

OPUNTIA

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WESTERCON 58

by Dale Speirs

Calgary hosted its first Westercon on the weekend of July 1 to 4, 2005, at the Westin Hotel in the downtown core. The dates neatly encompassed both the Canadian and American national holidays, although the actual start of the convention began the Thursday night of June 30, since us Canucks got Friday off as Canada Day. Westercon is a science fiction (SF) convention that perambulates around western North America, mostly in the American states but once in Vancouver. It is a regional convention, not a local one, and so is larger and longer than a local convention, with more tracks of programming and events.

The previous week, Calgary had suffered a once-in-200-years flood, but fortunately the downtown area was not seriously affected. The record rainfall (a year's precipitation in one week) was followed by a week of sunny weather, which in turn produced a record crop of mosquitoes. In the adjacent Rocky Mountains, a late snowmelt meant more grizzly bears than usual on the valley floors (two hikers killed plus several wounded up to date of convention). In short, a good reason to stay inside a hotel and discuss Shakespeare in the original Klingon.

Registration, for those of us who pre-registered, was quick and easy. I was given pause though, when the volunteer waved a hand

punch at me and asked if I wanted my badge punched so that I could buy alcoholic drinks in the Consuite. Since I was a few months short of 50 years, I took this as a compliment, accustomed as I am to being mistaken for Terry Carr or Rip Torn. In the actual event, I told the volunteer that I was a teetotaler and the punch was therefore irrelevant. However, it was a good idea for the younger set, as the convention committee would otherwise be at risk of criminal charges for serving alcoholic beverages to under-18s.

When attending conventions, it is my policy to have a huge breakfast and coast the rest of the day while at panels. The Westin Hotel had a nice breakfast buffet, so every morning I stuffed myself before the first panel. I told you that so I could tell you this; every morning when I went into the restaurant, I saw at least one person eating breakfast while reading an SF paperback. Only at an SF convention!

Throughout this convention report, if I mention people by name they are panelists, unless, of course, the context says otherwise. Although there were microphones available, panelists seldom used them and I often had difficulty hearing them. There were no name cards, but most panelists were the usual suspects I have seen at previous Calgary conventions so I knew who they were, and the rest I identified by logical deduction from the programme booklet.

Space Elevators 101.

This was my first panel of the convention, on the Thursday night. Jeff Krehmer reviewed the history and current status of space elevators. The basic idea is to orbit an asteroid about 115,000 km from Earth and use it as a counterweight to a carbon-nanotube cable anchored to a floating rig in the eastern equatorial Pacific Ocean. The space elevator was first proposed by Soviet scientists in 1960, and has since become a popular theme with SF writers. NASA did a study in 1999 which concluded that the space elevator would not be built for at least 300 years at the earliest. One contractor estimated it would cost \$7 billion for the technical end, and the same again for legal and regulatory approvals under international law, if built now. Personally I think \$14 billion is ridiculously low; Boston is spending that amount on its Big Dig subway system, which is ordinary technology. Proponents of the space elevator talk about how it is doable with off-the-shelf technology, but off-the-shelf doesn't work in space travel.

A space elevator would use climbers boosted by laser beams. The anchor rigs would be similar to deep-sea oil rigs, and would be mobile because the cable will have to be moved every few weeks to avoid orbiting debris and satellites. It would take about 8 days for a climber to reach geosynchronous orbit and another week or so to reach the end of the tether. The cable would more probably be a curved ribbon rather than a spherical cross-section.

The advantage of a space elevator is much lower freight costs to and from orbit. It could also be used elsewhere in the solar system, such as the Moon and Mars. Hazards include oscillations in the cable, induced electrical currents, atmospheric wind, and atomic oxygen. All told, I feel safe in prophesying that it won't happen in our grandchildren's lifetimes.

But Aragorn's The Good Guy!

