

OPUNTIA

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BERNICE SUMMERFIELD

by Dale Speirs

I've never been a fan of Doctor Who. I can forgive the shoddy sets as being the fault of cheapskate networks but I don't like time travel, a regular feature of the stories, because that way lies too many paradoxes and contradictions. Continuity errors also plague the show, much like Star Trek. Having thus riled up any Doctor Who fans who might be reading this, please note that any suspicious packages from them will be refused. I am the author of **THE HISTORY OF MAIL BOMBS** (available on-line from the Wreck and Crash Mail Society) and will be on guard.

I hasten to mention that I do have fourteen mass-market paperbacks about the Seventh Doctor's companion Bernice Summerfield. She was spun off from the series after the publisher lost the rights to Doctor Who novels. She was an independently created character, so she could be kept on for a new series of books unrelated to the original series. There were almost a hundred books about Bernice, some in the official The New Doctor Who Adventures, and the later ones in the spin-off books of just plain The New Adventures. There has also been an ongoing radio drama series starring her.

I first came across one of the later New Adventures (sans Doctor) books in the late 1990s at my local SF bookstore The Sentry Box.

I skimmed it and as it seemed a good read, bought it without knowing of its Doctor Who origin. I enjoyed the book so much that I went back and bought all the other Bernice Summerfield installments I could find, including some old stock from when the series was still with Doctor Who. I eventually accumulated twelve of the New Adventures and two of the Doctor Who books. I'm not a completist, and haven't added any new ones since nor do I feel the need. The Doctor Who books tend to rely on the reader knowing the past history of the series, while the independent New Adventures books are better at being stand-alone novels. Overall I enjoyed the series.

Bernice Surprise Summerfield was born in 2540 on the colony of Beta Caprisis. Her father was an admiral in the Spacefleet. Her mother was killed when Daleks raided the colony. Somewhere along the line she met up with Doctor Who and became one of his companions. In 2566 she published a popular archaeological book "DOWN AMONG THE DEAD MEN" and on that basis managed to fake her way into academia as a professor of archaeology despite lack of credentials. Her familiar name in the books was Benny, and I shall refer to her as such.

The Doctor Is In.

FIRST FRONTIER by David McIntee (1994) was published as part of the Doctor Who series. It does involve time travel, as the

Doctor and his two female companions

Ace and Benny go back to early 1957. The Doctor keeps the plot moving by his idiotic actions, such as walking around the perimeter of a military base with Majestic-level security and then being surprised because the guards notice him and arrest him. Ace likes to attack first and ask questions later. Benny is a supporting actor in this book and relatively quiet. There is nothing in the text to presuppose that she would become the leading character in future books.

Both the Russians and the Americans are having problems launching spacecraft, due to aliens in flying saucers zapping them as they leave the atmosphere. The Doctor and the women land near the White Sands proving grounds, where they witness a flying saucer taking out another rocket. Every time such an incident happens, a mysterious Major Kreer shows up and erases everyone's memory of the incident, then issues the usual weather balloon story.

Meanwhile, other aliens really are doing rectal probes on backwoods rubes. The Air Force has been infiltrated by modified aliens designed to look human, and is being duped for some nefarious purpose. The aliens themselves seem to be intriguing against each other, and the humans are suffused with Cold War paranoia. The aliens try to start a nuclear war between the USA and Russia. There is much to-ing and fro-ing of the characters to

the point where it becomes tedious. The Doctor and a renegade Time Lord calling himself the Master match wits, much of which is extended debates apparently designed to tie up loose ends from previous stories. In the end, nuclear war is averted, the aliens destroyed, and the two superpowers left unaware of what might have been. Benny is definitely a minor character in this book, with little in the way of seeding for future novels.

The author uses every UFO cliché he can find in this book. The aliens are collecting human DNA to repair their own corrupted genes. When an alien officer wants his security guards to stand at ease, he says “Klaatu barada nikto”. There are also some unintended errors, such as repeatedly referring to the hoods of jeeps and cars as bonnets in scenes set in American locales. While this is amusing, and given the uncritical nature of media fans and the fact that this isn’t great literature nor intended to be, it can jar the reader out of the story.

HAPPY ENDINGS by Paul Cornell (1996) is about Benny’s wedding to Jason Kane in the village of Cheldon Bonniface in 2010. Belated congratulations to the happy couple. The blurb on the back cover specifically states that one purpose of this novel is to tie up loose plot threads from previous books.

