

OPUNTIA

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Canada Day 2014

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.



Looking west across Deerfoot Trail to downtown Calgary.

LET ALL THE NUMBER OF THE STARS GIVE LIGHT

by Dale Speirs

CITIES IN FLIGHT (1970, hardcover) by James Blish is an omnibus of four books about the spread of the human race through the galaxy, done as Spenglerian history. The books were written in various lengths between 1950 and 1962, some of which are fix-ups of short stories, and others rearranged for the 1970 omnibus edition, which is the text I review here..

I read the series once in the early 1970s as a teenager in rural Red Deer, a second time in the 1980s as a yuppie in Calgary, and for the third and final time as I thin out my library. It made quite an impression on teenaged Dale, now a stranger to me, living as he did in a rural area where nothing ever happened, and where all of the kids couldn't wait until they could escape to the big city. Fifty years later, having spent the majority of my life as a suburban homeowner, my view of the series is not and cannot be the same.

Conjures The Wandering Stars.

The first book in the omnibus is *THEY SHALL HAVE STARS*. It is a prologue, at times murky and afflicted with several massive infodumps. There are several themes in what is an alternative history, with a hereditary FBI Director and a rapid convergence of the American political system to a form not much different than the Soviets. The only difference was that the USA was crony capitalism without ideology, while the Soviet system was crony capitalism with ideology. (Today, of course, America and Russia are both crony capitalist societies with no ideology.)

There are two hush-hush projects underway. On Jupiter, a structure called The Bridge is being built for no apparent reason. The real truth is that The Bridge is a cover for another government project, an antigravity drive called the spindizzy. Earth's gravity is too weak for the initial experiments, so Jupiter was chosen. The spindizzy project is a success, and will provide the subsequent books with the method by which the protagonists go traveling to the stars at faster-than-light speeds. The other project is a private one run by a major pharmaceutical multinational, the search for an anti-agathic, a drug that will delay aging and possibly even make humans immortal.

The grand scheme behind it all is a plan to take people to the stars. Not the mundanes and political malcontents who still believe in freedom, but the

scientists and free-thinkers who will scatter the human race among the stars. Spindizzies can travel from Earth to Jupiter in a few hours. With immortals on board and a suitable energy supply, they can travel to the stars. And so it begins.

Shake The Yoke Of Inauspicious Stars.

A LIFE FOR THE STARS is set four centuries into the future. Chris deFord is a teenager who comes of age after being pressganged into Scranton, Pennsylvania, as it launches out into space into a desperate search for an economic future. Earth has experienced Peak Everything, as most of the economic deposits have been used up and recycling only maintains the status quo. One by one, the cities of the world have been equipping themselves with spindizzies, stocking up on supplies for the voyage, and heading out. When they lift off Earth, they take with them a large chunk of the bedrock beneath them, and are surrounded by the spindizzy force field, which keeps the atmosphere in and deflects incoming bolides. The cities are collectively called Okies, with no room for political correctness or people with degrees in uselessness.

Economics devolves into barter, where germanium is currency. There are two categories of people, citizens who get the anti-agathic drugs, and passengers who live and die ordinary life spans. Besides ordinary radio communications, there is the Dirac transmitter, whose messages can be heard instantaneously throughout the universe. The disadvantage is that it only has one frequency, so everyone with a Dirac receiver can listen in.

Scranton is a late entrant to the Okies, as by now humans have spread out fifty light years. There is no room for latecomers in the settled sphere, so Scranton will head out further into the unknown. There was also a war against the only alien race discovered, the Vegans, which the humans won. The Vegan Empire was destroyed or nearly so. That “nearly so” will cause problems in the future, because a legend persists that a Vegan space fort ran for deep space and is waiting to revenge itself on Earth. Another foreboding is an Okie city that became a bindlestiff, hobo slang for traitors who prey on their own kind. The city changed its name to Interstellar Master Traders, commonly called IMT. And they too, will reappear in a future book.

deFord fakes his way into a job as an apprentice astronomer, helping to calculate navigational problems. It’s either that or a short-lived career shoveling

slag in the steel mills until he dies young from overwork. However he doesn’t stay long on board Scranton. The city meets up with the biggest of all the Okies, New York City. deFord finds himself sold to NYC, in what is probably a better deal than staying aboard a latecomer Okie that is going to always be struggling to stay alive.

deFord becomes a Horatio Alger story, as he is adopted by a middle-aged couple, studies hard in school, and carries out a heroic mission to save NYC from the intrigues of another Okie city, none other than Scranton. After various alarms and excursions, he is awarded citizenship in NYC. Mayor Amalfi knows him by name and there is no doubt that deFord is going places.

Certain Stars Shot Madly From Their Spheres.

EARTHMAN, COME HOME takes place several centuries after the previous novel. Amalfi is still the mayor but deFord was executed a couple of centuries ago for high crimes and misdemeanors because he took one short cut too many. The only place he was going was the morgue. Anti-agathic drugs slow the aging process, but do nothing against accidents or high-velocity lead poisoning.

The novel starts off with NYC being caught in the middle of a war between two planets while trying to resupply and do some business. Earth still manages to control the galaxy by its police force, who are free and easy in assessing fines against a planet for infractions. Earth cannot and does not try to rule the galaxy, but they do keep the cities in line. Partly it is because the cities themselves agree there is a need for law and order from an independent police force, and partly it is because it is easier for Earth to occasionally pick out a miscreant and swarm it as an example to the others rather than directly rule all the cities.



NYC has been accumulating petty fines to the point where it would be bankrupt if it had to pay up, so the city is constantly on the run from the cops. It finally makes a run to the Rift, a vast empty space in an arm of the galaxy that even at faster-than-light speed takes a century to cross. But there is no surcease; other Okies and human civilizations are out there in the boonies, and NYC finds trouble and strife no matter where it goes. Adding to the problem is that one of NYC's spindizzies is failing.