This panel featured fantasy novelists Dave Duncan and Rebecca Bradley on the topic of why fantasy favours absolute monarchies. The hero(ine) goes on a quest to claim the throne from a usurper, not to establish a democratic republic where just anyone can get elected. Bradley, an anthropologist in her day job, mentioned that humans like to kid themselves that they are social primates who do not behave instinctively but have free will. In fact, we have a strong instinct for pecking orders and to follow leaders and let them do the thinking for us. Fantasy kings are also largely wish fulfillment; nobody yearns to be a ploughman.

Duncan started off his comments by asking why we read fiction at all. He answered his question by saying that life is one crappy thing after another, but fantasy is about special people who do things and get someplace. Readers are interested in the high and mighty, not the ploughman's daily routine. He mentioned that aristocracies have one advantage in that because they are not

thinking about the next election they can therefore take the long view and think in terms of dynasty.

Audience members commented that democracy requires active participation, which is work that most people don't want to do. It couldn't exist in the old days because it requires communication. As transport and communication increases, it becomes more difficult to suppress democracy.

Disasters Large And Small.

The first panel I went to Friday morning was of particular interest to us Calgary fans, what with the recent floods in southern Alberta. The context here was natural disasters, not terrorist attacks or incompetent human behaviour. Panelist Blair Petterson said that ultimately the only way humans can survive is to disperse into space, so that if a nearby supernova blows or we get an extinction-level event, then our species can survive. He remarked that we are in a period of more and bigger natural disasters.

James Glass said that climate change is not a disaster now, but could easily trip over into exponential change. He cited as an example the melting of the Arctic Ocean ice, which might not raise sea levels much but could switch the Atlantic Ocean currents in a different direction. No Gulf Stream would put Europe back

into another Little Ice Age and trigger release of methane hydrates from the Atlantic Ocean, which in turn would trigger runaway warming. Glass also mentioned that one little-publicized impending disaster is a shortage of clean fresh water.

Lost In Space.

Hugh Gregory started off by saying that the Russian, American, and Chinese space programmes are adrift. "Why go into space?", he asked, then answered his own question by saying "Because it's there". Unfortunately he then went off on a rant about how the space programmes are stuck with expendable rocket launches instead of reusable X-planes because of a conspiracy of defense contractors, politicians, and bankers. At this point I checked out of the panel.

Frankenfoods.

Paula Johanson is an organic farmer who has a market garden in central Alberta. She noted that not all agricultural chemicals are bad, nor are genetically-modified organisms (GMOs) necessarily bad either. Barb Geller-Smith, a science teacher, commented that genetic modification of crops has been done for millennia, but in the last century there has been a sudden loss in genetic diversity of crop plants as farmers standardize on certain hybrids and GMOs. She pointed out that the long-term behaviour of GMOs is

still unknown.

From the audience, I added in my particular expertise (B.Sc. Horticulture and previous research work) and said that while GMOs are safe to eat, the real concern is genetic drift. Many GMOs with herbicide or insect resistance have already passed those genes on to related crop weeds via pollen flow. An audience member who is a Saskatchewan farmer said his problem was that the only seed available for large-scale farms like his is GMOs and hybrids. Like Internet users who have to keep upgrading their computers to get videos and MP3s, farmers have to plant only GMOs because they can't afford not to.

The Growing Influence Of Anime.

Lai Zhao had the absolute newest anime imports for this panel, as she had just flown in from Hong Kong a few hours before and was still jet-lagged. She said anime manga is extremely popular in Hong Kong. (Manga are comic books in trade paperback format.) She said that manga is not considered a fine-arts form in Asia but North Americans have elevated it to a cult. Tee Morris said he sometimes had trouble understanding anime in the same way that he did with 2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY, but eventually he caught on to the internal logic.

An audience member who is a librarian said that when the library introduced anime manga, their circulation increased 30%. This was not just because of readers checking out manga, but because the manga was shelved next to SF novels, the readers also picked out some of those as well. Another comment from the audience was that long-form anime suffers from being episodic; there are no true novels in manga.

Chicks In Chain Mail.

A very popular panel with a packed room. There were seven panelists, which I think is a record for Calgary. Six were women, and the lone man was Tee Morris, who was promptly declared the Token Male. He was there because he has one fantasy novel with tough chicks and romance in them, and he announced mock defiantly to the room: "I write romantic fantasy; get over it!".