Benny and Jason are constantly bickering and fighting, apparently more than just from pre-wedding jitters. This is a background to

the arrival of the guests. The alien ones are wearing holo-projector disguises so as not to panic the villagers. The Doctor is unhelpful as always and providing the idiot part of the idiot plot. Although the basis story line is no problem to a non-Whovian, there are numerous references to previous novels in the series, and they are quite obviously tying up the loose threads.

There are also lots of British cultural references, most of which undoubtedly sailed right past me completely unrecognized. I did recognize the campy pair of aliens who constantly introduced themselves as “*I’m Jacquilian and this is my friend Sanki.*” It happens that I collect old-time radio shows and have several ROUND THE HORNE episodes featuring the limp-wristed pair of Julian and Sandy, who always operated whatever shop the avuncular host Kenneth Horne happened to step into. The villagers have a friendly cricket match with Benny and friends, written up in terms completely incomprehensible to the average Canadian, where the game is even less popular than soccer.

The plot wends its way through the chaos, mis-understandings, sharp practice, and rom-com heartache and reconciliation. The book is too frenetic to suit me, with far more noises-off and commotion than necessary. It’s like an unfunny farce where the actors try to cover up the lack of laughter from the audience by shouting and hitting each other over the head with rubber chickens.

OH NO IT ISN'T! by Paul Cornell (1997) is the first of The New Adventures series without Doctor Who. Benny is now a professor of archaeology at St. Oscar's University on the planet Dellah, and her marriage to Jason Kane has since failed. She is taking a number of her students on a field trip to the planet Perfecton, where they will dig away to find out why that civilization disappeared. Accompanying them will be assorted hangers-on from other departments, including Benny's pet cat Wolsey.

Perfecton's star is a red giant in the final stages of life and could go supernova at any time. The St. Oscar archaeology team is racing to find out what happened to its civilization. So are another species, the Grel, who, before landing, attack the St. Oscar spaceship. Just as the attack commences, some ancient machine launches a missile from Perfecton and hits both of the spaceships simultaneously. Benny wakes up to find herself dressed as the Principal Boy in a pantomime, that peculiarly English type of music hall show. Wolsey is still a cat but now human-size and talking, in between singing ditties. The Grel are also confused, as any non-Brit would be, by finding themselves in the bizarre world of panto. Most of the book is filled with humans and Grels weaving about trying to escape this panto world, but eventually the truth about the missile comes out. It was not an explosive warhead but one carrying the entire Perfecton population

downloaded into a computer and seeking an interstellar ship that could carry them away before the star goes supernova. The missile generated an alternative reality that was supposed to take over the ship's computer but instead accidentally locked onto an e-book about the history of English pantomime.

I was expecting a "But it was all a dream" ending, but the author came up with a neat twist that explained everything in a more rational manner. For non-Brits, the panto was somewhat understandable for those such as I who have never seen one. There were no infodumps and the cultural setting was shown and not told.

But Seriously Folks.

The Bernice Summerfield novels, being written by multiple authors, have one problem in that there is no consistency in the tenor of the books. Some, such as the next few reviewed here, are serious dramas. Others are nudge-nudge humour or at least permeated with wry asides in the "Aren't we superior to everyone else, wot?" manner.

DRAGON'S WRATH by Justin Richards (1997) is a MacGuffin story, where everyone is chasing about after an object, in this case a jewel-encrusted statuette called the Gamalian Dragon. A perfect copy of it accidentally shows up in Benny's possession about the

time its previous owner was found deceased elsewhere on campus. The Dragon is a legacy of the ancient warrior Gamaliel, famous for defeating the Knights of Jeneve at the Battle of Bocaro. Gamaliel's distant descendent, a warlord named Romolo Nusek, has offered funding to St. Oscar's University to excavate on a distant planet for an extinct civilization. Since extinct civilizations are ten for a shilling out in the galaxy, Benny and the others are suspicious about why Nusek wants to fund the dig, but the university elders are not going to look a gift horse in the mouth.

