

SCENES FROM THE EARLY CHILDHOOD OF DRACULA'S
LESSER-KNOWN COUSIN, 'VLAD THE OPUNTIA'.

OPUNTIA

52



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Whole-numbered OPUNTIA's are sercon, x.1 issues are reviewzines, x.2 issues are indexes, and x.5 issues are perzines.

COVER ART CREDIT: Steve Jeffery, 44 White Way, Kidlington, Oxon OX5 2XA, England

EDITORIAL: Since OPUNTIA began in 1991, it has been appearing at roughly monthly intervals, although it is officially an irregular. As the executor of my mother's estate, I now spend my off days driving back and forth between Red Deer and Calgary, a 300-km round trip. There is a lot of work in clearing out a large house with 40 years of accumulation. My mother, a child of the Great Depression, never threw anything out because, like the rest

of her generation, she was brought up to be thrifty. The furniture was easy to move out. What took a lot of time was packing all the small stuff. One doesn't just toss the fine china into a box; each piece must be hand-wrapped. -2-

The contents of Mom's house were divided roughly equally between myself, my brother Neil, and the relatives out at her birthplace of Eckville (Mom's younger sister Darlene and several of Darlene's children and grandchildren). My house is now so full that the only open space is in the kitchen. The living room is racked with bookshelves, one has to edge sideways through the hallway, and the basement has tons of her fossils (she was a palaeontologist). It will take me years to sort out what I want and re-distribute the rest.

A couple of months after her death, I bought a new car, a 2002 Honda Civic 2-door coupe. My 1998 Civic hatchback now becomes my backup car, and the old 1987 Nissan Micra went to the Kidney Foundation as a donation. The hatchback cruises Highway 2 to Red Deer at 130 km/hr. I was delighted to discover that the new coupe cruises at 160 km/hr without even pushing it to the red line. I only hit this speed on the stretch between Crossfield and Bowden, about 80 km of absolutely straight, flat, treeless prairie (think of Nullarbor, Australia, or southern Saskatchewan). Any radar traps can be seen 10 km ahead. As a result, I can cut the 1.5 hour trip north down to 1 hour.

I spent so much time driving Highway 2, dealing with the house, lawyers, accountants, banks, and so forth, that I had no time for exercise. My weight has ballooned 20 kilos since Mom's death, but once I am not required in Red Deer every 48 hours I expect to get back to my weekly schedule of walking 10 to 15 km and return my weight to 75 kilos.

There was further delay due to the death of my step-grandfather George Lutz (Mom's stepfather; her biological father died of spinal meningitis when she was a year old) on December 4 at the age of 88. I'm not involved with the estate as he was no blood relation to me, but the funeral and helping out Darlene (he was her father; she and Mom were actually half-sisters) took up more time.

The result of all this is that OPUNTIA will be irregular, and my correspondence tardy. The articles in this issue had been previously set up in my backlog. Those who sent in items relating to World Wide Party #9 will need to be patient but I haven't forgotten them, and there will be doc to all for the WWP. I hope to get back to my normal life by the middle of 2003. I had confidently expected to be at the WorldCon in Toronto in 2003 but that is now off.

The University of Alberta has set up a memorial Web site for my mother. To see it, use Google and type in the search terms 'Joffre

Bridge', 'Joffrea speirsii', and 'Betty Speirs' to get the URL. There are some videos of her collecting at her main site at Joffre Bridge, as well as pages on the fossils named after her.

I can't complain too loudly. In the middle two weeks of January 2003, one of my co-workers was diagnosed with a brain tumour, and a week later his house burned down. The insurance policy had lapsed because he was so busy worrying about his and his wife's medical problems (she has heart trouble). Jim and Robin lost everything; it was -20°C weather the night of the fire and they got out only with the clothes they were wearing. We are helping them out of course. It makes my troubles trivial by comparison, and serves as a valuable lesson not to become too self-absorbed in my worries.

I HEARD FROM: Lois Klassen, Kate Lopresti, Davida Breier, John Held Jr, Joel Cohen, Pascal Lenoir, Jose Roberto Sechi, Martha Shivers, Babynous Cult, Peter Netmail, Karen Johnson, Sara Schaefer, Sheryl Birkhead, Robert Sabella, Phlox Icona, E.B. Frohvet, Lloyd Penney, Carolyn Clowes, Scott Crow, Milt Stevens, Steve Jeffery, Ned Brooks, Chester Cuthbert

THE BOY WHO SWALLOWED A LIZARD

by Dale Speirs

Introduction.