A panelist asked how many women in the audience had ever worn chain mail. Only four admitted to it. I noticed that none of the costumed women in the audience were actually wearing brass bras or chain mail; they were all in medieval gowns or Regency dress. It was agreed that chain mail needs a layer of cloth underneath because it is painful to wear. It chafes, pinches, and binds. Another panelist pointed out that medieval knights wore chain mail over plate, with padding underneath. Chain mail can defend against slashing but is useless against rapiers. It is, however, no

sillier in fantasy than Gonad the Barbarian fighting in battle wearing nothing but a loincloth.

From there, the panel shifted to the damsel in distress, a factor which had long kept many women from reading SF and fantasy. The damsel is slowly disappearing in recent years. One panelist, who is in her late 60s, said that when she was a girl, she could only find male hero SF. The first mention of Emma Peel by a panelist brought loud cheers from the room. In modern SF, a female lead character should not just be a male fighter pilot with boobs, but should be shown in all aspects of her life.

How Possible Is Time Travel?

Forward time travel is trivial, said the two panelists who were physicists, and backward time travel is not against physics at the quantum scale. Paradoxes arise only in single, closed-loop universes. If the universe is open, where time travel creates a new timeline, then there are no paradoxes. If you go back to kill your grandfather before you were born, you will still exist because you and your dead grandfather are on separate timelines.

The wormhole method of time travel is not practical because humans could not survive the gravitational stress. One panelist remarked that the great accomplishment of modern physics is that we have precisely defined the

limits of our ignorance by sweeping the anomalies into catchall bins labeled dark energy or dark matter.

Spintronics.

Canada's national SF and fantasy awards, the Auroras, were presented this year at Westercon. I was nominated for the Aurora Award again for Best Fanzine, but after 13 years of losing, I decided I wasn't going to sit through the ceremony just to watch someone else walk up to the podium. Instead, I went next door to a talk given by Kevin Roche, an IBM researcher from California, on spintronics. This is a developing field of electronics based on electron spin, not the normal flow of electrons in a current. Electron spin is the rotating electrical charge of the electron. Half of them rotate one way, half the other, and the spin is arbitrarily called Up or Down spin. Spin is the source of magnetism. Electrons can be polarized like light by applying an external magnetic field, which separates the Up electrons from the Down electrons.

Roche discussed devices using electron spin. The basic element is thin layers of magnetic and non-magnetic material. Electrons flow in one side of a layer, are sorted en route into Up and Down spins, and exit the other end. The most common use is in multi-gigabyte drives, because these devices can read smaller signals than regular electronics. This allows data to be compressed into

smaller bits on the disk. Another application of spintronics is electron tunneling, which conserves spin (that is, does not sort them). By controlling the currents on either side of the device, this can turn it into a high-speed switch.

Thank You, Thank You.

As I exited the Spintronics panel, I was surrounded by well-wishers, having won my first Aurora Award, for Best Fanzine. Cliff Samuels accepted the award on my behalf, after everyone in the audience had been looking about the room for me. Robert Sawyer told them that he knew I was around somewhere because just before the ceremony began, he and I passed each other going in and out of the men's washroom. Peter Jarvis was worried he would have to carry the trophy back to Toronto just to mail it back to me in Calgary, but all turned out well. A pleasant end to Canada Day. I look forward to getting my next Aurora in 2019.

Writers At The Improv.

Always a popular feature at Calgary conventions, the Imaginative Fiction Writers Association, a Calgary writers group, hosts this event. Several pairs of pro writers and IFWA members are given a word by the audience, and then have 60 seconds to write a sentence using it. The sentences are read off, the audience votes on the best one, and the process is repeated until a short-short is

built up. The result was as follows; the underlined words are the audience suggestions.

