lying to their faces. He interrogates clients and suspects mercilessly. If they put up a wall, he outflanks them. If they turn to face the flanking questions, he twists the interrogation about in another direction. His stubbornness keeps him asking questions about the little details that no one else thinks to enquire about. Archie Goodwin is more believable than Dr. Watson, and is a three-dimensional character. The regular characters are well drawn, not cardboard cutouts.

The Secret.

The next novel in the series was THE RED BOX (1937), which begins with the murder of a young fashion model who ate poisoned candy from a new box that she stole from someone else. Who that someone else was occupies the opening pages, for he was obviously the intended target, and is eventually discovered to

be Boyden McNair, owner of the fashion house. There is also a young heiress about to come into her fortune, an uncle who has been administrator of her estate during her childhood and who refuses to give an account of it, and assorted annoying relatives and parasitic family friends.

The chocolate box incident frightens McNair into making a new will naming Wolfe as the executor of his estate. McNair has all kinds of headaches and is living on aspirin tablets. Not surprising, considering all his wacky relatives, the pressures of running a business, and the attempted murder. McNair emphasizes to Wolfe that the most important part of his estate is a red box that contains documents that will put away for life certain people if not send them to the electric chair. Before he can tell Wolfe where the red box is, he takes some more aspirins that turn out to have been coated with cyanide and abruptly departs this vale of tears for the next world. The chase commences for the red box, as Goodwin and Wolfe's other legmen hunt here, there, and everywhere for it, often crossing paths with the police, who are also searching for it. And, of course, family and friends of the deceased want those documents, or at least one guilty person does. One of those suspects is next in line for the morgue, done in by an elaborate poison booby trap. (A basic rule of murder mysteries is that there is never just one murder. At least one supporting character and/or a prime suspect must meet their ends prematurely.)

No one can find the red box, so Wolfe decides to fabricate one as a decoy and use it at one of his famous J'accuse! meetings in his office. The denouement is somewhat telegraphed but not particularly so. All the family members are not as they appear, the heiress having been switched at birth with another baby, and others assuming false identities. The murderer is given the opportunity by Wolfe to look at the contents of the red box, and commits suicide.

Goodwin complains throughout the story that Wolfe has too many clients, as the various family members hire and fire him. The family members are drawn true to life. One yearns to slap the chatterbox uncle in the face just to get him to shut up, while the supposed heiress is a silly young woman with the brains of a Hollywood starlet and less common sense. The characters, while slightly exaggerated, are believable. This novel emphasizes how people get along with others they despise because they have to, and cannot go storming away.

Rumours Of War.

OVER MY DEAD BODY (1939) was published while the USA was vacillating about entering World War Two. Since it was still a neutral nation before Pearl Harbour, and Manhattan was a financial capital, the European combatants or soon-to-be combatants were roaming Wall Street looking for ready cash. Yugoslavian royalty was among those, sympathetic to the Nazis but preferring American dollars in exchange for investment concessions. Nero Wolfe was a Montenegrin who had served in the Serbian Army during the Balkan Wars that were a prelude to World War One.

This novel reveals that during his time there, he adopted an orphaned girl and placed her in a safe home after he left for America. Now she has immigrated to New York City with a friend, and the two women are teaching at a fencing club. The story begins when the daughter is falsely accused of stealing some diamonds and runs to Wolfe for help. That matter is quickly solved but since this is a novel and not a short story, other events happen, such as the murder of a patron of the club, who was speared with a sword just after the daughter had finished a lesson with him. The suddenly-deceased was a British spy, there are other Yugoslavs skulking around, the Wall Street bankers and embassies would prefer that matters be hushed up, and the police have to tiptoe about gathering evidence.

Wolfe and the police are hampered because there are conflicting stories about what happened, and it is evident that everyone, including the daughter, is lying about everything. Nothing can be taken at face value, so Wolfe has to sift through all the stories to find the truth. He interrogates each suspect and bogs them down in contradictions to force them to cough up at least one nugget of useful information, which then must be correlated with the physical evidence.

The MacGuffin of the story is a valuable document relating to the Yugoslavian sale of concessions, which is constantly passing from hand to hand but is mostly in Wolfe's control. As per tradition, a second body turns up, this time in the daughter's apartment, that of a Nazi spy. From there, events proceed quickly, secret identities are unmasked, and the J'accuse! meeting culminates in an attempt on Wolfe's life that leaves the murderer dead. Rex Stout was not Slavic but had the advice of a Serbian friend in writing the Wolfe novels. This novel is sprinkled with assorted Serbian phrases, from Wolfe as well as the Yugoslavians. As Goodwin narrates the story, he makes fun of what to him is gibberish. The ending is a bit rushed, but overall the novel reads well.