Whenever I am doing historical research, I jot down any references that might be of future interest, even if not related to my current work. As anyone knows who has done a lot of scrolling through microfilm reels of old newspapers, there are many fascinating tidbits and fillers that have vanished into obscurity. Many of these are what we nowadays call urban legends. Because few newspapers are indexed, and even fewer folklorists have time to page through them, these anecdotes are lost to posterity. One such thing I noticed while researching my main topic of postal history was the occasional reoccurrence of a report about someone swallowing a lizard accidentally while drinking out of a brook, suffering declining health over the next few years, and then vomiting up a live lizard and suddenly being restored to health.

The first example I saw is typical of the type. In 1846, THE TIMES of London reported that 16-year-old Joseph Bailey of Liverpool had recently vomited up an 18-cm long lizard. In retrospect it was believed that he must have swallowed it two years previously while drinking from a brook, as his health had been in decline since then, with severe stomach upsets. Bailey felt

the lizard scrabbling in his throat, hooked it out with a finger, and threw it on the floor. His sister caught it and in a panic crushed it beyond recognition.

I began looking for other such reports and found many that involved other animals such as snakes or rats. Stith Thompson classifies this in his folk motif index as motif #B784, the animal in the stomach story, which may involve a frog, snake, maggots, black beetles, or salamander [10]. Throughout this essay I will refer to it as the lizard story, but you may understand the term as shorthand to include other types of animals.

What, If Anything, Is A Lizard?

The description of the animal in some of the stories makes me wonder if the author was describing a salamander, as the description is closer to that type of animal rather than a lizard, and an aquatic animal such as a salamander makes more sense than a lizard in a brook.

An 1858 book by Frank Buckland [6], in which a lizard story is told, discusses how to distinguish the tadpole of the lizard from the tadpole of the frog, which leads me to believe that this was the case. Buckland tells a story told to him by a Lanchashire man about a creature lodged in someone's stomach. The creature is

variously and synonymously referred to as a water newt or a lizard. The newt certainly has its share of folklore attached to it [20].

One snake version of the story, originating from West Sussex, England circa 1868, nicknamed the snake as a nanny-wiper [17]. Was the word 'wiper' a corruption of 'viper'? My knowledge of English countryside etymology is minimal, so I leave this for some other scholar to speculate upon.

A Chronology Of Stories.

The story was still floating around in 1866, when it was familiar enough that the English humour magazine PUNCH could mention it knowingly to readers in a cartoon [4]. The cartoon showed a parlour scene with a troubled boy clutching his stomach and surrounded by sympathetic sisters. The caption reads: "*Oh, Lizzy, Willie would drink out of your aquarium, and he has been and swallowed a lizard!*". I suppose it was funnier at the time, but topical humour usually doesn't survive well.

Circa 1884, a folklorist reporting on superstitions of Irish peasants of Connemara wrote that one of the beliefs was that lizards were always trying to get down people's throats, and even sneaked into houses to target children [7]. A variation of this myth, circa 1888, was about an English boy sleeping in a meadow when a snake

crept inside him through his open mouth. All attempts to remove the snake failed until someone pointed out that there are no snakes in Ireland. On the basis of sympathetic magic, the lad went to Ireland, drank some holy water, and at once the offending snake was expelled [21].

Story Variations: Salted Food And Open Mouths.

E.W. Baughman's index of folk motifs refers to snakes in the stomach being enticed out by eating salted food to make the animal thirsty, then standing over fresh water with an open mouth [9]. The desperate animal then exits the body to quench its thirst.

Buckland's 1858 variation of the story (which he did not believe but only cited as folklore) had the victim get rid of the lizard (or newt) by eating nothing but highly salted food, and to drink nothing. Once it was unbearable for both man and lizard, he went to go lie down by the brook with his mouth open. What happened next was that: "*The lizard inside, tormented by the salt food and parched for want of water, heard the sound of the running stream, and came scampering up the man's throat, and jumping out of his mouth, ran down to the water to drink. The sudden appearance of the brute so terrified the weakened patient that he fainted away, still with his mouth open. In the meantime the lizard had drunk his full, and was coming back to return down the man's throat*"

into his stomach. He had nearly succeeded in so doing, when the patient awoke, and seizing his enemy by the tail, killed him on the spot." [6].