“As far as explosions go, it was a small one, but considering the exploding object was his left testicle, it was an event of some magnitude. He tried to get it into the waiting testicle receptacle and even though it was tricky, he pulled it off. He passed the receptacle to the next person in the pew, reflecting as he did so that he was reconsidering his membership in the Universal Ecumenical Church of Mandatory Organ Donation. “Mandatory, schmandatory”; he’d only stumbled into the dark crowded church hung over and broken-hearted, merely on the promise of pie and one of them sparkly ball things.* But as he looked down, he did feel sorry for the tarantula; he might only be half a man now but the poor spider was on its last legs. As the suppositories were passed about, he decided this was too much of a pain in the ass; forget religion, he’d turn to science. He leaped to his feet, and whipped from his blood-stained pocket a hyperbowl, a small bowl-shaped container of condensed space time.** Upending its contents, he reversed time in the church to before the testicle catastrophe, and walked out a free, whole man, a man about whom, and without hyperbole it could be said, he knew how to keep one eye on his balls.”

* A reference to one of the Westercon dealers selling bouncing balls that sparkled and glowed as they bounced.

** Actual word suggested was ‘hyperbole’.

Them Bones Gonna Rise.

This panel discussed the plausibility of cloning dinosaurs from fossil DNA, as in JURASSIC PARK. Dr. Phil Currie, of the Royal Tyrrell Museum of Palaeontology in Drumheller, said that palaeontology attracts people who are not interested in science but just spectacular animals. Fossilization can occur rapidly within days and preserve soft tissue in anaerobic conditions.

Sandy Fitzpatrick, a DNA specialist with the University of Calgary, said the main problem in reconstructing species from fossils is getting good DNA. It starts decomposing at the moment of death. We don’t even know how many chromosomes a given species of dinosaur had. A lot of it is ‘junk DNA’, called that originally because scientists thought it was useless, but now understood to be DNA whose purpose we simply haven’t yet discovered. Most DNA recovered from samples is fragmentary, and must be pieced together bit by bit by looking for overlaps in gene sequences.

Fitzpatrick said the bane of her life and other DNA specialists is the television series CSI, which is very misleading. Old bones (ex., a 10-year-old murder) do not necessarily yield DNA, and tests take three days minimum.

Although most of the CSI science is true, the timelines are ridiculously short (laboratory tests within a couple of hours) and laboratory technicians do not visit crime scenes (it is the job of police to collect the evidence).

Fanzine Kaffeeklatsch.

This was hosted by John Hertz (Los Angeles), who brought along samples of current zines and explained to the novices about how to get involved in the scene and how zine exchanges work. He mentioned that the Internet has been good for zinedom in one respect, in that crudzine publishers are now rare because most of them are on the Internet. He said that Webzines are not necessarily less work than paper zines, but rather a different kind of work. I mentioned that no one can Google the Papernet as they can with the Internet, which means your employer can't go fishing for your name or his.

Convention AGM.

The annual general meeting of Canvention, Canada's national SF convention, was chaired by John Mansfield. Canvention is where the Aurora Awards are presented, and alternates between western and eastern Canada (the dividing line is the Manitoba/Ontario border). Usually it runs as part of another convention. The only major business was to accept Toronto Trek's bid to host

Canvention in 2006. A Vancouverite in the audience suggested that V-Con might be bidding for it in 2007 when Canvention rotates back into the western zone.

Challenger, Columbia, And Hubble.

This panel discussed what was learned from past mistakes and where to go from here. Larry Niven said the shuttle was built by committee, hence its fatal defects. He said that a big problem in spacecraft design is parasite control, keeping out people who want to add their projects to the spacecraft. An audience member who is a Boeing engineer said there was too much interference from politicians, who are not interested in space but rather in spreading dollars around to constituencies.

Blair Petterson said Mir and the International Space Station were like camping in your back yard; they should be out in deeper space where they could be useful way stations. The Americans' mistake was to use man-rated shuttles to haul freight, instead of separating the two duties as the Russians do with Soyuz and Progress spacecraft. The shuttle disasters showed what happens when the margins of safety are pushed out further with each launch because nothing happened the last time a piece of foam fell off. The ill-fated Biosphere 2 experiment showed that we can't make artificial ecosystems work on Earth, much less in a spacecraft.