Adding to the problem is a collapse in the galactic economy when so much germanium has been mined that it becomes almost worthless and is no longer accepted as currency. Most science fiction stories on the galactic scale ignore economics or dispose of it with some utopian handwaving, but this novel spends some serious time on the effects of an economic collapse. NYC and other Okie cities find their germanium reserves reduced to about one-sixth the previous value (it is still good for electronics manufacturing) and their fiat currencies completely worthless (paper currency always goes to zero eventually). The Dirac transmitter was used for business transactions, so when one part of the galaxy's economy collapses, the rot spreads instantaneously. Because there are so many planets and asteroids to mine, no other metal can take germanium's place. Eventually medical drugs become the new currency. Easily synthesized drugs are the pennies and nickels, and hard-to-make drugs like anti-agathics are the equivalent of \$100 banknotes. That doesn't work too well either, as poor cities have to decide between public health and using the drugs for currency. Eventually the Okies decide to swarm Earth and demand something be done, much as the One Big Union march in 1919 on Winnipeg, and with about the same results.

Simultaneously with that storyline, Amalfi finally realizes what other humans have not, that spindizzies can be used to move planets, not just cities. He scavenges spindizzies from anywhere he can, lands NYC on a lifeless small planet, and converts it into the galaxy's biggest spaceship. NYC has run out of places to hide, so it decides to run for the Greater Magellanic galaxy next to ours. Along the way, it discovers the Vegan fort has reappeared, not a legend anymore, but a real thing determined to take advantage of the strife between Earth and the Okies to eliminate both. The cities are poorly armed, and NYC as a city could not take on the Vegan fort. But the Vegans do not realize what NYC is up to. Amalfi points the uninhabited part of the planet forward, and runs down the Vegan fort at faster-than-light speeds, leaving a molten crater on the planet's leading side where the Vegan fort impacted and was vapourized. They never knew what hit them.

And so to the Greater Magellanic. NYC's spindizzies and equipment are reaching the point of no economical repair, and it is time to find a permanent home on a planet, nevermore to roam the stars. The city settles on a planet that was previously colonized by the IMT. The leaders of IMT who committed the crimes against others all those centuries ago are still alive because of anti-agathic drugs. Amalfi brings them and IMT to justice and so concludes this book.

That Thou Among The Wastes Of Time Must Go.

THE TRIUMPH OF TIME is the final book. Amalfi is a thousand years old and feeling the weight of his years. NYC is an abandoned city on what is now called New Earth. Back in the Milky Way, the Earth Empire has fallen and is slowly being replaced by a hegemony called the Web of Hercules.

Amalfi is bored with life in the Greater Magellanic, but that boredom ends when a spindizzy-driven planet called He charges in with bad news. The universe's days are numbered. It and its antimatter counterpart are slowly moving through multiple dimensions to a point where they will coincide completely. When that happens, all the matter and antimatter will be converted into energy.

There is nothing that can be done to stop it, so the humans decide to take advantage of it to produce multiple new universes. The news of the end of the universe triggers religious wars and political strife. Against this background, Amalfi and others plot how to play God, with numerous extended philosophical discussions and quantum mechanics infodumps along the way. Each of them



wears a spacesuit into the other side, where each creates his or her own universe by forming a individual metrical space that immediately expands into a Big Bang, vapourizing each person as it does so.

How Thus We Met, And These Things Finish.

To sum up CITIES IN FLIGHT:

THEY SHALL HAVE STARS is a John Campbell-era saga of how engineers and scientists will rule uber alles.

A LIFE FOR THE STARS is exactly a Horatio Alger story but without any pederasty (read Alger's biography if you don't understand).

EARTHMAN, COME HOME is a fix-up novel of Spenglerian history, specifically the beginning of the end of the Earth empire. It is the longest and best book of the four.

THE TRIUMPH OF TIME should not be read on a rainy Sunday afternoon when you are feeling depressed. It is, however, very high-concept SF.

Each book carries out its plots on a successively larger scale. TSHS is confined to Earth and a remote Jupiter station. ALFTS steps out into the wider galaxy but not very far, much like driving to the far end of your province or state without crossing the border. ECH is definitely on a galactic scale, and TTOT not only spans the universe but goes into the realms where cosmology meets theology. This set of books deserves renewed attention. It is an epic that is eminently readable. Other than the occasional mention of slide rules, it bears its age well, and is superior to other fictional rise and fall of empires.

THE GRAND ILLUSIONS

by Dale Speirs

It is nothing new that movies often play fast and loose with historical events or people they portray. Sometimes it can be excused for artistic reasons, such as compressing events into one time period or place for a faster paced story. Sometimes it is done for political or cultural reasons, illustrating the old adage that one country's terrorist is another country's freedom fighter. All too often, alas, historical errors occur because the movie producer doesn't give a damn and calculates that most of the audience won't notice. What is particularly annoying is when the script plays fast and loose with the truth for no reason whatsoever, when it wouldn't have cost any more money to film it correctly.

The Screenwriter's Finger Writes, And Having Writ ...

HISTORY GOES TO THE MOVIES (1999, trade paperback) by Joseph Roquemore looks at these errors, using a variety of films from the silent era to modern times. Each movie review is prefaced with a summary of the true events for comparison. Not all reviews are critical, for more often than thought, the producers got it right. I'll only pick a few to consider.

"Butch Cassidy And The Sundance Kid" (1969) wasn't particularly accurate about the Wild Bunch gang. Cowtowners who know their history can quote the fact that Harry Longabaugh (the Sundance Kid) lived in Calgary for several years while laying low from American lawmen. He worked during the summer season on the Bar U ranch just south of the city, and in winter had a partnership in a saloon in Calgary. He went back south of the border after his partner tried to cheat him. Longabaugh stuck a gun in his partner's belly and requested his fair share of the saloon profits, after which he left town. The movie makes the Wild Bunch gang smaller than it really was, and portrays them as carefree good-ole-boys, rather than the quarrelsome psychotic killers they actually were.