An 1891 version from Ireland tells of a farmer who took a nap in a field one day, and later began suffering stomach pains. He was cured by the salted food method. On holding his open mouth over water, a brood of newts emerged from within him [19].

Story Variations: The Milk Of Kindness.

An 1868 English variation of the stories had the victim getting rid of the animal by holding their open mouth over a saucer of milk [17]. A far less plausible story from 1878 reported an Ipswich, England, child who was sitting on grass one day when a toad jumped on its chest, burrowed its way into the child's body, and began intercepting food in the throat. It was lured out by roasting meat nearby while the child held a bowl of milk in its lap. The toad came out to get the meat, fell into the bowl, and drowned in the milk [18].

An Irish version from 1891 was a warning by a lady to the narrator not to drink from a brook because he might accidentally swallow a serpent's egg. It would then hatch in the stomach and could only be brought out by fasting and holding the mouth open over a saucer of milk [19].

Story Variations: Exiting Through Orifices.

Another stream of lizard stories has the creature finally exiting the body, usually by vomiting but occasionally out the other end. An 1844 report from Distington, Scotland, told of a woman who coughed up a 30-cm water asp after months of pain [15]. An 1853 story told of Jonathon Smith, age 40, who was a gunner's mate on HMS Hastings. He was admitted to Portsmouth hospital suffering from stomach complaints so severe that he was dying. Two hours before his death, a snake came out of his mouth. His shipmates speculated he must have swallowed it when he was on duty in India and it grew in his stomach [16].

The lizard story crossed the Atlantic in 1860, where a Nova Scotia newspaper reported it as happening to a West Auburn, Maine, man named Abner C. Verrill [3]. He was 23 years old and had been in declining health for the last seven years, losing weight due to stomach and bowel troubles. He finally passed from his bowels an 18-cm long lizard. The newspaper report commented that "*The lizard is of the common dark colored and spotted species ... It is probable that the reptile was drunk from a brook ...*". It seems from this they are describing a salamander.

In February 1892, Jane Rowe, of Cornwall, England, suffered stomach pains for years, then finally vomited a lizard, after which she was free of pain [5].

Flaws: Survival In The Stomach.

Like other folklore in the category of urban legends, the lizard story is a mix of specificity and yawning gaps in logic. The victim is named to provide a patina of veracity, but it happened out of town, so as to make it difficult for a skeptical newspaper reader to easily verify the story. It demonstrates a chain of logic that would follow from a fantastic supposition, namely that the stomach upsets were attributable to an incident a years ago, and that incident in turn was identified as a cause from a fantastic premise in the present.

The fatal flaws in the lizard story are many. The largest and most obvious flaw is that no vertebrate could survive even a short immersion in stomach acids and a suffocating environment, and indeed that is the point that critics of the story instantly make. Victims of stomach lizards are said to have lost weight, because the lizard was intercepting the food. It would seem that a fat lizard would result, counterbalancing the victim's weight loss.

Flaws: Do Poets Drink From Brooks?

One flaw that strikes me is the business of swallowing a lizard while drinking from a brook. Often this is said to have been during harvest time. Lizards, snakes, salamanders, and frogs, like the vast majority of vertebrates, breed in the spring, so it is highly

improbable that any lizards small enough to be swallowed unnoticed would be around in the autumn. One would expect them to put on a bit of length and weight by harvest time. Try drinking down a long jelly baby in a glass of water without feeling it in the mouth. That would be the equivalent feeling, much smoother in fact than a scratchy lizard or newt.

Another point about drinking from a brook is how one would get enough suction to vacuum up a lizard. Supposing the lizard to be an extremely careless sort (and if so, why hadn't natural selection already removed it from the gene pool?), it could hardly be so weak as to be unable to avoid being sucked into the maw of a 16-year-old boy. And if it was that weak, it certainly wouldn't have the strength to survive years inside a human stomach. Any human kneeling down by a brook will send shadows and vibrations over the water, which will startle away all the fauna, lizards included. Ask a fisherman.

Let me now speak as someone who has drunk from brooks while harvesting, back when I was an undergraduate working a summer job at the University of Alberta Breton Experimental Farm in the middle 1970s. There was a lovely spring-fed rivulet in the adjacent bush, with wild strawberries growing on the banks. Nothing better could be found in the finest restaurants of the world to assuage a thirst from a hard day's work of reaping test plots by hand.