WHERE THERE'S A WILL (1940) begins with a delegation from the upperclass Hawthorne family, upset that their recently deceased wealthy brother Noel cut them out of his will and left his fortune to his mistress. Wolfe normally wouldn't bother with such a case as the family would be better served by a lawyer, but he needs the money, having overspent on orchids and truffles. The will quickly takes a back seat when NYPD Inspector Cramer barges into the meeting to advise everyone that Noel's death is now considered a murder. His manner of death isn't explained for several pages yet, but it is finally revealed that Noel died during a supposed hunting accident when his shotgun discharged while he was handling it. Supposed because the forensic lab determined that the gun had been wiped clean of fingerprints after it was fired.

The Hawthorne heirs and their hangers-on are a very annoying bunch of complainers and eccentrics. Wolfe has his hands full trying to keep them under control, and generally fails. The second body shows up in due time; she was, of course, the major suspect in the first murder so that lets her out. The will edges its way back into the story as it may have been a forgery. Another side story appears when it is revealed that one of the family made a fortune in Argentinian investments. It is learned that he had inside knowledge from another family member who is a cabinet minister in the federal government and who arranged for a war loan to Argentina. The revelation would destroy the latter's career and reputation if it became public knowledge.

It is one of the rare occasions when Wolfe is forced to leave his house. He travels into the wilderness of uptown Manhattan to inspect the Hawthorne mansion, where the food is just so common and he quickly is besieged by the family, each of whom proposes a different and conflicting plan to get off murder charges by some sort of perjury or bribery. Stout does a good job of misleading the reader in this novel. One of the Hawthorne sisters seems to be the culprit for most of the novel. In the final meeting Wolfe initially paints a picture that names a family friend as the killer, then suddenly shifts the spotlight to the true murderer.

You Shall Hear Of Wars.

NOT QUITE DEAD ENOUGH (1944) is a fix-up novel consisting of two novellas. The USA is finally in the war, and Major Archie Goodwin is with Army Intelligence, while Wolfe is actually exercising, dieting, and providing free help to the government to investigate suspicious matters. Wolfe is a patriot. He declares that he wants to serve in the front lines because he didn't kill

enough Germans in the Balkan wars, but of course no one takes him seriously on this. His duty was to wait in his brownstone and investigate when called. They also serve who only sit and wait.

In the first adventure, the new background is set up. Wolfe is no longer a recluse but leaves his house many times on duty. Goodwin is usually one brash remark away from a court martial. The case is an ordinary type of murder, a woman found strangled. Suspicion is thrown about like sand, onto Goodwin's girlfriend, Goodwin himself, and the usual suspects, who live in the same apartment building where the victim did. The story ends in a lackluster denouement. In the final J'accuse! meeting, Wolfe names the killer but with little corroborating evidence. Stout must have realized this, as he did some handwaving with an explanation of how the time of day of the murder proves the guilt, but one doubts a jury would accept that. The culprit is hauled away in handcuffs, but the reader leaves the story thinking that any defense lawyer would easily win an acquittal on grounds of doubt.

The second half of the novel reads better. Wolfe is asked to investigate the leakage of industrial secrets and the unexplained death of an Army Intelligence officer investigating it. Another murder occurs, this one a sabotaged suitcase that kills the officer-in-charge. The main suspect is a WAC Sergeant who is entirely too smart for her own good, and the case seems to build against her. There is a J'accuse! meeting, but it veers off into a completely unexpected path.

Instead of naming the guilty man, Wolfe invites him for a ride to a remote park, where a hand grenade is placed in the middle of the park and the accused left to do the honourable thing. Wolfe appears to be viciously cold-blooded in dealing with it this way, but the killer was a man of great consequence in Washington. Wolfe explains to Goodwin that it not only saves the cost of a trial, but that the government could not afford the distraction in the middle of the war.

This was done in real-life in many countries. The pilot responsible for dropping the atomic bomb on Nagasaki botched the job because he was deliberately late forming up for the flight to Japan and arrived over target off course, causing the bomb to detonate behind a hill which deflected much of the blast. As much as the high command wanted to court-martial him, they had to let it go. Winston Churchill quietly shuffled many incompetent officers out of the line of command during the early years of the war.

YOU DO NOT KNOW THE DAY OR THE HOUR

by Dale Speirs

The Mountains Quake Before Him And The Hills Melt Away.

Predicting the End Times is an ingrained instinct in humans, regardless of culture or religious belief. Our modern times have clothed many such armageddons in scientific drapery, but there is little difference between an ancient Israelite vowing God's vengeance and Al Gore making predictions about the climate when he wasn't busy inventing the Internet.

2012 AND THE END OF THE WORLD (2011, hardcover) by Matthew Restall and Amara Solari is a look at the most recent outburst of millenarianism. As you know, Professor, the world came to an end on December 21, 2012, because the Mayan calendar came to an end. Why the Mayans should be considered as having the definitive calendar is puzzling. The Mayans themselves, who are not an extinct race as many people believe, pointed out that their calendar is cyclical, not linear. For the prophets who never let facts get in the way of their beliefs, this was irrelevant. Cyclical calendars are not uncommon; the Chinese system is the best known. Since it repeats on a twelve-year cycle, it isn't used by prophets because there would be too many false alarms.