The expedition is set up to have the independent archaeologists unknowingly dig up planted evidence that will prove Nusek is the lawful leader among the warlords. Benny discovers that the extinct civilization isn't, and that the Knights of Jeneve aren't either but went into hiding for their own purposes. More copies of the Gamalian Dragon start showing up. Nusek is forced into staging what he thinks will be a kangaroo court to discredit Benny and friends, but the inquiry backfires on him. It all ends up in a chase scene, following which Benny winds up prisoner in Nusek's headquarters, built on an active volcano kept in check by a force field. She uncovers the truth about the Dragon and the Knights, disables the force field, and escapes as the volcano erupts. This could be easily adapted into a James Bond movie by changing a few names and keeping everything on Earth.

BEYOND THE SUN by Matthew Jones (1997) starts off with Benny digging on Apollox 4 with two undergraduate archaeology students, Tameka and Emile, when her ex-husband Jason Kane shows up looking for help. The phrase "no-good bum" was invented for him, and Benny is not too pleased to see him again. He has obtained some sort of artefact from an ancient civilization, and since Benny is an archaeologist he thinks she could identify it. He is kidnapped, leaving behind the MacGuffin, and as no one else, not even the police, are interested in him, it is up to Benny to find him.

She manages to pick up the trail to a backwater planet called Ursa, under occupation by the Sunless, whose attitude to the indigenous population makes Stalin's reign of terror look benign by comparison. The Ursalians were a communal peaceful utopian society until the Sunless arrived. Appearances can deceive though, for it turns out that ancestral Ursalians stole certain devices from the Sunless and crippled their planet. After centuries of rebuilding their civilization and regaining spaceflight, the Sunless have come to take back what is theirs, a device that will revive their dying sun and restore their planet. The novel is a grimmer read than most, and a noticeable contrast to the earlier books.

DRY PILGRIMAGE by Paul Leonard and Nick Walters (1998) has Benny accepting a free trip on a rusted-out cruise liner on her home planet of Dellah. Some persecuted aliens, the Saraani, want to buy an island in the tropical seas to set up their New Jerusalem, and St. Oscar's University was asked to send a few professors along to help. Benny can push, shove, and use her elbows with the best of them, as half the faculty fights over who gets to laze under the tropical sun for free. It isn't until the cruise ship has pulled away from the dock that she finds out the voyage will be teetotal, a devastating blow for a woman like her whose packing list for any trip is: 1) four bottles of booze, 2) clothes and stuff.

That soon turns out to be the least of her worries. On the first island, a cyborg comes ashore and stabs her in the leg, putting her in a wheelchair. One of the other passengers has a sideline going in these cyborgs, brought in from the planet Visphok. That planet has a civil war going on between republicans and monarchists that parallels the dispute the Saraani have between religious fundamentalists and the secular population. There is a plot afoot by the Visphok to take over the gullible Saraani, and it all ends in a battle of the cyborgs before justice and Benny prevail. The final third of the novel is standard military SF, with all blasters firing and supporting characters dying left, right, and centre.

BEIGE PLANET MARS by Lance Parkin and Mark Clapham (1998) begins with Benny attending a university conference on

Mars in 2595, on the occasion of its 500th anniversary of colonization. She makes friends with a local elderly academic named Elizabeth Trinity. The conference is sharing the hotel with a war veterans' reunion. They are the survivors of an invasion of Mars several decades ago, which succeeded because the Martian commander Tellassar failed to activate the missile defence. We are reminded of this important plot point every few pages when some old soldier uses Tellassar's name as a curse.

Benny, like Miss Marple, doesn't go anywhere without at least one corpse found nearby, in the first instance being an old war veteran who had the room next to hers. There are a couple of small-time crooks barging into the plot at random. Her ex-husband Jason Kane also shows up to thicken the mixture. This novel is plagued by anachronistic references that jar the reader out of the story. It is doubtful that people in 2595 will casually mention the names of Hollywood actresses circa 1998 who even in 2011 are already fading from public view. Nor will one believe that a character can shout "Thunderbirds are go!" five centuries from now and get an instant meaningful reaction from everyone else. The computer references are definitely stuck in the beige desktop era, and the authors don't appear to understand how computer viruses propagate.

Benny discovers who Tellassar is and triggers a riot. Just as that gets going, the plot veers back to the original murder and why it was part of a plot to steal computer software from an old nuclear launch site and use it (not the missiles themselves) to prevent a corporate takeover. There is also a scene where everyone races to the villains' lair for the final gunfight, in a fierce storm of course, and the destruction of it. I was skimming whole pages near the end and not missing much.

Parodies.