There are two ways to drink from a brook. One is to kneel down, cup your hands, and scoop the water up to your mouth. I suggest that this is the invariable method the average harvest labourer would use. If you drink by cupping your hands, your eyes will instinctively glance down into the hands. Surely a lizard would be noticed then. The other method, fondly suggested by poets and artists who didn't actually do it, is to lie down on your belly, stick your mouth into the water, and slurp. It isn't that easy. Since the water level is below the level of the bank on which you are lying, this means your head is tilted down, and either your nose will enter the water before your mouth or you have to tilt your head back at an uncomfortable angle. I'm not saying it is impossible to drink through the mouth when both mouth and nose are submerged, but the technical term for this procedure is called 'drowning'.

Lizards Or Stomach Problems?

There is one reasonably probable explanation for snakes being vomited. Roundworms can be coughed up by victims, and sometimes the helminths are quite large [22]. This would explain the snake stories, as an hysterical and usually poorly educated victim would not make a distinction between a snake and a roundworm. Another interpretation is that the lizard was never seen but only assumed by ignorant yokels as the cause of stomach pain that was actually due to ulcers, heart pain, or cancer.

Stomach pains of the kind in the lizard story are also consistent with heart conditions (which were once called 'acute indigestion'). Most of the stories report the lizard or snake only came partway up the throat. This could be bile or other stomach productions from some medical problem.

Alternatively, the pains were not really believed due to lizards but spoken of as a metaphor and perhaps mis-interpreted when written down. In the early years of the 1900s, Balkaners gave diseases the characteristics of animals [8]. Acute pains or fits were called snakes, and angina referred to as frogs or lizards.

Although most of the lizard stories appear to be manufactured out of whole cloth to fill blank space in a newspaper, I have reason to believe that some were based on a nugget of truth and later elaborated. An 1841 newspaper story reported a Peckham, England, woman suffered hysteria and believed she had a ravenous rat inside her [11]. She began starving herself to kill it. A physician examined her and determined that the pain was caused by a tumour.

In 1864, in Mercer, Canada West (now the province of Ontario), a woman was suffering pains supposed to be the growth of a large snake in her stomach [12]. The snake was so large that her belly was swollen. Pressing the protrusion caused pain, thought to be the snake objecting to the pressure. It was also said to rise up into

the throat when desiring food. Her physician said it was unsafe to operate. This appears to have been a true story, but it wasn't a snake that was growing, it was a tumour. James O'Grady, of Syracuse, New York, was reported suffering severe stomach pains in an 1890 case [13]. He couldn't lie down to sleep because a snake rose up into his throat. He thought he drank it from a brook but the probable cause seems to be stomach or throat cancer, or ulcers.

An 1851 report from the DONCASTER CHRONICLE of England [2] told about an 11-year-old girl, surname of Watson, who lived at Blaxton. She had drunk out of one of those deadly brooks and suffered chronic stomach pains since. The family knew it was a lizard because every so often it would become restless and climb partly up her throat, causing untold agony. The lizard could only be calmed down with copious amounts of warm milk, after which it would slide back down into her stomach. Might this be the traditional treatment for ulcers?

The Decline Of The Story.

The lizard in the stomach is not very credible in this modern age because even the average person ignorant of medicine knows better than to ascribe stomach pains to a lizard or snake. In a 1946 reference on lizards, a section discussing the folklore of them makes no mention of swallowed lizards [14].

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CON-VERSION 19

by Dale Speirs

The 2002 edition of Calgary's regional SF convention Con-Version went the weekend of August 9 to 11. It was held in conjunction with Canvention 22 (the national Canadian convention, which features the Aurora Awards) and Con Spec 2002 (the Alberta literary SF convention). Con Spec had the rotten luck to have been originally scheduled in Edmonton for a September weekend last year which turned out to be the one immediately following the WTC/Pentagon attacks. The chaos in the airline and hotel industry that followed in the months after made it impossible to re-schedule until now. There were, therefore, three sets of Guests of Honour, which made it complicated sometimes for Toastmaster Robert Sawyer to introduce them at the dais. Clear diction, close attention to the prepared text, and slow, precise speaking was an absolute necessity.