The Mayans had solar (365 days) and lunar (28 days) calendars like most cultures, but also developed a 5,126 year calendar known to us as the Long Count. This calendar is indefinite with no end, and some ancient Mayan texts extrapolated it billions of years into the future. It happened that the 13th cycle of the Long Count ended on 2012-12-21. The writings of the Mayan texts are sparse and ambiguous. They are capable of being interpreted by modern minds in various ways, from end-of-the-world to new-world-being-born to a simple reset of the calendar, in the same way we reset our calendars every January 1 to a new year. Naturally there were many prophets from the lunatic fringe who put their own interpretations on it, hence the media hysteria about 2012.

The Long Count was used by Mayans for religious and political purposes, and was not part of daily life as the solar and lunar calendars were. The start date of the Long Count is not tied to any significant event in Mayan history or astronomical alignment. As their culture declined, so did the use of the Long Count. The latest known reference to the Long Count by Mayans was dated to AD 910. By the time the Spanish arrived six centuries later, it was not in common use anymore.

2012-12-21 is written as 13.0.0.0.0 in the Long Count but it was also simultaneously 1.0.0.0.0.0, with the extra digit indicating the start of a new cycle. December 22 was therefore 1.0.0.0.0.1 of the new cycle. The archaeological evidence that has accumulated indicates that the ancient Mayans were not apocalyptic, backed by the testimony of today's Mayans. The interpretation that they were was added by Christian archaeologists who misread the Mayan hieroglyphics in terms of the Book of Revelation. This was recanted as new evidence came to light in the 1990s and early 2000s, including better translations of the glyphs. By then, unfortunately, the UFO and other fringe cults had latched on to the Armageddon interpretations and took over with their own scenarios.

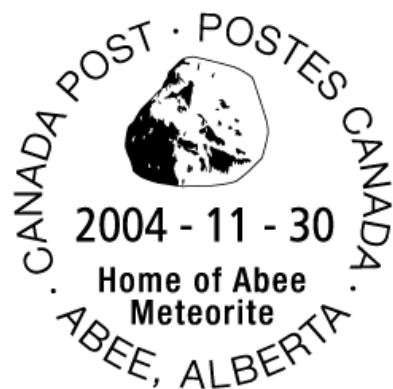
This book sums up with a look at people who want to believe the End Times are nigh, not just 2012-12-21 but Seventh Day Adventists, comet cults, and all the others. Scientific ignorance among the general public has not changed from a century ago. Countercultures accept ancient "wisdom" uncritically. Apocalypses are popular because they are written on a grand scale, with the forces of good and evil struggling for the fate of the universe. Everyday worries become trivial. No one stops in the middle of a disaster movie to fret about their mortgage payment.

And The Stars Shall Fall From Heaven.

INCOMING! (2011, trade paperback) by Ted Nield begins with a few anecdotes about meteorite falls in various places around the world. On a worldwide basis, about 95% of all recovered meteorites are stony, 4% are iron, and the remainder are stony-iron. The oldest meteorite fall whose precise date was recorded and was witnessed and which still survives is the Ensisheim, France, meteorite. Its fall was seen by the inhabitants of the district on 1492-11-07, who soon found its crater and recovered the 150-kg stone. Despite Ensisheim being in Alsace, the war-torn disputed area between France and Germany, the meteorite still remains there. It was preserved for centuries in the church tower and nowadays is in a municipal museum. Older meteorites have been collected as finds lying in the ground but were not seen to fall at a documented time. The most famous example is the Kaaba, which was venerated by pagan Arabs, then co-opted by Muslims. All Muslims pray toward Mecca, the centre of which is the Grand Mosque, and in the centre of which is the Kaaba, mounted in a shrine around which the pilgrims circulate.

It was a long time before the origin of meteorites was understood. Savants declared they were stones hit by lightning, or if a crater was found, the product of vulcanism. By the early 1800s enough falls had been studied to establish that meteorites came from above the sky, not within it. In the late 1970s and 1980s, a new idea began to take hold, that of extinction-level event meteorites. A buried crater underneath Chicxulub, Mexico, was identified as one of the causes of dinosaur extinction, although not the only cause. (At the same time as the strike, the Deccan Traps of India were forming, a massive outflow of basaltic lava 2 km thick and covering most of the subcontinent. The heat from this flow roasted the planet.)

For others, meteorites were not the end of life but the beginning. Fred Hoyle and other astronomers believed that life began in space and was brought to Earth by meteorites. Complex organic molecules are known to form spontaneously in space just as easily as on Earth, from which cellular life evolved. Ergo, life came from space. Since no one will ever find a fossil molecule in the act of transforming into a cell, this field of scientific enquiry is wide open, with no inconvenient facts to get in the way of an elegant hypothesis.



THE METEORITES OF ALBERTA (2009, trade paperback) by Anthony Whyte discusses a subset of astronomy where rural villages such as Abee and Bruderheim rank prominently because a famous meteorite fell in their vicinity.