Bad Religion And Odd Religion.

Rebecca Bradley started off by remarking that the difference between a cult and a religion is about 2,000 years. She said that outsiders view cults as odd, while cults view outsiders as bad. Cults and religions are subject to natural selection over time, and are constantly being winnowed down. Bad religion does not refer to morality or ethics but to the internal structure and organization of a religion, which is what helps it survive and prosper or else fail.

Marie Jakober said that until recently religions were not subject to the same scrutiny as other organizations, and could get involved in politics. She felt that a major part of religion in controlling sexuality and determining who has access to mates and how children are raised.

An audience member pointed out that most SF novels show the author's view of a religion, not as that religion may actually be practiced. Publishers are only interested in what sells, and their view of religion in SF will over the long run match the philosophy of SF readers. It had better, otherwise the books don't sell and the publisher goes out of business, another case of natural selection.

Evolution Of The SF Convention.

This panel was not on the past evolution but the future development of conventions. Kevin Standlee said the greying of fandom is mostly a reflection of the general population's greying, plus the fact that fans tend to stay longer in the hobby than they used to. Some increase in age is due to the expense of conventions, as only older fans can afford the hotels and travel. Convention running as a hobby is also expensive.

Standlee said that anime fans are the latest injection of new blood into fandom. He found from asking them at publicity tables he manned at conventions that they don't think of anime as SF, and thus have no interest in SF conventions. [Speirs: Technically, anime is a type of media, not a genre, so anime fans are correct.] Fandom does not attract marketing people, of which it could use more.

An audience member who is a 30ish convention runner said that media fans are the future of conventions. It is important to educate new and potential fans that volunteer-run conventions don't sell tickets, they sell memberships and expect active participation. He is on the Con-Version committee (Calgary's annual SF convention), which three years ago had a complete change of blood. The greybeards all departed at once, and the new committee chairs had to start from scratch.

Another audience member who recently retired from the military said that he noticed in his last five years of duty a sea change in the way the younger generation thinks. They are accustomed to 5-minutes video clips, not half-hour training videotapes. This new generation is not used to the idea of thinking out the consequences of actions and of planning ahead for an organization such as a convention.

Bobbie DeFault said she watches for new faces wandering around the convention and asks them if they would like to help out as volunteers. She targets specific markets of fans with different types of flyers. A generic flyer doesn't appeal to all groups. She is a goth and recruits from that community, and knows the prejudice against them. She said if you are not willing to accept other fandoms, you cannot expect others to share your fandom.

John Hertz mentioned it is better to promote the good in fandom than to waste time railing against the bad. Ordinary publicity about SF conventions often does not explain itself to the general public.

People For The Ethical Treatment Of Mars.

The question put to this panel was whether it is a good idea to terraform Mars, but this turned out to be almost entirely audience discussion, not the panelists. It was mentioned from the floor that

if life is discovered on Mars, there is fear that it might be a plague, or in the alternative, terraforming might destroy something useful. The concern would not be as great if it were archaebacteria but if multicellular organisms were discovered this would be an issue.

A panelist whose badge name was Ctein (no real name given) said that he would be concerned about his generation's terraforming ethics but not future generations, since he wouldn't be around for them. Terraforming has to be done on a large scale, because small ecosystems are too unstable, as demonstrated by Biosphere 2. Terraforming Mars shouldn't take place until after several centuries of exploration and research are done. There is some current contamination of Mars from the landers but this is not the same thing as terraforming. Danita Maslan said we can't afford the mistake of terraforming Mars into something that humans can't live in.

From the audience, I threw in my viewpoint that we have been terraforming the Earth for centuries. The Canadian prairies are nothing like they were before Europeans settled en masse, and of course eastern North America has been heavily urbanized. The result is that agricultural operations are plagued by pest problems. Imagine trying to control pests on Mars that were inadvertently introduced and whose control depends on chemicals that take six months to be imported from Earth. It is difficult to be ethical

about Mars if we aren't about Earth. If there was native life on Mars, we would put some into wildlife reserves and steamroller the majority of the planet's lifeforms, just as we do on Earth.