"Bonnie And Clyde" (1967) romanticized a pair of killers so psychotic that John Dillinger called them "kill crazy". Bonnie and Clyde were portrayed as folk heroes in the movie, but in real life everyone's hand was against them. They mainly robbed grocery stores and service stations for small amounts, and killed 15 innocent civilians in two years. The folk despised them, and were glad to see them dead.



“Fat Man And Little Boy” (1989), about the development of the two atomic bombs dropped on Japan, tended to sermonize against the military and suffered from dull dialogue. It made Oppenheimer as altruistic scientist who worked on the bomb because he had to. In real life, he was initially very enthusiastic about atomic warfare, and suggested to the military that they dust radioactive isotopes on Germany’s food and water supplies.

Nor Piety Nor Wit.

HOLLYWOOD SCIENCE (2007, hardcover) by Sidney Perkowitz is written by a physicist who starts off by noting that scientists in movies are usually better looking than in real life. Most don’t wear lab coats unless they are handling liquids. Mad scientists can’t do Big Science unless they inherited money or own a multinational corporation, so no underground laboratories with self-destruct buttons for the hero to push. Actual laboratories don’t have half as many blinking lights or computers displays. Perkowitz mostly summarizes movie plots before discussing any science in them. Some fallacies are reasonable artistic licence, such as humanoid aliens with funny foreheads, since true alien forms are still too expensive for extended SFX in television shows.

The section “Devastating Collisions” points out the well-known proclivity of movie asteroids to take direct aim at Manhattan or the Eiffel Tower instead of a more likely splash into the ocean or a hit on the Arctic tundra. Surprisingly though, the effects of such impacts are generally well done and movies usually get them right. 100-metre high tsunamis can be expected if a Big Ugly Rock splashes into an ocean, and since humans like to live along shorelines, there’ll be lots of death and destruction. Nukes are ineffective in breaking up incoming bolides and can only operate at close range since the ICBMs aren’t fast enough to hit the bolide in deep space. At short range, nukes turn death by a cannonball into death by a point-blank shotgun blast. They might be able to deflect bolides but this means getting to them far enough away so that the shallow angle of deflection has time to work.

The political issue of climate change spurred disaster movies such as “The Day After Tomorrow”. The movie science isn’t any better than the real-world science. Climate change will not turn Earth into a global desert or a water world. The problem is not the climate changes but humans, who live in hurricane zones or build cities on floodplains. However, the SFX of climatic disasters are always crowd pleasers.



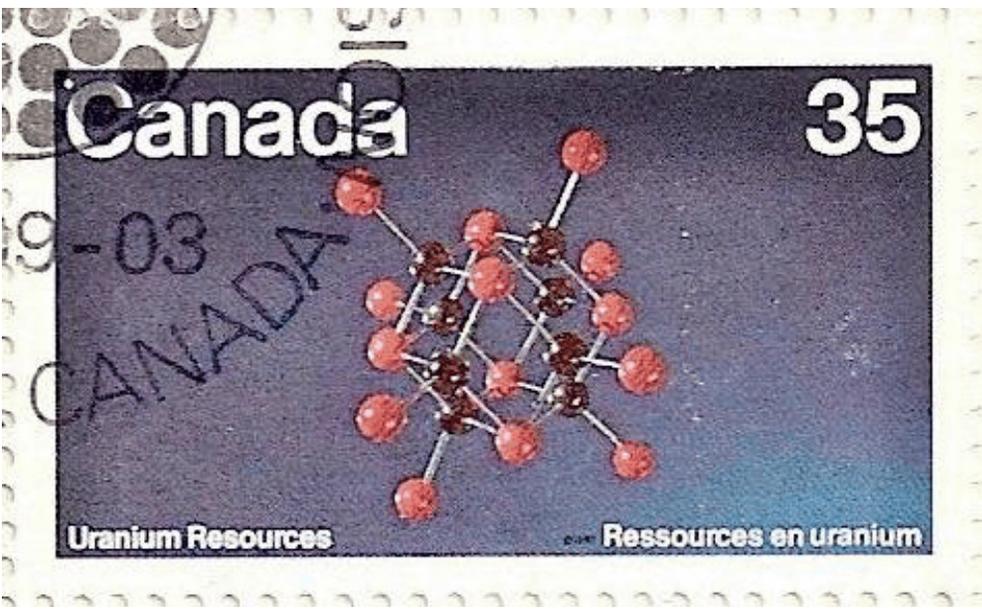
Other catastrophes are analyzed, such as nuclear accidents, genetic engineering, volcanoes, run-amok computers, and robots. There is some feedback between real-life scientists and movies though. The countdown to blastoff was borrowed from science fiction.

All Thy Tears.

APOCALYPSE MOVIES (2000, trade paperback) by Kim Newman discusses my favourite genre of movies, the disaster films. For the last decade of my career with the

City of Calgary Parks Dept., I was the Trouble Calls Supervisor. No asteroids, just broken tree branches and irrigation leaks in parks, but I enjoyed sitting back and watching someone else have to clean up a mess instead of me. Newman starts off with a look back at the origins of movies, which had disaster stories among them from the very beginning. The earliest producers and directors knew that nothing brings in audiences like spectacular disasters, real or imagined, which allowed the viewers to indulge in schadenfreude and voyeurism.

“Things To Come” (1936) based on an H.G. Wells story, is the earliest apocalyptic movie as we use the term today. The atomic bomb theme began appearing in post-WW2 films, first as gungho pilots explaining somebody had to drop it and we didn’t start the fight, then as Japanese films of the early 1950s about survivors dying because of the sins of others. The first Godzilla film was a serious mainstream movie in Japan and a box-office smash. It was obviously a parable of atomic war, and the audiences understood it as such, many coming out of the theatres in tears. The Japanese films mutated (pun intended) into monster movies, and North American audiences understood them to be teenage schlock.



WORLD WIDE PARTY #21

by Dale Speirs

2014 was 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 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.

Last year was a miserable WWP for me. It was the day of the great flood that inundated southwestern Alberta, flooding 100,000 Calgarians out of their homes, shutting the downtown core for a week, and wiping out the entire city of High River just south of us. I wrote up the details of the great flood, with photos, in OPUNTIA issues #264 to #266.

