

# OPUNTIA

29

Prickly  
pears are my  
babies even  
though there  
are those who  
consider them  
pests.

Everyone  
loved me until I  
had kids of my  
own.



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WHERE DID THE FUTURE GO?  
by Dale Speirs

The recent hoorah over the supposed microbe from Mars has reminded me that all those future histories in the pulps of Back When never came to be. Not that anyone seriously expected the details to be exact, or that SF ever was a predictive literature, but it certainly was quite reasonable back when that if we could put a man on the moon by 1969, then we would have either a Mars expedition or a genuine space station (not a floating tin can) by century's end. Alas ... Whenever someone says today "If we can put a man on the moon, why can't we do this?", to which I reply that we can't put a man on the moon today, the Apollo hardware no longer existing.

I've been doing a lot of historical research lately, browsing through dusty volumes of periodicals in the university library. One problem with this methodology is that I am constantly being sidetracked by interesting articles and notes on all kinds of neat stuff. In fact, the category of premature technology alone would make a large book. Premature technology is that which is too far ahead of its own time to succeed, whether

because the materials and methods were inadequate, or social conditions were against it. Obvious examples are Babbage's computers and visionphones. It has long been possible to build telephones that allow you to both see and hear the other party, but other than as videoconferencing for business purposes, it's never really caught on.

One example I came across of premature technology was an idea for what we would now recognize as microdots. The March 31, 1832, issue of PENNY MAGAZINE (page 8) has a brief note by a Mr. Colton that "An era is fast approaching, when no writer will be read by the great majority, save and except those who can effect that for bales of manuscript, that the hydrostatic screw performs for bales of cotton, by condensing that matter into a period that before occupied a page."

Now then, was Colton predicting microdots or computer chips?

Leon Carnovsky, in a 1964 article in LIBRARY TRENDS (13: 126-140) wrote about one reason why microfilm has never replaced books completely despite its apparent advantages.

"One group in Park Forest, Illinois, has already announced the creation of a "bookless college library" as a feature of a contemplated liberal arts college, utilizing 3"x5" slides similar to microfiche, each containing 64 pages of text, and providing each student with a projector for his slide reading. One of my colleagues has suggested that the first addition to this college will be a School For The Blind; anyone who has spent much time with microfilm or microcards will sympathize."

As CD-ROMs become available, will microfilm become the 8-tracks of the 1990s?

## ROUND ROBINS: A PRELIMINARY HISTORY

by Dale Speirs

A round robin (RR) is a circulating packet of letters or zines, each participant adding their contribution as it comes round and removing the previous one. The RR editor may make copies as it comes by, but often he won't, thus making RRs almost impossible to collect. A RR is essentially a zine published in a print run of one.

The history of RRs, if it has been recorded, is so obscure as to be almost non-existent. Ken Faig, in his recent history of zines (see *OPUNTIA* 28:7-15) gives a passing mention to THE TRANS-ATLANTIC CIRCULATOR, one of whose participants was H.P. Lovecraft. RR zines, as opposed to RR letters, are definitely known from the 1800s, and probably RR letters predate them. Since RRs circulate only amongst a small group of friends and only come in one copy, it is not too surprising that bibliographers and librarians are generally silent on the subject.

R Rs are popular in hobby groups. As an example, I am a participant in the American Philatelic Society club newsletter RR. Each time it wends its way to me, I insert the latest issue of the CALGARY PHILATELIST and read the other club newsletters in the RR. I remove the older issue and send the packet on its way. The Cactus and Succulent Society of America has had a large number of letter RRs going since 1951; I used to participate in the *Sansevieria* RR. The CSSA RRs are still popular, with dozens going about various genera of plants or general topics such as cultivation. RRs remain the cheapest method of circulating bulky letters and photographs. On the Internet, RRs are used by hobbyists such as quilters who, although they use the Net to send e-mail, use snail mail to circulate boxes of quilt squares to trade: take one out, put one in.