The oldest observed fall of a meteorite in Alberta, albeit not dated, is the Iron Creek meteorite, which fell to earth an

unknown number of centuries ago. When it blazed across the sky it was seen by thousands of aboriginals. Whether Cree or Siksika (the two main tribes in Alberta), they attributed it to a sign from Manitou, the Great Spirit, and set out in search of it. Scouts spread the word after it was found on a hilltop, a massive iron weighing 175 kg. The tribes were normally enemies but converged in peace and made it a holy site. It is an iron meteorite and gave the creek its name. Scientifically it is an average meteorite and analyses have not shown anything exciting about it. Culturally it was of great importance to the First Nations because it looks vaguely like a human head in profile and was

considered a direct sign from Manitou himself. The meteorite rested on the hill for centuries until a Metis (half-breed) hauled it away to Edmonton in 1870 and sold it to a missionary. The following year it was taken to eastern Canada, first a college in Cobourg, Ontario, then in 1892 to Toronto. It was repatriated to the Provincial Museum of Alberta in Edmonton in 1973. There are ongoing talks with the native peoples, who have always protested at its theft from the fall site, and perhaps someday it may be returned to Iron Creek.

Whyte then discusses a number of Alberta meteorites, one by one. The vast majority have been found by farmers cultivating their land. In Alberta, few fields are ploughed; they are gone over by duckfoot cultivators, which are horizontal V-shaped blades that travel below the surface and cut off the roots of weeds. Duckfoots are lighter than ploughs and when they hit a big rock, the tractor operator will know it. I grew up on a farm and drove a tractor as a young teenager before I drove a car, and spent countless hours driving around and around in circles in grain fields. The occasional big rock I hit with the duckfoots had to be lugged to the edge of the field. The vast majority of rocks in Alberta fields are quartzite, sandstone, or shale. At rare intervals one of them would be an extremely heavy iron rock that got the farmer's attention. Everyone learns about meteorites in school, so his first thought would be to contact the nearest university or museum.

The most witnessed meteorite in modern Alberta was the Bruderheim meteorite, which blazed a trail across the sky on 1960-03-04-01h00. The village is only 50 km northwest of Edmonton and the trail was seen from the big city. The meteorite fell just at closing time for the taverns, so thousands of people heading home witnessed it. Since it was winter, the blackened craters caused by the fragments were easily spotted in the snow-covered fields. Half the population of Bruderheim and Edmonton rushed out the next day to search for fragments. It was a veritable gold rush.

Whyte also considers general issues of meteorites, the most obvious being ownership. Until fairly recently, meteorites were not covered by any law in Canada and no one could establish title to them. There were frequent disputes as to whether the finder or the landowner had title to any meteorites found on the land. That was remedied by the Federal Cultural Property Export and Import Act, which explicitly states that the landowner has title. It also specifies that meteorites are protected cultural property and cannot be exported without permits and scientific examination. Meteorite hunting is like amateur astronomy, where an average person can still make a contribution to science.

**TRANSIT FANNING IN CALGARY:
PART 6. NOT YOUR FATHER'S BUS**

by Dale Speirs

The suburban buses I normally take are the standard-length big buses, and only rarely do I use a route that has double-length articulated buses. They are impressive, and it is quite a long walk to the back when you get on. The photo immediately below shows an example at a timing point downtown.



At bottom left is an articulated bus from the Airdrie Inter-City Express. The town of Airdrie is a half-hour drive north of Calgary on Highway 2, and is a commuter suburb.

The articulated buses don't pay on average suburban service routes. They are normally only used on the crosstown and circle routes, which have the greatest ridership, especially during peak commuting hours. A friend of mine who drives them says they are no worse at turning corners than towing a trailer. One has to swing wide a bit on the turn but it is like driving a semi-trailer. The only time I've ridden on one in the suburbs was when it was a fill-in for the regular bus that had broken down.

The photo at bottom right is an experimental bus powered by liquified natural gas. This type of bus is easily identified by its extra height, as the fairings cover the pressurized tanks. There is no energy saving in natural gas but it does burn cleaner, so it reduces engine maintenance and keeps the urban air clearer.