The Future Of Energy.

Steve Lopata started off this panel by worrying about the dwindling nuclear power in the USA. When the electrical shortages start developing, there will be a sudden scramble to get more nuclear power plants on line, resulting in bad compromises on safety. He was gloomy about the future of energy because corporations are only interested in the bottom line of the current fiscal year.

Blair Petterson said that historically North America and Europe were the world's energy gluttons, but that is starting to change as India and China ramp up their industrialization. Karl Johanson pointed out that we have centuries of uranium supplies available, so nuclear power plants will come regardless of the Greens.

Hayden Trenholm felt that the major problem with energy supplies is not technical but political. Electricity is hampered by inefficient distribution because it is not treated like a commodity. Enron had the right idea about trading it on an electronic market, but unfortunately the crooks took over due to lack of oversight.

The general consensus of the panel was that the future of energy supplies depends on what China and India do. An audience member said that long before the oil runs out a couple of centuries from now, the social effects will be felt in advance, because the price of oil will increase rapidly. People will have to reduce gas consumption and lower heating costs well before declining energy supplies make it compulsory.

Viking Costuming.

At every convention, I try to attend one or two panels on subjects about which I know little and do not participate in, hence my being in the room for the subject of Viking costuming. Gail Glass was the presenter, her interest deriving from her Norwegian ancestry and a genealogical link with the Vikings. She wore the traditional garb of a Viking woman. No helmet with horns, which were not worn by Vikings except in Hollywood movies, operas, and comic strips. She showed replica jewelry, swords, and other pieces.

The early Vikings were pagan but were eventually Christianized. They created havoc throughout Europe in the first millennium but eventually vanished. They disappeared mainly because of absorption into the cultures they colonized. The word started out as a verb; 'viking' was what young men did to get money and a bride.

The Viking women were strong too; they were the ones who carried the house keys. The sudden outburst of Vikings was due to over-population in their home fjords. Agricultural land is scarce in Norway, so they had to go pillaging to gain the booty they needed for survival. Vikings did not use massive swords a la Hollywood (few people did anywhere) since the best sword is a light piece that can be swung quickly to parry an opponent's blow. They also had skis.

Deep Impact.

The last panel of the convention, on Monday afternoon, was about NASA's Deep Impact project. There was a full house in the ballroom for this one. A few hours before the panel began, the space probe launched a projectile on a collision course with the comet Tempel 1. The projectile didn't aim directly at the comet, but instead swerved in front of it and let itself be run over from behind. Astronomer Dan Hladiuk had the latest downloads from NASA, some only an hour old, showing the impact and subsequent plume of ejecta. Very spectacular photos; this is what the Internet is for, not downloading stolen songs or spamming people. The impact half of the probe was of course vapourized, but the flyby spacecraft may next target Comet Boethin in 3.5 years.

Summary.

The convention's daily newsletter was titled GNIK'S GNEWS, which may have meant something to somebody but sounded too much of an in-joke. It did the job though, and also appeared as supplements to announce award results. Besides the Aurora Awards, the Locus Awards were presented, and there was a supplement for the masquerade results.

The paid attendance was about 800, twice the size of a normal Calgary convention. It didn't feel that way though. There were a few more panels and events, but nothing that made me feel I was attending something big. I only met one American zine publisher, John Hertz; there were a few Canucks who occasionally publish. I put out a batch of surplus zine exchanges of mine onto the freebie table and they all went, but I suspect it was collectors taking them, not zinesters.

All told, it was an enjoyable convention for me. If there were any disasters, they were well hidden and not apparent to the public.

Next Year In Ramada.

Calgary's regular annual SF convention was skipped this year because of Westercon. Next year will see Con-Version 22, but it is moving to a smaller hotel, the Ramada, on the opposite corner

of the downtown core from the Westin. The convention committee mentioned they may move again in the future as they are looking for a place where they can get multi-year bookings. They'll be lucky, I think, if they manage this feat. Calgary is a boom town and the hotels are not as desperate for our business as they used to be.