The newsgroup rec.crafts.textiles tracks the boxes and carries on general chitchat. The rec.crafts.rubberstamps circulates boxes of used maps for mail art.

Another kind of RR is storywriting, each participant adding a section to a story as it circulates through the group. This has long been done via the mails, and is well adapted to the Internet, such as fanfiction via the group alt.tv.space-a-n-b, or the website The Round Robin Storybook at <http://vanbc.wimsey.com/~jmott/RoundRobin/intro.html>

R Rs should not be confused with apas. In an apa, the members send in multiple copies of their zines, as many as there are participants. In an RR, only one copy is made and circulated. RR zines began at least as early as the 1800s and probably earlier, since they were hand-written and did not need to await the introduction of cheap, home-use printing presses as did apas.

As one example of an RR zine, THE SCOTS THISTLE began in April 1885 at Kilmarnock and was still going a century later. The originator of this RRzine got the idea from an English friend, where they had been popular for some time previous. A full account of this RRzine is given in the April 1985 issue of SCOTS MAGAZINE, but as this may not be readily available, I'll summarize a few details here.

THE SCOTS THISTLE was originally circulated amongst 12 to 20 members. Each contributed a manuscript or one-off zine to the editor. The editor binds the material into a single volume, together with editorial pages, a blank comments page, the comments page from the previous issue and a penalty page (where late or non-contributors pay the fines assessed in postage stamps). The zine is then circulated round the members. Everyone uses a pseudonym, ostensibly to soften the blows from the comments pages, although many know who is who behind the names. There



are get-togethers, just as apas often hold conventions. RRs have often been the starting point for subsequently famous authors. H.P. Lovecraft in the TRANS-ATLANTIC CIRCULATOR is well known on the American side. THE SCOTS THISTLE has two famous alumni, the poets Robert Garrioch and William Soutar, who wrote under the names "Grommet" and "Scriblerus" respectively.

Many RRs will probably appear on the Internet, but will always exist in snail mail, there being no way of transmitting physical items through wires. I am only writing in this article of written RRs, but it can be noted in passing that they exist on audio or video tape, and were popular when cheap home recorders became available. The major vulnerability of an RR is that if it goes astray in the mail, or more commonly, is detained or lost by one of its participants, then there will be difficulty restarting the RR and recovering the data.

When I start any research project, I always go to old dictionaries to get my citation search kick-started. The peculiar case of 'round robin' is that almost all of the references are for other meanings of the phrase and seldom for the literary meaning.

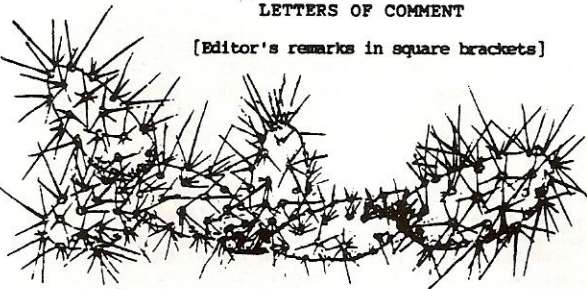
Dictionaries I checked for the era 1623 to 1780 were blank on the phrase. Starting in the 1800s, I found citations, most commonly for round robins as a petition where the signatures were written in a circle or on a ribbon looped through a hole punched in the paper in order to prevent the ringleader from being identified. Another use of the phrase is in sports competitions where each contestant plays each other. This usage is traced back to 1895 (for lawn tennis) by the OXFORD ENGLISH DICTIONARY SUPPLEMENT, Volume 3, which also adds a definition for a specialized type of horse race bet.

Not until the 1960s do many dictionaries give the literary meaning. This is surprising, since RR letters and zines date back to the 1800s, and being used by literary folk, should have drawn the attention of lexicographers. In fact, many modern dictionaries have dropped this meaning; as an example, FACTS ON FILE (1987) lists the earlier meanings but not the circulator meaning. I am reminded of Java moss, one of the most common aquarium plants in the hobby, but which is almost never sold in pet stores; it travels between aquarists by trade, sale at club auctions, or gift. Literary RRs seem to have the same underground life.

