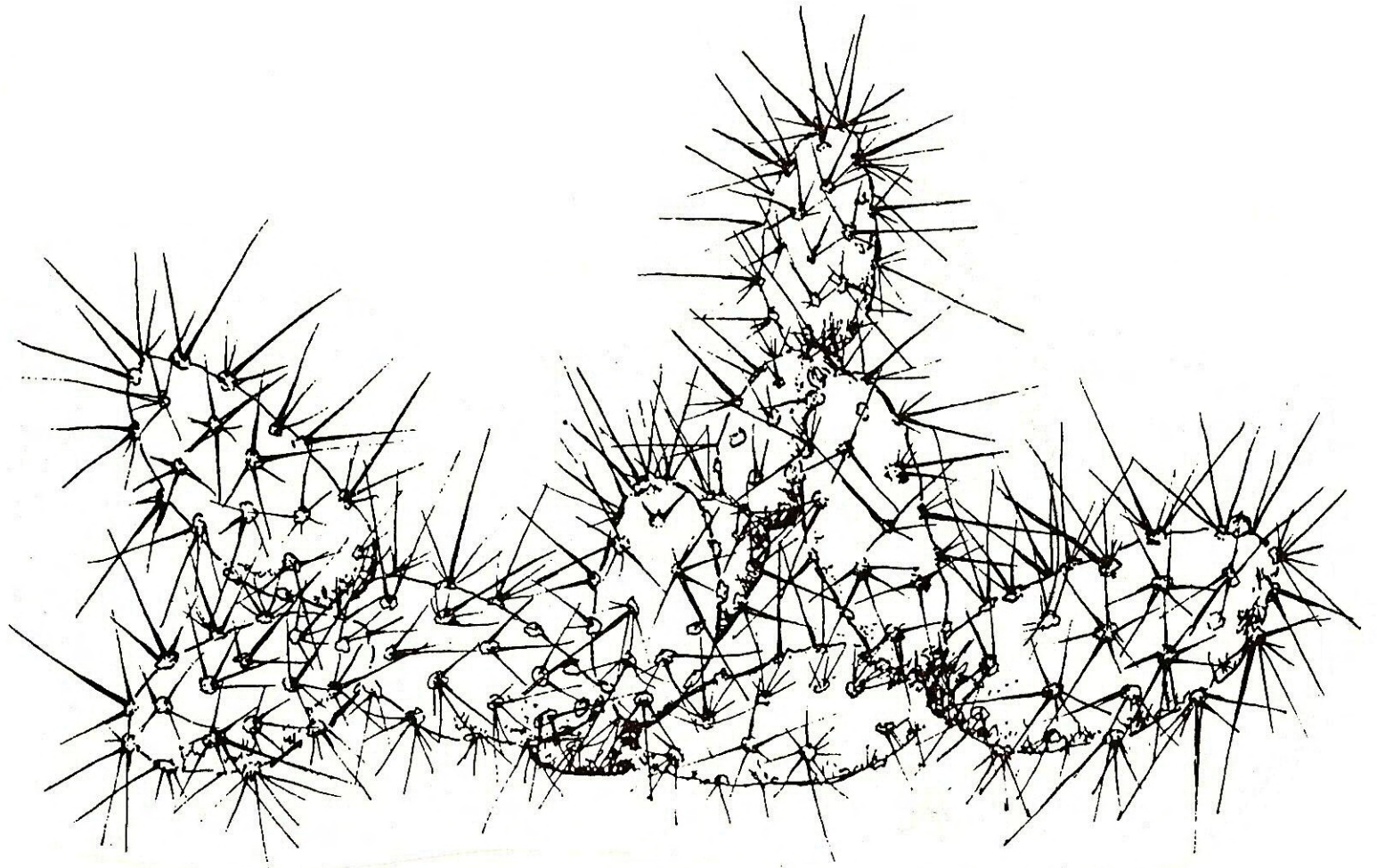


# OPUNTIA #1





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OPUNTIA is published irregularly by Dale Speirs, Box 6830, Calgary, Alberta, T2P 2E7. It can be had for \$1 per issue (American funds accepted at par) in cash. It can also be had for articles or letters of comment, or trade for a zine I don't already get. Sorry, but no unsolicited poetry, or art; I currently have a backlog. This zine will appear on an irregular basis, so don't set your calendar by it. From the very beginning I promise to be unreliable in publishing. That way if I am, then no one is surprised. And if I do publish frequently, then you can consider it an unexpected bonus.

EDITORIAL: Well yes, yet another zine. Just what the world needs, really. And for what purpose are these blank pieces of paper being sullied? I would like to stir up more commentary on Canadian SF, something that seems to be missing from current zines. I would like to see speculative fact articles, the kind that Analog runs, but without the math or diagrams. The letters of comment, of course, will take care of themselves, although I hope to avoid a FOSFAX-style mob for reasons of finance. (The only one making money off Opuntia will be the printer.)

WHAT IS OPUNTIA? Yes, you're right, it is a Latin name, although the root is Greek. Opuntia is the genus name for pricklypear cacti. Cacti are native to the Americas, but have spread to other parts of the world, mainly as a weed. The South Africans and Australians can tell you all about the troubles they have had with opuntias. Alberta