MEAN STREETS by Terrance Dicks (1997) is about a vast criminal conspiracy only known as The Project, spread across a hundred worlds, but no one knows what it is or who is running it. Benny is recruited by a friend Chris Cwej to help investigate it. They trundle off to Megacity, the apparent locus of The Project, and the fatality rate of those around them grows as if Miss Marple was in town. Something is causing people to go berserk at random and lay waste to everything around them.

The plot devolves into a gangster story, only instead of the Chicago mob there are aliens running the speakeasies and smuggling contraband. The Project is given such a big buildup as to lead one to believe it is the end of civilization, so there is a sense of disappointment when its true nature is revealed. The closing dialogue and sudden changes of heart among the bad guys

are poorly written, not to mention the usual "Yes, I did it! And I'd gladly do it again!" confession from the bad guy. This novel is but a mobster movie written down and the names and scenery changed to aliens.

TEMPEST by Christopher Bulis (1998) is the name of a storm-tossed planet across which Benny is traveling in a high-speed monorail known as the Polar Express. The plot is a mixture of a MacGuffin hunt and murder on the Orient Express, with no apologies to Agatha Christie.

The MacGuffin is a religious statuette called the Drell Immulate, which the Drell sect would like to get back. It is being transported on the Polar Express, and you will not be surprised to learn that murder and theft are committed just past the first whistle stop. Nor will you be surprised that more murder is done and a compartment-to-compartment search of the train fails to turn up the missing Immulate. Suspicion is thrown around like sand. Once all the usual suspects have been catalogued and the plot seems about to run out of energy with thirty pages still to go, a fresh crop of bad guys appears. They attempt to hijack the train and threaten mayhem unless the Immulate is turned over to them. The response that "We don't have the Immulate" isn't believed by them.

The rest of the story is a shoot-em-up followed by the drawing-room assembly of the survivors: “And the name of the murderer is ... “. It all works out about what you would expect, with a twist ending that wasn’t a major surprise. A good read for Agatha Christie fans.

THE JOY DEVICE by Justin Richards (1999) sees Benny bored with academic life at St. Oscar’s University. She decides to take her holidays in the frontier of the galactic Rim. Booking passage, she also hires a local guide named Dent Harper, explorer, big-game hunter, and man-about-the-galaxy, who writes up his expeditions as best-selling books. Benny’s friends are worried about her going off into the unknown, despite her having done it a hundred times before and proving over and over that she can handle herself. They decide to sneak on ahead of her and provide unseen protection, so successfully that both Benny and Harper are puzzled as to why the local crime scene is so quiet.

Just when it seems that Benny will die of terminal boredom on her vacation, she and Harper receive an offer from an illicit antiques dealer named Klench to find a relic called the Dorpfeld’s Prism. The actual hunt doesn’t take long (and I guessed the answer several pages ahead) and the Prism is soon found. The rest of the novel is a string of comedic vignettes as the Prism changes hands from one person to another, all the while exerting a malign effect on the person holding it. The local mob, known as the Cartel, are

on the hunt for the Prism but they have their own internal problems with succession to the current Godmother, who wants to retire. There are some witty scenes as Benny’s friends keep her out of trouble while she keeps looking for it. Not slapstick humour but an amusing read.

And The Name Of The Murderer Is ...

SHIP OF FOOLS by Dave Stone (1997) is a murder mystery parody set on board the spaceliner Titanian Queen. Benny has been hired by the wealthy Marcus Krytell to recover a stolen jewel, believed taken by a master criminal named the Cat’s Paw. She’s not the only one looking; the ship is crawling with a Who’s Who of detectives, including Emil Dupont of the planet Nova Belgique and the elderly amateur detective Miss Agatha Magpole. *“Everywhere she went, absolutely anywhere, people dropped down dead, horribly murdered, and it seemed only fortuitous that Miss Magpole always seemed to be on hand to solve it. It had been only comparatively recently that people had started to wonder about this.”*

The bloodbath soon begins in earnest, with people dying ridiculous deaths such as being sucked out into space when they flush the toilet or drinking exploding wine. The ship is being sabotaged as well, including the bionic brain that runs the ship. The Cat’s Paw leaves derogatory notes for Benny, and the police

detectives on board are Keystone cops. But in a twist, Benny discovers who the Cat's Paw is (so did I, several pages ahead of her) and makes friends with her, because she is not the one doing the killing. They begin a search of the ship for clues and find many puzzling discrepancies about its construction. One is put in mind of the Magic Christian (Google it if you've never read the book or seen the movie) but no one appears singing "If you want it, here it is, come and get it", and it turns out that the ship, like the Magic Christian, is not what it seems.