And why 'round robin'? Most dictionaries repeat the same origin, that of derivation from 'ruban ronde', the round ribbon on which French sailors of the 1600s signed their names when protesting against an officer. But when I took my next step in researching the phrase, consulting the indexes of NOTES AND QUERIES, I found that this had been a subject of dispute in the 1800s. In 1851, R.W.E. queried this phrase, saying he had found a quote "That the sacrament of the Altar is nothing else but a piece of bread, or a little predie round robbin." In a bit of Real Soon Now that would shame any modern zinester, the reply to this query came in 1896. F. Adams blasted the French origin as improbable, and suggested either that the little round pancakes of the same name were the origin, or that the term is corrupted from 'rope bands'. In a swift followup a year later, F. Chance agrees that the term could not have derived from French, traces it to at least 1643, and suggests that all the known meanings are alliteration or assonance from 'round ro - n' or possibly 'round robert'. Mr. Chance listed all the known definitions of the phrase, none of which included anything literary. Yet there is no doubt the literary RRs were common on both sides of the Atlantic during his life. What is it about this phrase that it stays so well hidden from official dictionary notice?

LETTERS OF COMMENT

[Editor's remarks in square brackets]



FROM: John Held Jr  
Box 410837  
San Francisco, California 94141

1996-4-4

The article by Ken Faig Jr on zine history was a revelation. Thank you for bringing this important article to my attention. I'm getting interviewed by V. Vale of ReSearch Publications next week; he's doing a zine book. I'll bring it to his attention.

[John Held Jr is well known as a mail artist.]

FROM: Chester Cuthbert  
Winnipeg, Manitoba

1996-4-7

Ken Faig's important article is a feature of OPUNTIA 28 ... [some additions to his bibliography are] the two volumes of Dr. Dirk W. Mosig's THE MISKATONIC (for which Ken compiled a wonderful index, making it an indispensable reference for students of Lovecraft) and THE WORLD OF FANZINES by Dr. Fredric Wertham (Southern Illinois University Press, 1973).

FROM: Ken Faig Jr  
2311 Swainwood Drive  
Glenview, Illinois 60025-2741

1996-4-6

Thank you for publishing "Zines: An Eo-History". I did make a couple of mistakes in my essay which I know about. Ernest A. Edkin should be Ernest A. Edkins. And I am not sure that HPL's lost serial story "The Mystery of Murdon Grange" circulated in the TRANSATLANTIC CIRCULATOR. In a 1918 letter to Kleiner, he speaks of including the conclusion of "Murdon Grange" in his new HESPERIA. In a 1921 letter to Long, he speaks of HESPERIA as "a manuscript magazine which I circulate in Great Britain". I don't know for a fact that HESPERIA was circulated in the TRANSATLANTIC CIRCULATOR. Maybe some other Lovecraftian can correct me.

FROM: Joseph Major  
3307H River Chase Court  
Louisville, Kentucky 40218-1832

1996-4-8

The problem with any index is the mental effort required to think like the indexer. Looking for "Bookstores" is fruitless when for some reason the local Yellow Pages colator has them lumped in with the public library, a photocopying shop, and the little back-alley shop that sells all its magazines wrapped in plastic, all under the heading "Printed Matter". Often the way an indexer divides up the world is exotic and eccentric, or comes from some workshop on a radical new way of indexing.

Ken Faig's eo-history of zines should be sent out to every features writer in the country. Almost all the articles on zines I have seen talk about how the trend got started in the 1970s.

FROM: Teddy Harvia  
701 Regency Drive  
Hurst, Texas 76054-2307

1996-4-10

Terry Jeeves' illustrated tribute to the ubiquitousness of prickly pears was full of vignettes and vinegar. I particularly liked the Australia in '99 digging a hole.