THINNING OUT MY BOOKS

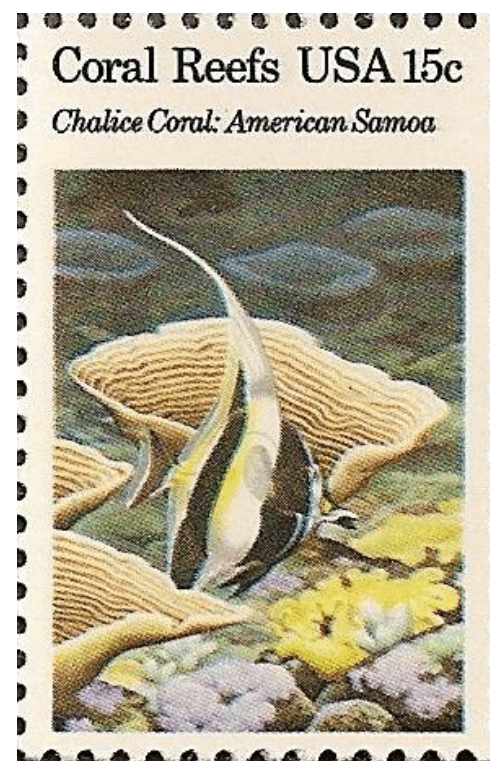
by Dale Speirs

I've been thinning out books I will never read again, donating some straight to the Co-op Book Exchange and re-reading others for one last time before donating them. Over three decades, I accumulated three rooms full of books, thinking they would be part of my old-age pension and I could sell them en masse for a tidy sum. The Internet has destroyed that idea. There is only one secondhand bookstore left in Calgary, who aren't paying any decent sums, and I am not going to spend my retirement hunched over a computer screen selling books one by one on eBay. No one else in my family is interested, so the books that aren't specified in my will as donations to specialized libraries will have to go now or run the risk of being dumped into the blue bin by my heirs.

My library included a number of volumes of the Doonesbury cartoon series by Garry Trudeau. Like most topical humour, his comic strips do not age well. What once seemed of importance and was funny has faded away over time to just another tedious political kerfluffle. One book caught my interest enough to re-read it before donating it to the Co-op Book Exchange. TALES FROM THE MARGARET MEAD TAPROOM (1979, trade paperback) is by Nicholas von Hoffman and Garry Trudeau, and is about a trip they and some friends took to American Samoa (not to be confused with Western Samoa). The text is by von Hoffman and is illustrated with the complete sequence of daily comic strips that Trudeau had previously published about Duke, one of his characters, taking up the governorship of American Samoa. Duke, who had many adventures in places around the world, usually related to topical issues of the day, is based on gonzo journalist Hunter S. Thompson. It is a true story that Thompson lusted after being appointed Governor of American Samoa, and in his autobiography he wrote that it was one of the greatest disappointments of his life that his friends in high places never gave him the job.

As von Hoffman writes, American Samoa is a colony accidentally acquired by the USA for which they have no need, unless they want a staging point to invade Australia. The Samoans are the archetypical lazy natives who can't make anything work properly. Their only major export is younger sons to either the National Football League or the U.S. Army. The latter maintains a recruiting station on the island because they can always use a good supply of big guys. The former likewise, because the average size of a Samoan native is in the refrigerator class, always well suited for defensive linemen.

von Hoffman documents the frustrations of the American bureaucrats who try to make the Samoans live like they do, with regular jobs and at least a modicum of following proper procedure. They are constantly stymied because in Samoa, free food grows on every tree, the land is communal so you can build a hut wherever you want, and no one ever froze to death. This is the reason why Europeans and Americans had so much trouble when they expanded into the tropics. Why work when you don't have to? However, cultural imperialism is slowly doing what brute force couldn't. To buy all the electronic doodads for their kids, and fancy clothes for themselves, paper currency must be had, forcing the Samoans into a wage economy. Most work for the government, since there is no industry other than the fish cannery, no mineral resources (which is why the imperialistic powers left it alone), and no factory owner in his right mind would locate a branch plant so far away from the main trade routes.



The book is good reading, with lots of dry wit as von Hoffman recounts the constant tug-of-war between the Samoans and the Government of American Samoa. GAS, as it is known, was destined from the beginning to be a dumping ground for political bagmen, expatriate alcoholics, and Graham Greene wanna-be novelists. The usual government boondoggles have the advantage in American Samoa that no one in continental USA is prepared to waste time investigating them because the amounts are too small. \$100,000 here or there doesn't even show up as a line item; it just comes out of petty cash.

The Samoans are not an oppressed people yearning to be free. They recognize good cargo when they see it, and the white folk, far from lashing away with whips, have too much trouble trying to get the water supply to function on one of the wettest islands in the world.

THE RAILROAD THAT CAME OUT AT NIGHT (1977, hardcover) is by railfan Frank Kyper about the shortline railways of his native Boston and adjacent areas of Massachusetts in the post-WW2 era. He writes with an enthusiastic style that helps overcome the dreary fact that during the post-war era the railways were in exponential decline. He was writing about the fall of an empire, as economic recession and trucking destroyed a major infrastructure. This is not a sweeping history of the Boston rail system but a series of articles about railfanning while the subject of interest becomes extinct.

The first chapter deals with the Union Freight R.R., a subsidiary of bigger railways which was intended to interconnect them across neutral territory along the Boston waterfront. The tracks were level with the asphalt in streetcar style so that the streets could be used by trucks and cars. The UFRR only operated at night to move a few dozen boxcars in and out of the waterfront for the few remaining businesses left that still used freight trains. But the end was nigh, and Kyper documented the slow decline. Maintenance was “deferred”, as the accountants liked to put it, and the yard engines were obsolete castoffs held together with duct tape. The trains had to move at dead slow speeds because the tracks were so warped. Since the asphalt was at the top level of the rails, any derailments were easily solved by backing up the train a few feet, having the engine driver jump out and pound the rail back into shape with a sledgehammer and chisel, and then carrying on. Drunks returning home from the bar were not too serious a problem because the trains moved so slowly that even a pedestrian could amble out of the way. The end came in 1970, and the city fathers finally managed to clear it out for redevelopment.