has two species, Opuntia polyacantha and Opuntia fragilis. The latter is the northernmost of all cacti, being found in the Peace River valley of northwestern Alberta. Both species are common in the prairies of the western provinces and adjacent American states.

WHY DID I PICK THE NAME? Well, I earn my living as a horticulturist. As a University of Alberta student (Class of '78), my first publication was a paper on the cacti of western Canada. Since then I have published several papers on Opuntia, and hundreds more on other aspects of horticulture. If you're driving in Calgary and you see a Nissan Micra with the licence plate 'OPUNTIA', then you'll know right away who the driver is. The plate also helps me find the car in parking lots, but that is another story.

ART CREDIT (No relation to Social Credit)

Front cover: O. fragilis, by Maureen Holt, from Sussex Cactus and Succulent Yearbook, 1975.

Page 4: Root system and growth habit of O. polyacantha, by George T. Turner and David F Costello, from ECOLOGY 23:422, 1942.

Page 7: Opuntia incertae sedis, by Shiba Kohan, from Illustrated Diary of a Trip Westward, 1790.



## CONTEST #1: OPUNTIOL

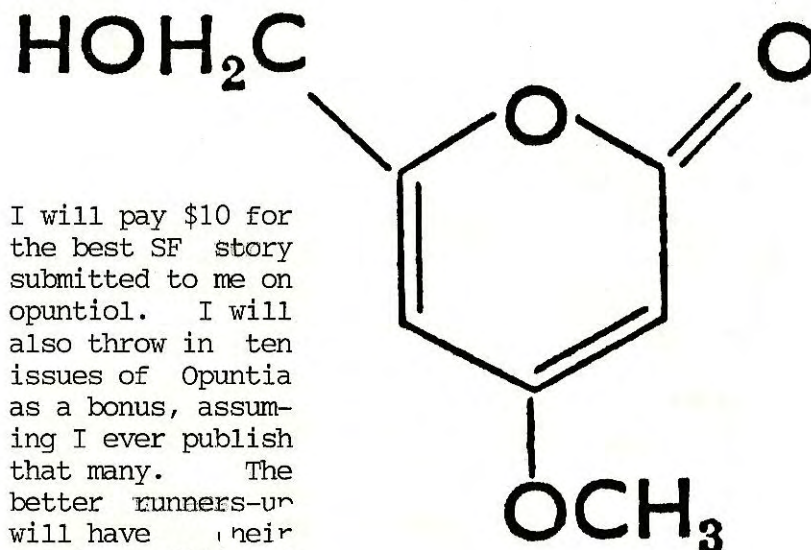
by Dale Speirs

The chemical shown on this page is that of an aromatic alpha-pyrone isolated by a research team in Bombay, India from the species Opuntia elatior. The literature citation, if you must look it up, is TETRAHEDRON 21:93-99. The full name of this chemical is 2-hydroxymethyl-4-methoxy-alpha-pyrone but even the laboratory people have trouble with those big words, so the substance is called opuntiol for short.