There is the traditional gathering of the Usual Suspects in the drawing room, or at least as close to a drawing room as a spaceliner can get, with Benny shouting "J'accuse!" at the murderer. There are a few twists, and the story more or less peters out in the epilogue.

THE MEDUSA EFFECT by Justin Richards (1998) begins at St. Oscar's University, where Benny is asked for help by the Advanced Research Department. Twenty years ago, they launched an experimental spaceship, the Medusa, which vanished into space and was presumed lost. Now it has come back, and inquiring minds would like to know what happened.

The search party finds decayed bodies on board the Medusa, victims of violent deaths. Soon after, ghosts of the deceased begin to appear at random, apparently in scenes of the past that were

flashed forward in time. Members of the search party, including Benny, find themselves being taken over by the personalities of the dead. Benny is able to resist where others succumb because she is half-drunk most of the time. Much of the middle part of this novel is endless scenes of befuddlement and characters screaming "I'm going insane!", so I began skipping blocks of text. Too much repetition and belabouring the obvious. It finally all unravels with the discovery of a massive conspiracy and the endless confession of the culprit, who can't help bragging about how she has won, just before someone sticks a knife in her. The conclusion is wrapped up with assorted handwaving explanations.

Time Is The Simplest Thing.

GHOST DEVICES by Simon Bucher-Jones (1997) takes a while to get going, as it starts off with a series of disconnected humorous vignettes. Eventually some sort of plot starts to coalesce, as Benny is asked to go on an expedition to Canopus IV, an Earth-type planet whose distinguishing feature is a single building rising 300 km above the surface, built by some vanished alien civilization for an unknown purpose. From space, the planet looks like it has a knitting needle stuck in it. Elsewhere around the galaxy, the Vo'lach, arms merchants extraordinary, have been having trouble, as some mysterious force is turning all their weapons useless, a thing not appreciated by the warlords and mobsters who bought them.

On Canopus, the natives tell Benny and company that the Spire was built by the Vo'lach, whom they have never seen. The Vo'lach always kept their home planet's location a secret, but the expedition figures out the star maps inside the Spire. Benny goes off with others to find the planet, while the other half of the expedition stay behind and research why the Spire can send images of the future into dreaming minds. At this point the narrative splits into two, alternating between the Spire and Benny, and gradually the pieces of the puzzle start falling into place.

It turns out that the Vo'lach have been extinct nine million years, as their war machines were programmed to destroy life and took that to mean all life. The planet Vo'lach Prime is sterile, continually bombarded by the machines with radioactives and chemicals to kill everything down to bacteria. Except that bacteria surviving in machine lubricants weren't eradicated, and under the constant flow of radiation and mutagenic chemicals have evolved sentience, a sapient liquid living unnoticed within the war machines themselves. The war machines also developed humanoid forms to sell weapons in the hopes of keeping other civilizations down. These sales agents were misunderstood by others as being the true Vo'lach.

From there, the author moves the plot into various time paradoxes at the Spire. As all such stories must, the novel ends up in a confused mess with no way to write the ending in a coherent

manner. The plot wraps up with an ending that leaves much to be desired.

WALKING TO BABYLON by Kate Orman (1998) begins with Benny being invited by The People to visit their homeworld on a Dyson Sphere kept intact by a supercomputer known, not without reason, as God. Two trillion people live on the inner side of the sphere, with its captive sun in the centre, and organize their society into Interest Groups.

A couple of the People have built and used an illegal time machine, called the Path, which has sent them to ancient Babylon. This takes the form of a silver road that stretches from the point of origin to the destination; one simply walks down it. God does not approve and will send a bomb to obliterate them and the city. Benny, as the descendent of Earthlings, objects to this as it would change the course of human history and obliterate her as well. This wouldn't affect the People's evolution, but would play havoc with others. God generously gives her five days to follow them down the Path and bring them back, otherwise it will use the bomb.

In Babylon, she runs into the usual cross-cultural difficulties and also finds Lafayette, an archaeologist who was digging the site of Babylon in 1901 and stumbled into the Path. There is the usual plot of setting up the circumstances, capture, escape, capture again, and a final escape with seconds to spare before the Path is

destroyed sans bomb. No time paradoxes as far as ancient Earth is concerned and all ends well. An average read, with mildly humorous flashes but mostly a standard mystery story, like one of those forgettable 1950s novels.