Kyper discusses the Boston & Maine R.R., which ran into financial difficulties because it used the hub-and-spoke system of rail lines. All its tracks radiated out from Boston in a pinwheel to specific factories or villages. The problem was that there was no way to ship in long-haul mode. When the factories began dwindling, so did the BMRR. Not mentioned by Kyper because it was after this book was published, is that airlines later tried the same system. They had the advantage that there was no physical infrastructure to maintain between points, so the hub-and-spoke method was suitable for them, if not for their customers.

Boston’s South Station was one of those grand railway terminals built in the palatial style when things were expected to last. In its glory days it was the busiest terminal in the USA, exceeding even the Grand Central station of New York City. But when passenger rail traffic vanished, the building was nibbled to death, not just figuratively, but a section at a time demolished. Part of the

structure managed to survive redevelopment in the middle 1970s. Adjacent to the South Station was an abandoned rail yard called the Dover Street terminal, used for freight trains and rolling stock maintenance.

When it came time to demolish it and redevelop, the contractors discovered that it had been built on top of an older, forgotten rail yard called the Old Colony yard which had been six feet above sea level. When the Dover Street complex was built in the 1890s, the railway simply buried the Old Colony yard under an additional twenty feet of fill. Buried as in Pompeii; they left the heavy stone buildings as is, filled their interiors with dredged material from the harbour, and buried the tracks, roundtables, and everything else where they stood. As the 1970s redevelopment began, the site engineers discovered the abandoned buildings the hard way when the pile drivers and tunneling moles hit the massive stone walls and foundations. No one could find a map of the ancient yard, so engineers had to stand next to the drivers and moles and make moment-by-moment guesses as to which way the piles or ducts should go. After the project was completed, one of the engineers went into a nearby restaurant and only then discovered that it had a large wall painting depicting the Old Colony yard, which showed the location of every building and track!

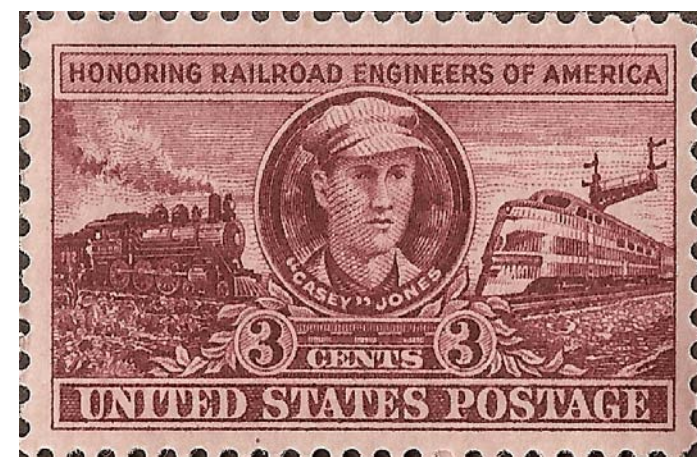
Boston railfans were delighted in 1969 when British millionaire (when a million was worth something) Alan Pegler brought over the famous Flying Scotsman engine for tours across the USA. Kyper goes into detail about the trouble and strife involved in bringing the train over, getting it unloaded off a barge in Boston harbour, certified for travel on American railroads, and trying to make money. The railfans were enthusiastic but income did not match outgo, and Pegler went bankrupt. Matters were not helped by the rainy weather that dogged the engine every time an excursion was run.

The recession of 1970 cost Kyper his job as a public relations man for a state agency, and since no one was hiring P.R. men in those years, he survived by getting a job as a crossing tender in Boston. In Alberta, railroad crossings are either automated lights or look-before-crossing, but in Boston there were municipal regulations which said that all crossings had to have lights and gates. Most were being automated but many were still operated by a man walking out of his shack and cranking the gates down just before a train came through. That was what Kyper did for three years until he was able to find a new P.R. job in December 1973. He relates anecdotes of his time as a crossing guard. There were drivers who tried to beat the gates and got the roofs of their cars bashed in. They never stopped to assess the damage but hightailed out of the area. Kyper

was working a gate in the Chelsea area on October 14, 1973, when a great fire destroyed the neighbourhood. The area was old wooden warehouses and abandoned factories, a strong dry wind was blowing, and when a warehouse fire erupted the rest was obvious. The neighbourhood was reduced to ashes and only his guard shack survived, although the paint bubbled and the shingles were charred from radiant heat.

The Fore River R.R. was in the industrial area of Quincy Point near East Braintree. It was only 2.36 miles long and served a shipyard founded by Thomas Watson of telephone fame, as in “Come here Watson, I want you”. After becoming wealthy from the telephone business, he branched out into building ships for the U.S. Navy. He needed the railroad to move heavy pieces of steel from one place to another within the shipyard or to and from the docks. The FRRR is unusual among shortline railways in that it only had one customer, which also owned it. The yard was later bought by General Dynamics, which continued to run the railway.