FROM: Robert Lichtman  
Box 30  
Glen Ellen, California 95442

1996-4-16

I really like Terry Jeeves' cover on OPUNTIA 28. Ken Faig Jr's "Zines: An Eco-History" covered ground very familiar to me, but it was good to read his presentation. I was a member of the National APA for several years back in the early 1960s and published a couple of papers that ran through the monthly mailings. You had to send in 450 copies to cover everyone! The subculture around the various mundane apas was utterly fascinating to me, a whole new fandom, and I got quite involved for a while. Looking up various old-timers, I ended up being gifted with an enormous amount of rare old ayjay publications. One of them was a water-warped copy of John Travis Nixon's HISTORY OF THE NATIONAL AMATEUR PRESS ASSOCIATION; the guy who gave it to me explained it was warped because it had gone through the San Francisco earthquake and fire of 1906. I still retain an affection for "the 'dom", as it calls itself, and am sporadically in contact with a few of its elder members.

I would add to Ken's bibliography MISCELLANEOUS WRITINGS, H.P. LOVECRAFT, edited by S.T. Joshi and published last year by Arkham House (cloth, \$29.95, 590 pages). Much of it is material that first appeared in one ayjay publication or another, and some of it is about the 'dom.

FROM: Harry Warner Jr  
423 Summit Avenue  
Hagerstown, Maryland 21740

1996-4-24

Ken Faig should arouse the old sense of wonder among some of your readers who have been unaware of the long history and extent of mundane amateur journalism. I would quibble with only one statement. Ken repeats the old estimate that Lovecraft wrote more than 100,000 letters during the years of his corresponding. This seems improbable to me on two counts. One is the simple fact that to have done this in less than a quarter-century would have required the creation of about 5,000 letters per year on the average, or about 14 letters per day, a most improbable output month in and month out for a person who wrote his correspondence longhand. More important, I don't think Lovecraft's budget could have financed such a letter-writing abundance. He was famous for his ability to survive on a tiny income. I don't think it was large enough in most years to pay for all that paper, all those envelopes, and all those postage stamps.

There's a good reason why we don't read about nostalgia for Addressograph labels on fanzines; they didn't use this method of getting themselves addressed. Fanzine circulations were small enough to make addressing them a comparatively quick chore. A fan who wanted to save some time could invest in gummed paper and use carbon paper to create three or four labels simultaneously for each addressee.

It isn't nostalgia for old publishing equipment that is so prominent today, but rather nostalgia for creating a fanzine with one's own hands. A good cook feels better about a meal he/she has prepared than a meal consumed at McDonald's. Older fans like to remember watching their pages come off the hekto surface or mimeo cylinder, collating them, stapling them ...



FROM: Sheryl Birkhead  
23629 Woodfield Road  
Gaithersburg, Maryland 20882

1996-4-27

Love the Jeeves cover! Fans tend to have more than one hobby. Do you happen to know which area was the first to have a written amateur magazine? I'm presuming they all do (westerns, romance, Star Trek, and so on) and I think that SF was the first, but I have no idea.

[If you mean a literary hobby, I'll guess that horror or weird fiction was the first to have zines. If you mean any type of hobby, then probably philately or astronomy were the first hobby zines. Can any readers advise?]

FROM: Federico Guglielmi  
C.P. 744  
40100 Bologna centrale, Italy

1996-8-13

I'm deeply interested in similarities between the present-day digital revolution and the previous upheavals in communication technology. Your 'uchronia' on t-zines and the piece on carbon paper (OPUNTIA 28) ... 1940s Hollywood movies and hard-boiled detective novels are my best gateways to the past-media landscape. IT HAPPENED ONE NIGHT (by F. Capra, starring Clark Gable and Claudette Colbert) is an orgy of the media: the mail, newspapers, telegrams, wireless, telephone. As regards crime novels, the "Los Angeles Quartet" by James Ellroy contains numberless metaphors. Even without computers, the anti-hero of the plot is constantly wired, his pockets always full of coins because he has to ring up informers and police stations. WHITE JAZZ was written in 1991-92, and I can't help searching for echoes of contemporary information wars. In the pre-digital years, only the police and intelligence agencies could surf the nets. As digitalization sets up a

total information society, we all become our own cops!?