Con-Version/Canvention/Con Spec was held at the Metropolitan Centre in downtown Calgary, a former theatre which had been converted into a complex of auditoriums and boardrooms for corporate meetings. Some events were also held at the Westin Hotel directly across the street, and it appears that next year the

entire convention will be held at Westin where it had originally been many years ago.

Opening Ceremonies.

As is standard, many guests and convention members went out Friday morning on a tour to the Royal Tyrrell Museum of Palaeontology in Drumheller, a two-hour drive east of Calgary across the prairies and into the badlands. This is the world's largest fossil museum. The Drumhellerites have also built numerous replicas of various dinosaurs around the downtown core, including a giant 5-story *T. rex* that one can climb up inside and look out a viewpoint from the gaping jaws of the monster. In his opening speech, Con Spec Guest of Honour Michael Bishop mentioned that on the lower lip of that *T. rex* was a small puddle that people had been tossing coins in. He got a good laugh when he said it was the first time that he had seen people tossing coins into dinosaur drool.

Another Con Spec Guest of Honour, Allen Steele, mentioned that to get to Calgary from his home town in Massachusetts, he first had to fly a turbo-prop to Toronto, then change for a regular passenger jet to Calgary. As the turbo-prop was about to land at Toronto, it suddenly veered hard and went around for a second attempt. The second landing succeeded, and as he deplaned, Steele asked the pilot (you can talk to them on the small planes)

what happened. The pilot said that as the plane was making its first try, a flock of Canada geese also came in for a landing on the same runway. The pilot then muttered to himself, "Only in Canada, eh?"

The Bob Gibson Collection.

The sensational news in Canadian fandom was the announcement a week before the convention began that the collection of old-time fan Bob Gibson had been donated to the University of Calgary. I happened to be talking to Robert Sawyer at a bid party Saturday night and he mentioned that the news had made the CBC national network.

Gibson died January 8, 2001, at the age of 92. He was long a familiar sight in Calgary bookstores and at convention dealer bourses, buying up books in box lots. Dealers were always pleased to see him come in. His collection had tens of thousands of books and pulps, and immediately made the University library a world-class SF resource. Gibson had numerous rare books and pulps from the 1800s and Edwardian eras, and had carefully indexed everything on cards.

One of the things that Gibson did that was unique was to go through old non-SF magazines such as MACLEAN'S, LIFE,

MacKimmie Library Tower,
University of Calgary, Calgary, Alberta T2N 1N4.

Cheques should be payable to "University of Calgary" and must be marked in the memo area "For the Gibson Collection".

SF In Education.

Four teachers discussed whether or not SF should be taught in grade schools. Donna McMahon opposed the idea because SF originally began as a literature outside mainstream life, a place to verbalize dissent and speculate on things the Bible-thumpers would rather be left unspeculated. When SF is taught in schools, it becomes part of the system. In academic circles, the litcrit crowd add layers of symbolism and obscurity never originally intended, and fossilize it in the eyes of students.

Paula Johanson said teaching SF doesn't have to be stultified. Her students are often so excited about a story they wait for her after classes to discuss it.

Barb Galler-Smith felt that any SF reading was better than no reading at all. She felt it surprises blase children. She buys those supermarket tabloids which feature aliens meeting with the American President and then asks her students what is wrong with the story; this gets them thinking about truth in journalism.

ARGOSY, PLAYBOY, and others, as far back as a century ago, and carefully razor out any SF stories. He then bound them by title of magazine, and did a hand-illustrated cover and table of contents. For anyone to repeat this feat today would require endless hours of research and a bottomless purse. I think this was probably the single greatest accomplishment of Gibson. Now anyone wishing to study the history of SF in general magazines has a quick reference at hand, instead of lengthy paging through indexes and microfilm.

The University Library staff gave a presentation about the Gibson donation on the Friday night of the convention to a full room. Obviously they could only show a few highlights (they are still unpacking) and were there not only to publicize the collection but to pick up information from audience members who had known Gibson. Dave Hall, owner of Off The Wall bookstore, sold much material to Gibson and from the audience was able to enlighten the librarians on Gibson's methodology of collecting. Although the librarians were genuinely enthusiastic about the collection as part of their popular culture studies, it was obvious they needed some training. One of the librarians pronounced the word 'fanzine' analogous to 'Zion' instead of as 'fan-zeen'.