Kyper concludes his book with a brief history of railfan excursions from the 1920s to the 1970s. The original emphasis was on the trains and tracks, but as costs rose, railfans had to bring in “daisy pickers” to help pay the cost. These were non-railfan passengers who just wanted a day out in the country and had no interest in the trains themselves. They got their nickname because at stops they did not photograph the train or trestles but wandered about admiring the scenery and picking wildflowers. His account reminded me of the same sort of thing that goes on with SF conventions, the big tent versus small tent argument.



All told, the book was a pleasant read. I am not a railfan but I read it with interest, and you don't need to know the lingo to enjoy the stories.

MUCH ADO ABOUT ME (1956, hardcover) is the first half of Fred Allen's autobiography, covering his childhood and years in vaudeville and Broadway. He died suddenly before completing this book, so it cuts off abruptly as he began writing about his Broadway career when it was just starting. Allen wrote the second half of his autobiography first, TREADMILL TO OBLIVION, dealing with his glory years in old-time radio (OTR) as one of the greatest comedians of the 1900s. Today he is forgotten by the general public, but OTR fans such as myself still listen to his nasal Bostonian twang. Many of his shows are free mp3 downloads from: www.archive.org/details/radioprograms

He was born in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1894 as John Florence Sullivan. His brother arrived two years later and the following year his mother died, leaving him with no memory of her. There being no day care in those days, his father moved in with a sister-in-law, Aunt Lizzie to Allen. The extended family lived in poverty, and various members came and went depending on their circumstances. Years later, Allen's father remarried but Allen chose to stay with Aunt Lizzie. The first job Allen had was working in a library, then later worked at a piano store as a debt collector (at which he was very good). Along the way he became involved in local talent shows and won a few prizes. The money on the stage was better than hounding debtors and more fun to earn, so Allen began performing in local vaudeville theatres as a “coast defender”, a performer who never went more than a day's travel from Boston. He was supporting himself and Aunt Lizzie and thought of vaudeville mainly in terms of how much it paid.

Allen started out as a juggler, added some comic patter, and as the years went by the amount of juggling decreased and the amount of comedy increased. In those days, if you had made all the theatre circuits or had been blacklisted by an impresario, you changed your name and your act and started afresh. There was no radio or movies, newspapers didn't print photos, and stage theatres were the only form of mass public entertainment other than sports. The demand for new acts for theatres was tremendous. Allen, like all the others, started out at the penny theatres. As the quality of his act improved, he worked his way up to the big time. Initially he was afraid to leave Boston because he was the sole support of Aunt Lizzie, but eventually took the big step and went to New York City, then Australia, in that order. He faithfully mailed most of his paycheques to Aunt Lizzie while gallivanting about the world. As a juggler he worked under the name of Freddy St. James, then dropped the Saint part, and finally settled on Fred Allen.

He spends quite a bit of time detailing the world of vaudeville, which had been dead for three decades by the time he wrote this book. He describes the slang and type of actors on the theatre circuits, who worked five shows a day and seven theatres a week and loved it. The money was terrible at the low end and was quickly spent at the high end, but the performers couldn't live without the applause and laughter. They lived in cheap boarding houses, traveled second-class as a matter of course, and were dreadfully abused by theatre owners and agents. But it was their life, and to them a respectable day job in an office was hell.

Allen started to ease out of vaudeville in the late 1920s as it began to be killed off by movies and radio. 1926 is considered the death year of vaudeville, although it lingered for a while in small towns out in the boondocks. Allen settled in New York City, which had the population to support a large number of stage theatres. He gradually shifted into Broadway, and about this time met the love of his life, Portland Hoffa, whom he married and only death separated them. She had been born in Portland, Oregon, and her family left when she was a few months old so she never saw her birthplace. She worked as a chorus girl and they were introduced by mutual friends. In later years, she co-starred with him on radio, but that is in his other book.

Allen concludes with stories about the Broadway shows he was in, from the successes to the more interesting disasters. He usually worked "in one", meaning he did his routines by himself in front of the curtain while the stagehands shifted scenery behind for the next act. The book concludes with an account of one failed show, where he battled a prima donna who was a legend in her own mind, and an impresario who thought changing casts and writers daily would help improve the show. Alas, it went down in flames, and alas, the book cuts off sharply as Allen died from a heart attack a few hours after composing the last paragraph.