My neighbourhood is up on the plateau so we did not have overland drainage, but 190 mm of rain in one day meant a steady flow of water from leaky walls across my basement floor into the sewer drain. Since none of my neighbours have sump pumps, mine ran for several months afterwards because it was draining the water table for a block around. I did toast SF fandom and general zinedom at 21h00, but my heart wasn't in it.

Recently I was browsing some books in the public library and came across a set of Farmer's Almanacs. I've never taken them seriously but out of curiosity I looked up their prediction for June 2013 weather. The general forecast for the Prairies was: "*Summer will be cooler than normal, on average, with the hottest periods in late June and early July. Rainfall will be above normal in the east and below normal in the west.*" Well, as we now know, in late June much of the western prairies ended up floating into Hudson's Bay. The specific forecast for the west was: "*19-25 Scattered t-storms, warm, then cool.*" Again, another completely wrong forecast.

I've since extended the drain spouts to the edge of my property and cleaned out the gutters. Like the rest of Calgarians, I now get nervous whenever the weather forecast says "periods of rain", but I can't complain too much. I didn't lose my house, the basement water drained away by itself leaving only a few calcium stains, and my livelihood wasn't affected since I am retired. Calgarians now divide the history of their city into before the flood, and after the flood.

Movies from "Strategic Air Command" (1955) to "Dr. Strangelove" (1964) looked at the bomber pilots who carried the nukes and the responsibility for WW3. The Bikini atoll and other bomb tests provided stock footage for countless movies, and still do for producers who don't have an SFX budget.

Another subgenre that developed was the bomb shelter movie, back when people thought it would be a safe place to survive. In actual fact, the vast majority of backyard shelters would have only prolonged the agony. Underground worlds became popular, and so did espionage movies where the MacGuffin was an atomic bomb or fissionable materials.

With radiation came the monsters, although not in real life. Hiroshima, Chernobyl, and Fukushima gave us cancers, not superheroes or giant lizards. Monsters date back to ancient times but the Bomb gave them a new lease on life.

Alien invasions were a product of the Cold War, although the movies' reputations were hampered by bad lighting and rubber-suit monsters. Sometimes the aliens were here to save us from ourselves, but mostly they wanted to lunch on us, steal our minerals or women, or enslave us in factories. Post-holocaust films in modern times were revived by "Planet Of The Apes". Films such as "Mad Max" did good business but when the Cold War ended, there wasn't much to hang a hat on.

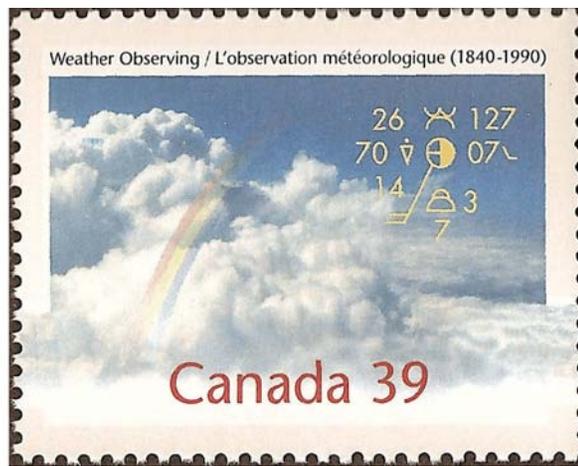
June weather forecasts are now the lead items in the mass media news. Alberta gets half its annual precipitation between Victoria Day and the start of the Stampede rodeo, but once the dry season arrives we relax.

My practice at 21h00 on WWP day has been to face east and toast the zinesters and fans who have already celebrated the event. Next I face south and then north to acknowledge those in my time zone, and finally to the west for those about to celebrate in an hour. In the past I just said “Salute!” as I raised my glass, but this year I added the phrase “And may you never have the sorrows of a disaster”.

Calgary was fortunate in 2013. Only five people drowned. We don’t have earthquakes, hurricanes, tornadoes, or forest fires. Others have suffered far worse than we have. To you, dear reader, I hope in all sincerity that you never face overwhelming disaster, and may you enjoy zinedom and fandom as a respite from the cares of the mundane world.

IN OTHER WORDS, BUT NOT OTHER WORLDS

August 8 to 10 is the 2014 edition of When Words Collide, Calgary’s annual readercon. Attendance is capped at 400 and it is almost sold out as of June. For them that has read a book. This literary gathering brings together the genres of science fiction, fantasy, westerns, mystery, and romance. Lots of cross-fertilization of ideas on the panels. The dealer bourse is book dealers and small-press publishers, not Iron Man masks and crystals. No Klingons roaming the hallways, just publishers, readers, writers, and librarians. Details are at: www.whenwordscollide.org



THE MAN FROM MONTENEGRO: PART 5

by Dale Speirs

[Parts 1 and 2 appeared in issues #252 and #253 in 2012. Part 3 was in #275 and Part 4 in #278 in 2014.]

Unlike Sherlock Holmes pastiches, which number in the thousands, Nero Wolfe hasn’t been farmed out as much. The main reason is that Rex Stout only died in 1975, and therefore his works are still copyright-protected. Robert Goldsborough got permission of the Stout Estate to publish a series of Nero Wolfe novels, still ongoing. I won’t review all the novels but herewith are a selection.

All The Daughters Of Music Shall Be Brought Low.

The first Goldsborough novel was MURDER IN E MINOR, published in 1986. It opens with Wolfe in retirement but still able to maintain his expensive household and orchid collection due to good investments and deferred income. The story begins with Maria Radovich seeking Wolfe’s help to assist her uncle Milan Stevens, conductor of the New York Symphonic Orchestra. Her pleas bring Wolfe out of retirement not for her but because he knew Stevens back in the Old Country as Milos Stefanovic, a freedom fighter who once saved Wolfe’s life during the Balkan Wars.