All told, the Bernice Summerfield novels are an interesting lot, given that many are hackwork and others were written by authors at cross-purposes with each other. As light entertainment they are acceptable.

EROSION CONSPIRACY THEORY

by Dale Speirs

Introduction.

During my time as a university student in the middle 1970s I did a lot of fossil collecting. When looking for fossils, one naturally seeks out exposed strata of sedimentary rocks. I took erosion for granted and assumed that everything was being weathered away over time. Reading through the scientific literature as a young boy (other kids bought comics at the newsagent; I bought SCIENTIFIC AMERICAN and NEW SCIENTIST) I learned from them that rivers erode valleys, valleys cut into cliffs, and rainfall does the rest. In the absence of plate tectonics to lift up new

mountains, the planet would be reduced to a level plain after a couple hundred megayears and that plain in turn washed into the ocean after another hundred megayears, leaving a planet covered entirely in water.

Alberta is essentially flatlands with a thin strip of mountains along its western edge. Whether fossicking in the badlands or, in later years, just hiking in the mountains, I saw evidence of erosion everywhere. I also saw endless prairie and wide coulees that seemed unchanged since the continental ice sheets melted away 8,000 years ago but never stopped to think why.

After graduating in 1978, I moved to Calgary, got a permanent job after two years of seasonal and part-time work, and bought my house in 1982. Settling in to a good job that paid well and a house with more rooms than I could fill with furniture, I soon began buying books and books and books, filling two rooms as a library, plus lining the living room walls with bookcases, and occasional stray bookcases elsewhere. Calgary had a population of about 600,000 in those days. There were thirty secondhand bookstores in the city, plus several chain bookstores and as many independents. Once a month I made the rounds and bought a fresh supply of books. Now Calgary has a population of 1.1 million, about two secondhand bookstores, and only one chain store (Indigo/Chapters/Coles/W.H. Smith/Classic Books, all owned by Heather Reismann).

Tell that to kids these days and they don't believe you. Actually they don't care; most have never set foot in a bookstore and those who read books will instinctively go online to download a text into their smartphone. (Only Boomers use e-book readers.)

A Voice Crying In The Wilderness.

In one of those long-vanished bookstores, I picked up a copy of *THE ART OF LOOKING AT BROAD VALLEYS*, self-published by C.H. Crickmay in 1969. It was a slender 8.5 x 11 book, just 21 pages, produced in a local copy shop and priced at \$2. It caught my eye because it was obvious the author was on a crusade against his fellow geologists. The first half of the book is a tirade against groups neither I nor anyone else in the scientific community had ever heard of. Crickmay followed the standard procedure of Communists and anarchists to attach labels to their enemies, real or imagined, and by repetitive name-calling bring them into disrepute. If you never heard of the Equilibrists, Neo-Davisians, or Penckians, don't feel embarrassed; neither has anyone else.

Crickmay's war against geomorphologists (the scientific study of landscapes) was based on something that historically has been glossed over by geologists, namely that there are some places in the world where erosion does not exist. There are landscapes where it has been established by mainstream geologists that they

have not changed in shape for tens or hundreds of millions of years. Studies in Australia have shown that some ridges and plateaus, not just in the arid interior but also the wetter areas, have not changed in shape for up to 251 megayears [1]. The vegetation that covers them has evolved through countless species, but the rocks are as they were. The plateaus have not been incised and eroded away. What was a slab of rock when dinosaurs first evolved is still that slab of rock, hardened and immune to water. -12-

In his book, Crickmay discusses several areas in Alberta where time has come to a stop. Southern Alberta is rife with coulees, which are broad grassy valleys initially gouged out by the melting of the glaciers but unchanged since then. The average Alberta coulee is hundreds of metres deep and kilometres across, and could contain the Mississippi River in full flood with room to spare, yet today it only has a tiny stream meandering down the middle. I have walked through many of these coulees and easily jumped over the creeks but needed a half-hour of steady walking to get from one side to the other. Test pits dug into the gentle grass-covered slopes of the coulees show they have not eroded back since the glacial meltwater dwindled down. While southern Alberta is a semi-desert, it isn't that dry, and if erosion never slept, one would expect that they would have receded noticeably over the past 8,000 years.