SEEN IN THE LITERATURE

Lin, J., et al (2014) **China's international trade and air pollution in the United States.** PROCEEDINGS OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES USA 111:1736–1741

Authors' abstract: *China is the world's largest emitter of anthropogenic air pollutants, and measurable amounts of Chinese pollution are transported via the atmosphere to other countries, including the United States. However, a large fraction of Chinese emissions is due to manufacture of goods for foreign consumption. Here, we analyze the impacts of trade-related Chinese air pollutant emissions on the global atmospheric environment, linking an economic-emission analysis and atmospheric chemical transport modeling. We find that in 2006, 36% of anthropogenic sulfur dioxide, 27% of nitrogen oxides, 22% of carbon monoxide, and 17% of black carbon emitted in China were associated with production of goods for export.*

For each of these pollutants, about 21% of export-related Chinese emissions were attributed to China-to-US export. Atmospheric modeling shows that transport of the export-related Chinese pollution contributed 3–10% of annual mean surface sulfate concentrations and 0.5–1.5% of ozone over the western United States in 2006. This Chinese pollution also resulted in one extra day or more of noncompliance with the US ozone standard in 2006 over the Los Angeles area and many regions in the eastern United States. On a daily basis, the export-related Chinese pollution contributed, at a maximum, 12–24% of sulfate concentrations over the western United States. As the United States outsourced manufacturing to China, sulfate pollution in 2006 increased in the western United States but decreased in the eastern United States, reflecting the competing effect between enhanced transport of Chinese pollution and reduced US emissions. Our findings are relevant to international efforts to reduce transboundary air pollution.

Speirs: It seems that any real progress in cleaner air in North America was not because of all the environmental legislation forcing manufacturers to clean up their act (pardon the pun). Rather, the manufacturers just moved the factories overseas. Since American manufacturing was mostly east of the Mississippi, the easterners' gain was the Pacific coast's loss. Not mentioned in this paper is that the Chinese Politburo doesn't like breathing smog anymore than the lumpenproletariat, so they have recently begun forcing Chinese manufacturers to clear the air.

Gibson, J.J., et al (2013) **Evidence of discharging saline formation water to the Athabasca River in the oil sands mining region, northern Alberta.** CANADIAN JOURNAL OF EARTH SCIENCES 50:1244-1257

Authors' abstract: *This paper summarizes various lines of evidence, including new geophysical and geochemical surveys indicating the discharge of naturally occurring saline formation water from Cretaceous and Devonian formations to the Athabasca River downstream of Fort McMurray, an active oil sands extraction area. The following features are indicative of saline water discharge: (i) the hydrogeological setting of the reach which is situated near the western, up-dip, and subcropping, edge of the Western Canada Sedimentary Basin; (ii) springs and seepage along area rivers and tributaries that have been observed and reported in previous studies; and (iii) a significant increase in dissolved solids in the river, particularly chloride, occurring in a downstream direction from Fort McMurray. Further evidence of the saline groundwater discharge was obtained from electromagnetic surveys conducted along a 125 km reach from the Clearwater River to the Firebag River. This technique was used to map the distribution of saline water in the riverbed hyporheic zone, and revealed broad zones of generally high terrain electrical conductivity values in deeply incised Cretaceous- and Devonian-aged subcrop areas, but with numerous point-source and lineal anomalies attributed to occurrence of saline water discharge in less incised areas. Porewater sampling using drive-point piezometers was then used to confirm the presence of saline water in selected zones. Depth-wise gradients in chemical parameters observed in the riverbed porewaters in these zones are interpreted as evidence of upward movement of saline formation water mixing with the Athabasca River. Geochemical properties of the porewater are consistent with natural sources of groundwater flow from the Cretaceous- and Devonian-aged formations discharging along various reaches of the river.*

Speirs: The Athabasca Tar Sands have been seeping bitumen and saline water into the rivers and groundwater of the area for millennia. Native tribes used the seeps to waterproof their canoes. The contamination of the water from Fort McMurray downstream is a natural event and has been since before the first humans arrived.

Van Le, Q., et al (2013) **Pulvinar neurons reveal neurobiological evidence of past selection for rapid detection of snakes.** PROCEEDINGS OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES (USA) 110:19000–19005

Authors' abstract: *We report the existence of neurons in the primate medial and dorsolateral pulvinar that respond selectively to visual images of snakes. Compared with three other categories of stimuli (monkey faces, monkey hands, and geometrical shapes), snakes elicited the strongest, fastest responses, and the responses were not reduced by low spatial filtering. ... Our findings are unique in providing neuroscientific evidence in support of the Snake Detection Theory, which posits that the threat of snakes strongly influenced the evolution of the primate brain. ... Our interest in snakes may have originated much further back in time; our primate lineage has had a long and complex evolutionary history with snakes as competitors, predators, and prey. The position of primates as prey of snakes has, in fact, been argued to have constituted strong selection favoring the evolution of the ability to detect snakes quickly as a means of avoiding them, beginning with the earliest primates. Across primate species, ages, and (human) cultures, snakes are indeed detected visually more quickly than innocuous stimuli, even in cluttered scenes. Physiological responses reveal that humans are also able to detect snakes visually even before becoming consciously aware of them.*

WORLD WIDE PARTY #21

2014 will be the 21st annual World Wide Party, held every year on June 21st at 21h00 your local time. It was invented by Benoit Girard (Quebec) and Franz Miklis (Austria). The idea is to get a wave circulating the planet as zinesters and science fiction fans toast each other. At 21h00, you are requested to raise a glass to fandom. Do a one-shot zine or some mail art, have a party with fellow fans, or whatever else you can think of to celebrate our connections. Let people know how you celebrated by writing it up.