Stevens has been getting threatening letters demanding he resign from the orchestra but he scoffs at them. He never gets a speaking part in the novel though, as he is murdered in the apartment that he and his niece share. The last person seen leaving the apartment at the time of the murder was Maria’s boyfriend, a NYS violinist named Jerry Milner. Her uncle did not approve of him, and all who knew them testify that the two men had public shouting matches. Naturally the NYPD Homicide squad pick up Milner as their one and only suspect.

Wolfe’s investigation initially concentrates on the orchestra, with all its petty jealousies and politicking. The associate music director was upset at being passed over for conductor in favour of Stevens. Some members of the fund-raising committee didn’t mourn his departure from this vale of tears either. And so on. Stevens’s frequent escort to functions was the widow Lucinda Forrester-Moore, who managed to retain most of her looks and all of the late Mr. Moore’s wealth. Various other characters are also brought in to muddy the waters.

The novel concludes with the traditional J'accuse! meeting, with everyone gathered in Wolfe's office to hear his solution to the crime. The ending is unfair to the reader because it introduces facts not previously mentioned and which were deciding factors. The real murderer gives the time-honoured speech "Yes, I did it! And I'd gladly do it again!"

The ending was hack work but what has to be considered is the flavour of the pastiche. How well does it match the original canon? Many Holmes pastiches fail because their authors made Watson into a blithering idiot, or failed to set the ambience of the gaslight era. For this Wolfe pastiche, it does read as if Rex Stout wrote it. Goldsborough matches the lifestyle of the brownstone, Inspector Cramer's plum-faced bellowing, and Wolfe's rigid routine.

A Woman Scorned.

THE BLOODIED IVY (1988) starts with the offstage death of Prof. Hale Markham, who fell over a cliff on the campus of Prescott University. A few weeks later, a colleague named Walter Cortland drops by Wolfe's brownstone and declares it was murder, not an accident. Cortland is the executor of Markham's estate and wants an investigation, but the Prescott police understandably won't act without any evidence.

As far as motive was concerned, there was plenty. Markham was a reactionary right-winger often in the news, he had numerous feuds with fellow academics, dallied with women and then dumped them hurtfully, and behaved in general like a boor. In short, he was one of those characters where the mystery is not why he was murdered but why it took so long for someone to do a public service and kill him.

Archie Goodwin drives to Prescott University to sniff around the scene of the crime, making friends with doctoral candidate Gretchen Frazier. She may have been more than a student to Markham. Goodwin's investigations land him in the hoosegow. The local police are suspicious and resentful about fancy New York private eyes infringing into their territory. Wolfe is forced to leave the brownstone cocoon and travel up to Prescott to help Goodwin. He rounds up the usual suspects for an interrogation in his motel room but discovers little of value.

As one might expect, a second body makes its appearance. Frazier's remains are found at the bottom of the cliff exactly where Markham died. This puts the

Prescott police in a bad light and stirred up all the suspects. Inevitably there is one of Wolfe's J'accuse! meetings. But there is a twist, because Frazier's death was a suicide in remorse for killing her unfaithful lover.

The plot is average but Goldsborough replicates Rex Stout's ability to write dialogue. The academic feuding is shown, not told, in all its viciousness**. The passions that led to the actual murder aren't quite as well fleshed out (pardon the expression) but did skillfully mislead the reader as to which woman scorned by Markham did the murder.

The Love Of Money.

THE LAST COINCIDENCE (1989) opens with Goodwin's long-term girlfriend Lily Rowan worried about her niece Noreen getting into the wrong crowd. Noreen has been done wrong by playboy millionaire Sparky Linville. At Lily's request, Goodwin agrees to open a case file on Linville. He tries to meet him, is rebuffed, and never gets another chance because Linville turns up dead in a parking garage.

The police arrest their first suspect, Noreen's brother Michael, who quickly confesses. But did he really do it or was he covering up for someone else? Noreen hires Wolfe to investigate. A variety of suspects are introduced and Archie makes a grand tour to interview them. The long conversations are a pleasure to read, not stilted at all, and indicate that Goldsborough has inherited Stout's ability to write dialogue. The emphasis of the story slowly shifts to one particular suspect, who had unrequited love for Noreen and great anger for Linville's treatment of her. The J'accuse! meeting brings him to his final fate, with Inspector Cramer and Sergeant Stebbins on hand to escort the prisoner to justice.

SILVER SPIRE (1992) has a Staten Island preacher at the Tabernacle of the Silver Spire receiving death threats in the form of Biblical quotations dropped into the congregational offerings. Wolfe won't take the case, so Goodwin gets their occasional legman Fred Durkin, a private detective as well, to look into it. Unfortunately Durkin ends up charged with murder after a church official is shot dead with Durkin's stolen gun.

** When Woodrow Wilson was elected President, a reporter asked him how he would be able to handle White House politics. Wilson replied that after having been president of Princeton University, federal politics would be a walk in the park.

The case begins with Lloyd Morgan, assistant to the Rev. Barnabas Bay, visiting the brownstone. The Tabernacle has 12,000 members plus a television show, so Morgan would like the case discretely handled, what with all those other televangelists being exposed as sinners.



Wolfe refuses to consider the matter, so Goodwin recommends Durkin. Eleven days later, Durkin is in the slammer after Royal Meade, the assistant pastor, is shot dead in the church with Durkin's gun.

Wolfe bails out Durkin and meets with him. Durkin had concluded, and Wolfe agreed, that the threatening notes were an inside job and that someone in the inner circle of the church was the culprit. The interviews begin and soon uncover Meade's transgressions, thereby increasing the number of suspects who wanted him to meet his Maker ahead of schedule. Sheets of Biblical quotations jotted down by Meade are found, including the most commonly misquoted line from the entire Bible, 1 Timothy 6:10.

There is a J'accuse! meeting but amazingly it is not in the brownstone. Wolfe voluntarily suggests a gathering at the Tabernacle. A sheet of Biblical verses is decoded, not theologically but by cryptanalysis, and reveal the name of the culprit. I always wonder at murder mysteries where the victim leaves the killer's name in a complicated code, instead of just writing "Bob did it". The novel reads well, and Goldsborough replicates the style of Rex Stout nicely in this book.