Straddling the southern Alberta-Saskatchewan border are the Cypress Hills. They loom high over the prairies, not quite mountains but high enough that they can be seen from a hundred kilometres away. The traditional explanation is that they were covered by erosion-resistant cap rock and thus survived the glaciers. Yet there is erosion where streams are cutting straight down through cracks; but the cap rock plateau has not receded in eight millennia. Crickmay takes this as evidence that water flowing horizontally over hard layers of rock will not erode it.

He points out another example of where erosion has stopped, the plateau of the Grand Canyon. This and similar canyons have long embarrassed geologists who have not been able to explain why the only erosion has been by the river cutting down. It is often said in textbooks that steep slopes will erode back from rain or mass wasting (crumbling away from gravity), or that rivers will ultimately undermine every metre of slope on their banks. Yet if this was so, there should be no Grand Canyon, since as the river cut down, the slopes should have collapsed and been washed away at the same rate. The usual hand-waving explanation, also applied to the Cypress Hills, is that the cap rock protects the sediments. But cap rock, the hard resistant layers, is not resistant to gravity, and especially not the softer layers that usually underlie it. If gravity is supposed to collapse cliffs over time, how much time is needed? We know that many plateaus and ridges around the world are unchanged by erosion over 200 megayears. Crickmay's

explanation is that meandering water erodes straight down but only shuffles sediments back and forth in the same broad valley. If the slopes are covered in vegetation or by cap rock, they will remain unchanged for millions of years.

A Prophet Without Honour.

Although Colin Hayter Crickmay lived in Calgary, I never met him; he died in 1988 of advanced years after a long illness. He was born and raised in Vancouver, British Columbia, and took his B.A. in biology from UBC in 1922. He went to the USA and earned his PhD in palaeontology in 1925 from Stanford University. He then taught at UCLA for four years but couldn't take the hot summers, and moved to the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana. The turning point of his life was when his work permit was not renewed because he was a Canadian and protectionism was in full force as the Great Depression trundled on. Canada had been hit even harder than the USA and when Crickmay returned to his homeland there were no jobs available in either academia or industry. No one was hiring for anything but seasonal field work, so Crickmay bought a farm in British Columbia to support his wife and children, and worked summers for the Geological Survey of Canada. That was his life from then on, and the experience shaped him into a bitter man.

After the war, the petroleum industry revived and Crickmay found permanent work with Imperial Oil (the Canadian branch of Exxon-Mobil) until 1970 when he finally retired [2].

Crickmay had published several papers on geomorphology but disliked the way they had been edited. He lapsed into conspiracy mode and cut himself off from the mainstream geological community. He reverted to self-publishing not because no one would listen to him, but because he couldn't bear any editor touching so much as one word of his prose. After reading his book on broad valleys, my sympathies are with the editors. He was wordy, quoted irrelevant texts and anecdotes, and meandered through the pages as much as the rivers he was studying. Had the World Wide Web been available in those days, he would have been on it, much like all those fanfic and slash writers who expect only praise for their works and refuse to concede anything to an editor.

Crickmay's prickly personality delayed for decades the recognition of the fact that he was actually on to a good idea. Rivers shuffle sediments back and forth across valleys but the plateaus do not erode if capped by hard rock or vegetation. When poets speak of timeless landscapes, they may be right. Crickmay didn't live to see it but there is increasing evidence to suggest that in many parts of the world erosion has stopped. Not just for a few decades or centuries, but forever in the absence of tectonic uplift.

References.

- 1] Twidale, C.R. (2000) Early Mesozoic (?Triassic) landscapes in Australia: Evidence, argument, and implications. *JOURNAL OF GEOLOGY* 108:537-552
- 2] Twidale, C.R. (1993) C.H. Crickmay, a Canadian rebel. *GEOMORPHOLOGY* 6:357-372

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

[Editor's remarks in square brackets.]

FROM: Murray Moore
1065 Henley Road
Mississauga, Ontario L4Y 1C8

2011-10-31

My take on steampunk is that steampunk is blank verse and SF is a sonnet. Steampunk is easier to write but harder to write well.

Sheryl Birkhead wonders, whither Benoit Girard? [the founder of the World Wide Party, held every June 21st] Benoit was in Boston in 2011 attending the Boskone convention.