[As a completely irrelevant aside, I have always thought that scientific names make the best mantras for chanting. My personal favourite is prophenylisopropylamine N-(phosphorylmethyl) glycine, a herbicide I use at work. I can rattle it off in an instant, and repeated in an Irish jig type of rhythm, it sounds quite catchy. Much more impressive than Hare Krishna. Good for snowing any visitors and demonstrating one's technical skill.]

Getting back to opuntiol, it is one of those chemicals isolated for no apparent purpose and having no useful function. As any chemist can vouch, the scientific periodicals are filled with reports of this nature. Most of them are obviously left over from graduate thesis projects, and will never be cited by anyone other than the author. Such chemicals were isolated for the sake of isolating, not to mention the most important purpose of all scientific research, that of building up one's bibliography.

And now to the reason for all this. Or, as Bill Cosby likes to say, I told you that story so I could tell you this one.



I will pay \$10 for the best SF story submitted to me on opuntiol. I will also throw in ten issues of Opuntia as a bonus, assuming I ever publish that many. The

better runners-up will have their entries published as well, but will get only the usual

contributor's copy. Deadline for entries will be September 1, 1991. No word limit, but about four or five typewritten pages are the limit.

A couple of restrictions. Opuntiol's purpose in cacti is unknown, but no stories about it being used as a narcotic, stimulant, or depressant. Find a novel use for it, or explain why opuntias have it, but don't make it a recreational drug. That's too obvious, and I'm looking for imagination.

Also, I am looking for stories based on an idea or central theme, not one that relies on a bad pun or lowbrow comedy to make its point. Gimmick stories will be considered, but it should be a pretty good one, and not a O. Henry type surprise ending.

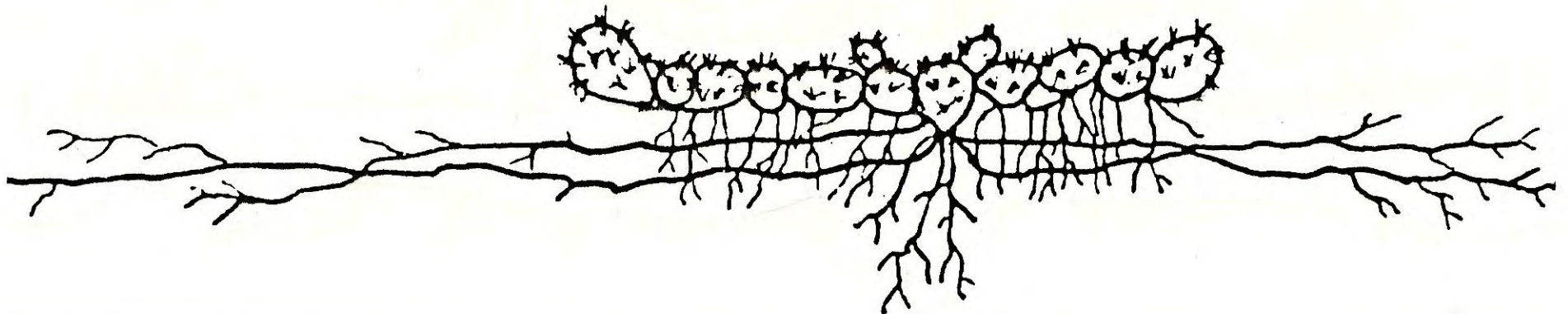
Mail entries to Dale Speirs, Box 6830, Calgary, Alberta, T2P 2E7.