Other multiple name bearers and I are writing a novel on 16th Century German Peasant's War. The metaphor on which the plot is centred is: Thomas Muntzer as a human terminal. He would send and receive letters from/to all the local rebellions, copy and pass them, like a newsgroup, a snail-mailing list.

FROM: Lloyd Penney  
1706 - 24 Eva Road  
Etobicoke, Ontario M9C 2B2

1996-8-12

It's been about six weeks since I've written my last loc because of our move. See Change of Address above; I'm back in metro Toronto.

A great article by Ken Faig on the history of zines. It serves as a backgrounder to many fanhistories. This is the kind of article that should be available to all via printed paper and the Internet.

[Any Timebinders reading this should communicate to Ken and put his article on the Web.]

FROM: Taral Wayne  
245 Dunn Avenue, Apartment 2111  
Toronto, Ontario M6K 1S6

1996-8-30

I do thank you for submitting your fanzine OPUNTIA to my cover. If it wouldn't be too much trouble though, I'd like to ask that a few small changes be made before using it. First, I really like your editorial but find I cannot agree with its conclusion. If it were re-written to change your support to opposition, the editorial will suit my art ever so much better. It would probably be

[continued next page]

little more trouble to shorten the letter column by a page and instead of the article on page 6, substitute one on fanhistory. Finally, if you wouldn't mind, could you retype the issue in a single column instead of double? Also, perhaps you have a middle initial to your name you could use, Dale X. Speirs or whichever letter is correct. Don't hurry on my account, however. I have several issues backlogged, and won't need OPUNTIA for my cover for many a month and a day.

[A polite reminder to artists about OPUNTIA covers. I am happy to accept line drawings in horizontal format, leaving room for me to insert title and issue number, and without large areas of black or grey which won't photocopy well. I ask that the art have some connection with opuntias, but please, if you don't know what an opuntia looks like, check a botany book at your local library. If the art has barrel, pincushion, or saguaro type cacti, it'll be returned with a polite letter in the style that Taral parodied above. I pay \$10 for one-time use, which I know isn't fannish, but I try to compensate the artist a bit for his work, if only a token.]

FROM: Scott Crow 1996-9-9  
Box 1948  
Fair Oaks, California 95628-1948

What is publishing about? I've been considering that question recently. My wife and I want to eventually do publishing full-time because we love books so much. But the book industry is such a mess, it's a little daunting at times. We tend to be idealists and romantics, which might not be the best for a cutthroat industry like publishing.

[One problem is that making it a job runs the risk of killing the joy. I am a professional horticulturist; my yard is probably the shabbiest on the block because

I maintain parks all day at work and can't be bothered to summon the energy to do more of the same at home. So go where your heart leads you but don't forget the business plan and never distribute on sale-or-return.]

FROM: Dré Dee 1996-9-23  
2365 Cobbinshaw Circle  
Mississauga, Ontario L5N 2G2

I'm currently working on a feature-length story for the RYERSON REVIEW OF JOURNALISM, at Ryerson Polytechnic in Toronto, about zines that have a more journalistic content than most lit- and fanzines. These zines include feature articles that appear to rely on research, facts, and/or interviews instead of pure opinion. I'm studying the relationship between zines and professional journalism. What can journalists learn from zines?

I ALSO HEARD FROM: Henry Welch, Garth Spencer, Rodney Leighton, Pat Silver, Harry Andruschak, Paul Olsen, Buck Coulson, Russ Forster