FROM: Bob Jennings
29 Whiting Road
Oxford, Massachusetts 01540-2035

2011-10-26

I am not surprised that Richard Rohmer used info-dumps to pad out his books. This is an old technique mostly devised by the paperback market to turn short stories and novelettes into full-length novels. Just add plenty of technical information whenever possible and the book fills out to 80 or 100 thousand words pretty easily. I think Rohmer probably got pretty much a free pass with his info meanderings because he was a General in the Royal Canadian Air Force as well as a decorated hero, and the publishers undoubtedly expected him to add a few insider technical details about assorted planes and military gadgets. Probably they didn't expect him to throw in as much info as you say he used.

The worst example I can think of is in the J.T. Edison western novels, where at least two-thirds and often more of each book consists of information about guns, horses, Indians, cacti, cattle breeding, and anything else that could stretch out the word count. Most interesting to me is that Edison is a British writer specializing in westerns set in Texas during the 1850s to 1860s time period. I suppose it's not much different from postal clerks and college students writing SF adventures, but it seems strange.

FROM: Franz Zrilich
4004 Granger Road
Medina, Ohio 44256

2011-10-31

Flying saucers might come from a large number of varied technical societies. Some creatures might not tolerate a Biff Evacuation Drive experience, while others thrive only on Hiccup Spasm Ships. Most Third Rate Sleazoids cannot navigate and are thus given the simplest of ships. Rumtickilians cannot tolerate electrical fields, so they rivet their ships instead of welding them. Also, many societies might try to disguise their crafts to pass as what would seem to them to be human crafts. Bear in mind that many groups are managed by brainless bureaucratic politics too. I am also reminded of the early years of European exploration in the 16th Century where there were large variations in the way their ships were rigged and in their sizes.

[Whenever a superior civilization met an inferior culture, they did not skulk about doing rectal probes on back-road rubes. The Europeans barged in, met with the head chiefs, and made treaties (honoured or not). I don't accept that starfaring races would sneak about instead of hovering over the Kremlin or the White House. That is untenable and is why I do not accept UFOs. I do believe that life has evolved on numerous planets, and sentient life may have evolved on several planets, but not that they would travel all the way to Earth and then act coy.]

FROM: Stuart Stratu
Box 35
Marrickville, New South Wales 2204, Australia

2011-10-20

[Re: Richard Rohmer reviews] But what's this? You use "obsolete" as a verb? I think that is coming dangerously to that awful corporate-speak I hear these days. Ex. "Let's get proactive and workshop it ..." etc.

[Verbing the noun and nouning the verb are time-honoured processes in the English language, and I have no objection to them because the meaning is clear. What does annoy me is when words are used out of their true meaning. When I was in the Parks Dept., the bureaucrats soon learned not to use words like "facilitate" or "parameters" in my presence. One facilitator (and that was her actual job title) always avoided me after I lectured her on the correct meaning of "positive feedback", which unfortunately now means "praise" to most people, including her. If you're not sure what positive feedback means, ask an engineer.]

I Also Heard From: John Held Jr, Jeanette Handling, Anna Banana, Lloyd Penney

SEEN IN THE LITERATURE

-16-

noticed by Dale Speirs

McFarland, R. (2011) **Recent fictional takes on the lost Hemingway manuscripts.** JOURNAL OF POPULAR CULTURE 44:314-332

In December 1922, Ernest Hemingway's wife took a suitcase on a train containing not only his unpublished manuscripts but also all the carbon copies. The suitcase was lost or stolen, and no sight of those manuscripts has ever been seen. Since then, a number of authors have written novels using this as a theme. As Thomas A. Marshall remarked: "*Apparently Hadley's decision to pack the manuscripts has launched a cottage industry*" This essay looks at the many novels or short stories written about the missing manuscripts and how they were used as plot motivators. Examples are: Gerhard Koepf (1994) PAPA'S SUITCASE, Joe Haldeman (1990, novella) "The Hemingway Hoax" (1990), MacDonald Harris (1990) HEMINGWAY'S SUITCASE, Vincent Cosgrove (1983) THE HEMINGWAY PAPERS, Howard Engel (1992) MURDER IN MONTPARNASSE, Clancy Carlile (1999) THE PARIS PILGRIMS, and Diane Gilbert Madsen (2010) HUNTING FOR HEMINGWAY, among many others.

Speirs: An interesting article but as for me, I have too many sideline book collections already to add any more.