## THE VISIT OF SAINT NOMENTANUS

by Leanteri Polvikoski

'Twas the night before Kristallnacht, when all through the haus,  
Not a creature was stirring, not even a maus.  
The gas and the ovens were run with care, but I wasn't worried; I wasn't there.  
I wasn't homosexual, Communist, or Jew. Der Fuhrer knew best was all I knew.  
And Mama and I avoided any traps. We settled our brains for a long decade's nap.  
When out in the world there arose such a clatter, I sprang to the curtains to see what was the matter.  
Away to the window I fled like a flash, peeked carefully out from behind the sash.  
The moon on the shards of new-broken glass, gave the luster of midday to the blood-soaked grass.  
When what to my wondering eyes should appear, but a miniature sleigh and eight tiny reindeer.  
With a fat old driver, so debauched and pompous, I knew in a moment it was Saint Nomentanus.  
More rapid than Stukas, his coursers they came. He whistled and shouted, and called them by name.  
"Now Gauleiter! now Schadenfreude! Nebelwerfer and Panzerfaust!  
On Zeppelin! Gotterdammerung! on Donder and Blitzkrieg!  
To the top of Polen! to the Reichstag Hall! Now dash away, dash away, dash away all!"  
As Messerschmitts against the Hurricanes fly, when they meet as obstacles and mount to the sky,  
So up to the hausgarten the coursers they flew, with the sleigh and Saint Nomentanus, too.  
Then in a twinkling, I heard a fist pound the door. "Here is Gestapo!". Those words chilled me to the core.  
As I drew back my head and was turning around, through the door Saint Nomentanus came with a bound.  
He was dressed in uniform from his head to his foot, and his clothes were all tarnished with ashes and soot.  
His eyes, how they twinkled! His dimples, how merry! The blood on his clothes, like a dried-up cherry.  
His sour little mouth was drawn up in a bow, and his double chins were as white as snow.  
He had a square head, and a fat round belly, that shook as he walked, like a bowl full of jelly.  
He was chubby and plump, Goering as an elf, and I laughed when I saw him, in spite of myself.  
A wink of his eye, and a twist of his head, soon gave me to know I had nothing to dread.  
He spoke not a word but went straight to his work. Went to the kitchen and grabbed the cook with a jerk.  
And laying his finger aside of his nose, he nodded at the chimney, and then at Rose.  
He stuffed her in the sleigh, to his team gave a whistle, and away they flew like the down of a thistle.  
I said nothing as he drove out of sight, but prayed that it would never be me on a future night.





## WHAT, IF ANYTHING, IS CANADIAN SCIENCE FICTION?

by Dale Speirs

Sixty-five years after it began, there is still no generally accepted definition of science fiction as we know it today. Fanzines occasionally erupt with arguments and definitions, with the word 'speculative' usually being a focus. There are those who even refuse to acknowledge the origin of SF in the Year of Our Gernsback 1926, and insist on tracing it back to Frankenstein or the usual gang of Greeks. Notwithstanding the latter, there can be little doubt that modern SF and Fandom As We Know It trace back to the events of the late 1920s. The squabbles over an exact definition of SF are, to me at least, sterile debates, in the same category as all those newspaper articles asking "Is the theatre dead?" or "Whither the novel?" For the purposes of this article, I will use the most common definition of SF, namely "I know it if I see it!".

From one quagmire to another. What is Canadian SF? And from that question, one logically proceeds to another one. What is a Canadian SF author?

Taking the last question first, what are the criteria for being a Canuck Sfer? Residency in Canada is the one favoured by many, but to me it does not follow that Spider Robinson writes Canadian SF just because he has lived in Canada for a number of years. William Gibson writes American SF, despite living in Canada. Authors such as these write for the American market, and their product is indistinguishable from what would be expected if they still lived south of the border.