A Banquet Of Consequences.

THE MISSING CHAPTER (1994) is about the late unlamented Charles Childress, author of the Sergeant Barnstable police procedurals. The Barnstable books were originally created by Darius Sawyer, also defunct, and Childress was his successor chose by the estate to write pastiches. (Goldsborough is obviously having some fun here with his own situation.) Childress supposedly killed himself with his own gun. His publisher Horace Vinson doesn't believe it though, given that Childress was a cantankerous man with many enemies. And so to the brownstone.

The story Vinson tells is that Childress managed to get his editor Keith Billings fired, dismissed his agent Franklin Ott, and barely avoided a libel suit from literary critic Wilbur Hobbs. All that was just for starters, as other people hated his guts, so motive is not the question. Childress fiancée Debra Mitchell hardly seems shaken by his death. Patricia Royce, ostensibly a platonic friend of Childress, is shaken by his death. She is a fellow novelist who specialized in historical Scottish mysteries.

The middle of this novel is the interviews of the cast of characters, by Goodwin out in the field, or Wolfe at his desk. They slowly build up the details of the deceased and his circle. The story then moves to Mercer, Indiana, where Goodwin travels to interview Childress's next of kin. He brings to light a woman named Clarice, a cousin of Childress by whom an unexpected pregnancy. She left for New York City after him and was never seen again in Mercer. What surname she is using is anyone's guess.

There are distractions. Wolfe has an elevator in his house to lift his bulk up to the rooftop orchid greenhouse or his bedroom. After decades of strain, it is kaput and must be completely replaced. The house is a noisy chaos of tradesmen tramping around as they rip the old elevator out and install a new one. Wolfe is also plagued by Barnstable fans who heard that he considers the Childress death a murder and want to "help" him with crowdsourcing.

Goodwin locates Clarice in Hoboken, New Jersey, a town that Wolfe has heard vague rumours about, it apparently being somewhere not far from Manhattan. She is automatically added to the list of suspects. She had her child, for which Childress set up a trust fund.

From there to the inevitable J'accuse! meeting in Wolfe's brownstone. The twist in the plot is that the murderer is exposed for a different motive than the women-scorned line that threaded through the novel. Goldsborough played fair by seeding hints about a sudden change in the quality of Childress's writing for the better. In retrospect the motive of revenge for plagiarism can be seen.

Goldsborough does teeter on the edge of too much self-referentialism with cute remarks about mystery authors and literary franchises, but does not do so annoyingly.

SEEN IN THE LITERATURE

Fritz, Claudia, et al (2014) **Soloist evaluations of six Old Italian and six new violins.** PROCEEDINGS OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES USA 111:7224–7229

Authors' abstract: "*Many researchers have sought explanations for the purported tonal superiority of Old Italian violins by investigating varnish and wood properties, plate tuning systems, and the spectral balance of the radiated sound. Nevertheless, the fundamental premise of tonal superiority has been investigated scientifically only once very recently, and results showed a general preference for new violins and that players were unable to reliably distinguish new violins from old. The study was, however, relatively small in terms of the number of violins tested (six), the time allotted to each player (an hour), and the size of the test space (a hotel room). In this study, 10 renowned soloists each blind-tested six Old Italian violins (including five by Stradivari) and six new during two 75-min sessions—the first in a rehearsal room, the second in a 300-seat concert hall. When asked to choose a violin to replace their own for a hypothetical concert tour, 6 of the 10 soloists chose a new instrument. A single new violin was easily the most-preferred of the 12. On average, soloists rated their favorite new violins more highly than their favorite old for playability, articulation, and projection, and at least equal to old in terms of timbre. Soloists failed to distinguish new from old at better than chance levels. These results confirm and extend those of the earlier study and present a striking challenge to near-canonical beliefs about Old Italian violins.*"

van Deursen, J. M. (2014) **The role of senescent cells in ageing.** NATURE 509:439-446

Author's abstract: "*Cellular senescence is a process in which cells cease dividing and undergo distinctive phenotypic alterations, including profound chromatin and secretome changes, and tumour-suppressor activation. Hayflick and Moorhead first introduced the term senescence to describe the phenomenon of irreversible growth arrest of human diploid cell strains after extensive serial passaging in culture. Later, this particular type of senescence (replicative senescence) was causally linked to telomere attrition, a process that leads to chromosomal instability and promotes tumorigenesis, supporting the original hypothesis that senescence guards against unrestricted growth of damaged cells. Subsequent studies have reinforced the importance of cellular senescence*

as a safeguard against cancer. Emerging evidence indicates that the physiological relevance of cellular senescence extends beyond tumour suppression into biological processes such as embryonic development."

Herwartz, D., et al (2014) **Identification of the giant impactor Theia in lunar rocks.** SCIENCE 344:1146-1150

Authors' abstract: "*The Moon was probably formed by a catastrophic collision of the proto-Earth with a planetesimal named Theia. Most numerical models of this collision imply a higher portion of Theia in the Moon than in Earth. Because of the isotope heterogeneity among solar system bodies, the isotopic composition of Earth and the Moon should thus be distinct. So far, however, all attempts to identify the isotopic component of Theia in lunar rocks have failed. Our triple oxygen isotope data (D17O) reveal a 12 plus or minus 3 parts per million difference in D17O between Earth and the Moon, which supports the giant impact hypothesis of Moon formation. We also show that enstatite chondrites and Earth have different D17O values, and we speculate on an enstatite chondrite-like composition of Theia. The observed small compositional difference could alternatively be explained by a carbonaceous chondrite-dominated late veneer.*"

Lemieux, Frederic (2014) **The impact of a natural disaster on altruistic behaviour and crime.** DISASTERS 38:483-499