Looking further down the road in both time and space, there were a number of groups bidding for various future Westercons and Worldcons. Montréal is bidding for the 2009 Worldcon, which they would call Anticipation. Pre-support memberships are \$25, from Anticipation, C.P. 505, Succursale NDG, Montréal, Québec H4A 3P8. They propose to use the Palais des congrès, which has about 20,000 square metres exhibition space plus 65 meeting rooms. As well, there are various hotels with lots of floor space.

Epilogue.

The convention ended Monday afternoon, a regular business day in Canada but the American national holiday. I took the #13 bus home and noticed a commuter sitting in front of me was reading a Robert Sawyer novel. As the bus went past the American consulate, I saw it had a large American flag hanging from the balcony, and dozens of small flags on the boulevard. Also two security guards pacing back and forth.

CHEAT THE PROPHET

G.K. Chesterton, in the opening paragraph of his 1904 novel THE NAPOLEON OF NOTTING HILL, writes about a game called 'Cheat the Prophet': *"The players listen very carefully and respectfully to all that the clever men have to say about what is to happen in the next generation. The players then wait until all the clever men are dead, and bury them nicely. They then go and do something else. That is all. For a race of simple tastes, however, it is great fun."*

"Laser-generated fusion is a virtual certainty during this decade. This means that the 1980s will see both cheap, "clean" energy and the first constant-acceleration space-vehicles (oh, what the hell - spaceships!) capable of ranging the Solar System at a payload cost of pennies-per-pound at point of delivery."

James Baen, in an editorial in the March 1975 issue of GALAXY. Baen should have remembered Leacock's Law: "Never predict anything to happen in your own lifetime, only after you are safely dead and can't be embarrassed."

"You'll never get anywhere with all those damned little short sentences."

Gregory Clark to Ernest Hemingway, when both were reporters on the TORONTO STAR in the 1920s.

Clark went on to become Canada's best-selling humour writer in the 1950s and 1960s but is rapidly being forgotten today.

"The aeroplane is an invention of the devil and will never play any part in such a serious business as the defence of a nation, my boy!"

Canadian Minister of Defence Sam Hughes, speaking at the end of August 1914 to J.A.D. McCurdy, who flew the first aircraft in Canada in 1909.

MODERN JUNK MAIL IS TOMORROW'S CLASSICAL POSTAL HISTORY

by Dale Speirs

I get my mail at a post office box number, and when I pick it up I am not ashamed to do some rummaging in the garbage cans of the box lobby. I don't expect to pick out anything with a good stamp since such mail is almost extinct. What I do look for are envelopes with postal markings or unusual pieces of direct mail. The latter category get very creative sometimes in the desperate attempt to catch the recipient's attention. Direct mail, popularly known as junk mail, has two critical aspects from the advertiser's

point of view. The first part is to get the mail noticed and opened, and the second part is to make the message good enough to convince the recipient to take action. Postcard direct mail must have a snappy headline or graphic, sufficient to get the recipient to read the text. Envelope direct mail must convince the addressee to open the envelope to see what is inside. -14-

One popular method among many direct mailers is to make the junk mail look official and important enough to open. This can shade into outright forgery occasionally, although direct mailers normally stay on the legal side of imitating official envelopes. An example I recently found in garbage can diving is an unopened 8.5 x 11 envelope from Reader's Digest, dated March 2005. The envelope is liberally plastered with official sounding notices and warnings. The only genuine Canada Post indicia on the envelope is the bulk mail permit in the upper right of the front side. Throughout all the text, the imperative tone is always used. Nowhere is the word "Please" used. None of the notices are false; everything they state is true as far as it goes, but stated in a manner that suggests the envelopes are official products of the post office.

The envelope is identified as EXPRESS DAY TIMED DELIVERY on both sides, which skirts the actual wording of genuine envelopes. There is actually a good reason for this. If

they use the word “priority mail” then the envelope will be charged by the post office at the genuine priority mail rate instead of bulk mail. Given the millions of pieces that the company must mail, such a mistake would be very expensive.