Convention programs and other publications that have biographical lists of authors are somewhat depressing to read, as it seems if every other author was born in the United States or Britain and came to Canada in []. Conversely, those who made good now reside in Iowa or Tonawanda. A.E. van Vogt, the Bard of Winnipeg, is an example of the latter group.

Assuming we have a real live Canuck, bred, born and raised in The Great Lone Land, this doesn't mean that the output of such an author is automatically Canadian SF. For one thing, the only market where one can make a name and income is the United States. SF sold to American magazines must be written to American specification for the most part. (More about this in a moment.) Canadian authors will therefore write stories to fit this market.

The overwhelming presence of American books and magazines in Canadian bookstores gives rise to the most important effect of cultural imperialism. That is the adage that because the Americans are everywhere, have the slickest advertising, and set the standards, then those standards must be the best ones. Insecurity in Canadians gives rise to the popular belief that if you were any good then you'd be living down in Los Angeles. There is a bit of truth here, because the Canadian market is too small to allow most authors to survive solely on writing income. "On Spec" is all very well, but a budding author cannot survive on their acceptances alone. "On Spec" and the anthology series now in its third volume "Tesseracts" have all they can do just to get half-decent distribution, never mind compete with Analog, Asimov's, et al on Canadian newstands.

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"Tesseracts", the anthology of Canadian SF, was founded by Judith Merrill, best known as an American SFer, despite her long residence in Toronto.

None of this is to say that Americans are not wanted here on my part. I mention this because too many people confuse Canadian nationalism with anti-Americanism, and assume that if you are the one, then you are automatically the other. This may be true of, for example, the NDP Waffles, but it is possible to stand up for Canada without favouring terrorist attacks on Bantam Books or Davis Publications.

What are the themes that Canadian writers should be writing about? Separatism is the most obvious one, not just Quebec, but western Canada and other parts of a country shakily united mainly by mutual hatred of Toronto. John Bell has published a bibliography of such stories (Science Fiction Studies 9:82-88, 1982). These stories generally are jackboot SF; there will be war. If not actual war, then at least there will be clear endings, with the situation resolved one way or the other. I refer to this as the Analog syndrome. To write Meech Lake up as suitable for an Analog story, one would either have complete success, with Newfoundland, Quebec, and Elijah Harper all joining together to sign the Accord, or else complete failure, with Customs posts going up along every provincial border and Quebec minting a French-only loonie.

While Canada had a frontier, it was not settled the same way as the American frontier, and such a mythos may be safely be left off a list of Canadian themes. We do have the wilderness legends, where trappers and explorers were swallowed up by the vast forests and prairies, and changed in the face of such uncaring expanses. This may ex-

plain why Canadians prefer universal medicare, and other security blankets instead of recklessly pursuing life, liberty, and happiness. With winter never far away, our ancestors were constantly worrying about firewood and food supplies, and we today worry about snow tires and the furnace fuel supply. Winter makes Canadians cautious in every aspect of life, which in turn provides a theme for SF writers about a planet of conservative, careful space-goers.

It has been suggested that alienation is a typical Canadian theme. While it may be true that Canadians suffer from this affliction, it isn't just ourselves. Alienation is a universal dis-temper, from the canyons of Manhattan to the quaint Scottish countryside.

To me, the best Canadian theme is that of the cultural imperialist overwhelming its smaller neighbour. Other countries may have problems with large, aggressive neighbours, but they at least have a language barrier to reduce the impact. Germany may dominate Europe, but French newstands are not 90% German magazines. Russia has left its mark on eastern Europe, but Slavic countries recently released from communism have their own cultures protected by language. For Canada, it is a different matter. Quebec can shelter itself behind the French barrier, but the rest of the country faces a continual barrage in English from a neighbour with ten times the population and a hundred times more confidence. Translate this into SF, and write the story of a planet imbued with fear and loathing of a more populous neighbour.

One thing that can be quickly disposed of is setting an SF story in a Canadian locale when that story could taken place anywhere.