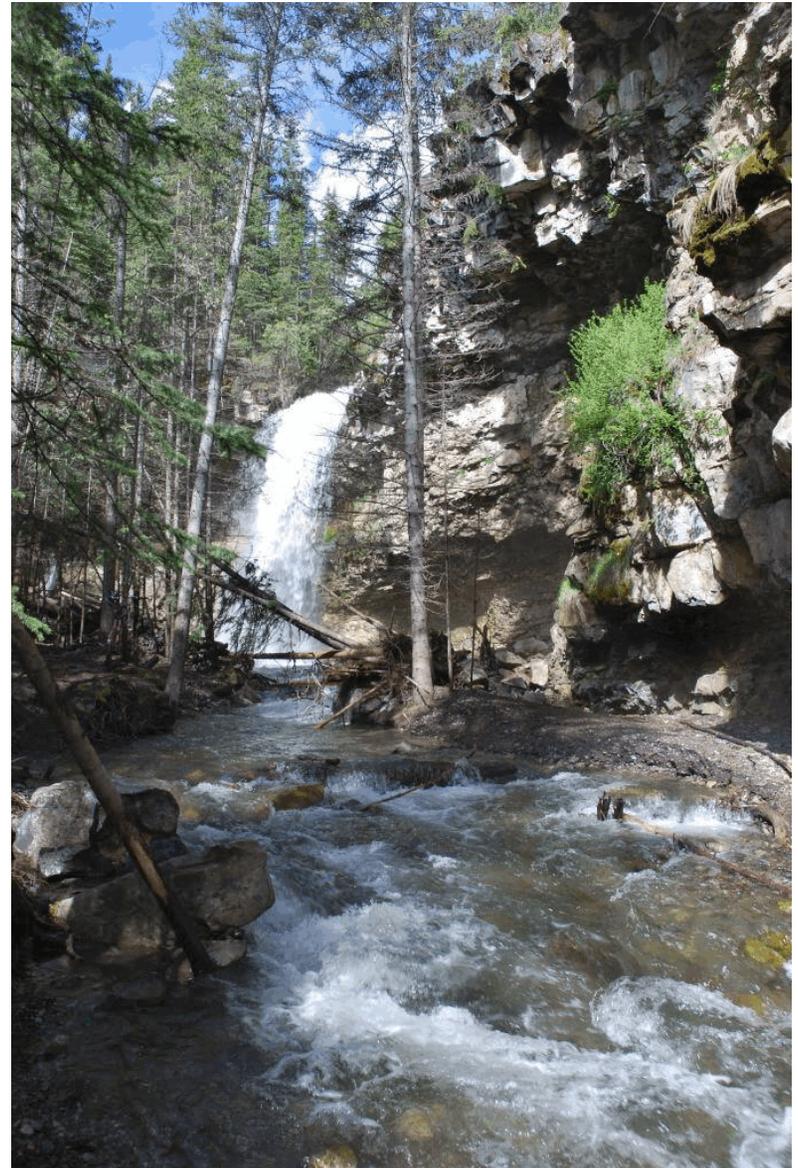
Author's abstract: "*Institutional altruism in the form of a public-sector intervention and support for victims and social altruism generated by mutual aid and solidarity among citizens constitute a coming together in a crisis. This coming together and mutual support precipitate a decrease in crime rates during such an event. This paper presents an analysis of daily fluctuations in crime during the prolonged ice storms in Quebec, Canada, in January 1998 that provoked an electrical blackout. ... A significant decline in property crime rates was noticed when cheques were distributed to crisis victims in financial need in Monteregie, and hence they were attributable to public intervention (institutional altruism). Moreover, the rate of social altruism (financial donations), which was more substantial in adjoining rather than distant regions, was inversely proportional to crime rates.*"

Amos, C.B., et al (2014) **Uplift and seismicity driven by groundwater depletion in central California.** NATURE 509:483-492

Authors' abstract: *"Groundwater use in California's San Joaquin Valley exceeds replenishment of the aquifer, leading to substantial diminution of this resource and rapid subsidence of the valley floor. The volume of groundwater lost over the past century and a half also represents a substantial reduction in mass and a large-scale unburdening of the lithosphere, with significant but unexplored potential impacts on crustal deformation and seismicity. Here we use vertical global positioning system measurements to show that a broad zone of rock uplift of up to 1–3mm per year surrounds the southern San Joaquin Valley. The observed uplift matches well with predicted flexure from a simple elastic model of current rates of water-storage loss, most of which is caused by groundwater depletion. The height of the adjacent central Coast Ranges and the Sierra Nevada is strongly seasonal and peaks during the dry late summer and autumn, out of phase with uplift of the valley floor during wetter months. Our results suggest that long-term and late-summer flexural uplift of the Coast Ranges reduce the effective normal stress resolved on the San Andreas Fault. This process brings the fault closer to failure, thereby providing a viable mechanism for observed seasonality in microseismicity at Parkfield and potentially affecting long-term seismicity rates for fault systems adjacent to the valley. We also infer that the observed contemporary uplift of the southern Sierra Nevada previously attributed to tectonic or mantle-derived forces is partly a consequence of human-caused groundwater depletion."*

ROCKY MOUNTAIN WAY: KANANASKIS RIVER VALLEY
photos by Dale Speirs

The day after WWP #21, I motored on out to Kananaskis Provincial Park. It has only one village, about halfway along the valley. Just northwest of it is Marmot Creek, flowing down from Mount Allen. The creek is the regular sort of babbling brook, but as it reaches the toe of the mountain, it falls over a cliff about 20 metres high, before flowing on down into Kananaskis River. Troll Falls, as it is named, is easily accessible from the bottom.





Kananaskis Village is on a glacial terrace near the foot of Mount Kidd. A promenade runs around the edge of the village and provides some wonderful views. As I strolled along the promenade, I came upon an alpine meadow that had a chair and table set up on it, both draped in white. There was no sign of any organized activity nearby. It looked like installation art, except the parks staff don't approve of that sort of thing. No idea what this was about, but there must have been a reason.



At left is Ribbon Peak, northwest of Kananaskis Village. I took this photo with a telephoto lens, since Ribbon Creek completely eradicated the trail up its narrow canyon during the great flood of 2013. It is doubtful if the trail can be restored anytime within the next several years, because the flood waters scoured the canyon clean. You can see why this mountain is called Ribbon Peak.