The University is seeking funds to help house and curate the collection. Donations can be made in care of Blane Hogue, 750

Christie de Souza said she was more concerned about parental reaction to SF required reading. Her experience has been that as long as the kids were reading, the parents were happy.

Fandom Panel.

This was basically a monologue by Linda Ross-Mansfield on convention running, mostly Worldcon stories. She made one point I hadn't considered before. Like many people, I prefer smaller conventions rather than the big ones with twenty tracks of programming and dozens of special interest groups. She mentioned that small conventions generally have a shorter life span than bigger ones, due to a smaller margin of error in finances. As an example, the literary conventions tend to be erratic, about every few years rather than a steady annual convention, because they don't have a large base of support.

Space Travel In Fact And Fiction.

Dr. Geoffrey Landis, who works on the Mars rover team and has two SF books on the side, discussed his practical experience of spacecraft construction. Another panelist, Blair Petterson, had mentioned that real spacecraft are never as reliable and smooth to operate as fictional ones. Landis told the story of NASA's low-oxygen sensors, which keep giving false alarms because the

sensors rust so easily. As a result, the NASA staff ignore them. When one goes off, the response is not a mad rush to emergency stations but rather someone shouting down the hallway "Shut that damn thing off!".

Landis also mentioned that in the real world, contrary to Libertarian assertions, rockets to orbit will remain the domain of government agencies. It is too complex, expensive, and long-term for orbital space travel to become economic. However, he felt that rockets going straight up to 100 km and back to Earth would be possible for private industry as high-priced thrill rides. The killer cost in space travel is not altitude but orbital insertion.

Invading The Red Planet.

This was a slide show by Dr. Landis on his day job in Mars exploration. A full auditorium as is usual for Con-Version science panels. He discussed the photographic evidence for water erosion on Mars, and mentioned that any free liquid water would be hypersaline.

He is currently working on the new Mars rovers, which are intended to be long range travelers with a lot of autonomy. The next generation after that will be airborne, whether a solar-

powered flying wing, a balloon, or a re-startable rocket that can hop about the planet from one site to another. There are no serious plans for human travel to Mars. Although the technology is not considered a barrier, the political and social will to do it does not presently exist. He mentioned that the JPL staff are very worried about the success of the next rovers. The failures of past Mars explorers can be survived, but one more disaster may kill Mars exploration for decades.

Anime Fan Fiction.

Fanzine fans often wonder what they can do to encourage outsiders to join in. I decided to test this in reverse by attending this panel. I have no involvement in anime beyond buying the Ranma 1/2 books as they come out, so it would be like a non-zinester attending a fanzine panel. The anime panel was an eye-opener to me. The panelists talked of writing 'fic', not stories, and posting it on Websites, not publishing it in zines. Fanzines in the traditional sense were not mentioned even in passing.

One agreement among the panelists was that Website fic produced faster feedback to the author. Some authors who expected feedback were actually trolling for positive feedback only.

Fic writers develop reputations the same as pro writers, and many readers follow the fic authors they are comfortable with. Eden

Lackner mentioned one of her favourite fic authors suddenly switching to slash fiction (homoerotic fiction involving television characters of the same gender, such as Kirk/Spock, Picard/Data, or (remember them?) Starsky and Hutch). Lackner didn't realize this until she was well into the story, which was a bit of a shock.

Cat Armour.

Jeff de Boer is an artist who became famous for building suits of armour for mice, cats, and other critters. He takes amusement in the thought that centuries from now, archaeologists may dig up a helmet for a Persian cat and be totally confused about our society's functioning. A Japanese film studio came over and filmed one of his cat suits. He was shown fitting the armour on a rather uncooperative feline. He also did another shoot of a mouse wearing his armour. He rented a mouse from a pet shop for 27-cents a day, thinking it would be a quick job. The mouse got sick, and in order to avoid a cruelty-to-animals charge, he took it to a veterinarian. The vet billed him for \$84. The good news was that since he was doing the job for an ad agency, he was able to charge it off as expenses.

Neolithic Man.

I mentioned that science panels have always been popular in

Calgary conventions. The proof was that this panel, held bright and early Sunday morning, filled a large room of con-goers, some of whom I know were still partying in the small hours when I left for bed. Dave Duncan started off with a general summary of current thought about human evolution. It appears, based on a study of genetic diversity, that about 75,000 years ago, humans hit a bottleneck of some kind which reduced the worldwide population down to about 10,000.