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It is interesting to read SF written by outlanders and set in Canada. The more blatant stuff has the Mounties on duty in dress scarlet or Pierre de la Kamloops talking in a peasouper accent that makes Jean Chrétien sound like the actor who did the voice of HAL in 2001: A Space Odyssey. The less jarring stories can still slip up and refer to an Indian reservation instead of reserve. Such minor errors are invisible to readers outside Canada but clang horribly for a Canuck. But when I see such errors though, it makes me wonder if the same sort of thing exists for other parts of the world. For example, Mike Resnick has been doing 'Kirinyaga' stories that certainly read well to me, but for all I know could be a source of either amusement or anger to a Kenyan.

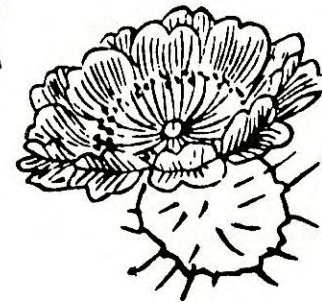
The background of an SF story set in Canada can be letter perfect, but if the characters act like any damn Yankee you ever saw, then the staging is to no avail.

In recent years, we have seen more and more Canadian writers. At one time, being picked as the Canadian Guest of Honour for an SF convention was not so much an honour as a matter of default. It was like winning first prize in a contest where there was only one entry. 'Critical mass' is the phrase being bandied about in fanzines, and certainly does describe the situation. With this has come Canada's version of SFWA, travelling under the nomen of SWAC. In any other country, SWAC might be considered a trifle silly, but you must remember that the Canadian equivalent of the Hugo was for many years called the CASPER. Ya gotta luv a country like that, eh?

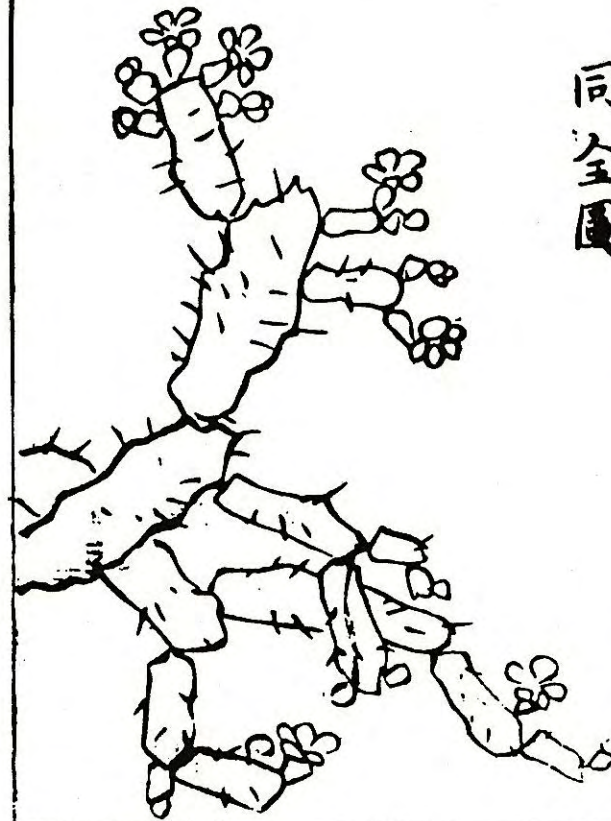
畫圖西遊譚

サボテンノ花  
霸王樹花

花れ色  
カバ黄



同全圖



駿府町敷オオノ町有皆板屋作御城ハ往來の者ハ行リ  
四面山繞々氣候不順夏月忽々變ジテ冷マシム  
土俗曰富士山より冷際ノ風ト云ハオロスユ  
フキオロス ユー

FROM: Dale Speirs  
Box 6830  
Calgary, Alberta  
CANADA, T2P 2E7

WHY YOU GOT THIS ZINE

**TO:**

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