A view from the promenade looking south up the valley, with the Kananaskis River below.



UTILITY BOX ART IN CALGARY: STAMPEDE

photos by Dale Speirs

As part of Calgary's anti-graffiti campaign, the utility companies hire professional artists to paint proper art on streetside utility boxes. There are now



hundreds of such decorated boxes, and I'll start off a new series of articles by showing you a few of them from time to time. The art is usually matched to the theme of the neighbourhood, so herewith are some near the Stampede rodeo grounds. The rodeo is every July for ten days, and the next issue of this zine will have more about it when I report on my yeehawing.



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

2014-06-20

OPUNTIA #277: Ah, the true Marx Brothers on the front page. I think most of us are (Groucho) Marxists. These days, Groucho gets a little more attention than Karl does. Both would have their own modern-day WTF moments if they got to see modern-day politics.

[Re: separatist novels] Canada's three main sports are hockey, lacrosse and hating Toronto, which often says more about the Toronto-haters than anything else. I ran into that when I spent a summer on Vancouver Island working for a weekly newspaper. Good thing I was only there for the summer, for my job was often hampered by the refusal of the local Toronto-haters to talk to me, or tell me what was going on in School District 69 that weekend. The Parti Québécois has just elected the head of the St-Jean-Baptiste Society as their new leader, which is a sign that the moderates have already been used up and gone, and now only the extremists remain.

[For my non-Canadian readers, St-Jean-Baptiste Day, June 24, is the provincial holiday of Quebec. It has been taken over by nationalists who refuse to accept the results of the Battle of the Plains of Abraham in 1759.]

[Re: the 1968 separatist novel *KILLING GROUND* by Ellis Portal, a pseudonym of Bruce Allen Powe] I thought it sounded familiar. Ellis Portal is the tunnel that goes north from the main subway intersection of Bloor Street and Yonge Street in downtown Toronto. I've also heard the pseudonym Gardiner Westbound, which is a reference to the lakeshore-area Toronto highway in the west end of the city.

We will be observing the World Wide Party tomorrow night, with a quiet evening at home after a busy day out. Won't be much to write about, but we will party.

We did have our table at Anime North, and there is where we found out best convention outing yet as a dealer. In the thousands of anime fans, there were a



FROM: Joseph Nicholas
London, England



OPUNTIA #278: You note of the Lancaster bomber aircraft that *"despite what it looks like on the outside, the interior is a tunnel about the diameter of a sewer main. I had a hell of a time getting through and almost got stuck"*. Such was the fate of many Lancaster crews when they ran into flak or nightfighters. RAF crews in particular preferred the Handley-Page Halifax to the Avro Lancaster because there was just that

bit more wriggle room. Even so, when one reads of who managed to escape from a shot-up bomber falling out of the sky, there is a preponderance of rear gunners, because they could turn their turrets to the side and squeeze out through the turret's rear door, and navigator/bomb-aimers, because they were closest to the escape hatch. Pilots and other crew members very rarely got out. The same seems to be true of the USAAF B17s and B25s: the rear gunners and the waist gunners could throw themselves clear, but the rest would face an impossible climb up (in an aircraft going down nose first) to the entrance/exit hatch located on the starboard side of the rear fuselage.

Hilbert Schenck's STEAM BIRD (reviewed in the same issue) first appeared as a novelette in a mid-1970s issue of THE MAGAZINE OF FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION. It read then like an extended essay in a dead-end Cold War project, but I'm surprised to note, from the 1988 year of publication, that it took him a decade to turn it into a full-length novel. Unless there were earlier editions, but you only have a 1988 printing, that is.

[Had, that is, as I am donating my books to local book exchanges after I finish reading them. I no longer have a copy to check the publishing history. I have never been an edition collector, so I just report the year date on the copy I read.]

I Also Heard From: Brant Kresovich (who sent a postcard for WWP #21)

few steampunk fans who liked what we had, and they purchased just over \$1,000 of merchandise from us. Now, it is time to source more items, make some more, and see where we can go to sell some more. We know dealers who are at a show nearly every weekend; that is not us. We're not as visible, but we have been working hard to make a presence for ourselves, so we will be in demand at the few shows we do go to.

OPUNTIA #278: Our unpopular mayor has announced his return from rehab for drug and alcohol addiction. Most of us know that it takes more than just a month for such a recovery process, but he had announced that he is fit and healthy and will take the reins of power again. Ford forgets once again that he had no powers, with all powers and responsibilities taken from him by council, and given to deputy mayor Norm Kelly, who has been doing a quiet and responsible job while Ford supposedly dries out. As soon as Ford gets back, guaranteed he will do/say something extraordinarily stupid/arrogant/sexist/racist (choose one, several or all). The most amazing thing is after all of this, he is still one of the leading candidates to be mayor in the October municipal elections.

[Meanwhile in Calgary, which the Toronto intelligentsia like to label a redneck city, our Muslim mayor Naheed Nenshi continues to be a respectable man who has never been in a cellphone video or accused of anything untoward. It is just so frustrating for the small-l liberals who think Calgary and Toronto elected each other's mayor by mistake.]

I haven't been in a Lancaster bomber, but the Canadian Warplane Heritage Museum has a Lancaster, and I've stood beside it. It's huge. Toronto used to have a Lancaster on a plinth near the waterfront. The one in Hamilton actually does fly; does the one in Nanton?

[The engines run and it is taxied about but the Nanton plane is too valuable to risk flying. It took countless volunteer hours over several decades to restore the plane to mint condition. No one wants to risk a crash destroying all that work.]

Murray Moore talks about work. I am pleased to say that both Yvonne and I have found full-time work. I am finishing my third week at Transcontinental Media in Mississauga, working on the flyers for our assorted clients. Yvonne is finishing her first week at Crown Wallpaper, up the highway from us. We are both hopeful that we shall be able to retire sometime down the road from these employers who were good enough to hire us at our ages.