Robert Sawyer has been adding Neanderthals into his stories, so he discussed what he had learned about them. He suggested that tool making must have been instinctive in humans during the Stone Age. There was a big leap about 40,000 years ago with grave goods and cave art. Sawyer takes that as the origin of consciousness.

Archaeologist Rebecca Bradley believes that Neanderthals may have contributed a very small percentage of genes to the makeup of modern humans. She spent most of her time demolishing the myth of the Great Goddess that neo-pagans promulgate. This is the idea that from hundreds of thousands of years ago to 5,000 years ago, the dominant religious belief among humans was a benign Earth Mother-style goddess, who was then displaced by the Judeo-Christian culture. The Great Goddess was supposed to have encouraged a matriarchal and peaceful way of life, and the Judeo-Christians supplanted it with war and poverty. There is no

proof of such a thing in the archaeological record but plenty of proof that the idea originated in the 1800s from romantic wishful thinking.

Other Conventions.

There were a number of groups bidding for various conventions who held bid parties at Con-Version, such as Seattle in 2005 for Nasfic, Los Angeles in 2006 for the Worldcon, and Calgary in 2005 for Westercon.

Torcon 3 also bid successfully on Sunday afternoon for next year's Convention, to be held as part of the Toronto Worldcon. The significance of this is that Convention hosts the Aurora Awards, the Canadian equivalent of the Hugos.

The Calgary Westercon bid is proposed for July 1 to 4, 2005, the weekend before the Calgary Stampede (the world's largest rodeo, with more than 1.1 million paid admissions). Pre-supporting memberships are C\$15/US\$10 from Calgary in 2005, Box 43078, Calgary, Alberta T2J 7A7.

The 2003 Con-Version will be August 15 to 17. Guests of Honour are Terry Brooks, Esther Friesner, Charles de Lint, and Robert J. Sawyer. Details later at www.con-version.org

This year's Convention business meeting at Con-Version refused to ratify some constitutional amendments passed at last year's Convention. It did, however, ratify an amendment disallowing clubzines from the Best Fanzine Aurora. This problem has been building in recent years as clubs bloc vote for their publications, making it impossible for a true fanzine to win, and giving the Aurora to a Star Trek clubzine once again this year. The original intent of the Aurora Fanzine award was to encourage individuals, not allow bloc voting for club activities. Clubzines can still be nominated for Fan Activity - Organizational, which is more in keeping with the spirit of the awards. The new amendment takes effect for the 2003 Auroras at Toronto.

I suppose I should declare my interest in this matter. OPUNTIA is not published to win awards, but it is annoying to observe crudzines nominated by clubs. I have never seen a copy of the Star Trek zine that has won the Fanzine Aurora for the past three years, but Robert Sawyer assured me at the Con-Version meeting that it was a good quality publication. What bothered me more was to see, in past years, the worst crudzine in North America, an Ontario clubzine, repeatedly nominated, although mercifully it never won due to the apathy of its members. It was shoddily photocopied (often with cut-and-paste lines visible), and was almost entirely Internet downloads and clippings from other

sources. Usually the only original content was a

Lloyd Penney letter of comment. (Penney is Canada's answer to Harry Warner Jr; you don't have a real Canadian zine until you've published a Penney letter.) It made a travesty of the Best Fanzine award.

The problem is that all categories of the Auroras have such low voting totals, and the cost to vote is so low (\$5) that it is not too difficult to arrange bloc votes. I have nothing against bloc voting per se; it is not illegal or fraudulent as some people think. In fact, bloc voting is how political elections operate; each party tries to round up as many members as possible. This doesn't matter too much in federal, provincial, or municipal elections where millions of voters turn out to the polls and three-quarters of the electorate turns out to do their moral duty. That makes an election representative of the people's mood. Some categories of Auroras are decided by five votes. That's not the margin of victory; that's the total number who voted.

One of the other discussions at the Con-Version meeting was the matter of francophone awards. Each category of the professional Auroras is duplicated, one for each language. The francophones seldom vote for the French awards, as they prefer their own Prix Boreal. It might be time to acknowledge their apathy and make the Auroras only for anglophone literature. As Sawyer pointed out, the present situation is basically tokenism.