The overall design is a melange of different types of courier or express mail that an average person might be familiar with. The general colour scheme is similar to that of the USPS priority envelopes, and the typography very close. This envelope was mailed by Reader’s Digest from Montréal, but it is highly probable that the envelope design was done in the parent company’s headquarters in the USA. On both sides are large arrows reminiscent of Fed-Ex, and the front side has stuck on it a bar-coded green label that resembles an airport luggage tag.

The Front Side.

At upper right centre, next to the bulk mail indicia, is a window. Peeking through it is the corner of a letter, with the following : “EMG45 Issue Date: 03/08/2005”. Underneath that line, printed in red ink but simulating a hand-applied rubber stamp is “TO BE RETURNED”. I haven’t opened the envelope so I don’t know what the promotional offer is, but I’m willing to bet it is printed impeccably. The simulated rubber stamp is not. It has spotty red ink that looks like the same kind of uneven texture that a genuine rubber stamp creates.

The return address is: “Finance Director / Reader’s Digest Association / (Canada) Ltd. / Montréal, QC H3B 5H5”. This would impress the naive recipients that they are so important that a company director himself is writing them. The addressee’s section has an impressive array of numerical codes along with her name and address.

The green baggage label angling across the right centre has a bar code that is likely meaningless. The text below it reads: “Instruction / The contents have / been sealed and / dispatched under / supervision to ensure / compliance with / all entry deadlines.” There is a TRACKING REF: 011 followed by assorted gibberish. Where a baggage tag has the airport code number and name, there is “RDA / Montréal”. The two Montréal airport codes are actually YMX and YUL, and as far as I have been able to determine, there is no RDA airport.

The label is partly over some more pompous gibberish: “Contents: For Special Classification, Itemize here” (their proofreader missed capitalizing that last word) and miscellaneous verbiage. The label was put on by machine at an angle to look as if someone had slapped it on by hand in the mailing room.

What impressed me as attention to detail is the fake 2-D bar code at right centre, partly hidden by the baggage label.

That it is a fake can be seen by the fact

that it has too much white space within it, and it is not segmented into squares as are the genuine 2-D codes.

The Back Side.

There are three clumps of text designed to simulate what an official post office envelope might have by way of instructions. The leftmost is: "Limitation on Contents: / Maximum 20 mm thickness. If the gross weight / of contents, mailing envelope and attachments / (if any) exceeds category specifications a higher / mailing rate will apply. Do not ship liquids in this / packaging." That last sentence is inspired; how many people ship liquids in envelope flats? I tip my hat to the copywriter who thought of adding that one.

The middle text block reads: "Address/Delivery / Use the CPC approved indicia for / shipments within Canada. / Use complete street address or PO Box, / CPC cannot deliver without such / specifications. Please identify house/box# / wherever possible." Well yes, the post office cannot deliver the mail if you don't tell them where it is going to.

At right is: "Liability Information / Insured by lettershop. Terms/conditions of liability set forth in agreements between / sender/lettershop contractor. CPC to handle / in conformance with Canadian law as / outlined in Sections 48 and 49 of the

Canada / Post Corporation Act. Sender not / responsible for lost or misdirected mail."

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"lettershop" is a generic term used in the direct mail industry for companies that specialize in printing, pre-sorting, and dispatching mail. It is a billion-dollar business and the companies ship out billions of pieces of mail. I'm sure that the terms of liability are indeed set forth in agreements between Reader's Digest and their lettershop contractor.

Sections 48 and 49 of the Canada Post Corporation Act state that the mails, mail bags, and mail boxes cannot be opened or handled except under authority of the CPC and that it is an offence to wilfully delay or abandon mail. In other words, only a postie can deliver this direct mail and he had better not toss it in a culvert somewhere.

Mail Art.

For those in the mail art community, direct mail can often be a source of colourful envelopes that can be detoured or used as if, perhaps with a little editorial comment by way of stickers or added artwork. One could add additional pompous regulations or not-so-pompous rules. Here is a place to use up those old Victorian engravings you have in your drawer, or put those rubber stamps to use.